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Reader Resources

A Wizard of Earthsea

by Ursula K. Le Guin



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“To me a novel can be as beautiful as any symphony, as beautiful as the sea.”

Preface

Ursula K. Le Guin's *A Wizard of Earthsea* has become a classic coming-of-age novel. Originally published as a young-adult fantasy novel in 1968, Le Guin's adventure tale proved so imaginatively engaging and psychologically profound that it captivates readers of all ages.



What is the NEA Big Read?

A program of the National Endowment for the Arts, the NEA Big Read broadens our understanding of our world, our communities, and ourselves through the joy of sharing a good book. Managed by Arts Midwest, this initiative offers grants to support innovative community reading programs designed around a single book.

A great book combines enrichment with enchantment. It awakens our imagination and enlarges our humanity. It can offer harrowing insights that somehow console and comfort us. Whether you're a regular reader already or making up for lost time, thank you for joining The Big Read.



About the Book

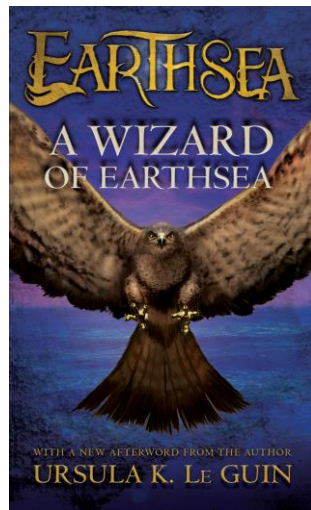
Introduction to the Book

Ursula K. Le Guin's *A Wizard of Earthsea* (1968) is arguably the most widely admired American fantasy novel of the past fifty years. The book's elegant diction, geographical sweep, and mounting suspense are quite irresistible. Earthsea—composed of an archipelago of many islands—is a land of the imagination, like Oz, Faerie, or the dream-like realm of our unconscious. Earthsea may not be a "real" world but it is one that our souls recognize as meaningful and "true." Actions there possess an epic grandeur, a mythic resonance that we associate with romance and fairy tale.

Songs, poems, runes, spells—words matter a great deal in Earthsea, especially those in the "Old Speech" now spoken only by dragons and wizards. To work a spell one must know an object or person's "true name," which is nothing less than that object or person's fundamental essence. In Earthsea, to know a person's true name is to gain power over him or her. "A mage," we are told, "can control only what is near him, what he can name exactly and wholly."

Understanding the nature of things, not possessing power over them, is the ultimate goal of magic. Indeed, the greatest wizards do all they can to avoid using their skill. They recognize that the cosmos relies on equilibrium, appropriateness, and "balance"—the very name Earthsea suggests such balance—and that every action bears consequences. To perform magic, then, is to take on a heavy responsibility: One literally disturbs the balance of the universe.

The young Ged is born—a fated seventh son—on the island of Gont and, by accident, discovers that he possesses an innate talent for magic. Even as an untrained boy he is able to use his nascent powers to save his town from marauders. Soon, though, he goes to study with gentle Ogion the Silent, whom he foolishly fails to appreciate. Sent to complete his studies at the Archmage's school for wizards on the island of Roke, Ged grows increasingly proud, over-confident, and competitive. To display his much-vaunted skills, he rashly attempts a dangerous spell—with dire consequences for Earthsea and himself. Hoping to repair the damage he has caused, the chastened Ged embarks on a series of journeys around Earthsea—and eventually beyond the known world.



Major Characters in the Book

Ged

The hero of *A Wizard of Earthsea* is called Duny by his family and known to the world as Sparrowhawk. But Ged is his hidden true name, disclosed to him in an adolescent rite of passage. He must learn self-discipline, humility, and the power of silence. By so doing, he gradually acquires the inner balance and wisdom that will make him, in due course, worthy of two other names: Archmage and dragonlord.

Ogion the Silent

This quiet, philosophical magician is Ged's first teacher. He lives on the island of Gont in utter simplicity, yet his powers are formidable. Ogion urges moderation and restraint to the impetuous Ged—to no avail. His manner recalls that of a Taoist master, practicing stillness and non-interference (*wu-wei*).

Jasper and Vetch

At Roke, where Ged has gone to learn magic, he makes an enemy of the quicksilver Jasper and a friend of the stolid Vetch. These two boys pull Ged in different directions: Jasper taunts him to demonstrate just how good a magician he really is; Vetch, hoping to temper the rivalry, repeatedly urges restraint and caution. Jasper eventually leads Ged into overestimating his powers, with terrible consequences.

Serret and Yarrow

These are the two principal female figures in the novel, one reminding Ged of the dark allure of great power, the other of the satisfactions of an ordinary life. Serret is the seductive chatelaine of a strange castle, who nurses a ravaged Ged back to health—but for purposes of her own. By contrast, Vetch's sister, the kind-hearted Yarrow, offers the even greater temptation of a family, home, and children.

The Shadow

When Ged works a summoning spell over which he doesn't have full control, he releases a dark formless power of "unlife" into the world. It apparently seeks to take over his body and wreak evil through him. Much of the second half of *A Wizard of Earthsea* focuses on the contest between the young magician and this creature of darkness. But what, really, is the Shadow?

Sources of Inspiration

The Language of Fantasy

A writer, like a wizard, creates with words. Throughout *A Wizard of Earthsea* Le Guin's language is plain, strong, and exact; her tone grave and slightly formal; and the rhythm of her sentences carefully balanced and musical. Note the occasional touches of alliteration and assonance—reminiscent of Old English verse—in such phrases as this: "Forest rises ridge behind ridge to the stone and snow of the heights."

Taoism

This ancient Chinese philosophy pervades Le Guin's work. Lao Tzu's poetic meditation on how to live, the *Tao-Te-Ching*—roughly "The Classic Book of Integrity and the Way"—emphasizes silence, peace, and non-violence. It rejects dualism—good vs. evil, light vs. dark—for mutual interdependence, typically represented by the yin–yang symbol, made up of interlocking light and dark semi-circles.

The Journey into the Self

Le Guin's work draws on several ideas and symbols used in cultural anthropology (see, especially, Arnold van Gennep's 1909 classic, *The Rites of Passage*). Some of these elements include rites of initiation, night–sea voyages, rituals of death and rebirth, and what the psychologist Carl Gustav Jung called archetypal images: the wise old man, the helpful animal, the Shadow.

Dragons

Dragons are ambiguous creatures in Earthsea. They are fearsome and destructive yet they possess great wisdom. While most literary dragons are creatures of darkness—William Blake's horrific red dragon, the covetous Smaug of Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, the devil serpent defeated by St. George—Le Guin's dragons are great forces of nature, dangerous and sublime.

About the Author

Ursula K. Le Guin (b. 1929)

Ursula K. Le Guin spent her childhood in California, mainly in Berkeley, where her anthropologist father (Alfred L. Kroeber) was a professor, but also in the Napa Valley, where her family owned a ranch. As a child she heard Native American myths as bedtime stories, while also having the run of her parents' library. The young Le Guin read voraciously. Her favorite books included the Norse myths, retellings of folktales and legends from J.G. Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890), and the fantasy stories of Lord Dunsany. Such a background may explain, in part, Le Guin's own approach to literature: She is a world-builder. Indeed, just as an anthropologist reports on an indigenous people in as much detail as possible, so a science fiction or fantasy author will build up an elaborate picture of an alien culture and its inhabitants.

In her teens, Le Guin read fantasy and science fiction magazines but also devoured many of the classics of world literature. She once listed her influences as Percy Bysshe Shelley; John Keats; William Wordsworth; Giacomo Leopardi; Victor Hugo; Rainer Maria Rilke; Edward Thomas; Theodore Roethke; Charles Dickens; Leo Tolstoy; Ivan Turgenev; Anton Chekhov; Boris Pasternak; Charlotte, Emily, and Anne Brontë; Virginia Woolf; and E. M. Forster. Among science fiction authors, she has spoken with admiration about the fiction of Cordwainer Smith (Paul M.A. Linebarger); James Tiptree, Jr. (Alice B. Sheldon); and Philip K. Dick. A lifelong interest in Lao Tzu and Taoism eventually led her to translate the *Tao-Te-Ching* (1999).

Le Guin attended Radcliffe College and then Columbia University, where she earned a master's degree in Italian and French, with a focus on Renaissance literature. While on a trip to France, she met her future husband, the historian Charles A. Le Guin. The couple settled in Portland, Oregon, with their three children. Le Guin has said that she enjoys a very regular life there and prefers things to be "kind of dull, basically," so that she can get on with her work as a writer.

While preferring a quiet routine and privacy, Ursula K. Le Guin does speak out strongly on matters she cares about—American politics, the value of fantasy and science fiction, the importance of reading, and, above all, the condition of women in the arts and society. During much of the 1970s and



Ursula K. Le Guin (Copyright Marian Wood Kolisch)

'80s, she was a frequent speaker and instructor at writing workshops around the country.

Over the years Le Guin has won numerous awards for her novels and stories, including the Hugo and Nebula for science fiction, but also the Boston Globe–Horn Book Award (for *A Wizard of Earthsea*) the National Book Award, and the National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters. She is perhaps the most honored living writer of science fiction and fantasy—and one of America's finest writers.

An Interview with Ursula K. Le Guin

On January 7, 2008, Dan Stone of the National Endowment for the Arts interviewed Ursula K. Le Guin at her home in Oregon. Excerpts from their conversation follow.

Dan Stone: What does fantasy allow you to do that realistic fiction doesn't?

Ursula K. Le Guin: Fantasy has a much larger world to play with than realism does. Realism is stuck pretty much with the here and now because as soon as you get more than a century in the past, you're writing historical fiction, which is a form of fantasy. Fantasy has all the past and all the future to play with, if it wants to call it the future. It opens all the doors and windows of the house of fiction and says, "Look, you can go out any door here and come in a different one."

DS: You've talked before about wizardry being akin to artistry. Do you see *A Wizard of Earthsea* being about artistry itself?

UKL: What a wizard does is like what a writer does. He or she is making things out of words and making things happen with words. I saw the parallel. But I don't know where it goes or really what to do with it. I've always been talking about language, about speech, about words, about books, as a great power in our lives. This is obviously one of my themes.

DS: How were wizards depicted in literature before *A Wizard of Earthsea*?

UKL: I believe I'm the first who described a wizard having to learn his trade and go to school to do it. I started thinking that wizards can't have always been old guys with white beards. So what were they like when they were fourteen? And that opens up a world, doesn't it?

DS: Is it true that when you wrote the novel, you had not yet read Carl Jung?

UKL: Yes. That was an amazing coincidence, if you want to see it as such, how two incredibly different minds arrived at

the same point by incredibly different routes. Jung came to his idea of the Shadow through psychology; I came to it through pure fictional imagination. Ged has a darkness in him that he couldn't handle. Ged and I learned how to face his enemy as I wrote the book. I was not certain what the end would be until I got to it.

DS: Some of those same ideas are found in Taoist philosophies, the ideas of balance, equilibrium, light and dark.

UKL: Yes, you could say that *A Wizard of Earthsea* is full of Taoist imagery. The whole idea of a vital balance which is never still, which is not at rest. The wise wizards are working for a kind of balance. Young Ged gets out of balance. He's got to fix it or else it'll kill him.

DS: For what age group did you write this book?

UKL: In 1968, young-adult fiction was a category, but it wasn't particularly noticed. The first-edition cover flap says "eleven and up," which I think is about right. Fantasy crosses generation lines like no other literature. People who like fantasy tend to begin liking it as kids, and then twenty years later, they will go back to these books and find a whole new joy in them. Fantasy has an incredible availability to a grandfather and granddaughter at the same time. As a writer, it's wonderful, because if you write it with all your heart and all your art, you'll have readers that will be coming back to it the rest of their lives.

Historical and Literary Context

Fantasy, Science Fiction, and Ursula K. Le Guin

1920s

- 1922: E. R. Eddison brings out his epic fantasy *The Worm Ouroboros*.
- 1926: Book-of-the-Month Club is founded.
- 1929: Ursula Kroeber is born in Berkeley, California, on October 21.

1930s

- Ursula Kroeber grows up surrounded by books and three older brothers, and passes her summers on a ranch in the Napa Valley.
- 1938: T. H. White publishes his beloved Arthurian fantasy, *The Sword in the Stone*.
- 1939: The first Worldcon—science fiction's annual convention—takes place.

1940s

- This is the great decade of the science fiction and fantasy magazines, including *Amazing Stories*, *Astounding Science Fiction*, *Startling Stories*, and *Thrilling Wonder Stories*.
- 1947: Ursula Kroeber enters Radcliffe College.
- Mervyn Peake creates his expressionist Gothic masterpiece, *Titus Groan* in 1946, followed by *Gormenghast* in 1950 and *Titus Alone* in 1959.

1950s

- This is the heyday of flying saucers, alien invaders, the space race, comic-book heroes, and fears of atomic disaster.
- 1953: Ursula Kroeber continues her studies in romance languages at Columbia; marries historian Charles Le Guin.
- 1954–1955: J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* is published.

1960s

- The Twilight Zone, The Outer Limits, and Star Trek become hit television shows.
- 1963: Maurice Sendak revolutionizes children's picture books with *Where the Wild Things Are*.
- Ursula K. Le Guin begins to publish science fiction and fantasy. *A Wizard of Earthsea* receives the Boston Globe-Horn Book Award in 1968.

1970s

- Le Guin grows increasingly active as a teacher, mentor, and example to younger writers of fantasy and science fiction, particularly women.
- 1979: Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* re-imagines classic fairy tales from a feminist perspective.
- Fantasy becomes a dominant aspect of much innovative fiction around the world, notably in the work of Italo Calvino, Jorge Luis Borges, John Barth, Donald Barthelme, and many others.

1980s

- 1981: John Crowley creates a genuinely American fantasy classic, *Little, Big*.
- 1985: Le Guin creates the dossier-like *Always Coming Home*, the portrait of a peaceful, cooperative culture. She also brings out a series of fairy tales and picture books for young children.
- More and more women publish science fiction and fantasy, including Joanna Russ, C.J. Cherryh, Octavia E. Butler, Tanith Lee, Karen Joy Fowler, and Connie Willis.

1990s

- Author websites, fan groups, and online discussions of fantasy and science fiction proliferate on the Internet.
- 1990: Le Guin returns to Earthsea with *Tehanu*.
- 1996: Philip Pullman publishes *The Golden Compass*, followed by *The Subtle Knife* in 1997, and *The Amber Spyglass* in 2000.

2000s

- Le Guin continues to write innovative fiction and essays about literature, politics, and the imagination.
- 2003: Peter Jackson's *The Return of the King* wins the Oscar for best picture.
- 2007: With *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, J. K. Rowling completes her seven-volume series about the education of a young wizard.

Yet while fantasies look at life steadily and hard, they don't end in despair: these narratives of spiritual education, set in what Tolkien called a "secondary world," describe a hero's journey from ignorance and bondage to wisdom and an earned, if unexpected, happiness. *A Wizard of Earthsea* is more than just an exciting story. Like so many other great fantasies, it is, as Le Guin has written, "a journey into the subconscious mind, just as psychoanalysis is. Like psychoanalysis, it can be dangerous; and it will change you."

The Fantasy Tradition

Myths, folktales, animal fables, medieval romances, Arabian Nights entertainments, Celtic accounts of the Other World, fairy tales and tall tales, ghost stories, horror fiction, and much of our greatest children's literature might all be loosely thought of as fantasy. In such works impossible or surreal things happen—and no one seems at all surprised. Animals talk. Wishes are granted. Predictions come true. This is, in truth, the realm of dream, of the unconscious manifesting itself in story. Such narratives hint at our hidden desires, reveal unacknowledged aspects of ourselves, and usually teach us some good lessons, too. The truest fantasies are never frivolous—the smallest action, the least word spoken or unspoken may prove consequential, dire, even fatal. As Ursula K. Le Guin writes, "Fantasy is the natural, the appropriate language for the recounting of the spiritual journey and the struggle of good and evil in the soul."

People sometimes imagine that fantasy offers mere escapism, whimsical adventures full of improbabilities or elves. In fact, the great modern fantasies possess a brilliant purity, often denied to modern realist fiction. They show us the natural world's mystery and holiness, the grandeur of noble men and women, the need for integrity, the beauty of self-sacrifice. Little wonder that fantasy is a cousin to the fairy tale, parable, and religious allegory. As in the medieval Arthurian romances or John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678–1684), heroes are tested, confronted with painful ethical dilemmas and difficult moral choices.

Certainly the great modern fantasies—whether by J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, or Philip Pullman—often externalize what are, in fact, psychological or spiritual battles that go on inside each of us. The clashes of armies in Middle Earth are, in part, symbols of the ashen and weary Frodo's inner fight against the growing power of the evil Ring. Even in a cinematic fantasy such as *Star Wars* (1977), Luke Skywalker must put his trust in the force that flows through the universe.

Other Works/Adaptations

Le Guin and Her Other Works

Like Ray Bradbury or Philip K. Dick, Ursula K. Le Guin is among the few writers of fantasy and science fiction to escape (partially) the genre label and be regarded as simply a major American author. She is, moreover, as much a woman of letters as a storyteller and poet. Her collections of essays, especially *The Language of the Night* (1979) and *The Wave in the Mind* (2004), offer not only shrewd commentary on fantasy, but also feisty arguments about women and writing, contemporary fiction, and the processes of the imagination.

Le Guin has published many novels and short stories, several of them multiple award-winners. Readers enchanted by *A Wizard of Earthsea* should obviously go on to its sequels, all of which take up, with variations, the coming-of-age theme. *The Tombs of Atuan* (1970) deals with the young priestess Tenar who, with the help of Ged, breaks free of a sterile underground existence to discover her real self as a woman and human being. *The Farthest Shore* (1972) investigates the purpose of mortality, as Ged—now Archmage—aids a young prince in discovering his destiny, while together the two seek to understand why Earthsea's magic has begun to fade. All three of these novels appeared within a short space of time and form a unified sequence. Much later, Le Guin continued the story of Ged and Tenar in *Tehanu* (1990), a somewhat somber yet powerful look at old age, the place of women in society, and what it is to lack, rather than possess, power. Further aspects of Earthsea are explored in *The Other Wind* (2001) and *Tales from Earthsea* (2001). This last volume includes Le Guin's "A Description of Earthsea," a kind of ethnographic account of the archipelago's history and culture.

Apart from her Earthsea fantasies, Ursula K. Le Guin's best known works are her short story "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" and her two science fiction novels, *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) and *The Dispossessed* (1974). In the short story—virtually a philosophical parable—Le Guin shows us the wonderful utopian society of Omelas, but then reveals what it truly costs, hardly anything really, to maintain its citizens' comfort and cultivated lifestyle.

Perhaps the best-known and most taught of all modern science fiction novels, *The Left Hand of Darkness* is written in a tone even more gravely austere than *A Wizard of Earthsea*. Sent to a wintry planet called Gethen, the black envoy from the Ekumen discovers a world where the people are androgynous, becoming at certain times either male or female. Upon this framework Le Guin builds an intricate and moving study of politics, cultural chauvinism, friendship, and love. *The Dispossessed* is even more overtly about social ideals, contrasting two civilizations, one essentially capitalist, the other anarchist. Its hero, the scientist Shevek, isn't at

home in either world, and Le Guin—with her Taoist belief in balance—makes it clear that there are pluses and minuses to each system. She returned to world-building in her most ambitious vision of utopia, *Always Coming Home* (1985), as much a dossier as a novel, since the work presents the customs, myths, rituals, and even music (on a cassette) of the Kesh people.

Though each of her novels and stories stands alone, Ursula K. Le Guin has created a body of work, an *oeuvre*, of great range and moral seriousness. Her many books—from the briefest children's picture album to her most recent novel—testify to the commitment she feels to such themes as social and ecological responsibility, the nature of personal identity, the condition of women, and the importance of the imagination. Her writing is self-assured and wise, sometimes provocative, and always beautiful.

Selected Works by Ursula K. Le Guin

- *A Wizard of Earthsea*, 1968
- *The Left Hand of Darkness*, 1969
- *The Tombs of Atuan*, 1970
- *The Farthest Shore*, 1972
- *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia*, 1974
- *The Wind's Twelve Quarters*, 1975
- *The Language of the Night: Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction*, 1979
- *Always Coming Home*, 1985
- *Dancing at the Edge of the World: Thoughts on Words, Women, Places*, 1989
- *Tehanu*, 1990
- *Tales from Earthsea*, 2001
- *The Other Wind*, 2001
- *The Wave in the Mind: Talks and Essays on the Writer, the Reader, and the Imagination*, 2004
- *Lavinia*, 2008
- *Cheek by Jowl*, 2009
- *Cat Dreams*, 2010
- *The Unreal and the Real: Selected Stories of Ursula K. Le Guin*, 2012 (2 volumes)
- *Steering the Craft: A 21st-Century Guide to Sailing the Sea of Story*, 2015

Discussion Questions

1. What are some characteristics of a young-adult novel?
2. Why is this world called Earthsea? Why might Le Guin have decided to set her story in such a world?
3. On the first page of the novel, we learn that Ged will eventually become Archmage and dragonlord. Doesn't this undercut a certain amount of suspense? Why would Le Guin tell us this?
4. The language of *A Wizard of Earthsea* is often quietly poetic. Comment on three sentences that you find particularly beautiful or moving. In what ways is a writer or artist like a wizard?
5. The young Ged tends to be impulsive, getting into trouble like the sorcerer's apprentice. Point out occasions in the book when Ged loses control of himself or his magic.
6. Why do Ged and Jasper quarrel? Who is to blame? Why do Ged and Vetch become friends?
7. There are several mentions of shadows even before Ged's attempt to raise the dead Princess Elfarran. List them. What do these various shadows suggest about Ged?
8. Discuss the meaning of Ged's two encounters with the Doorkeeper of Roke.
9. Compare the evil of the Shadow with the evil of the Stone of Terrenon. Are they evil in the same way? How do they differ?
10. What does Ged learn from his encounter with the dragon Yevaud?
11. Why do Ged and Vetch avoid using magic on their last voyage?
12. Were you surprised by what happens when Ged confronts the Shadow? Would you say that his realization is true of all human experience?

Additional Resources

Other Works about Fantasy, Science Fiction, and Ursula K. Le Guin

- Bucknall, Barbara J. *Ursula K. Le Guin*. New York: Ungar, 1981.
- Clute, John, and John Grant. *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997.
- Clute, John, and Peter Nicholls. *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*. 2nd ed. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993.
- Cummins, Elizabeth. *Understanding Ursula K. Le Guin*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1990.
- Spivack, Charlotte. *Ursula K. Le Guin*. Boston: Twayne, 1984.
- Waggoner, Diana. *The Hills of Faraway: A Guide to Fantasy*. New York: Atheneum, 1978.

If you want to read other fantasy novels for young people, you might enjoy:

- Philippa Pearce's *Tom's Midnight Garden*, 1958
- Alan Garner's *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen*, 1960
- Norton Juster's *The Phantom Tollbooth*, 1961
- Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time*, 1962
- Russell Hoban's *The Mouse and His Child*, 1967

Website

[The Ursula K. Le Guin Website](#)

The official website of Ursula K. Le Guin includes a blog, biographical information, maps, interviews, and more.

Credits

Works Cited

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The Wave in the Mind: Talks and Essays on the Writer, the Reader, and the Imagination. Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2004.

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Writer: Michael Dirda

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