

OVERCOMING THE STIGMA OF SCIENCE FICTION
AND FANTASY IN THE CLASSROOM:
AN OVERVIEW OF THE ANDRE NORTON AWARD

By

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A THESIS PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

2011

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To my family, who kept on believing even after I appeared hopeless,
I dedicate this work.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thank the chair and members of my supervisory committee for their encouragement and guidance and the Norton Book Award committee for their help with research. I also wish to thank the authors of the award-winning books for their wonderful novels, and my family for their constant belief and help.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>page</u>
ACKNOWLEDEMENTS.....	4
ABSTRACT.....	6
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION.....	7
2 ANDRE NORTON.....	9
3 THE AWARD.....	10
4 THE BOOKS.....	13
5 STIGMA IN THE CLASSROOM.....	16
6 THEMES.....	18
Complex Ideas, Simple Language.....	18
The Journey.....	22
Nature and the Past.....	25
Emphasis on Action.....	28
Good Vs. Evil.....	31
7 NOT JUST FOR ENGLISH CLASS.....	36
LIST OF REFERENCES.....	37
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH.....	38

Abstract of Thesis Presented to the Graduate School
of the University of Florida in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts

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December 2011

Chair: Ruth Lowery

Major: Curriculum and Instruction

This paper examines the Andre Norton Award for Excellence in Young Adult Science Fiction and Fantasy: its nomination and selection process, the author for which it is named, an overview of the winning books, and then an examination of how well the winning books uphold the themes for which Norton herself was known. The purpose of the paper is to introduce an award that can provide a resource for teachers and librarians to find excellent books in an often overlooked and marginalized genre in schools--science fiction and fantasy. The four award winners are discussed in detail to show the themes and ideas that make them a good resource to use in a classroom.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

A discussion of favorite childhood books will often turn up similar choices in a vast variety of readers: J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy and *The Hobbit*, Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time* series, Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, or, for younger readers, J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, all members of the science fiction/fantasy genre. However, despite the prevalence of this genre in the minds of readers, it is woefully under-represented in classrooms across the country. A study done by Worthy, Moorman, and Turner (1999) showed that although the genres of science fiction and fantasy were consistently in students' top ten lists of preferred genres, finding the books in libraries and classrooms was difficult. They noted that “teachers...felt pressure to provide and use *quality* literature in their classrooms. Quality was variously defined as 'something from the library', 'something with educational content', 'an award-winning book', 'classics', 'something wholesome', 'appropriate', or at least not something 'frivolous” (p. 22). And science fiction/fantasy has traditionally not been viewed as educational or award-winning. In 2005, however, the Science Fiction Writers of America decided to add a young adult section to their Nebula Award, and the Andre Norton Award for Excellence in Young Adult Science Fiction/Fantasy was born. This award provides a resource for teachers and librarians to find substantial, award-winning books in a popular but overlooked genre.

The winners of the Norton Award have been proven award-winning by other organizations, as well. *Valiant* won a Locus Award for best young adult book and a Mythopoeic Award for fantasy in children's literature. *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* won a BILBY (Books I Love Best Yearly) Award, a Children's Choice Book

Award, an Indigo Teen Read Award, and a Mythopoeic Award, as well as being nominated or honored by many others. *Flora's Dare* won a Cybils Award for fantasy and science fiction for middle grades and a James Tiptree, Jr. Award for fantasy or science fiction that explores gender roles. Science fiction and fantasy are oftentimes viewed as separate genres, but for the purposes of this paper, they will be used interchangeably. "Young adult" is a similarly vague term, and one that is not defined by the selection committee of the Norton Award. Based on Booklist's published reading levels for each winner, we will define "young adult" as grades 5-11, or approximately ages 9-17. Because the winner of the award in 2009 is not yet published, we will discuss the four available winners in depth.

CHAPTER 2 ANDRE NORTON

Andre Norton was born Alice Mary Norton in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1912. She legally changed her name to Andre Norton in 1934 to compete with the male-dominated field of science fiction writing that was prevalent during that time. She has also used the names Andrew North and Allen Weston. She started writing as a teenager in high school. After having to withdraw from her freshman year of college at Western Reserve University, where she was studying to become a history teacher, Norton took night classes in English and Journalism at Cleveland College, while working to help support her family during the Great Depression. She worked in various aspects of the literary field, including the Library of Congress, owning a bookstore, and working in the children's section of a public library. Between 1999 and 2004, Norton opened High Hallack, a research library and retreat for fellow writers (SFWA website). Norton wrote over 130 novels and numerous short stories spanning multiple genres, including historical fiction and romance, but her most well-known work is in the fantasy and science fiction genres. She said that "SF appeals to me, as I have always enjoyed reading it, and it is a purely imaginative exercise - though one does have to do a lot of research for each book. I find that the sword-and-sorcery has the greatest appeal for myself - and it is the most fun to write." Her Witch World series grew to 35 novels at fans' requests (Taddeo, n.d., para. 12). Norton died of heart failure in Tennessee at the age of 93 in 2005. Before her death, she approved the formation of the Andre Norton Award and even suggested some titles for consideration (Zaleski-Ejgierd, n.d.).

CHAPTER 3 THE AWARD

The Norton Award is given by the Science Fiction Writers of America, a professional organization made up of science fiction and fantasy writers. Members are considered active if they have published three qualifying short stories, one novel, or one full-length dramatic script that has been professionally performed. The SFWA is also responsible for the Nebula Awards for adult science fiction/fantasy and the Ray Bradbury Award for dramatic presentation. The Norton Award is a relatively new addition to the SFWA award base, first awarded in 2006, a year after the death of Andre Norton. Any book published in the past calendar year as science fiction or fantasy work for a young adult audience is eligible for the award, including graphic novels, as there is no minimum or maximum word length required. This leads to one interesting aspect, which is the fact that a book can be eligible for both an Andre Norton Award and a Nebula Award at the same time, although this has not yet happened. If the judges deem that the work is for both adults and young adults, it will be considered for both awards. The novel must have been published in its first English edition in the previous calendar year, so older foreign language books are eligible if their first English translation was published in the past year. Because the genre of science fiction and fantasy lends itself so well to a series of books, many of the winners of the Norton Award are one in a series. However, it is not always the first or last in a series that wins the award, and sequels or first books that have not won the award often show up as finalists.

There is no formal submission process required. All works published in the past year are eligible for consideration, but a work must be nominated by ten members of the

SFWA to be put on the preliminary ballot. Publishers or authors themselves can bring their work to the attention of any active SFWA member in the hopes of getting their work placed on the ballot. They can do this by sending a copy of the work to members of the SFWA or by sending an electronic copy to the SFWA website, which makes it available for all members to read. After nominations are completed, a Final Ballot is created, with the top six works short-listed for final consideration. There is also a Norton Award Jury responsible for seeking out books that might be overlooked otherwise. The Jury is made up of 3-7 active members of the SFWA. They have the opportunity to place up to three books on the Final Ballot. Publishers can send copies of books to Jury members to increase their chances of getting nominated. A work is eligible for twelve months after its date of publication, so the sooner a publisher or author gets their work to a member of the Jury, the more time it has to be considered. Publishers and authors are encouraged to make their works available to as many members as possible to increase their chances of getting the ten nominations necessary to be placed on the ballot. If an author would prefer to remove their work from consideration in one year and resubmit it another time, they may do so under the condition that the work was a limited edition or the author recalled the work because of publication or editing errors that need to be fixed before republication. The Final Ballot for the Norton Award is added to the ballot for the Nebula Awards and voted on at the same time and under the same rules.

Andre Norton was also the recipient of another award given by the Science Fiction Writers of America--the Damon Knight Memorial Grand Master award. This is given to a living author to recognize a lifetime's achievement in science fiction or fantasy. A member must be nominated by the president of the SFWA, and the award is voted on

by officers and past presidents who are active members. Andre Norton was awarded the title of Grand Master in 1984 for the over one hundred novels she had written. She was also awarded the title of Gandalf Grand Master in 1977 by the World Science Fiction Society. In addition to these titles, she was known as the “Grand Dame” of science fiction both during her lifetime and after. (Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America, n.d.)

CHAPTER 4 THE BOOKS

Since the establishment of the Norton Award, there have been five winners and twenty-five finalists. The first winner, for 2005, was *Valiant: A Modern Tale of Faerie* by Holly Black. *Valiant* is an urban fantasy set in modern times in New York City. Valerie Russell, the heroine, runs away from home and falls in with a group of teens living in the subway system. She discovers that they are in the employ of a troll who makes a drug for faeries living in our world that enables them to withstand the damaging effects of iron. The drug can also be taken by humans and provides them with magic for a short amount of time. It is highly addictive and Val soon finds herself hooked. She develops feelings for the troll, and when faeries start dying around them, she must break her addiction to prove that he is not the one poisoning them. *Valiant* is a companion novel (but not a sequel) to Black's other "modern tale of Faerie" *Tithe*, published in 2002.

The second winner of the Norton Award was first published in Australia in 2005 and won the Norton Award for 2006. Justine Larbalestier's *Magic or Madness*, the first novel in a series of the same name, features a magic door that links New York City and Sydney, Australia. This portal is in Esmeralda Cansino's house, the grandmother of the heroine of the novel, Reason Cansino. Reason and her mother have been living as nomads in the Australian outback for fifteen years, on the run from Esmeralda. Reason's mother will not tell her why her grandmother is to be feared, and so, when her mother has a mental breakdown and ends up in the hospital, Reason is sent to live with her grandmother and distrusts her immediately. However, upon discovering the door to New York, Reason starts to realize that her grandmother is more than she seems. Reason travels through the door and makes a friend named Jay-Tee in New York. She

learns that magic is real, and the females of her family are especially powerful. She soon falls into the clutches of a man trying to steal her family's power and must be rescued by her grandmother, who explains that Reason's mother never liked magic, and so tried to run away from it, but that unused magic will eventually drive a person mad. Reason then agrees to study magic with her grandmother, setting the premise for the next two books in the trilogy.

In 2007, the seventh and final book of J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, won the Norton Award. Harry chooses to forgo his final year of wizarding school to embark upon a quest to kill the most evil wizard in the world, Voldemort. Voldemort has split his soul into seven parts, and Harry and his friends must find and destroy them all. Along the way, they learn of three items that together make up the "deathly hallows" and add these items to their quest. At the end of their journey, Harry realizes that Voldemort accidentally put the final piece of his soul into Harry himself, and so Harry must die to destroy Voldemort completely. However, because Voldemort had once used Harry's blood to transform himself, Harry was protected from harm via Voldemort's hand. Therefore, he returns to the world of the living, and Voldemort is destroyed.

The Norton Award winner for 2008 was *Flora's Dare: How a Girl of Spirit Gambles All to Expand Her Vocabulary, Confront a Bouncing Boy Terror, and Try to Save Califa from a Shaky Doom (Despite Being Confined to Her Room)* by Ysabeau S. Wilce. This unwieldy title is the sequel to an equally unwieldy Norton Award finalist of the year before, *Flora Segunda: Being the Magickal Mishaps of a Girl of Spirit, Her Glass-Gazing Sidekick, Two Ominous Butlers (One Blue), a House with Eleven*

Thousand Rooms, and a Red Dog. The heroine of these two novels is Flora Fyrdraaca, a young girl whose father has gone crazy and shut himself in the attic and whose mother is a general in the army of Califa, the fictional world in which they reside. Flora must discover what is causing the massive earthquakes that are threatening Califa's foundations, while battling a sidekick who has taken on the evil persona of the borrowed boots he's wearing and a family history that unravels upon inspection. She is also trying to expand her magical vocabulary and enhance her abilities. At the end of her journey, she is forced to grow up and make her own decisions.

The most recent Norton Award winner, for 2009, is *The Girl Who Circumnavigated Fairyland in a Ship of Her Own Making* by Cathyrenne M. Valente. An interesting fact about this novel is that it has not yet been published, as of March, 2011. The full text was published on the author's website, but upon receiving a publication deal, the last chapters have been removed. The book is scheduled to be released in May of 2011. *The Girl Who...* was originally a short story inside one of Valente's adult novels, *Palimpsest*. Upon urging from readers, Valente expanded the story into a full-length young adult novel and uploaded it to her website. The novel features a little girl named September, who is carried off on the back of the North Wind and goes through many classic fairy tale adventures.

CHAPTER 5 STIGMA IN THE CLASSROOM

The genre of science fiction suffers from two different preconceptions--that it is not educational or “substantial” literature, and that it is written primarily by men. The Norton Award winners shatter both of these stereotypes, as they have been dubbed the best of their genre by fellow writers and are all written by female authors. Science fiction/fantasy books are rarely selected as winners of national awards for young adult literature. According to a breakdown done by the Madison, WI, Public Library, in the 89 years since the Newbery Medal started, only five of the winners are classified as science fiction or fantasy. The Young Adult Library Services Association has six different awards for young adult literature, not one of which has a focus on science fiction or fantasy. Science fiction and fantasy, which tends to have books in a series and unrealistic elements like outer space, magic, and mythical creatures, are generally viewed as okay for reading at home, but not in an educational setting. The genre is not seen as “serious” literature, which is why awards like the Norton Award are so important. It helps a teacher or librarian distinguish the best books in a genre seen traditionally as being of lower quality.

Alice Norton changed her name to the more masculine “Andre” to be taken seriously in a field that was, at the time, dominated by male writers. This stereotype has persisted to this day, but as the Norton Award shows, many of the best books in the field of science fiction and fantasy are being written by women. Male authors have been nominated for the award, also, but out of the 21 nominees who were not winners, only five are men. Jane Donawerth (1990), from the University of Maryland, writes, “Anthologies and histories make the genre look like one written exclusively by and for

middle-class white males. On the contrary, women have participated vigorously in the writing of science fiction throughout its two-hundred-year history, and many have written with adolescent readers as their audience” (p. 39). Donawerth also gives some reasons why it is beneficial to include science fiction by female writers in the classroom:

Male science fiction writers are notorious for neglecting to picture women and children in their worlds or for stereotyping the females they include. [...] Teaching science fiction by women writers will add to discussions not only the possibilities of women becoming scientists but also the awareness of important contemporary issues, such as changes in gender roles, alternative methods of childcare, and the importance of empathy and communication, rather than aggression, for resolving human problems. (p. 41)

Even further stigmatized than science fiction is the genre of fantasy. Science fiction has a basis in technology and science, which is seen as more worthwhile than the basis of fantasy, which is magic and the supernatural. As Melissa Thomas (2003) writes, “The problem with fantasy literature is that it has a certain stigma attached to it. This stigma has been identified and debunked by literary critics for quite a while now, yet the genre itself continues to be dismissed as escapist fluff.” However, she goes on to say that “what seems lacking in acknowledgement are two facts about fantasy that make it perfect classroom fodder: 1. Students like it. 2. It is a metaphor for the human condition--ripe with mythic structures, heroic cycles, and social and religious commentary” (p. 60). The winners of the Norton Award encompass this idea very well, distilling life lessons and issues into a fantasy realm that makes them easier for teen readers to understand.

CHAPTER 6 THEMES

Although not a requirement to win the Norton Award, many of the novels that have won contain the same main themes found in most of Andre Norton's work, themes she considered essential for good literature, science fiction or not. On Norton's official website are interviews and articles written by and approved by Norton herself prior to her death, pointing out five major themes that were important to her in her own writing and in the writing of others: complex ideas written in a simple style; a journey of some kind, whether physical or personal; the virtues of nature and of the past in shaping a protagonist's fate; an emphasis of action over description; and a twist on the age-old theme of good versus evil. These themes are universal, not unique to science fiction or fantasy, and will resonate with teen readers.

Complex Ideas, Simple Language

Taddeo writes, “[Norton] calls herself an old-fashioned storyteller. [...] Her style is clean and simple” (para. 1 & 4). Norton herself believed that a writer need not simplify an idea just because the novel was for a younger audience and required simpler language. She writes, "Most of my contributions in the field have been for teenagers, and my one rule is that one must never simplify - which is an insult to the readers' intelligence - and most of the SF [sic] readers tend to be in the upper third of their classes in school" (Norton, n.d., para. 5). This combination of complicated ideas presented in simple language provides a winning formula for all of the novels that received the Norton Award.

According to Booklist, Holly Black's *Valiant* is for readers grades 8-11, the highest reading level of all the Norton Award winners. Not surprisingly, therefore, it

contains the darkest and most complex issues of all the winning novels, as well, including drug use and teen homelessness. The protagonist, Val, runs away from home and falls in with a group of teenagers squatting in the New York City subway system. They introduce her to Never, a substance that allows faeries to exist in the real world, and that acts like heroin to humans, giving them magical powers for a short amount of time. Val is soon as addicted as her new friends and has to deal with the downward spiral associated with her drug use. When she has to break the addiction near the end of the novel, her pain is felt by the reader: "Her muscles, which had ached like they did after exercise, now burned like a charley horse that woke you from sleep. She looked through his bottles and potions and mixtures [...] but she found not a single granule of Never to take away the pain" (Black, 2006, p. 228). Black addresses the nitty-gritty underground world of runaways and drugs through analogies of faeries and magic, but it comes across in a very real way, giving teen readers a less heavy-handed narrative that is easy to understand, entertaining, and yet still deals with the big issues. Her language is simple, as the story is told from Val's perspective. This teenage voice adds to the easy readability of the novel, as Val describes her world in a way appealing to fellow teenagers:

As Val jumped down onto the litter-strewn concrete after them, she thought how insane it was to follow two people she didn't know into the bowels of the subway, but instead of being afraid, she felt glad. She would make all her own decisions now, even if they were ruinous ones. It was the same pleasurable feeling as tearing a piece of paper into tiny, tiny pieces. (p. 52)

Justine Larbalestier's *Magic or Madness* also deals with some heavy issues.

Reason Cansino struggles with accepting her mother's mental illness, the culture shock

of moving to a city after years in the outback, making new friends, and learning who to trust. The entire novel is told in a very straightforward way. Reason believes in logic and it comes across in her choppy, direct narration: “My mother, Sarafina, was mad and my grandmother, Esmeralda, was evil. I wondered what that made me” (p. 80). After years of traveling with her mother through the Australian bush, hearing stories about her evil grandmother, Reason is forced to move in with the grandmother. In addition, she finds a magic door that leads from sunny Sydney to snowy New York City, an even bigger shock. Scenes set in Australia are told from Reason's point of view, while scenes in New York are told by Jay-Tee, Reason's new American friend. The language changes accordingly, with a handy glossary of terms in the back of the book for readers unfamiliar with Australian or American slang. As with *Valiant*, having the story told by teenagers keeps the language simple and easy to read, which helps propel the story, as well. Reason's description of her mother's mental illness, which she comes to understand with the help of her grandmother, highlights how effective simple language can be for handling a difficult issue: “She started screaming as soon as I walked in. She was strapped to the bed. As I walked closer, she only got louder. There were no words, just a raw, violent, piercing noise. It went straight through my head” (p. 83). The sentences are short and simple and the language is easy to comprehend.

The final installment of the Harry Potter series, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, has the culmination of seven books' worth of tragedy and triumph, the ultimate issue that is hard for teen readers to understand--self-sacrifice. This has been a theme throughout all seven books (Harry's mother sacrifices herself for baby Harry, Dumbledore sacrifices himself for Draco Malfoy, etc.), but now it is Harry's turn. In this

story, he comes to the realization that only he can defeat Voldemort, and in doing so, Harry will have to die. This is a big thing for a teenager to deal with, but Rowling's language portrays the actual conflicting feelings associated with such a big sacrifice:

It was over, he knew it, and all that was left was the thing itself: dying. If he could only have died on that summer's night when he had left number four, Privet Drive, for the last time, when the noble phoenix-feather wand had saved him! [...] Or if he could have launched himself in front of a wand to save someone he loved...He envied even his parents' deaths now. This cold-blooded walk to his own destruction would require a different kind of bravery. He felt his fingers trembling slightly and made an effort to control them, although no one could see him. (p.692)

In addition to his own death, Harry and his friends must accept the deaths of many friends and family in the final battle to save the world. Through it all, however, Rowling doesn't let her characters get bogged down with self-pity. They resolutely set out to do what must be done, what they know is right. Her simple, straightforward language belies the difficulty of the situation and makes it more bearable for the reader.

Flora's Dare is unique from the other winning novels in that it has perhaps the most "adult" theme: politics. It is rare to see a young adult novel dealing with politics, as it is considered too confusing or difficult for young readers to understand. However, Wilce doesn't shy away from this topic and instead explains the complicated political situation in her fictional world of Califa in terms even young readers can understand. It is necessary, because her protagonist, Flora, is only 12 years old herself. Flora discovers that her parents are not actually her parents and she is the head of one of the great Houses of Califa, making her a major political player in Califa's government. Flora herself has some trouble grasping the concept, which allows Wilce to spell it out for readers, who might not be familiar with the political scene, especially a fictional one. Describing her mother's role in the army of Califa, Flora says,

Mamma is Commanding General of the Army of Califa and everyone thinks she's a great hero for saving Califa from the Birdies, as we call the Huitzils. Thanks to Mamma's peace accord, we are a client state instead of a conquered one. But she's a slave to duty; she's hardly ever home, spends all her time pushing paperwork, handling the Warlord, bowing to the Birdie Ambassador, trying to keep the Republic together. (p. 13-14)

In one paragraph, Wilce has introduced the military structure of Califa, the enemy, and the current governmental state. She writes as though the reader knows about Califa already, but still manages to get all the necessary information across, so the reader is never left confused.

The Journey

Many of Norton's works and all of the Norton Award winners have a journey component to the story: travel to another world, whether physical or emotional, somewhere foreign to the protagonist and sometimes the reader, as well. Travel to a different world, planet, or dimension is a staple of epic fantasy and science fiction for adults, but "other worlds" in young adult fiction tend to be closer to or similar to home. Three out of the five winners are set primarily in our world, and yet the protagonists have a journey to a realm outside of their understanding, whether it be a fictional or a real place. Norton loved to create "wild, beautiful worlds where being different is no crime" (Taddeo, para. 6), and that tradition is carried on in these modern novels.

Valiant takes place primarily in New York City, a place fairly well-known to the protagonist. However, she is introduced to the underground magical culture of her new friends, a world wholly unknown to her previously. Lolli, Luis, and Dave know all the tricks--skipping subway turnstiles, scavenging items dropped by careless subway-goers. She quickly learns from them and adapts to the underground lifestyle. She is also introduced to the realm of faerie, both in the "real" world and in the faerie world. Val's

greatest journey, however, is internal, as she battles her addiction to magic. Her first experience with Never is enough to hook Val: “Everything looked too clear, too bright. Val found herself getting lost in the patterns of grime on the sidewalk, the promise of candy-colored neon signs, the scent of distant pipe smoke, of exhaust pipes, of frying oil. Everything was strange and beautiful and swollen with possibilities.” (p. 108) It quickly escalates from there, until they run out of Never and Val must endure the pain of withdrawal. After a couple painful days, she realizes how much Never has messed up her life: “She didn't need to make the shadows dance. She didn't need to keep choosing the wrong path, gloating that at least she was picking her disaster. No matter how bad her decisions, they weren't keeping any other troubles at bay.” (p. 240) Then her journey through addiction is truly complete, as she is able to resist the lure of the drug.

Reason Cansino's journey in *Magic or Madness* is a much more literal journey than Val's struggle with addiction. Her grandmother's magic door transports her from Sydney, Australia, to New York City, in America. She travels between the two and must adjust to the culture shock of a city literally on the other side of the world, where everything is different--the food, the speech, even the seasons: “It wasn't her backyard. It wasn't even daytime. The light was wrong. [...] The world had definitely been turned upside down. Nothing I could see or feel made any sense. Daytime and summer, both had vanished” (p. 98). Walking through this door is a much more difficult journey for Reason than any physically draining travel would be, since she's used to living like a nomad with her mother. The emotional toll that the magic door takes on Reason, while also sending her on a physical journey, is the main point of the book, as Reason

struggles to accept the fact that there is magic in the world, and she is expected to participate in it, despite all her mother's warnings and attempts to shield her from it.

Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows is perhaps the closest example to a traditional fantasy journey narrative that we have in the Norton winners. The three main characters spend the majority of the book traveling around England, trying to hide from the villain and find a solution to the evil forces that have taken over the wizarding world. This plot could be straight from *Lord of the Rings*, but again, Rowling's simple language and her ability to focus on relationships keeps a younger reader interested. Though their journey is fraught with obstacles, the main characters need this time to work out their emotional problems and for Harry to come to terms with the idea that he must sacrifice himself to save the world.

Flora Fyrdraaca also takes both a physical and emotional journey in her story. She wants to learn the truth about her heritage, and in searching for it, she ends up in the House to which she truly belongs and gets sent on a journey back to the past, where she learns about her family and her rightful place in the world. While playing in the Current, the source of magic in her world, Flora is transported forty years back into the past, where she meets a young girl who will turn out to be her mother. She must find a way to travel back to the present to save Califa from the earthquakes that are threatening to tear it apart. Once she does get back to the correct time period, she is still kept busy traveling, trying to keep up with her friend Udo, who has accidentally donned the boots of Springheel Jack, a criminal who was aptly named for the boots he wore, that jump around on their own. By the end of the novel, Flora has been all over the city, and finally ends up where she belongs--as the Head of the House of Hyðraaða.

The main “journey” taken by every main character in these young adult novels is that of growing up. In each story, the protagonist starts out fairly carefree and young, and throughout the novel learns about themselves and their pasts, growing into the adult they will be for the rest of their lives. Whether the novel takes place over a matter of days, as in *Flora's Dare*, or over months, like *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, the protagonists go through a maturation that teen readers can identify with and learn from as they follow the characters' journeys. Seeing the issues with which the characters must contend should put into some perspective the “troubles” many teens complain of today, while helping them deal with any similar issues that are happening in their own lives, as well as the protagonists' lives in the novels.

Nature and the Past

The worth and nostalgia of nature and the past is also a common theme in Norton's novels and most of the winners of the Norton Award, which is an interesting theme in a category that includes science fiction, since that genre stereotypically lauds the progress of technology and industry over nature. However, the fantasy genre is often set in a more pastoral setting, and each of the Norton Award winners is classified as fantasy rather than science fiction, due to the presence of magic. Since the advent of books like Rowling's *Harry Potter* and Stephenie Meyers' *Twilight* series, fantasy as a genre has become vastly more popular with teen readers. This lends itself very well to Norton's theme because the genre of fantasy traditionally has characters with a connection to nature, and who draw upon their family histories and personal experiences from the past to complete their journeys.

One of the main tenets of the story of *Valiant* is the trouble faeries are having living in towns and cities due to the large amount of iron, which is harmful to their skin. This constitutes the necessity of the magic drug Never, which allows faeries to live undetected and unharmed in the real world. When consumed by humans, however, it provides the human with an amount of magical powers, a heady sensation that soon leads to addiction. The city is a negative space that the faeries must endure. Ravus the troll describes his life in the city: "I find it difficult. I am constantly distracted by the press of smells, the noise. There is poison everywhere, and iron so close that it makes my skin itch and my throat burn." (p. 182) The Seelie Court, however, the home of the faeries, which has been taken over by an evil queen, is in nature: "The vines had grown from the stone into wild looping things, blooming with strange flowers and thorns long and thin as needles. Birds flew from their sculpted nests to pick at the swollen grapes." (p. 238) When the city-dwelling faeries gather, they always go to a river or a park, to get away from the man-made areas and back to nature.

Reason Cansino, the heroine of *Magic or Madness*, has an ingrained distrust of cities, as well. She grew up wandering out in the Australian outback with her mother, who taught her that cities were evil places filled with evil people. Reason loved the bush:

I'd seen brolgas taking off at sunset, their white feathers stained pink, purple, and orange by the light, making vast ripples radiate through the wetlands, sending lily pads rocking, frogs leaping from pad to pad, and lazy crocs slipping flash quick into the water. I'd seen a platypus clear as the air after rains have finally wiped the dust and dirt of a drought away, swimming slow and easy at dawn in water so still, so glass-like. (p. 2)

So when Reason is forced to move to Sydney, she plans her escape right away, because the city confuses and scares her. Compare the earlier passage about nature to Reason's first impression of the city:

I hadn't seen a single tree since we'd left the airport. Instead of vegetation there were grassless footpaths, giant signs with advertisements on them for hundreds of things I'd never seen before, ugly grey or dirty brown buildings, without verandahs or any signs that people lived in them. I'd forgotten how ugly Sydney was. (p. 6)

However, before she can leave, she finds the magic door to New York City, which is even more grim and forbidding than Sydney. As for the virtue of the past, Reason's mother never shared anything about the history of their family, which would have been very helpful in Reason's move to her grandmother's house. Reason's mother tried to ignore the past, in the hopes that it would not catch up with her, but her ensuing mental illness proves that one can never run away from the past. Reason learns this and must face her history before she can move on to the future. Her grandmother and her new friends help her with this, but only Reason can truly accept her past and her mother's actions in order to access her magical abilities.

The themes of nature and the past are prominent in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. When the wizarding world is overthrown by evil forces, Harry and his friends must escape to the wilderness, the only place still “pure” and safe from the corrupt wizards and demons. They travel from place to place, changing every night, but always in a forest or the mountains, somewhere isolated in nature. But even more prominent than the nature theme is the theme of the past, and its importance in shaping the future. Perhaps because it is the final novel in a seven-book series, elements of Harry's past are brought up constantly and many questions are answered. Harry finally learns that

he must die for Voldemort to die, because Harry himself is a horcrux and contains a piece of Voldemort's soul. But because Voldemort has some of Harry's blood in him, Harry cannot be permanently harmed by Voldemort. These events of the past form the main plot of the novel. In addition, Harry's mother sacrificing herself when Harry was a baby protects him from harm, as Dumbledore's sacrifice saves Draco Malfoy. Every character Harry has met in the past six books shows up for a final battle, bringing all of their stories to a complete and satisfying end. All of the loose ends are tied up and that allows Harry to move on to his future, which is shown to be a happy one in the epilogue to the novel.

The importance of the past is also highlighted in *Flora's Dare*, as the main mystery of the book concerns Flora's heritage and birthright. She learns that her mother is not her real mother and that she does not belong to the House in which she has been brought up. Coming to terms with her father's infidelity and her true family is difficult for her, but she soon realizes that the only way to save the city from the giant squid living in the sewers is to claim her rightful place as the Head of the House of Hyðraaða: "If I was the last Hyðraaða, then the City's salvation was up to me" (p. 393-4). This is driven home when Flora sees the body of the woman who turns out to be her real mother and gets thrown into the past, where she meets her true mom as a girl. Her time in the past helps Flora realize the foundation of the problems her world is having in the present, and allows her the means of fixing it for the future.

Emphasis on Action

Unlike the long descriptive passages found in a lot of adult fantasy, Norton and the award winners focus on the action of the story and the protagonists' journeys. As

Taddeo writes, “[Norton] doesn't digress into an examination of minutiae, of either exterior or interior worlds” (para. 4). Norton felt that modern young adults had shorter attention spans and less imagination than their predecessors and wrote her novels accordingly. She wrote that young people today “don't read as much, or use their imagination; they just watch what's on the [television] screen” (Coker, III, n.d., para. 23). The winners of the Norton Award, except for one, are set primarily in worlds we recognize--New York City, Sydney, England, the world of fairy tales--and so the authors do not need to spend a large amount of time describing them. Rather, they can focus on propelling the story forward through action. Some of the winners are more successful at this than others.

Valiant does not spend a lot of time on introspection or description of Val's surroundings, as the author assumes a basic familiarity with New York City on the part of the reader. Even the descriptions of the Seelie (or faerie) Court are brief. Action sequences, however, are frequent and fast-paced. Val is constantly traveling--from home to New York, to the subways, to Ravus's troll bridge, to the Seelie Court, on deliveries of the magic drug--and therefore the reader does not have any idle time either. Black holds the reader's interest by constantly introducing new characters and locations, and allowing the reader to see them through Val's eyes.

Flora's Dare is similarly fast-paced, with jumps from locale to locale in Wilce's fictional world of Califa. Despite the fact that Califa is not a real-world place with which a reader would be familiar, Wilce does not spend much time describing it. Part of this could be due to the fact that it is a sequel, and the author has introduced Califa in the first novel. Flora jumps from adventure to adventure almost as quickly as her friend

Udo is forced to jump around in Springheel Jack's enchanted boots. Because the setting is completely fictional and unknown to the reader, some description would have been helpful in setting the scene. There are so many different things packed into this novel, it can get overwhelming. Wilce might have been more successful if she had chosen politics, family genealogy, tested friendships, or the trials of officially becoming an adult, rather than putting all of them into one story. Genevieve Gallagher (2009), a teacher in Virginia, wrote in her review of *Flora's Dare* for the *School Library Journal*, "Many scenes are so fast paced that they come across as superficial, and it often feels as though the author is trying to fit too much into the telling." However, because of this frenetic energy, for the middle school grade level for which it was written, the novel will most likely hold the reader's interest throughout all of its 511 pages.

Magic or Madness is also very fast-paced, but unlike the other winners, it does prominently feature introspection and internal monologues. Told from the point of view of Reason in Australia and Jay Tee in America, Larbalestier cannot help but reveal the innermost thoughts of the two girls to the reader. Both girls also have secrets and few friends, which contribute to their focus on inward thinking. However, because it is told from the point of view of the two teenagers, there are practically no lengthy descriptive passages or omniscient telling of other characters' thoughts, so that the pace of the action of the novel is not compromised in any way. The reader gets Reason's thoughts on what is happening to her at the same time the action is actually taking place, so the action itself is not slowed. Perhaps the fastest read of all the Norton Award winners, *Magic or Madness* is helped tremendously by having a fairly simple premise--a magic

door between Sydney and New York City--that doesn't require too much description or explanation that might hinder the action of the novel.

The only winner that has slow scenes with little or no action is *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. However, since it is by far the longest novel (759 pages), there is still plenty of action. It is just condensed into small segments separated by segments of idleness. A major portion of the novel follows the three main characters as they hide from Voldemort. The camping scenes are very slow, which is necessary for understanding the characters' frame of mind. As they start getting cabin fever from being cooped up alone for so long, so does the reader. So the bursts of action are quite welcome. This novel is also the last in a series, and so the author does not need to provide much description of the characters or their surroundings, since the readers have had six other books' worth of descriptions. *Deathly Hallows* is best for fans of the rest of the series, as the many slow passages and the length of the novel will probably lose new readers.

Good Vs. Evil

A final theme, and one that is not new to the science fiction/fantasy and the young adult genres, is the triumph of good over evil. However, Norton strove to include a hopeful message in her novels. She felt that "A lot of children's stories these days, while being well-written, are downbeat. They have no hope, and the protagonist is someone that you wouldn't like, and they are no better off at the end of the story than they were at the beginning. This is a new format, and it's getting in to stories in the Science Fiction and Fantasy fields" (Coker, III, para. 23). Although all of the Norton Award winning novels have a dark element in them, the heroes and heroines overcome

the darkness and end happily ever after, in true fairy tale format. Often, the story requires an internal as well as external struggle for good to ultimately triumph, “great, courageous hearts [that] overcome their own fears and prove stronger than evil” (Taddeo, para, 6). The books are also unique in that every one of them contains characters that appear either good or evil, but actually turn out to be the opposite. This analogy to real life, where bad guys do not always wear an eye patch or have a scar, and good people are not always beautiful, is a good message to give to teen readers.

In *Valiant*, none of the characters is what they seem. The homeless teens squatting in the subway are the heroes, the beautiful faeries are the villains, and the ugly troll turns out to be the bravest and most pure of them all. Val spends most of the book not knowing who she can trust, as well as battling her addiction to the heroin-like magic. In the end, only she can overcome her addiction, and it is a difficult struggle. But to save Ravus's life, she is able to do it, and fight the faerie queen for his petrified heart. When Val first meets Ravus, she thinks he is evil:

Someone loomed in the doorway, tall and lean as a basketball player, bending to duck under the doorframe. As he straightened up, lank hair, black as ink, framed the grayish-green skin of his face. Two undershot incisors jutted from his jaw, their tips sinking into the soft flesh of his upper lip. His eyes went wide with something that might have been fear or even fury. (p. 95)

However, with time, she comes to realize he is actually the best person she knows. He is only scary when he learns of her addiction to the drug, and the deceits it had caused her to perpetrate. On the other hand, the lovely faerie court entrances her at first, before she is able to see that all that glitters is not gold, and they were the truly evil ones.

Much like *Valiant*, magic in *Magic or Madness* is not the wonderful thing that most fantasy novels would have a reader believe. It is dangerous unless used properly, and it can kill its users. The women in Reason's family have an average death age of 30, and the more she denies her magic and refuses to use it, the more dangerous it is. Reason also has to deal with people being different from how they seem. She spent her childhood listening to her mother's stories about her evil grandmother. At the beginning of the book, Reason refers to her simply as "the witch". However, by the end of the novel, her grandmother is the only one who can help her, by being her teacher and guide to the use of her magic. On the other hand, Jason Blake, the "nice" man who provides housing and food for Jay Tee in New York, turns out to be only interested in stealing magic from the children, once again proving that looks can be deceiving: "*I'm not scared of you*, she told herself. But she was. [...] He terrified her. She didn't ever want him to take her magic by force again" (p. 250). After learning the horrifying truth about her abilities, Reason must come to terms with the fact that she will have to practice her magic, even though it will eventually kill her. She ends the novel with a new-found determination to find a way to stall this process or reverse it, so the women of her family will no longer be cursed with an early death.

Harry Potter has perhaps the biggest internal struggle before he can triumph over the villain, as he must face the reality of his own death. This amount of self-sacrifice from a teenager is hard for a reader to handle, even though Harry himself eventually comes to accept it: "Finally, the truth. Lying with his face pressed into the dusty carpet of the office where he had once thought he was learning the secrets of victory, Harry understood at last that he was not supposed to survive. His job was to walk calmly into

Death's welcoming arms" (p.691). But once he gives in to his fate, he is able to defeat and kill Voldemort, and eventually return to his own body, the ultimate triumph over evil. There are also people in this novel who are not as they appear. Severus Snape is a character whose allegiance has been in dispute for the entire series. After he kills Dumbledore in the sixth book of the series, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, Snape was assumed to be evil. However, at the end of *Deathly Hallows*, it is revealed that Dumbledore asked Snape to kill him so that Draco Malfoy, a student, would not be forced to do it. Harry had vehemently hated Snape all through school, so admitting he was wrong was difficult. Draco Malfoy, also hated by Harry throughout school, shows that he, too, is not as evil as it was supposed, when he joins the battle and fights against Voldemort. Because it is the final book in the series, *Deathly Hallows* wraps up a lot of loose ends and reveals many characters' true colors.

Flora learns the truth about many of her acquaintances, as well. She believes that her best friend Udo has betrayed her, before learning that he is inadvertently wearing the enchanted boots of a notorious criminal, Springheel Jack, which force him to behave in unusual ways. Lord Axacaya, her mother's enemy and a traitor to his country, may be her only hope of learning magic, and is willing to teach her, even if she is her mother's daughter, which it turns out she is not! She discovers that her mother was actually the head of a different House, and so Flora is the heir to a House that has been without a head for many years, and she is the best hope to save the country from the massive earthquakes that are shaking its foundations. Not surprisingly, all of these revelations are a bit much for Flora to take in, but she handles it fairly well, in addition to

the fact that she must die to save her City: "I know that I must die; it's the only way to save the City and the City is more important than me. But I'm afraid" (p.455).

CHAPTER 7 NOT JUST FOR ENGLISH CLASS

The four winners of the Norton Award lend themselves very well to being used in classrooms, in various subjects, not only English. Comparisons of Australian and American language, geography, and culture can be done with *Magic or Madness*, just as *Deathly Hallows* could lend itself well to discussion of English customs and language. Also in *Magic or Madness*, Reason's logical upbringing and obsession with the Fibonacci sequence, or "fibs", as she calls them, are a good place to start a discussion in a math classroom. Val's drug use and homelessness in *Valiant* are heavy topics that can be difficult to address in a classroom, so the book is a good place to start. The politics in *Flora's Dare* would be good prompts to start discussion about different government systems around the world, and the damage of the earthquakes in the novel is a perfect analogy for natural disasters that have happened in the real world.

Since all of the award winners have multiple subplots, as most good literature does, there are many, many ways they could be used in classrooms, if teachers and librarians can overlook the stigma of science fiction and fantasy in the classroom and choose the best in the genre to use in schools. The winners of the Norton Award have complex themes and deal with deep issues in ways that appeal to their intended young adult audience. The exhaustive nomination and selection process really recognizes the best books, and provides a basis for teachers to choose novels that they know will be beneficial to their students. As Melissa Thomas (2003) writes, "What is most important about fantasy, what separates it and frees it from the boundaries of other genres, is that it is an undistilled version of human imagination--momentary worlds and magic that may be at odds with the rational truth, yet continue to reflect our culture and times" (p. 63).

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Kristin Paulson received her Master of Arts degree from the College of Education at the University of Florida in the fall of 2011. She holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in English from the same institution, from the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences.