

Interviews

Interview with Ursula K. Le Guin

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Ursula K. Le Guin wrote her first story at age nine – it was about elves. Over the past 75 years she has published over 23 novels, 10 collections of short stories, 8 volumes of poetry and 13 books for children. Though she is mostly known as a writer of speculative fiction, her work often defies the classifications of genre. Since she started publishing, her writing has won every major sf and fantasy award. She has also been short-listed for the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize.

Le Guin began her career in the late 1960s writing sf. At that time sf, a male-dominated space, tended towards power-fantasy pulp tales about white men conquering the galaxy or hard science “thought-experiments” about physics and technology shaping the future. With her interest in softer sciences like anthropology and biology, her commitment to feminism and her literary sensibilities, Le Guin revolutionized the genre with books like *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Dispossessed*.

At the same time, Le Guin ventured into the realms of the timeless truth – of myth – in her works of fantasy. “A Wizard of Earthsea,” the first in her Earthsea series of novels and stories, was named by *Locus* magazine as the best all-time fantasy work after

The Lord of the Rings and *The Hobbit* (*Locus*, online). And, here too, Le Guin continued to push genre boundaries by introducing, in 1968, a fantasy protagonist who wasn't white (a significant detail that filmed adaptations of Earthsea have failed to take into account.)

In addition to writing novels, short stories and poems, Le Guin is also an essayist, blogger and public speaker. At 84 years of age, she continues to write and to speak, to publish and win awards. When I contacted her to ask if she was interested in talking to *FemSpec* about ageing, women and speculative fiction, she quickly replied in the affirmative. Here is what she had to say:

1. You've long been a champion for ageing women. "The Space Crone," which you wrote in 1976, talks about the importance of embracing the transition of menopause and celebrating the role of Crone with all its wisdom and its wrinkles. In our youth-fixated culture, where ageing is feared, this message seems more important than ever. On your blog you're pretty upfront about the invisibility of old women and how platitudes like "you're only 84 years young!" are disrespectful of the experience of ageing. As an 84-year old woman living in America today, how has this culture of denial most impacted your experience of ageing?

UKL: Well, as an old woman, I'm perfectly willing to talk about old age as it affects women. But I don't want to just repeat my blogs, and there is something I want to say, so I am grabbing this chance – thank you, Stephanie!

Old age affects gender in some ways I didn't expect – I think it tends to lessen gender differences, and in some ways is an equalizer. And it can be at least as hard on men as it is on women. I've seen old men friends realize that they've become invisible to the young, just like ageing women; and a lot of men haven't had the practice in being not seen that we have, so it's hard for them not to take it personally. Men are supposed to be physically strong, and losing strength, they lose self-respect. Men are so invested in being what they do, when they can't do it any more they feel it as a fault in themselves, and again, they're ashamed, as well as depressed.

So disrespect or denial of old age hits men and women equally hard. And therefore, in my experience, being old tends to create fellow-feeling. If he and I are sitting on the same bench at the stand-up-and-chatter party because he has arthritis and I have stenosis and standing hurts both of us like hell, we don't have to talk about it (and he probably wouldn't, because as a male he's been taught to deny weakness). But we're not just the him stranger and the her stranger sitting on the bench – we're the old ones. An understanding is implicit – acceptance, compassion. That's important.

2. Your relationship with the genre of speculative fiction (and here I'm including fantasy, sf and magical realism) seems to be a complex one. You've said before the need to publish drove you to write sf, and yet – once you started – you redefined and feminized the genre with books like *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Dispossessed*. Your story "The Day Before the Revolution" – with its elderly heroine – is so potent and subversive but in such

a different way than a more “realistic” work like Margaret Laurence’s “The Stone Angel”. Though you’d rather drop the genre labels and be known only as a novelist and a poet can you speak about the significance of sf for you both as a feminist and as a writer?

UKL: Again, I’ve said and written so much about this, that I dread going over the ground yet again. Very briefly, then, fifty years ago a marginalized genre such as sf offered freedom from the limiting expectations and ambitions of the literary establishment, which most respected and rewarded male writers and male-centered writing. It still does, but the breakdown of the Modernist/Realist regime in fiction has freed critics to redefine what literature is and who writes (and reads) it. And the feminist movement in literature had a lot to do with this “post-modern” breakup of the ice that kept the mainstream frozen, this freeing of the current.

Now, if sf is just one of the ice floes crashing downstream, melting into the river, how much sense is it going to make to keep talking about it as “a genre”? Isn’t it just one way of the many ways of writing fiction, telling a story?

3. Do you feel there’s a specific role that sf can play in helping to increase the visibility of ageing women?

UKL: Well, that’s easy: Write about them!

But please can they not be women-who-act-just-like-men? I’m fed up with heroes-with-tits who conquer and boast and fuck and kill and all the rest of the easy part of being a hero,

while some faceless no-bodies in the background try to make sure the kids get fed. Let's put some real grandmothers in charge, please. Let's find out what aunts are for.

4. When you talk about your coming to feminism in the 70s and 80s, you mention how often people took you to task for not writing more female characters. You have apologized for this and have written essays explaining the choices you made at that time and the feminist shift that took place in you and your writing. You've also given many public talks on the same issues and other issues – like abortion – related to women. I've gotten so much from reading these essays and I know I'm not the only woman who's done so. Can you speak about your experience of being a feminist role model and how you feel about taking on that role?

UKL: Being a role model is playing a role, and I don't like playing roles, it makes me feel like a fake, an impostor. Grace Paley, now – there's the real thing – somebody who by being purely who she was set an example to us all of how to be who we are.

The best things that came out of feminism as I lived it were the high points of a meeting or discussion or a workshop when we established a genuine, active understanding among women, which is remarkably different from an understanding among men or both genders. All three are equally valuable, but active understanding among women has historically been discouraged and kept down on a sub-intellectual plane. To achieve it intellectually and artistically, to feel the strength of the

community of women running through us all, was and is a great experience, and one not enough women ever have.

I'd already had a taste of that experience in college, before the re-invention of feminism, because I went to an intellectually oriented women's college, Radcliffe, the tiny, uppity enclave which Harvard finally succeeded in devouring or incorporating. Harvard is full of women now, and that's great. But is there anything in our schools to give young women the buoyant solidarity and intellectual self-confidence as a woman that I knew at twenty? I hope so.

5. You've spoken about the differences you see between male and female ways of speaking and writing. In your "Bryn Mawr Commencement Address" you contrast them saying, "The father tongue is spoken from above. It goes one way. No answer is expected, or heard. ... [W]hen it claims a privileged relationship to reality, it becomes dangerous and potentially destructive." On the other hand, "The Mother Tongue, spoken or written, expects an answer ... [it] is language not as mere communication but as relation, relationship. It connects." (Le Guin 149) Now, more than ever, as we become increasingly disconnected from ourselves, each other and the environment, the female language of connection is vital. From your perspective of experience, do you feel that progress is being made in terms of the acceptance of this way of speaking? How can we keep moving feminine discourse forward?

UKL: By writing in the mother tongue. By expecting an answer, and listening very carefully. By feeling free to put women

and what women do and how we do it at the center of our stories, including male ambitions and interests or leaving them outside just as we please. By learning to devalue the M/F dichotomy, to explore ungendered behavior.

At which our agents or editors may whine “Can’t you make it more like *Harry Potter*? Can’t you make it more like *Game of Thrones*? Can’t you make it a War between the Good Guys and the Evil Guys?” Don’t listen to them. Put wax in your ears. Carry on.

6. One of the things you’ve said you wanted to do with your writing is to “connect what it’s now fashionable to call waking-time and dream-time.” To quote you more in full. “There are two aspects of time, and we live waking in one; but western civilization has announced that there’s only one real time, and it is that one. This I more or less consciously reject, and I am perpetually attempting by one metaphor and device or another in my books to reestablish the connection between the dream-time and the waking-time, to say that one depends on the other absolutely.” (Le Guin, Wickes, Westling 20) Would you characterize the distinction between these two states of time as male (waking) and female (dream)? Or is that too simplistic? Why is it so important to communicate this connection?

UKL: What I’m trying to get at in that quote is something like the yin-yang figure, where hard-bright-dry-active-male-sky and soft-dark-wet-receptive-female-earth are opposites yet neither can exist without the other and indeed without becoming the other. Western Civilization, as exemplified in say Descartes,

made a big effort to establish Permanent Yang. We are now paying the price for that triumph of the will as exemplified in the uncontrolled human exploitation/destruction of earthly resources. Which is why it's important to remember, and communicate, and celebrate, the absolute interdependence of the two great forces.

7. I noticed the spirals on your website; they made me think of how your characters often come back to the place they began and I'm reminded of the labyrinth – not the patriarchal maze of the Greek hero, but the old prehistoric labyrinth which facilitated a vision quest, a journey into dream-time from which one emerges from the same place transformed. What is the connection here with the spiral for you?

UKL. Those spirals come from my book *Always Coming Home*. They're called heyiya-if and represent the hinge between the material and the spiritual world. A bit too complex to explain here, but there's lots about them in the book.

8. I'm curious about the process of "listening" you talk about when you're writing. Your characters come to you and you translate or transcribe their story. This "overhearing," this surrender to the other voice – a voice that isn't yours – seems very feminine to me. And yet sf in particular seems very intentional or intellect-focused, as in: "I want to write a book that explores this idea or that idea." Is writing, for you, a process of balancing your intellect with your receptive side? What shifts have you seen in your writing process as you've aged?

UKL. Balancing the intellectual with the receptive, yang-

yin again, right? Intention is control, intellect seeks control.

Getting old (let's face it) is ultimately a losing battle – if you look at it as a battle. If you see it not just a fight against loss of control, but as something you need to learn to do – learning how to yin – that frees you up in some ways. In writing, for instance, you can relax the effort to control, to be completely in charge of everything in the work, at least long enough to find out what happens when you do. So this is really just a continuation of the taoistic approach that has always made the most sense to me. To paraphrase Lao Tzu, write a long novel the way you cook a small fish.

9. Throughout your career you've spoken about the importance of Taoism to you. You've even done your own translation/interpretation of the Tao Te Ching. "Lavinia," your most recent novel, can be seen as a feminist revision of the classical Latin poet Vergil. Yet, despite its ancient Roman setting, the work feels very Taoist to me. It is a book full of paradoxes both in terms of its characters and its structure. Yin and yang play back and forth in the book on many levels but there is a sense of the "rightness" or the "naturalness" of this interplay. The most interesting paradox for me is that between Lavinia herself and her creator, the poet Vergil. Their relationship – which is filled with such compassion – is both real and unreal, both constraining and freeing, both true and untrue; it is very enigmatic. Can you speak about what you wanted to explore with this relationship?

UKL. I'd call it more of an homage to Vergil than a revision, but yes it's Taoistic, at least in the sense of relaxing

intentional control of a story in order to find out what happens from the story itself.

I wasn't trying explore anything with the relationship, just the relationship. The relationship of a minor character to a great writer, there's a strange thing, a fascinating one. But then of course there's another relationship, Aeneas and Lavinia – the unwritten love story, the unexplored possibility. And the family relationships, the crazy mother – what is going on there? The characters are powerful, complex, and enigmatic – and so is Vergil, who was dying as he tried to finish the book. It was all fascinating –intellectually, emotionally, morally. But I was just struggling along trying to read it in Latin, no thought of a novel in my head, until Lavinia began suddenly to tell me about it. She told me one day, clearly, in English, in my notebook, "I know who I was, I can tell you who I may have been, but I am, now, only in this line of words I write." Once I had written those words, all I had to do was to keep listening. To keep listening very, very carefully, to make sure I got it right.

Thanks for the interesting questions, and my best wishes to your readers –

Ursula

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