

Ursula K. Le Guin: Prominent science fiction and fantasy writer (1929-2018)

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Ursula K. Le Guin, the enormously popular writer of numerous works of fantasy and science fiction, died at her home in Portland, Oregon on January 28. She was 88 years old.

Many obituaries of Le Guin have appeared in the media, where she is rightly celebrated as a talented and original writer of science fiction and fantasy. She is also often touted as a significant subversive writer, as a feminist and as the author of one of the few utopian novels (*The Dispossessed*, 1974) written in the second half of the 20th century.

These accolades, for the most part, however, do not delve deeply into Le Guin's work and the complexities and challenges of the period in which it was produced. It is difficult to seriously address her writing without considering the relationship of art to politics and the devastating decline in left-wing social thought over the last 40 years. Some explanation is necessary.

Le Guin was born in 1929 and raised in Berkeley, California. Her parents were both anthropologists. Her father, Alfred Louis Kroeber, was noted for his work on Native American cultures in California. Her mother, Theodora Kracaw Kroeber, wrote *Ishi in Two Worlds* (published in 1961 and a bestseller), about the "last wild Indian" in California (later made into a 1992 film, *The Last of His Tribe*, with Graham Greene as Ishi and Jon Voight as Alfred Kroeber). For years the book was widely read in American undergraduate anthropology classes.

Ursula attended Berkeley High School where a classmate of hers was the innovative science fiction writer Philip K. Dick (*The Man in the High Castle*, 1962). She was exposed through her parents and their friends to some of the finest achievements of 20th century art and literature. When she was nine or 10, she watched Diego Rivera on a scaffolding, painting murals at the Golden Gate International Exposition (1939 and 1940). As a young woman, she met writer John Steinbeck, the uncle of a close friend, whose *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) late in life she referred to as "the great American novel."

She attended Radcliffe College in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where she obtained a masters in medieval literature. On a Fulbright residence in Paris she met and married Charles Le Guin, who survives her, and with whom she raised three children.

In 1966 Le Guin published her first novel, *Rocannon's World*, at a time when science fiction was rapidly changing under the influence in part of a New Wave ("imaginistic, highly metaphoric ... inclined more towards Psychology and the Soft Sciences than to Hard SF [science fiction]," *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*), identified with authors and editors such as Michael Moorcock, J. G. Ballard, and Philip Jose Farmer. These writers were testing out new themes and paying more attention to aesthetics.

This was also the period in which J. R. R. Tolkien's work reached a broad audience and fantasy began to grow as a genre. Two other Le Guin novels, *Planet of Exile* (1966) and *City of Illusions* (1967) followed, and then in 1968, her fantasy *A Wizard of Earthsea*, appeared, written, at the suggestion of her publisher, for a younger audience.

This launched the Earthsea series, which is widely regarded as her best

work, or, at any rate, the most popular, and included after *A Wizard of Earthsea*, *The Tombs of Atuan* (1971), *The Farthest Shore* (1972), *Tehanu* (1990), and *The Other Wind* (2001), along with related short stories. They tell the story of a wizard, Ged and his travels in a giant archipelago called Earthsea, populated by peoples of many cultures and languages, intelligent dragons and creatures from the darkness. The books relate Ged's deeds from his beginnings as a goat-herd to an archmage [powerful magician or learned person] in old age.

The Earthsea novels can be read by adults with pleasure: they possess the charm of fairy tales, and Ged encounters many fanciful places and people. Le Guin brought to bear on these books much of her knowledge of early human cultures and mediaeval romance. They are some of the first works to assimilate and attempt to duplicate the type of fantasy Tolkien produced: highly developed worlds that had a history and an internal logic to their religions, cultures, and practice of magic.

Ged moves over the course of the novels from a youthful egotism and bravado to a patient understanding of people and places later in life. The lives of ordinary peasants and fisher-people are treated with sensitivity. Le Guin gave play to her best qualities as a writer: an eye for fictional detail and rhythmic language, and a general compassion for people. After Tolkien's *The Hobbit* (1937) and *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-55) and T. H. White's *The Once and Future King* (1938-58), the Earthsea novels remain the best works in modern heroic fantasy in the English language.

Le Guin is also well known for several works of science fiction that exhibit serious social concerns, beginning with her novella *The Word for World is Forest* (published in 1972 but written in 1968), *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), *The Lathe of Heaven* (1971) and *The Dispossessed*.

The Word for World is Forest treats a brutal colonial invasion by Earth's humans of a culture on a less developed planet, and the resulting war of liberation by the latter's native species. The novella originally appeared in *Again, Dangerous Visions* (1972), the second volume of the anthology of innovative and experimental science fiction edited by Harlan Ellison. Le Guin wrote it out of disgust with the American war in Vietnam.

She later worried that the novel was too "preachy." It does strike one today as being aesthetically marred by simplistic and single-note earthling characters and overly noble and sympathetic native rebels, whose cultures resemble those of Native American and Australian peoples, borrowed somewhat uncritically.

But it was with *The Left Hand of Darkness*, which she termed a feminist work, that Le Guin began to suggest that gender played a prominent, if not the determining, role in social development.

In the novel, an emissary from Earth makes first contact with the inhabitants of a planet, Gethen, whose inhabitants are normally asexual except for about once a month when they can become sexually active, sometimes as males, sometimes as females.

Le Guin says that she began the book as a "thought experiment." "I eliminated gender to find out what was left," she wrote in an essay about

the work, “Is Gender Necessary?” (1976). But far from eliminating the role of gender in society, or at least in the society she and her readers inhabited, the novel elevates it to world-historical proportions.

For example, while there is personal, and sometimes even localized, violence on Gethen, there are no large-scale wars because male aggression is missing. As she remarked later, “To me the ‘female principle’ is, or at least historically has been, basically anarchic … It has been the male who enforces order, who constructs power structures, who makes, enforces, and breaks laws.”

Writers with left-wing views certainly faced difficulties in the 1960s and early 1970s. “Socialism” was still largely identified with the USSR and the Communist Parties (and perhaps Maoist China), or the social democratic parties and unions. Powerful bureaucracies by and large sat on the working class and prevented its independent activity.

The “radical” artist, not entirely due to his or her fault, was largely cut off and distant from broad layers of the population. The left intellectual atmosphere was dominated by a search for some substitute for the working class as the agent of social change—students, intellectuals, Third World peasants, Castroite guerrillas, etc.—or, in Le Guin’s case, the pacific-anarchistic “female principle.”

At the same, these were also years of substantial struggles by the working class and by colonial peoples against imperialism, above all in Vietnam. The imperialist bloodletting in that country had a radicalizing influence on the thoughts and feelings of many writers and artists. Le Guin herself refers to her ‘anger and frustration’ with the world in 1968, whose first product was *The Word for World is Forest*.

In a significant remark about *The Left Hand of Darkness* in 1988, Le Guin said, “I was interested in writing a novel about a society that had never had a war. That came first. The androgyny came second.”

As a work of art, the novel is damaged by its feminism. The genderless society doesn’t seem much different from our own, but the novel constantly strains to elevate gender through the eyes of its Earthly protagonist, who is trying to understand Gethen sexuality. The existence of repressive monarchical and totalitarian states makes no sense given the absence of male-generated violence, a fact Le Guin herself recognized later.

But other aspects make the novel good science fiction: the means by which Gethen’s cultures have adapted to a perpetual winter, for example, is effectively drawn. Le Guin also writes with a genuine sensitivity to her protagonist, the emissary from Earth, a man who must come to an alien world by himself and attempt to persuade its leaders to join a peaceful league of worlds. There are dramatic scenes of adventure and survival, a trip in subzero temperatures across a glacier, a prison camp.

The novel struck a chord. It won both the Hugo and Nebula Awards, the top honors in the science fiction world, in 1969 and established Le Guin as a major figure in the genre.

Le Guin’s failed search for the social axis on which society turns is even more pronounced in *The Dispossessed*. The novel about the human physicist Shevek is told in the form of alternating chapters about his life in two different civilizations. One set of chapters takes place on his home world, the anarchist society on Anarres, a moon of the planet Urras, from which the anarchists, followers of a theorist named Odo, emigrated about 200 years before the start of the novel. The second set takes place during Shevek’s visit on a scientific mission to a university in A-Io, a wealthy capitalist nation on Urras itself.

The scenes on Anarres describe the childhood and youth of a precocious boy growing up and becoming a leading scientist in an anarchist-communist society. Le Guin’s depiction of Shevek’s challenges of career and personal relationships are well drawn. But none of the characters on Anarres strikes one as being a new kind of person molded by new kind of society. Anarresti society, overall, seems to resemble an Israeli kibbutz or one of the utopian experiments of the 19th century.

That is, the conceptions about life and society in Anarres and Urras are entirely divorced from a genuine understanding of social development, both by the characters and by the author. The material and historical foundations of Urresti and Anarresti society are not so much as hinted at.

On Anarres, there is no private property and work is regulated by a combination of personal preference and lottery-type assignments. What holds this society together, though, is not material reality—because this is a desert planet on which there is often scarcity—but good intentions and ideas. And even with those, certain syndicates—voluntary associations of people—play more important roles than others and greed and privilege enter through the back door, despite people’s best efforts.

The nation-state of A-Io on Urras, on the other hand, resembles the America of the 1970s, or rather, what a middle-class radical observer found especially objectionable at the time: its consumerism, its gender roles, its unjust foreign interventions. Compared to A-Io, the communal austerity on Anarres appears to be a virtue.

There is one set of scenes, though, that would be unlikely to find its way into the fiction of the last ten or twenty years. One of the servants assigned to Shevek at the university tells him that the working people find Anarres a political inspiration. “We had about enough,” the man says. “Let somebody go free from this goddamned prison we live in.”

Shevek finds out from this man that there are revolutionaries among the poor of A-Io. He then escapes from his university handlers and contacts the working-class anarchists who are motivated by Odo’s ideas. He speaks at a mass workers’ antiwar demonstration that is bloodily suppressed by the police. Shevek is nearly killed, too, and hides for days in a cellar with a wounded demonstrator.

These scenes do show an active, political working class—virtually absent from art and literature today. But it is doomed to defeat. Shevek then makes his own way with an invention, based on his theories, that will help unite the inhabited planets in the galaxy.

As with *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Le Guin’s revulsion with the Vietnam war was a starting point for this book. She noted in a 2017 introduction to the work, “I started by reading a whole mess of utopias and learning something about pacifism and Gandhi and nonviolent resistance. This led me to the nonviolent anarchist writers such as Peter Kropotkin and Paul Goodman. With them I felt a great, immediate affinity.”

The great historical problem of the nature of the Soviet Union and the role of Stalinism lurk in the background here as well. Besides wealthy capitalist A-Io, Urras contains another nation-state, Thu, that speaks in the name of the working class, but is a totalitarian regime. Anarchist Anarres itself, established peacefully by emigrants from Urras, implicitly raises questions about the validity of revolution, the working class, and Marxism.

The work, as a modern “utopia,” has sparked a small academic industry that extols precisely the weaknesses of Le Guin as an artist. Unfortunately, Le Guin’s work has popularized utopianism and anarchism far more and longer than they deserve.

It can’t be said that her social conceptions helped her develop as an artist. One later novel, *Lavinia* (2008) is a feminist retelling of scenes from Virgil’s *Aeneid* from the point of view of Lavinia, the Italian princess whom Aeneas eventually marries when he founds Rome. While it is faithful to Virgil in many ways, the novel tends to fall flat when Lavinia has conversations with “the poet,” and apparently sees herself as a character in a poem.

Le Guin continued to associate herself with feminism and anarchism: In 2011 she wrote an introduction to a collection of essays of the anarchist Murray Bookchin that was suffused with pessimism about the possibility of changing the world.

Nevertheless, Le Guin was a talented and sincere artist, and many of her works, particularly those that are less self-consciously political, such as

her Earthsea books, will no doubt continue to please readers for a long time to come.



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