Ursula K. Le Guin

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In a writing career spanning nearly six decades, Ursula K. Le Guin pushed the boundaries of fiction, transcending genre and style conventions to create a unique and distinctive literary voice.

Le Guin and her works have been described as feminist, anarchist, Taoist, and other labels, but they are both all of these and none of these simultaneously.

Her groundbreaking novels and stories question gender constructions, challenge our notions about gender and identity, imagine an anarchist utopia, wrestle with ideas of free will and destiny, and subtly made commentary about race and race relations.

She was born in 1929 and raised in Berkeley California. Her parents were the writer Theodora Kroeber, author of *Ishi in Two Worlds*, and the anthropologist Alfred L. Kroeber.

She credits her inspiration for wanting to be a writer to learning to write at the age of five.

Despite the 1930s Great Depression, her family was well off thanks to her father's work as a university professor, and their Berkeley home was a vibrant center for intellectual life.

> "There were lots of visitors, lots of talk and argument and discussion about everything, lots of books around, lots of music and storytelling. The life of the mind can be a very lively one. I was brought up to think and to question and to enjoy."

Ursula K. La Guin, photo by Eileen Gunn

In this setting she pursued her interest in writing,
with the understanding that as she approached college-
age that she look to college as a tool to obtain "'a salable skill'—learning a trade that [she] could live on." To this end, she attended Radcliffe College, earning her B.A. in 1951, and went on to study French and Italian Renaissance literature at Columbia University, earning her M.A. in 1952.

In 1953, she married historian Charles A. Le Guin in Paris, and together they moved to Portland, Oregon in 1958.

In 1966, Ace published her first novel, *Rocannon's World*, based on a 1964 short story first published in *Amazing Stories*. A follow-up set in the same universe, *Planet of Exile* (Ace) followed later that year, and a third novel, *City of Illusion* followed a year later.

The three books mark the beginning of what some fans, critics, and publishers have dubbed the Hainish Cycle, or the Ekumen Saga, or series. Though Le Guin does not consider them part of a series because they do not "form a coherent history" she admits that there are connections between the books.

A Wizard of Earthsea, published by Parnassus/Houghton Mifflin in 1968, was the first book in what would become the Earthsea series in the 1970s, and really is a series, meant to be read in the order written, because in Le Guin's words on her website, "it is all one story."

Before she would continue the Earthsea series in the '70s, though, Le Guin would write and in 1969 publish one of her most widely known and regarded works, *The Left Hand of Darkness*.

In *Left Hand*, Le Guin imagines the alien planet of Gethen/Winter, a world in which all the people are androgynes, capable of developing into either sex during the peak of their sexual cycle, a period known as Kemmer.

Gethen is a world without gender or socio-sexual roles, but it does hold to a strict code of social and political conduct—shifgrethor—to which all members of society are beholden. To this world comes Genly Ai, an emissary from the Ekumen, an alliance of human worlds who has come to Gethen to convince the world to join the Ekumen. Genly must confront not only his own gender biases, but navigate the complex code of shifgrethor, and the numerous layers of political intrigue that surround him. The novel was a masterpiece, and won both of science fiction's top awards for 1970, the Hugo and the Nebula awards.

In the 1970s, Le Guin continued to publish at a furious pace, with a new novel nearly every year. She wrote two sequels to *A Wizard of Earthsea*, *The Tombs of Atuan* (Atheneum) in 1970 and *The Farthest Shore* (Atheneum) in 1972, creating one of the most celebrated and widely read fantasy trilogies since Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*.

The year between the two Earthsea sequels, Le Guin published The Lathe of Heaven, an alternate-reality story neatly meshed with elements of Taoist philosophy.

In the middle of writing these three novels, the idea for a new story began germinating that tied into Le Guin's reading of all the pacifist-anarchist literature available in English at the time. This idea developed into perhaps her most well-known novel, *The Dispossessed*, the story of a brilliant scientist at odds with his utopian anarchist society. The novel is one of the best, if not the best, fictional realization of an anarchist society as it might be practiced, and remains one of the most influential modern utopian novels written.

The Dispossessed was awarded both the Hugo and Nebula awards for its year, making Le Guin the first author to win both awards twice for novels. Le Guin published several more novels and stories before decade's end, and her first book of essays, *The Language of the Night* (Putnam) in 1979.

Since the 1970s, Le Guin continued to put out a constant stream of new material, from novels to poetry, translations, and books for children. In 1983, Harper published *The Eye of the Heron*, a novel about a society of pacifists inspired by the life and writings of Gandhi. *Always Coming Home*, an experimental work mixing elements of narrative, anthropological study, poetry, songs, and art, to depict the culture and lifestyle of Kesh, a people living in the Pacific Northwest in a far distant future, followed.

In 1989, she published her second book of essays and criticism, *Dancing at the Edge of the World* (Grove), which included the essay, "A Non-Euclidean View of California as a Cold Place to Be," reprinted in *Fifth Estate* #382, Spring, 2010, an issue paying tribute to her writing.

[New writing continued as did honors recognizing her work through 2017.]

For more about Le Guin's life and work, visit her website: ursulakleguin.com.

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