



## The Story Behind the Poul Anderson Writing Contest

The Friends of the Orinda Library Creative Writing Contest was renamed in 2002 in the memory of Poul Anderson, a popular science-fiction writer of over eighty books. The contest name honors an Orinda resident who was a true friend to our community. The Friends carry on the contest with the help of a panel of local judges who are involved professionally in reading, writing, or publishing. This year's judges are Sally Small, Janet Boreta, Marian Nielsen and Maria Roden.

The contest allows you, as an entrant, to have your work read by a professional panel and gain the experience of submitting your work for review. You can also request an individual critique of your work if you so indicate on the entry form. Up to four winners will be awarded \$250 prizes at the close of this school year, underwritten by the Friends of the Orinda Library.

Mr. Anderson was born in Pennsylvania in 1926 of Danish and Danish-American parents. His family went to Denmark for a short period after his father's early death in a car accident, but returned to live in various parts of the U.S. where his mother worked in an office, ran a chicken farm, and was a college librarian to support Poul and his brother. Poul went to college at the University of Minnesota Institute of Technology. Before he graduated in 1948, with distinction, he had begun writing science fiction stories and selling them to magazines. Mr. Anderson says,

"Out of our conversations (with a friend and fellow scientist) about the atomic bomb came the idea for a story, which I thereupon wrote. He (his friend) said it merited submitting for publication. I borrowed Mor's (his mother's) typewriter, put the thing in proper form, and sent it to *Astounding* (magazine)—giving Neil (his friend) a shared byline, since the basic notion had been his. Months passed. I went off to a summer job in the north woods. I was back at school that fall before a letter came. John Campbell, the editor, had *read* 'Tomorrow's Children.' He wanted to *buy* and *print* it. That kind of experience comes once in a lifetime."

His realization that his writing skills surpassed his scientific skills came over a period of time, resulting in his decision to pursue a career in writing science fiction.

"This was when I settled into a writing career in earnest. Graduating into a recession, with no money left for further studies, but being a bachelor who had never had a chance to develop expensive tastes, I thought I'd support myself by my stories while I looked around for steady employment. The search was half-hearted, and eventually petered out. I liked too much being my own boss, precarious

though the living was. Only slowly did it dawn on me that writing had, all along, been what nature cut me out to do.”

Mr. Anderson met his wife, Karen, at a science fiction convention in Chicago. They moved to Berkeley in 1953 where their daughter was born, then found a home in Orinda in 1960 where the family lived until Mr. Anderson’s death in 2001. Commenting on his writing career towards the end of his life, he says:

“If I don’t otherwise say much about my work, it’s because of a feeling that it has to speak for itself. As of today, the books total about eighty. That’s less impressive than it looks, when you consider how long I’ve been in the business. Compared to, say, Isaac Asimov, I’m a sluggard-especially as of the past decade or so. Mainly my work is classifiable as science fiction or fantasy, but it also includes historical, mystery, and juvenile fiction, science fact, journalism, essays, verse, and translations.

“I’ve been honored with various awards and such, but am not among those writer’s who appeal to English departments. No sour grapes here; those who do, like Ursula LeGuin and Frank Herbert, I admire myself, and enjoy reading. It is more than enough for me to know that my following numbers in it scientists, technologists, astronauts, and others of whose doings I am a fan. Considering the generally masculine tone of my writing, I’ve been a little surprised at the high proportion of women among those readers who really like and understand it. The last time I counted, works of mine had appeared in eighteen foreign languages.....I hope I’ve been improving. Certainly I no longer find the production of my first years readable, and it’s lucky for me that the public in those days was tolerant.... Science, technology, history, the whole world around us and the whole universe around it, provide endlessly fascinating subject matter.

“Over the years I’ve written in a lot of different veins, from romantic to realistic, adventurous to abstract, somber to slapstick. The last two or three novels seem pointed in other directions, new to me. Where this will lead I don’t know, but it should be fun along the way.”

Poul Anderson’s words are inspiring to those of us who have a story in our head and the desire to get it down on paper. He was an intelligent, talented man who decided to follow a career that did not necessarily reflect the cultural wisdom of his day. By following his own writing path he created a successful and happy life. For more than forty years he was our neighbor. If you have a story and an interest in trying your hand at writing this is your opportunity.

Additional questions or comments? Please check out our website [www.friendsoftheorindalibrary.org](http://www.friendsoftheorindalibrary.org) or email us at <mailto:contest@friendsoftheorindalibrary.org>.

We look forward to hearing *your* story!