

Ursula K. Le Guin is a titan among science fiction and fantasy writers, and one of the few to be equally comfortable with, and adept at, both genres – as evinced by her *Earthsea* (fantasy) and *Hainish* (SF) series. Her books are, without exception, evocative, powerful studies of the human condition, every word displaying her deep understanding of what makes mankind tick. She's one of our favourites, okay? By Guy Haley

URSULA K. LE GUIN

There are authors who entertain without enlightening, there are authors who enlighten without entertaining, and there are authors who do both. Twisting these two goals of literature into perfect lines of prose is not easy, but then most of us are not Ursula K. Le Guin.

Her remarkable attention to detail makes the places described in her books live and breathe in a way that few other authors can manage. Furthermore, her characters are amongst the most believable in the genre. She has a fundamental understanding of the human soul that allows her creations to almost walk from the page. Her portrayal of the differences between men and women is unsurpassed, to the extent that *A Wizard of Earthsea* is one of the best coming-of-age tales for men ever written. Her writing is often placed in the box marked 'feminist', but her works are egalitarian, not angry polemics, and tend to see the good and bad in both sexes.

Le Guin has undoubtedly been influenced by her anthropologist father, Alfred L. Kroeber. He was recognised as one of the foremost scholars in the field, especially for his work with disappearing Native American cultures. His mastery of the social sciences is something that Le Guin also exhibits, and it is her grasp of how society, gender and environment interacts that make her books so compelling. Whether we're being given insight into the nature of power through the maritime culture of *Earthsea*, or unknowingly imbibing concepts about the liquidity of our perceived reality in *The Lathe of Heaven*, her books are grave, thoughtful but altogether uplifting takes on the ultimate nobility of the human spirit. That they are also often exciting and thoroughly absorbing adventures in ◀



URSULA K. LE GUIN FACT FILE

Born: 1929, Berkeley, California

Where is she to be found? She has lived in rainy old Portland, Oregon for almost 50 years.

What does she write? Her work tends towards examinations of the human condition, through the redemption of a character who is alienated from, or alien to, a particular setting. She is best known for two major series. Her *Hainish* books are set in a universe seeded millennia ago by humans from Hain, its clashing cultures fertile ground for her anthropological themes. Her fantasy *Earthsea* stories look at the balance of power between the genders. She's written several standalone novels and realist short stories, and is a prolific essayist, her favoured topics being writing, the power of language and storytelling.

Who is she influenced by? It's best to ask who she influenced, not who influenced her. She (unsuccessfully) submitted her first short story to *Astounding Science Fiction*, aged 11.

Awards: She has won over a dozen, including five Nebulas and five Hugos. *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) and *The Dispossessed* (1974) won both. Other awards include *Lucas*, National Book, and more.

☛ wonderfully imagined alien settings is more than enough to merit all the attention she's had from genre fans, mainstream critics and academics alike. Frankly, we love Le Guin's work: she's a woman possessed of an almost frightening wisdom...

DEATHRAY: To begin at the beginning, which authors inspired you to become a writer?
URSULA K. LE GUIN: I started writing poems and stories at age five. Not quite sure what authors and books I was familiar with at that age. *Peter Rabbit?* *Mother Goose?*

I think 'the anxiety of influence' is considerably overrated. Some people, if they get half a chance, are going to find rhythm and music in their language and make up stories with it, just like other people are going to make songs or draw pictures or dance. Yes, we borrow a lot; but art is, primarily, a gift.

DR: You're often described as a feminist writer. Do you think that is an accurate assessment? Did you set out to be a feminist writer, or is this opinion of you based on the fact that you were a well-received female author at the time when feminism was at its height, and you were sort of co-opted by the movement?

UKL: I have frequently described myself as a feminist, because feminist thinking and writing of the '60s and '70s had a huge liberating influence on me, setting my mind free from a whole lot of masculist bigotries and superstitions; and so it would be untruthful and ungrateful not to call myself a feminist, even if the term doesn't fully describe either my thinking or my writing.

Besides, when you say you're a feminist it annoys the bigots and the old farts and the prissy ladies so much, it's kind of irresistible.

DR: Did feminism succeed?

UKL: I see fish riding bicycles everywhere... Don't you?

DR: One of the most noteworthy things about your books is that your characters are entirely believable. How do you manage this?

UKL: By being fully convinced, while writing them, that they exist. And that, therefore, there's a whole lot about every one of them that I don't know. It's my job as a novelist to try and find out what I need to know about them.

DR: You also portray men in an accurate way that few men, even, succeed at. They are not the caricatures women often write – emotionally stunted, annoying and inclined to unthinking action, nor the caricatures men are prone to writing – all notions of war and conquest and the masters of easily gained power. What gives you this insight into the male psyche?

UKL: Thank you for some much-appreciated praise. I think women look at men partly in wonder and mystification – why ever do men act like that? – and partly with the clear, impartial understanding of the interested observer: this is how men act. Men look at women with the same double vision, I think. The other gender's view of us can be and should be a very valuable thing to us. But too often it's clouded by prejudice,



ON FANTASY

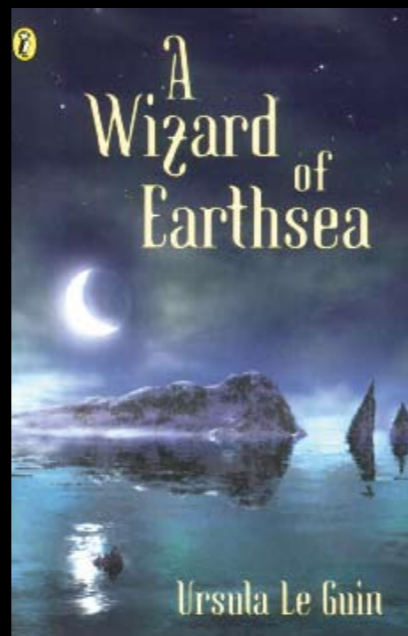
WE ASKED URSULA K. LE GUIN WHAT THE HALLMARK WAS OF GOOD FANTASTICAL FICTION. AFTER ALL, WE FIGURED IF ANYONE SHOULD KNOW THE ANSWER, IT WOULD BE HER...

Good writing style and accurate detail makes good fantastical fiction: to start with. I don't have much to say about this that I haven't already said, and I hate to find I'm repeating myself without knowing it; so let me repeat myself deliberately. In a piece called 'From Elfland to Poughkeepsie' reprinted in my book *The Language of the Night*, I talked about style in fantasy writing:

"Why is style of such fundamental significance in fantasy? Just because a writer gets the tone of a conversation a bit wrong, or describes things vaguely, or uses an anachronistic vocabulary or shoddy syntax, or begins going a bit heavy on the ichor before dinner – does that disqualify the book as a fantasy? Just because the style is weak and inappropriate – is that so important?"

I think it is, because in fantasy there is nothing but the writer's vision of the world. There is no borrowed reality of history, or current events, or just plain folks at home in Peyton Place. There is no comfortable matrix of the commonplace to substitute for the imagination, to provide a ready-made emotional response, and to disguise flaws and failures of creation. There is only a construct built in a void, with every joint and seam and nail exposed. To create what Tolkien calls 'a secondary universe' is to make a new world. A world where no voice has ever spoken before; where the act of speech is the act of creation. The only voice that speaks there is the creator's voice. And every word counts.

This is an awful responsibility to



undertake, when all the poor writer wants to do is play dragons, to entertain us all for a while... But all the same, if one undertakes a responsibility one should be aware of.

And I believe that the reader has a responsibility; if we love the stuff we read, we have a duty toward it. That duty is to refuse to be fooled; to refuse to admit commercial exploitation of the holy ground of Myth; to reject shoddy work, and to save our praise for the real thing. Because when fantasy is the real thing, nothing, after all, is realer."

I wrote that about 35 years ago. It still says pretty much just the same as what I'd say now.

As for accurate details in the story, it's essential in fantasy for the same reason that a strong style is: because there isn't any world there at all except the one you build up out of details and description. It's all up to you.

So how can a detail be 'accurate' if you made it up? How do we know that nimriths weigh only a few ounces and have long claws? I made up nimriths, so why can't I say they are heavy and clawless? Because back on page 90, as our heroine crossed the Voomian Desert, she noticed that she could track the nimriths in the greyish dust only by the deep scratches left by their claws as they hopped along...

A fantastic detail is accurate if it is consistent throughout the story and if it is coherent with other details in the story. If it's changed, there has to be a reason, a cause, just as in the real world.

I keep hitting on this because I read so much would-be fantasy that cheats on the accurate, vivid details that would build up a credible world. The writer just pushes a lot of tired, borrowed, fake clichés around. Fantasy kingdoms in which people fight and kill each other all the time, which have no economy, no working class, no possible way to keep going... fantasy people who ride horses all day and night and then leap off them and never give them another thought... I'm supposed to be interested in the people but I'm sorry, I'm with that poor heart-strained horse who's never going to get the pail of water he'll die if he doesn't get...

Wishful thinking is not fantasy. And imitation of fantasy clichés isn't fantasy either. It's commercial schlock.

Well, you asked!

personal resentment, the will to dominate, fear, hatred – and then it's worthless.

DR: You have an amazing family history – your clan seems to be brimming with great achievers and deep thinkers. How has this affected you?

UKL: I like my tribe. They argue well, and loudly, with great passion. They love the arts and sciences. They are kind and honourable people. They set me a lot of good examples – both those who came before me, and those who are younger than I.

DR: Who had the most influence on you as a writer, do you think: your writer mother or anthropologist father?

UKL: My mother didn't write anything 'til she was getting on to 60, so I guess it had to be my father; but I didn't read much of what he wrote until I was in my 30s, so his influence must have been osmotic. Also genetic – I believe my mind works somewhat the way his did, though less disciplined and methodical. He loved to read fantasy, by the way.

DR: What do you think the purpose of story is in human society?

UKL: Oh, I have written whole essays about this. I think we tell stories to each other to remember who we are as a people, and to find out who we are as individuals. Our stories carry our memory as members of the human community, information we need to find our way through life. Therefore it's important that the stories we tell be as true as we can make them.

DR: Which has most utility from a storytelling perspective: fantasy or science fiction?

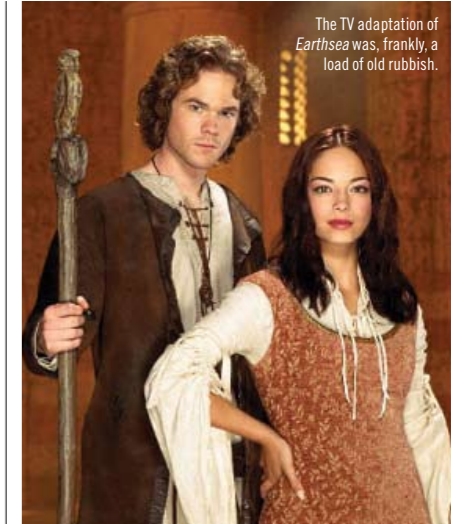
UKL: Depends on the story you want to tell, I should think? Science fiction is wonderfully useful for offering a convincing picture of alternative ways of doing and being, which can shake readers out of fixed mindsets, knock the blinkers off them. It's also awfully good for dire warnings. Fantasy, which I see as vastly older and larger than SF, can do almost anything you want it to do. It can entertain the king, or mock him mercilessly, or found a religion, or describe Colombia. People who think fantasy means wishful thinking need instruction in the uses of the imagination.

DR: Why is it that you write so little in the way of contemporary fiction?

UKL: You mean realism? Oh, I suppose because, all through the 20th century, realism was what you were supposed to write, and I never have liked being told what to do.

DR: You have several grandchildren. What will science fiction and fantasy be like when they have grandchildren of their own?

UKL: Guy, this question spooks me. When I think what the world, the Earth, may be like, when and if my grandchildren have grandchildren, I quickly begin to tell myself how tough human beings are, how life survives and even flowers



The TV adaptation of *Earthsea* was, frankly, a load of old rubbish.

under incredible abuse and deprivation; but sometimes, looking at what we've done and what we're busy, busy, busy doing right now, my hope sinks pretty low. I guess I hope the kids have something to read and enough to eat.

DR: Anthropological themes suffuse your work, especially in the *Hainish* books. They make excellent stories that are wide-ranging and capable of tackling many issues simultaneously. In the light of its strength in stories, do you see anthropology as a sort of

"Fantasy can do almost anything you want it to do. People who think fantasy means wishful thinking need instruction in the uses of the imagination."

'master science', in the social sciences, able to explain much of who we are and why?
UKL: I like that idea very much. May I steal it?

DR: Why do you think these themes work so well in this science fiction context?

UKL: For one thing, because they do exactly what I said I think science fiction is particularly good at and useful for: they present alternative cultures/societies/technologies/physiologies/mores/sexualities/etcetera to the reader – who, like all of us, is more or less 'culture-bound', stuck in one way of seeing, one way of doing.

DR: The TV *Earthsea* series was not very good, to put it mildly. You did not think much of it yourself. What went wrong?

UKL: The people who made it, having smarmed me with promises to respect the story and to honour the consultative capacity given me in the contract, didn't. Having hyped or lied about who was to write the screenplay, they gave it to a hack. The casting and directing were as feeble and foolish as the writing. I feel sorry for a couple of the older actors. Everybody else concerned deserves nothing but derision. Including me, for letting

☛ (continued on page 82)

8 OF THE BEST

Ursula K. Le Guin's understanding of the subtle joys and agonies of the human condition is beyond compare, her prose flawless, her wisdom ineffable. Like folkstories from long ago, her tales teach as well as enthrall. Here are eight classics of hers that you absolutely must read.



1

A WIZARD OF EARTHSEA 1968

A Wizard of Earthsea concerns the early life of Ged, a man who will one day become the greatest Archmage in Earthsea's history. But in this first book he is young and headstrong, and his rivalry with another student at the wizard's school on Roke leads him to accidentally summon a spirit that gravely wounds him and causes the death of the Archmage. Though Ged recovers and becomes a wizard, the spirit dogs him for years, until Ged resolves to turn the tables on his pursuer, and chases it past the furthest of the southernmost islands. Here he confronts it and speaks its true name – Ged – thus healing the two halves of his broken soul. *A Wizard of Earthsea* examines Le Guin's constant theme of balance. It is also about the responsibility of power, as Ged grows from impotent childhood to all-too-powerful adulthood, and it is one of the most effective coming of age tales ever written. The book is bursting with Le Guin's inventiveness. Earthsea, with its thousands of islands, resembles a temperate Indonesia, its combination of multiple cultures and seafaring traditions setting it far above other, more formulaic fantasies. Its magic is particularly fascinating. Earthsea is as fine a creation as J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle-earth, which always feels a thing of myth (though intentionally so). Earthsea, however, achieves a genuine verisimilitude. Le Guin writes like she is documenting reality, and nowhere is this more apparent than in her *Earthsea* books.

4

THE WORD FOR WORLD IS FOREST 1972

Another Hain book, one full of the horror of war. Athshea is a planet occupied by colonists from Earth; they start cutting down the forests and enslaving the local populace, who are only one metre tall, have green fur and big eyes. They are regarded as lazy primitives, and are brutally treated by the settlers to the extent that the Athsheans eventually turn on the Terrans, despite having no history of violence. The arrival of Hainish and Cetian diplomats with an ansible and the news of the formation of the League of All Worlds looks to bring the crisis to a peaceful end, as the Terrans are told by their own government to mend their ways. However, a raid on an Athshean tree-city by their main oppressor, Captain Davidson, precipitates more bloodshed. The Terrans depart Athshea, but native society has been rocked to its roots. Though the novel was released in 1976, *The Word for World is Forest* was first published as a novella in Harlan Ellison's 1972 collection *Again, Dangerous Visions*. It was written at the height of the Vietnam war and is clearly allegorical in its depiction of colonial exploitation. It says there are no innocents among humanity, for at the end of the book even the childlike Athsheans have learnt the ways of violence.

2

THE LEFT HAND OF DARKNESS 1969

The third in Le Guin's Hainish series marked her emergence as a major SF talent, earning her a Hugo and a Nebula award. Genly Ai is an Earth-born agent of the Ekumen, the interplanetary government that links the scattered worlds of the human diaspora. He tells the story of his mission to Karhide on the planet of Gethen, to bring it into the broader fold of mankind. The Gethenians are unlike any other humans, being asexual, only choosing a sex temporarily in their phase of 'Kemmer'. Ai's fixed maleness fascinates and disgusts the Gethenians, while Ai himself is hopelessly baffled by their ambivalence and subtle power games. Despite his training finds he himself making gaffes both in Karhide and the nation of Orgoreyn, and becomes embroiled in intrigues in both countries as they edge closer to the planet's first full-scale war. Only through the efforts of the Gethenian Estraven does Genly survive his stay, and it is their relationship that forms the core of the story as Genly slowly comes to an understanding of the Gethenians through Estraven, eventually finding a kind of love with him. This is a powerful work, an examination of what is fundamental to all humans once gender identity is stripped away.

5

THE DISPOSSESSED 1974

According to internal chronology, *The Dispossessed* lies at the start of the Hainish cycle, as it details the creation of the New Math that will lead to the invention of the ansible. However, the book's real concern is with social theory, and Le Guin uses the story of the restless mathematician Shevek to examine the implications of revolution. Shevek lives upon Anarres, the massive moon of Urras, from whose governments it broke away following an anarchist revolution nearly two hundred years in the past. Although the state is supposedly non-existent on Anarres, Shevek's radical theories bring him up against the hidden power structure there. Dismayed, he undertakes the dangerous journey to Urras, but though he is feted on Urras and is initially grateful of its personal freedoms, he finds himself equally ill at ease with that society's capitalism. Through these two worlds, which are far enough away from real-world analogues to be more than cyphers, Le Guin shows us that all societies have their flaws, no matter how perfect they may seem on paper. That the characters are well-drawn individuals only reinforces the idea that people everywhere are occupied with trying to get along as best they can no matter what their culture.

3

THE LATHE OF HEAVEN 1971

A parable about man's desire to control his own destiny to disastrous effect. George Orr is a draughtsman living in a world dogged by overpopulation, global warming and war. He is frightened by his ability to 'effectively dream' – when he sleeps, the world changes. Referred to the psychiatrist William Haber for abusing drugs that suppress these dreams, Orr is exploited as Haber tries to harness his power to change the world for the better. So much meddling goes on that the glue of reality threatens to come unstuck, forcing a showdown between Orr and his therapist that leaves the universe whole, but only just. Though the book's point is essentially 'The grass is always greener' writ large, it is also notable in how negatively psychology is portrayed. Orr tries to escape Haber, but finds this virtually impossible by dint of the fact that he is a patient in therapy and, therefore, regarded as incapable of making a rational decision. However, as it turns out, it is Haber, not Orr, who is insane. The book is definitive of Le Guin's personal philosophy: The theme of 'being' versus 'doing' occurs many times in her books, as it is a fundamental part of the Eastern ideas that suffuse her work; but it is arguably most strongly evident in Orr, the man who wants to simply be, but cannot help but do.

6

THE WIND'S TWELVE QUARTERS 1975

This collection of 17 short stories is a fantastic primer to Le Guin's themes, her worlds, and her way of thinking. There's a broad mix here, from *Earthsea* stories ('The Rule of Names', 'The Word of Unbinding') to hard SF. All exhibit her awesome understanding of humanity. For example, 'Nine Lives', which she slightly disparagingly refers to as 'wiring diagram' fiction (ie, dependent on science), tackles the hard SF staple of cloning, but does so, as is usual for Le Guin, through the eyes of characters so solid that they feel like real people. The stories show that Le Guin's style has remained remarkably consistent throughout her career. Though her themes have become richer, her prose gelled early into the sparse, uncluttered poetry that has always marked her out as an exceptional storyteller. Many of the tales included – like 'The Rule of Names' – provided the springboards for full-length novels; others present different perspectives on some of her books, such as 'Winter's King' (about King Argaven from *The Left Hand of Darkness*) and 'The Day Before the Revolution' (which describes the last day of Laia Aseio Odo, *The Dispossessed's* equivalent of Marx).

7

THE TELLING 2001

The latest full-length Hainish book, and the first Le Guin had written for 20 years, is a tale of mirrored oppressions. Suttu is a Canadian of Indian descent who decides to join the Ekumen as a cultural observer to escape the Unist Religion that dominates Earth. She is assigned to the world of Aka; however, during her transit to the planet, which takes the relative equivalent of 60 years, there is a cultural revolution on the planet that destroys its earlier culture. All Suttu has learned is useless; and her purpose on the world, to catalogue its folk-knowledge, defunct. But the old culture clings on in places, and Suttu embarks on a momentous journey to discover it. The juxtaposition of religious and scientific intolerances simmers away as Suttu tries to protect what remains of the old ways. The message here is that we cannot ignore our pasts or rewrite them, and to deny them is to deny ourselves. It's an interesting book, unusually written with overtones of a thriller.

8

THE OTHER WIND 2004

Tales from Earthsea – Le Guin's collection of *Earthsea* short stories, written after the initial trilogy – to some degree rebuilt *Earthsea* in a feminist mould, revealing that the school of wizards was co-founded by women. This tack, continued in the later novels, outraged some fans, who saw it as a betrayal of the series' purity as a fantasy construct, and Ged's reduction to a simple villager as akin to emasculation. In actuality, these *Earthsea* tales are not out of character, and deepen the series' themes of balance and responsibility. *The Other Wind*, the latest *Earthsea* book, brings a satisfactory conclusion to the series, and ends with a transformation of Earthsea. Life and death, humans and dragons, male and female are reconciled as the Dry Lands, Earthsea's artificially created afterlife, are returned to the dragons, freeing the trapped dead to be reborn. Tehanu's true nature is revealed and peace comes between Earthsea and the lands of the white-skinned Kargad. As Tenar returns home to Ged and their simple life together, the saga concludes with a message of home and belonging.

THE GREAT HUMAN DIASPORA

MUCH OF LE GUIN'S AWARD-WINNING FICTION IS SET IN THE HAINISH UNIVERSE. A VAST GALAXY FULL OF VERY HUMAN-SCALE CONTRASTS, IT PROVIDES A SANDBOX FOR LE GUIN'S FAVOURITE CULTURAL RIFFS.

☛ (continued from page 79) myself be fooled by some Hollywood jerks looking for a free ride on the back of an author's name.

DR: Did you like the Miyazaki anime?

UKL: I like all Hayao Miyazaki's films – particularly *My Neighbor Totoro* and *Spirited Away*. The one Goro Miyazaki film I've seen (described as being based on the *Earthsea* books, although in fact it merely uses some names and episodes from them in an entirely unrelated story) did not particularly make me want to see any others.

DR: Do you think we'll see a *The Lord of the Rings* style adaptation of the sequence some time – *Earthsea* is arguably one of the few, full-on secondary world fantasies that would cope well with a big screen treatment, as it has the necessary depth to survive the transition from one medium to the other. Or have you had it with adaptations?

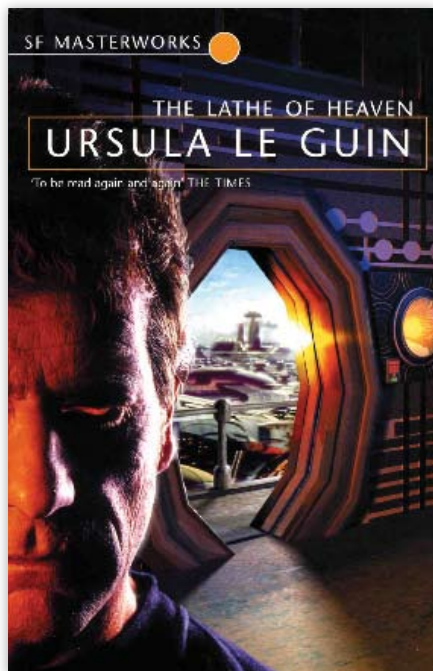
UKL: Well, a filmmaker with genuine imagination, who is also actually able to read a book and understand it, will have to come along. Every now and then there is one. Michael Powell was one. He wrote a lovely little script for the first two books, years ago; but fantasy films were out of fashion then and he couldn't sell it; and then Coppola, who was backing him, went broke. Since then nobody of any stature has come along, except Hayao Miyazaki, and he handed it over to his son.

DR: You are at the height of a very fruitful career. You've already had a huge influence on many writers and readers. What do you hope your legacy will be?

UKL: Irreverence toward undeserved authority, and passionate respect for the power of the word. Oh, and my books staying in print, too.

DR: Which are your favourite books from your own work?

UKL: I love them all, the flawed little bastards. 🐼



Though Ursula K. Le Guin is perhaps best known as a fantasy author in the UK, the vast bulk of her work has been science fiction. And many, though not all, of her SF books are set in the *Hainish* universe. This interstellar backdrop postulates that in the distant past, human beings from the planet Hain spread out and colonised the galaxy, seeding many worlds with human and other life. However, the people of Hain had no technology that enabled faster-than-light travel or communication, and their star-spanning culture collapsed catastrophically under the weight of unconquerable distances. Many worlds, including our own, were isolated for so long that their populations reverted to primitive levels of technology and forgot their heritage.

That is until, a few centuries from now, agents of the Ekumen begin to contact numerous worlds. The Ekumen are not a colonial organisation intent on conquest, but are more akin to something like the British Council, dedicated to promoting cultural exchange. (Le Guin's books are notable in that violence is frequently absent.) That's not to say that many human societies are not bent on domination, and several of her stories concern the actions of one culture trying to dominate another.

This, of course, sets the scene for many situations that enable Le Guin to tackle her favourite ideas, as long-isolated human populations meet and have to figure each other out. A lot of these stories feature an outsider, whether it be the aloof agents of the Ekumen or men and women of conquering societies encountering foreign cultures.

The lessons these 'outsider' characters must learn is invariably one of acceptance, for the principles of Tao are also key to Le Guin's work. To live well one must not pit one's will against the universe, but allow it to work with it, and that balance in all things is vital. So, we have stories like that of Genly Ai in *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) who must learn to accept the unique sexuality of the people of Geneth. Also, stories such as 'The Fisherman of the Inland Sea' (1994, from the short story collection of the same name), where characters are already at one with the environment. One of the few tales actually set on Hain itself, the story sees the Hainish unconcerned by the immeasurably old relics of prior civilisations that dot the planet, viewing them simply as part of the landscape.

But Hain can be a ticklish thing for the kinds of readers who like to categorise and list. The *Hainish* books might cover 2,500 years of future history, but, unlike *Earthsea*, Hain never was intended to be a continuous creation, and has many inconsistencies.

"I didn't set out to write a series, exactly," says Le Guin. "It just grew, like Topsy in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. I found it a lot easier to keep going back to the same universe than to keep making up new ones. Ask God – God probably doesn't forget what he did with various places and peoples, though. I do. So people who try to make a grand history out of the *Hainish* books are doomed to extreme frustration – they find whole millennia missing, two planets with the same name – Werel – that aren't the same planet – a universe of boo-boos. It's such a mess you'd think Coyote [the Native American Trickster god] made it. Like this one."

Despite Le Guin's interest in social issues, and societies that eschew high-tech for simpler lifestyles, there is an underpinning of hard SF to the Hain books. New technologies are being developed that allow a League of All Worlds and the Ekumen to come into being. One of her double award winners, *The Dispossessed*, features the development of the instantaneous communications device known as the ansible, and the 'New Math' that underpins it, as a major part of the story.

Ansible is a corruption of the word 'answerable', and the device has gone on to be a part of the SF trope toolkit for many authors. Likewise, in other books we see the use of NAFAL (nearly as fast as light) travel, the deployment of death rays that work using the ansible technology, genetic engineering, and the coming development of 'churten' technology that will allow instantaneous travel.

Le Guin herself has pointed out the unlikelihood of much of this technology, but would not change any of it were she to get a second chance.

"The ansible works fine, doesn't it?" she says. "Most of the fundamental tropes of science fiction – zooming around the galaxy at FTL speeds or via strings or whatever, meeting and communicating with aliens on other planets, interplanetary wars and empires and leagues, all that – it's pure hokum. Pure and glorious. The space ship is not a prediction, it's a metaphor. That doesn't invalidate it! Just the opposite: it makes it as useful as it is enjoyable. Take her out, Scotty!"

