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
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 wrote a well-received female author at the time when feminism was at its height, and you were part of—co-opted by the movement?

Ursula K. Le Guin: 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. A whole lot of mass media bigots and superstitions—and we would be untruthful and ungrateful not to call myself a feminist, even if the term does not fully describe either my politics or my gender.

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

Dr: Did feminism succeed?

Ursula K. Le Guin: I like fish riding bicycles everywhere—Don't you?

Dr: One of the most noteworthy things about your books is that your characters are entirely ungrateful not to call myself a feminist, even if the term does not fully describe either my politics or my gender.

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Did you succeed?
A Wizard of Earthsea 1968

The third in Le Guin's Hainish series marked her emergence as a major SF talent, earning her a Hugo and Nebula Award. Ged, a native of the planet Karam, enters the interplanetary government that rules the scattered territories of the world of Gethen, to bring it into the broader fold of mankind. The Gethenians are unlike any other beings, being asexual, only coming into sexual maturity for a short period of a few months. Ajdor's forces invade the planet, forcing a confrontation between Ged and the leader of the Gethenians, who is revealed to be the descendant of the first beings created by the universe. This novel has been praised for its philosophical depth and its complex characters, and is regarded as one of Le Guin's finest works.

The Left Hand of Darkness 1969

A science fiction novel that explores the concept of gender and sexuality. Ged's encounter with artificial intelligence in the form of a triad of entities, each of whom represents a different way of being in the universe, leads to a deeper understanding of the nature of gender and identity. This novel is considered a classic of the genre and is widely regarded as a masterpiece of speculative fiction.

The Dispossessed 1974

This collection of 17 short stories is a fantastic primer to Le Guin's themes, her worlds, and her philosophy. The theme of 'being' versus 'doing' lies at the start of the Hainish cycle, as Le Guin's characters grapple with the implications of revolution. Shevek lives upon Anarres, the massive moon of Terra. Through his work, he comes to understand the concept of a universe whole, but only just. This novel is a meditation on the nature of reality, the role of science in society, and the search for meaning in a universe that often seems chaotic and senseless.

The Wind's Twelve Quarters 1975

This collection is a series of short stories that explore the concept of a world beyond our own. The stories are set in a world where the seasons are not determined by the sun but by the movement of the stars. This collection is considered a masterpiece of speculative fiction and is widely regarded as one of Le Guin's finest works.

The Telling 2001

Sutty has learned the true name of the god 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 Tak, however, during her transit to the planet, which takes the relative equivalent of 66 years, there is a cultural revolution on the planet that destroys its earlier culture. All that Sutty has learned is useless, and her purpose on the world, to catalogue its folklore, knowledge, and belief, is all but destroyed. The old culture clings on to place, and Sutty embarks on a impossible journey to discover it. The juxtaposition of religious and scientific intolerances summer 2001, as Sutty 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.

Tales from Earthsea - Le Guin's collection of Earthsea short stories, written over the initial trilogy - to some degree reimagines Earthsea in a feminist mould, revealing that the school of wizards was co-founded by women. This tactic, continues 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 2004

The latest full-length Hainish book, and the first Le Guin had written for 30 years, is a tale of murdered opportunities. Sutty is a Canadian of Indian descent who decides to rejoin the Ekumen as a cultural observer to escape the Unist Religion that dominates Earth. She is assigned to the world of Tak, however, during her transit to the planet, which takes the relative equivalent of 66 years, there is a cultural revolution on the planet that destroys its earlier culture.

Outlander - Le Guin's understanding of the subtle joys and agonies of the human condition is beyond compare, her prose flawless, her wisdom ineffable. Like folktales from long ago, her tales teach as well as entertain. Here are eight of her classes that you absolutely must read from.
**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.

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 Genech. 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.

An sensible 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 chartered 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 a metaphor. That’s doesn’t invalidate it! Just the opposite: it makes it as useful as it is enjoyable. Take her out, Scotty.”