My Favorite Misfit: Ursula K. Le Guin [1]

April 30, 2018 Authors [2]
Science and Society [3]
First Person [4]

Essay by Martha Nichols

Ode to a Realist of a Larger Reality (1929–2018)



As I watched the season finale of *Star Trek: Discovery* in early February, I wondered if Ursula Le Guin had seen the new series before she died. Maybe she hated it. But I want to believe she would have appreciated the main character: a black woman named Michael Burnham (Sonequa Martin-Green). Michael is a perennial outsider, a human raised by Vulcans to revere logic. The series also includes a female captain (Michelle Yeoh) and, by season's end, a female admiral (Jayne Brook).

At least fictionally, we're light years beyond the original *Star Trek*, when women weren't allowed to be captains. Acts of imagination do impact popular culture, and Le Guin's provocative speculations helped many of us reimagine what's possible. She died on January 22, 2018, and when I first heard the news, I felt a deep ache. More than anyone, she was my writing mother, the gimlet-eyed angel watching over me decades ago when I attempted my own futuristic

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novels.

Although I never met her, Le Guin's science fiction classics—especially *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), *The Lathe of Heaven* (1971), and *The Dispossessed* (1974)—fired up my young dreams of changing the world of gender and politics. Then there's her nonfiction. Her most recent collection, *No Time to Spare: Thinking About What Matters*, came out just last year. Le Guin's voice was always authoritative, sometimes a bit too impersonal, but wonderfully prickly.

Take "The Space Crone," first published in 1976 in the *CoEvolution Quarterly*. In this short essay about menopause, Le Guin noted that when women reach the "change," as she had, they often view it as just another physical challenge to surmount. But if they instead embraced the transformation, they'd have an edge on men, who don't experience the same shift in reproductive status. Men "never change again," she sniffed. "That's their loss, not ours." Then she posed the following scenario:

Friendly Altaireans arrive on Earth, seeking a human to come back with them on their spaceship "to learn from an exemplary person the nature of the race." That volunteer shouldn't be a daring young male astronaut, she argued, but a postmenopausal woman "from behind the costume jewelry counter or the betel-nut booth." The woman won't volunteer on her own, she wrote:

> It will be very hard to explain to her that we want her to go because only a person who has experienced, accepted, and acted the entire human condition—the essential quality of which is Change—can fairly represent humanity.

Le Guin's tart last line: "Into the spaceship, Granny."

Now that I'm older myself, this resonates. But Le Guin's death has also caught me off guard, pointing up another kind of change in perspective. Rather than walking the familiar road back to my teenage obsession with science fiction, I've realized what I owe her as a journalist and teacher.

From Le Guin, I absorbed how easy it is to misinterpret other people. I didn't become a science fiction writer, but I still feel her influence on me as a feminist journalist. In *The Left Hand of Darkness*, humanoids on the icy planet of Gethen can shift gender, but these sorts of flashy transformations were only the starting point for me. Le Guin exemplified both the strengths and weaknesses of being an outside observer—and the guts required to keep speaking the truth as you see it.

As a role model, she's my favorite misfit: a female intellectual among male geeks; a west-coast author amid east-coast literati; a self-proclaimed housewife in Oregon survived by a husband, three children, and four grandchildren. She came of age in Berkeley, California, the daughter of an anthropologist and a writer (Alfred and Theodora Kroeber). She mixed social science with literature, writing poetry as well as fiction and nonfiction, hopping all over the creative map.

Le Guin, who graduated from Radcliffe in 1951, was certainly a misfit in the literary world of the fifties. But she didn't fit in anywhere over the course of her 88 years, even after she won top awards for her science fiction and fantasy. The last time I saw her speak, at the 2014 AWP Conference in Seattle, she talked wryly about receiving recent rejections of her work from literary magazines.

A 2012 "Science Fiction" issue of the *New Yorker* did include a personal recollection by her called "The Golden Age," a reference to what it was like to be an SF writer in the way-back time of space sagas, when traditional English departments didn't consider science fiction to be literature. But that's all changed with the rise of hybrid authors like Michael Chabon, she wrote, "who came crashing like a golem out of Berkeley across the genre walls and through the gated communities and left them in rubble."

Here's the irony: that special issue didn't include actual science fiction by Ursula Le Guin or any of the other SF writers listed under "Sci-Fi" in the table of contents. The fiction slots went to literary writers like Sam Lipsyte and Jennifer Egan.

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"How she's received really depends on who you talk to," Julie Phillips told me recently by email. Author of the 2006 biography *James Tiptree, Jr.: The Double Life of Alice B. Sheldon* (Tiptree, another renowned female SF author, wrote under a male pseudonym), Phillips adds, "I'd say that the 'literary elite' isn't a monolith: there's a section of it in which Le Guin is highly regarded, and another in which she's thought of as an oddity. Her last few books were widely reviewed in literary magazines, but the *New York Times* never got over thinking of her as a science fiction writer."

Phillips is at work on an upcoming biography of Le Guin and spent many hours interviewing her before her death. In a 2016 *New Yorker* profile, "The Fantastic World of Ursula K. Le Guin," Phillips describes the view of river and mountains from the author's back porch in Portland, then makes this perceptive observation:

> The span of it evokes the feeling of distance and isolation that runs through her work, and the awareness, more often found in science than in fiction, that what we can comprehend is a small part of everything there is to know.

Many of Le Guin's characters are isolated outsiders, too. They're an alien envoy on Gethen, a physicist caught between two warring worlds, a psychiatric patient whose dreams can change reality in terrifying ways. They're like journalists trying to make all the weird facts fit. They emphasize the uncertain nature of observation itself, which may put off readers who prefer more personal dynamics.

Le Guin juggled head and heart, not always successfully, but it's her contrariness about everything from avoiding confessional writing to Amazon's chilling effect on book publishing—her refusal to give in to utopian clichés—that made her a mentor to me. She even subtitled her novel *The Dispossessed* "An Ambiguous Utopia."

My own SF manuscripts have been gathering dust in file drawers for years, but I'm still a passionate reader of hybrid stories that tweak the conventional wisdom. In reading *The Left Hand of Darkness* for the third time, I have a new appreciation for how Le Guin combined faux first-person accounts and historical records with folktales to offer competing perspectives on an "alien" society. Her main character, the envoy Genly Ai, opens with his notes on Gethen, a world known by outsiders as Winter:

> I'll make my report as if I told a story, for I was taught as a child on my homeworld that Truth is a matter of the imagination. The soundest fact may fail or prevail in the style of its telling: like that singular organic jewel of our seas, which grows brighter as one woman wears it and, worn by another, dulls and goes to dust. Facts are no more solid, coherent, round, and real than pearls are. But both are sensitive.

The notion of facts as sensitive remains remarkably relevant and not just because Genly's story grapples with gender fluidity. Reporters are accustomed to being told to act like "anthropologists on Mars." But even when journalists and scientists do their best to be objective, these outsiders have biases, as Le Guin knew when she wrote this novel in the late sixties. Outsiders can also be profoundly changed by what they observe, whether it's the real war in Syria or a king giving birth on a fictional planet.

Challenges to social norms demand a different way of interpreting the world. Are the changes good or bad? It depends on who's watching and recording. Le Guin grew up steeped in social science, and if you're in her camp, as I am, human experience can't really be conveyed without stories—or without acknowledging the storyteller's point of view. Information by itself isn't meaningful, even if it's often used as a cudgel to prove the immutability of facts. Le Guin's final blog post last September was "Poem Written in 1991, When the Soviet Union Was Disintegrating" and includes these lines:

My father didn't like words like 'soul.'
He shaved with Occam's razor.
Why make up stuff

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when there's enough already?
But I do fiction. I make up.
There is never enough stuff.

The stuff we need—"kindness, courage, twilight, and the ocean"—seems to be dwindling fast in the digital realm. On my bad days, this world feels like a mess of imperfect knowledge, and I wonder if rereading her poems and books could just be a defense against believing Ursula Le Guin is really gone. But if she taught me anything, it's that close observation matters. It's how we misfits imagine a better reality. As Le Guin said in a stirring speech for the 2014 National Book Awards:

> Hard times are coming, when we'll be wanting the voices of writers who can see alternatives to how we live now, can see through our fear-stricken society and its obsessive technologies to other ways of being, and even imagine real grounds for hope. We'll need writers who can remember freedom—poets, visionaries—realists of a larger reality.

I hope you're on that spaceship, Granny.

Publishing Information

- "Ursula K. Le Guin, Acclaimed for Her Fantasy Fiction, Is Dead at 88" [5] by Gerald Jonas, *New York Times*, January 23, 2018.
- "The Space Crone," reprinted in *Dancing at the Edge of the World: Thoughts on Words, Women, Places* by Ursula K. Le Guin (Grove Press, 1989).
- "The Golden Age" [6] by Ursula K. Le Guin, *New Yorker*, June 4 and 11, 2012.
- "Literary elite" quote by Julie Phillips, personal correspondence, April 14, 2018.
- "The Fantastic Ursula K. Le Guin" [7] by Julie Phillips, *New Yorker*, October 17, 2016.
- "Postscript: The Subversive Imagination of Ursula K. Le Guin" [8] by Julie Phillips, *New Yorker*, January 25, 2018.
- *The Left Hand of Darkness* by Ursula K. Le Guin (Ace Books, 1969).
- "Ursula K. Le Guin's Blog" [9] (2017) and "Tributes to Ursula K. Le Guin" [10] on the author's website (this includes a link to the public memorial for Le Guin to be held in Portland on June 13, 2018).
- "Ursula K. Le Guin Is the 2014 Recipient of the Foundation's Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters." [11] National Book Awards Ceremony, 2014.

Art Information

- Photo of Ursula K. Le Guin by Jack Liu © 2014 Jack Liu; used with photographer's permission.

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Note: Julie Phillips, quoted in this piece, will be the judge of TW's 2018 essay contest. The topic is "Place and Identity," something Phillips captures brilliantly in her biographical writing about Ursula Le Guin.

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[8] https://www.newyorker.com/culture/postscript/the-subversive-imagination-of-ursula-k-le-guin
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