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Ursula's Bookshelf

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Ursula's Bookshelf

Abstract

In keeping with the purpose of the Mythopoeic Society—"promoting the study, discussion, and enjoyment of fantastic and mythic literature"—this selective list examines a few of the authors and works Ursula K. Le Guin acknowledged as being influential or among her favorites, and to which some connections might be traced in her own mythopoeic and cosmopoeic works. The list includes Ray Bradbury's *Martian Chronicles*, Lord Dunsany's *A Dreamer's Tales*, Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*, T.H. White's *The Sword in the Stone*, Rudyard Kipling's *Jungle Books*, and J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, among others.

Additional Keywords

influences; mythopoeia; world-building

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URSULA'S BOOKSHELF

KRIS SWANK

LOOKING BACK ON THE LIFE AND WORKS OF URSULA K. LE GUIN (1929-2018), it is natural to be curious about the authors and works which influenced or inspired her writings. Le Guin read widely in a number of genres from realism to the fantastic, from the mythic to the modern. She said, "There are many bad books. There are no bad genres," though she did find pornography, horror, and most political thrillers personally unappealing (Le Guin, "Genre: A Word Only a Frenchman Could Love" 14). Not surprisingly, many of Le Guin's major influences and inspirations derive from fantasy and science fiction. However, as her diverse reading habits reveal, some of her favorite authors—Tolstoy, Dickens, and Woolf—write in a variety of other modes, from the realist and the feminist to the satirical and the picaresque. Dickens's best-known work, *A Christmas Carol*, is a fantasy. In keeping with the purpose of the Mythopoeic Society—"promoting the study, discussion, and enjoyment of fantastic and mythic literature"—this selective list of Le Guin's influences and inspirations focuses specifically on works which informed her mythopoetic (myth-creating) and/or cosmopoietic (cosmos-creating) processes, but even within these parameters, some modernist and non-fiction authors sneak in under the tent. This list comprises eight numbered titles and authors, but these are augmented, where applicable, with related and supplemental works. They are not presented in any ranked order, but are ordered by Le Guin's authorial chronology, except for the final entry which acknowledges Le Guin's legacy as an influence for other authors. This, then, is not, nor is it intended to be, a comprehensive source-hunter's guide for Le Guin's entire oeuvre, and there may be some justifiable objections over the inclusion of one title or the exclusion of another. Simply put, the main purpose of the project is to explore some of Le Guin's mythopoetic influences: which authors and works, if any, inspired or aided her fantastic creations, and where can that influence be detected in Le Guin's own works? What made Ursula K. Le Guin tick? Or, what tickled her fancy? If we could go back to when she was writing some of her most memorable mythopoeic literature, what volumes might we find on Ursula's bookshelf?

1. *THE MARTIAN CHRONICLES* (1950) BY RAY BRADBURY

The Martian Chronicles is a "fix-up" novel, what Ray Bradbury (1920-2012) called a "book-of-stories-pretending-to-be-a-novel" (qtd. in Eller and Touponce 111). It contains over two dozen of Bradbury's stories originally published in science fiction magazines from 1946-1952, stitched together with some connecting material original to the collection. Additionally, some of the contents have varied slightly across different editions. All of the stories are set

during the colonization of Mars by humans from Earth. Gloria McMillan writes that Bradbury's "Martian landscapes recall the dusty, windswept streets and washes of Tucson, Arizona" where he lived, at times, as a boy (5). Colonization is complicated by the existence of aboriginal Martians who "were reminiscent of Tucson's centuries-old, vanished American Indians" (McMillan 6). The pioneering spirit and hardships experienced by the colonists are contrasted against the plight of the indigenous Martians who, like Earth's Native Americans, are exterminated or pushed to the margins of habitable land. As the colonizers supplant the original peoples, they themselves slowly become the new native species.

In an interview for *Wired* magazine, Le Guin was asked if she had any favorite books by Ray Bradbury. She replied —

Oh, *The Martian Chronicles*. You know, it came out a long time ago. I was in my twenties at most, I guess. I just loved it. He was making science fiction romantic. Science fiction often gets kind of hard-edged and dry and a little over-intellectual. And I just thought, "Oh, wow, look what he's doing. He's making it beautiful and romantic, with this warmth of human feeling in it." And that was important then. (Adams and Kirtley)

Le Guin's concern for native peoples can be traced to her father, anthropologist and archaeologist Alfred Louis Kroeber, who specialized in the native cultures of North America. Le Guin said she shared "some temperamental affinity" with her father and those anthropological interests can be seen in many of her works, including the novel, *Always Coming Home* (1985) (J. White 101). However, the work which best combines her concerns for indigenous cultures with both mythopoeia and the sort of planetary romance found in *The Martian Chronicles* is arguably "**Semley's Necklace**." First published as "The Dowry of the Angyar" in *Amazing* (1964), the short story became "the germ of" and prologue to *Rocannon's World* (1966), the first novel set in Le Guin's Hainish universe (Le Guin, "Semley's Necklace" 1).¹ Le Guin described the story as "the most characteristic of my early science fiction and fantasy works, the most romantic of them all" (1).

Ostensibly science fiction, the story was actually modeled upon Norse mythology. The immediate source of "Semley's Necklace" was the story "How Freya Gained Her Necklace and How Her Loved One Was Lost to Her" in Padraic Colum's *The Children of Odin* (1920) (Le Guin, *Hainish Novels and Stories* I, 1086, n.3.2). Here, the goddess Freya departs from Asgard to ask the Three Giant Women for a gift made of gold, being envious of the golden objects they gave to others among the gods. Freya and Le Guin's Semley both travel above

¹ "Semley's Necklace" was Le Guin's preferred title (Levin C4, #8).

the earth, below the earth and, finally, on a high place (Freya on a mountaintop; Semley in space). Le Guin's three species—the Fiia, Gdemiar, and humans—likewise correspond to the Norse mythological light-elves, dark-elves (i.e. dwarves), and giants, respectively.

However, like Bradbury's *Martian Chronicles*, "Semley's Necklace" also deals with the devastating consequences of contact between indigenous and extrinsic cultures. Semley is a high-ranking lady in a society reminiscent of the Danes in *Beowulf*. Fierce, proud, and physically-imposing, her people are, nevertheless, technologically-innocent. The bargain she strikes for her ancestral necklace with the technologically-advanced Gdemiar ends up costing Semley more than she can hope to understand, that is, until it is too late. Le Guin revises Norse mythology, but, like Bradbury, combines space ships with sweeping vistas and vanishing cultures to create a poignant planetary romance. Introducing "Semley's Necklace" in the collection, *The Wind's Twelve Quarters* (1975), Le Guin wrote, "The progress of my style has been away from open romanticism [...but] I am still a romantic, no doubt about that, and glad of it" (1).

2. A DREAMER'S TALES (1910) BY LORD DUNSANY

Le Guin said, "When people ask me about 'a book that changed my life,' one of the several hundred honest answers I can give them is *A Dreamer's Tales*. (Then they look blank, which is too bad)" ("Vivid Fantasy" R4). That book's author, Edward John Moreton Drax Plunkett, the 18th Baron of Dunsany (1878-1957), otherwise known as "Lord Dunsany," was an Anglo-Irish peer, fantasy author and dramatist, with over ninety books published in his lifetime. *A Dreamer's Tales* was his fifth book, and contains the iconic stories: "Poltarnees, Beholder of Ocean," "Bethmoora," and "Idle Days on the Yann": all titles which conjure up exotic cities and wide, ancient rivers. Le Guin was about twelve when she pulled *A Dreamer's Tales* from her family's bookshelf, a moment she recalled throughout her life. She wrote, "from the first sentence I was a goner" ("Vivid Fantasy" R4):

Toldees, Mondath, Arizim, these are the Inner Lands, the lands whose sentinels upon their borders do not behold the sea. Beyond them to the east there lies a desert, for ever untroubled by man: all yellow it is, and spotted with shadows of stones, and Death is in it, like a leopard lying in the sun. To the south they are bounded by magic, to the west by a mountain [...]. (Dunsany 162)

She admired Dunsany's "mannered but vivid, clear and subtle style [...] detached amusement, [and] the cool wit that almost always underlies his gorgeous fancies and flourishes" ("Vivid Fantasy" R4). But she was particularly

captivated by his world-building. She wrote that *A Dreamer's Tales*, "opened up to me the whole range and realm of fantasy literature—imagined countries, invented histories. I beheld that vast landscape not only as a reader but also as a writer. I could not only go there with Dunsany, I could also go exploring on my own" ("Vivid Fantasy" R4). She described herself as a citizen of Dunsany's Mondath, musing, "I was headed toward the Inner Lands before I ever heard of them" (Le Guin, "Citizen of Mondath" 26).

Indeed, one of the best-loved features of her Earthsea series, beginning with two short stories and the *Horn Book* Award-winning novel, *A Wizard of Earthsea* (1968), is Le Guin's world-building.² The whole of Earthsea is a great archipelago of islands with names as exotic and mysterious as any of Dunsany's. There are Atuan, Gont, Havnor, Selidor, Vemish, and dozens of others. Her Inmost Sea is as varied and exciting as Dunsany's Inner Lands. Both worlds feature a plethora of cultures, languages, and lifestyles, ancient cities, legendary monsters, cruel gods, and magic. Le Guin wrote five novels, nine stories, and two essays concerning the Matter of Earthsea, and she drew its original maps. Once plotted, it was a world she continued to visit for the rest of her life.³ And yet, with her passing in 2018, there are still places on the maps of Earthsea which we have never visited. That we will, now, never visit. They lay enticingly just out of reach, like one of Dunsany's jeweled cities glimpsed across an impassable desert.

3. ORLANDO: A BIOGRAPHY (1928) BY VIRGINIA WOOLF

In 2011, *The Guardian* newspaper asked leading science-fiction writers to choose their favorite novel or author in the genre. Some expected titles were represented: Brian Aldiss picked Olaf Stapledon's *Star Maker* (1937); Margaret Atwood selected Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953); William Gibson chose Alfred Bester's *The Stars My Destination* (1957). Le Guin, however, interpreted the question rather broadly and selected twentieth-century modernist Virginia Woolf and her novel, *Orlando*, a satirical history of English literature which traces the life and loves of an Elizabethan poet who lives for centuries and changes sex. Le Guin wrote—

I learned a lot from reading the ever-subversive Virginia Woolf. I was seventeen when I read *Orlando*. It was half revelation, half confusion to

² The two short stories set in the world of Earthsea which precede *A Wizard of Earthsea* are "The Word of Unbinding" and "The Rule of Names," both published in 1964 and both reprinted in *The Wind's Twelve Quarters* (1975) and *The Books of Earthsea: The Complete Illustrated Edition* (2018).

³ Le Guin's last published story, "Firelight" (2018), was set in Earthsea. It is also available in *The Books of Earthsea: The Complete Illustrated Edition* (2018).

me at that age, but one thing was clear: that she imagined a society vastly different from our own, an exotic world, and brought it dramatically alive. I'm thinking of the Elizabethan scenes, the winter when the Thames froze over. Reading, I was there, saw the bonfires blazing in the ice, felt the marvelous strangeness of that moment five hundred years ago—the authentic thrill of being taken *absolutely elsewhere*. (Le Guin, "Learning to Write" 95, emphasis original)

The winter scenes from *Orlando* are vividly echoed in one of Le Guin's best—and best-loved—novels, Hugo and Nebula Award-winning *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969). Set in her Hainish universe on frozen Gethen, the climate is "so relentless, so near the limit of tolerability" that the planet is nicknamed "Winter" by off-worlders (Le Guin, *Left Hand* 96). The quintessential image from the book is of Genly Ai, the Terran envoy, and Estraven, the disgraced Gethen Prime Minister, fleeing from the capital, enduring "weeks of hauling a sledge across an ice-sheet in the dead of winter" (Le Guin, *Left Hand* 240). This is planetary romance at its best, where the alien planet itself is a character in the story, and the plot revolves around the distinctive physical and cultural characteristics of the native Gethenians. Like Woolf's protagonist, Orlando, Le Guin's Gethenians are androgynous, with no fixed sex. Each twenty-six-day lunar cycle, mature Gethenians enter the sexually-active, fertile state of *kemmer*, when they may express female or male genitalia, depending on the context. Thus, any single individual might be mother or father to different children by different lovers over their lifetime. Le Guin wrote of *The Left Hand of Darkness*—

Yes, indeed the people in it are androgynous, but that doesn't mean that I'm predicting that in a millennium or so we will all be androgynous, or announcing that I think we damned well ought to be androgynous. I'm merely observing, in the peculiar, devious, and thought-experimental manner proper to science fiction, that if you look at us at certain odd times of day in certain weathers, we already are. (Le Guin, *Left Hand* xv)

4. *THE MAN IN THE HIGH CASTLE* (1962) BY PHILIP K. DICK

The works of Philip K. Dick frequently play with shifting realities, memory, identity, and human perception. Among the best-known of these is his novel, *The Man in the High Castle* (1962), the Hugo Award-winning alternate-history novel which posits that the Axis Powers win World War II and occupy the United States. An alternate history within the alternate history is depicted in a subversive novel within the novel which several characters are reading, *The Grasshopper Lies Heavy*. In it, the Allies win World War II, although through a different chain of events than in "real-world" history. Like Bradbury's *Martian*

Chronicles, Dick's *Man in the High Castle* is a romantic work filled with *Sehnsucht*, the German Romantic idea of wistful longing, "thoughts and feelings about past, present, and future aspects of life that are incomplete or imperfect, coupled with a desire for ideal, alternative states and experiences of life [...] producing an ambivalent emotional experience" (Kotter-Grühn, et. al. 428). Thus, the American subversives yearn for the alternative world depicted in *The Grasshopper Lies Heavy*, while the Japanese occupiers of California yearn for the romanticized nineteenth-century Wild West. Nobusuke Tagomi, a high-ranking Japanese trade official momentarily perceives yet another reality, an alternative-history version of San Francisco. As in many of Dick's works, such layering of multiple realities challenges reader presumptions about their own identities and the existence of any truly objective reality. Le Guin argued that *The Man in the High Castle*, "may be the first big, lasting contribution science fiction made to American literature" ("Philip K. Dick" 121).

Le Guin and Dick both attended Berkeley High School, both graduating in 1947. However, she did not recall ever meeting him, or even knowing his name there. She wrote:

Absolutely no one I've spoken to from our Berkeley High years remembers him. Was he a total loner, was he out sick a great deal, did he take 'shop' courses rather than the more academic ones? His name is in the yearbook but there is no picture of him. In Dick's life as in his fiction, reality seems to slither from the grasp, and ascertainable facts end up as debatable assertions or mere labels. ("Philip K. Dick" 121)⁴

Le Guin's own novel, *The Lathe of Heaven* (1971) plays with Dickian unstable and overlapping realities, as well as questions of memory, identity, and human perception. She admitted in her *Wired* interview that it was written as an homage to Philip K. Dick:

You know, I couldn't write a Phil Dick book, but I could steal some of his tricks, in a way. Pulling reality out from under the reader all the time, changing reality on them, the way he does. Well, I did it through dreams. Phil would have done it another way. But yeah, homage to Phil Dick is right. (Adams and Kirtley)

In *The Lathe of Heaven*, mild-mannered everyman, George Orr, possesses the ability to alter reality through his dreams. Deemed insane and a drug addict by the medical establishment, he is referred to oneirologist Dr.

⁴ Later, Le Guin and Dick corresponded and spoke on the phone a few times — "always about writing" — but they never met in person ("Philip K. Dick" 121).

William Haber. Haber recognizes the humanitarian potential of being able to manipulate reality through George's dreams. However, each time George wakes from a session with Haber, some new, terrible, and unforeseen consequence has emerged from Haber's playing God. For example, when Haber directs George to dream of a non-overpopulated world, George wakes to find that six billion people have died from a plague. Only George, Haber, and eventually attorney Heather Lelache, can perceive the overlapping realities. George thinks, "His head was too full, holding the two sets of memories, two full systems of information: one of the real (no longer) world with a human population of nearly seven billion and increasing geometrically, and one of the real (now) world with a population of less than one billion and still not stabilized" (*Lathe* 65). Haber is also tempted to pervert George's ability for his own personal gain.

Into their careening dystopias, both Dick and Le Guin foreground morally-good, but otherwise ordinary characters. Le Guin argues that Dick's "moral vocabulary is Christian, though never explicitly so" ("The Modest One" 176). This can be seen in *The Man in the High Castle*, where Mr. Tagomi authorizes the release of the Jewish Frank Frink rather than allow him to be deported and exterminated by the Nazis. She wrote that Tagomi, "sacrifices himself by refusing an act that would harm another man though not himself. He sees evil and, nervously and unhappily, he says no to it. His gesture is modest, its results are uncertain, and his personal reward for virtue is a heart attack" ("The Modest One" 176). Just before his heart attack, however, Tagomi has his vision of the alternate-reality San Francisco, one which is at peace following the long world war. Le Guin wrote, "Mr. Tagomi is a commonplace, conventional, limited, moderately decent middle-aged businessman who is forced to perceive, and tries to face up to, unmitigated human evil" ("Philip K. Dick" 124).

Le Guin's George Orr is, similarly, a commonplace, conventional, limited, moderately decent person who is forced to confront evil in the form of Dr. Haber's megalomania. But if Dick's moral vocabulary is Christian, then Le Guin's is Taoist, and explicitly so in *The Lathe of Heaven*. George is a man perfectly in balance, scoring the exact median on a variety of psychological tests for extraversion/introversion, dominance/submissiveness, independence/dependence, creative/destructive. Haber tells George, "Both, neither. Either, or. Where there's an opposed pair, a polarity, you're in the middle; where there's a scale, you're the balance point. You cancel out so thoroughly that, in a sense, nothing is left. [...] [A] peculiar state of poise, of self-harmony" (*Lathe* 137-138).⁵ Where Haber argues that the nature of the universe is change, George counters

⁵ This sense of being in the middle, in balance, may be encoded into George's surname "Orr" (i.e. "Either, or").

that its other aspect is stillness (Le Guin, *Lathe* 139). Over half of the epigrams heading each chapter in *The Lathe of Heaven* derive from the *Chuang Tse* (i.e. *Zhuangzi*) and *Lao Tse* (i.e. *Tao Te Ching*) the two foundational texts of Taoism, the Chinese philosophical tradition which emphasizes living in harmony. The book's title was derived from a mistranslation of the *Chuang Tse*: "To let understanding stop at what cannot be understood is a high attainment. Those who cannot do it will be destroyed on the lathe of heaven" (*Lathe* 26). Those who meddle with things beyond their wisdom will themselves be wrecked by what they put into motion. Thus, Haber is eventually destroyed by the very dream-enhancing machine he uses to manipulate George's dreams. George, on the other hand, stops at what cannot be understood and finally switches off the machine, quietly, heroically saving the universe from eternal chaos. "I am tired," George tells a stranger who offers him a place to sleep. "I did a lot today. [...] I pressed a button. It took the entire will power, the accumulated strength of my entire existence, to press one damned OFF button." His rescuer replies with a fittingly Taoist sentiment, "You have lived well" (*Lathe* 178).

5. THE SWORD IN THE STONE (1938) BY T.H. WHITE

Le Guin named T.H. White's *The Sword in the Stone* as one her favorite fantasies (along with *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Jungle Books*, Mervyn Peake's *Gormenghast*, and—of course—*The Lord of the Rings*) ("Ursula K. Le Guin: By the Book"). She said in an interview that White's book was "absolutely wonderful. It had a deep, permanent effect on me" (Le Guin and Naimon 115). She wrote in an essay based on her 2004 Arbuthnot Lecture to the American Library Association, "*The Sword in the Stone*, which I first read at thirteen or so, influenced my mind and heart in ways which must be quite clear through the course of this essay, convincing me that trust cannot be limited to mankind, that love cannot be specified" (Le Guin, "Cheek by Jowl" 97). She repeatedly praised the animal element of this coming-of-age story in which the wizard Merlyn teaches leadership skills to the orphan Wart (the future King Arthur) by transforming him into a variety of animals. Le Guin said, "Here for the first time we meet the great mythic theme of Transformation, which is a central act of shamanism" ("Cheek by Jowl" 95). The Wart is transformed into a fish, a hawk, a snake, an owl, and a badger. She wrote, "He participates, at thirty years a minute, in the sentience of trees, and then, at two million years per second, in the sentience of stones. All these scenes of participation in animal being are funny, vivid, startling, and wise" ("Cheek by Jowl" 95).

Le Guin noted that when White incorporated the fantastical *Sword in the Stone* together with his more realistic and adult Arthurian novels as the omnibus *The Once and Future King* (1958), he "cut marvelous, mystical things, added political rants" (Le Guin and Naimon 115). She specifically calls out

White's removal of the original Chapter 13, in which Merlyn turns the Wart into a grass snake, for the insertion of "a trite political satire about ants" ("Cheek by Jowl" 96).

In *The Sword in the Stone*'s revised Chapter 13, Merlyn transforms the Wart into an ant for a lesson on totalitarianism. A notice above the entrance tunnel to the ant-colony reads, "EVERYTHING NOT FORBIDDEN IS COMPULSORY (122, all-caps original)." When the Wart first enters the nest and does not immediately engage in work activities, he is judged to be insane by a soldier ant. Political slogans are repeatedly broadcast to the ants' antennae, such as "*Antland, Antland Over All*" a conscious imitation of "*Deutschland, Deutschland über alles*," the imperial German slogan later co-opted by the Nazi Party (T.H. White 128, italics original). The ants' vocabulary is mostly limited to the concepts of "Done" and "Not Done" (denoting orthodoxy and heterodoxy) in the same way that George Orwell's 1984 "Newspeak" eliminates heretical thoughts by eliminating any words which can be used to describe them. "Rebellion," for example, is removed from the language, and thus rendered literally unthinkable (Orwell, Loc. 4257-4260). T.H. White writes that the ants "had not got the words in which humans are interested—so that it would have been *impossible* to ask them whether they believe in Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness" (127). Only the "beloved Leader" has any agency to issue directions or command executions. As a worker ant in a collectivist society, the Wart spends time feeding his nest-mates mash from his own mouth, for "Even his stomach was not his own" (T.H. White 127).

Le Guin answered White's ant-story with one of her own, "**The Author of the Acacia Seeds. And Other Extracts from the *Journal of the Association of Therolinguistics***" (1974), winner of the 1975 Locus award for Best Short Story. This very short story takes the form of a feigned scientific paper on the translation of what appears to be an ant diary. Entries are composed in a pheromone-based language and deposited on rows of de-germinated acacia seeds found at the dead-end of a tunnel in an abandoned ant colony. Using only the sort of vocabulary that would be available to ants, Le Guin nevertheless creates a formic poetry of alienation—"As the ant among foreign-enemy ants is killed, so the ant without ants dies, but being without ants is as sweet as honeydew"—and metaphysics—"Long are the tunnels. Longer is the untunneled"—and rebellion—"Up with the Queen!" (5). This ant must have also been judged insane, or a dissident. Her desiccated body was found beside the final seed of the diary, her "head had been severed from the thorax, probably by the jaws of a soldier of the colony" (6). Like T.H. White, Le Guin's colony is totalitarian and oppressive, but in Le Guin's hands, a "trite political satire about ants" is transformed into pathos concerning self-expression and individuality in a world which finds both of these tantamount to anarchy.

6. THE JUNGLE BOOKS (1894 & 1895) BY RUDYARD KIPLING

In her essay “Re-reading Peter Rabbit,” Le Guin observes, “Many of us have at least one book or tale that we read as a child and come back to now and then for the rest of our lives” (20). It might be *Peter Rabbit*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *The Snow Queen*, or *Kim*, *At the Back of the North Wind*, the *Alice* books, *The Wind in the Willows*, the *Pooh* books, *Dr. Doolittle*, *The Hobbit*, *Mistress Masham’s Repose*, *The Once and Future King*, *Charlotte’s Web*, or *The Jungle Books* (all, Le Guin favorites). These types of books are frequently fantasies, and many feature animals that speak. She writes, “Children have to be persuaded, convinced, that animals don’t talk. They have to be informed that there is an impassable gulf between Man and Beast” (“Cheek by Jowl” 55). She recalls from her own experience, “in the last of the Mowgli tales in the *Jungle Books*, though the yearning pain of final exile from the kingdom of childhood was hardly comprehensible to me, I felt it as a truth awaiting me, and wept for it” (“Re-reading Peter Rabbit” 24).⁶ But, as long as they ignore what well-meaning adults tell them, children may go on with a certainty that humans and animals are mutually comprehensible, and so we can all be friends. Le Guin asserts the human animal is a social animal, and it yearns to belong to something “older and greater than ourselves”: an “animal otherness” (“Cheek by Jowl” 106). She argues that children, sure of their ability to communicate with animals, are humanity’s closest link to this otherness: “Mowgli and young Wart reach out their hands, the right hand to us and the left hand to the jungle” (“Cheek by Jowl” 106). Likewise, Baloo and Bagheera reach out their hands for ours.

This mutual desire of humans and animals to communicate with one another lies at the heart of Le Guin’s picture-book for young children, *Catwings* (1988). Alley-cat Mrs. Jane Tabby gives birth to an unusual litter of four tabby cats born with wings: James, Thelma, Roger and Harriet. Mrs. Tabby does her best to raise them in the city, but when little Harriet is menaced by a vicious dog, she encourages her brood to fly away to the countryside. However, they find the wild predators are equally dangerous neighbors there. Only when they encounter two human children, Susan and Hank, who feed and house them, who have “kind” hands and promise to never cage them or reveal them to others who might exploit them, do the Catwings finally find their forever home. The fourth book in the series, *Jane on Her Own: A Catwings Tale* (1999), deals with the negative version of the human-animal relationship when the youngest Catwing, also named Jane, is trapped in a city apartment by a man who hires her out for television commercials. Little Jane eventually escapes and returns to her mother. Mrs. Tabby’s human caretaker promises Little Jane the freedom of an open window and protection from exploitation.

⁶ Le Guin is referring to “The Spring Running” from Kipling’s *The Second Jungle Book*.

The other books in the series—*Catwings Return* (1989) and *Wonderful Alexander and the Catwings* (1994)—also focus on family, both the ones we’re born into and the ones we create for ourselves. These charming children’s books give Le Guin the opportunity to demonstrate her keen ethnographer’s eye, her talent for observing and describing exotic cultures like those of Earthsea or of Cat. She does so with equal parts respect and wonder. Cat culture is also the subject of “The Annals of Pard,” a series of short pieces in her essay collection *No Time To Spare* on adopting (or being adopted by) a cat. Here readers learn about her frequent encounters with Cat culture in the form of a fourteen-pound gray tiger tom, the siblings Laurel and Hardy, then Willie, Zorro, and finally the tuxedoed Pard. Le Guin even lived, for a time, with the “pretty golden Mrs. Tabby [who], probably after an affair with her handsome golden brother, presented us with several golden kittens”—possibly the inspiration for the *Catwings* (“Choosing a Cat” 23). While “The Annals of Pard” are told from the human point of view about the burgeoning relationship between a cat and its human, the four *Catwings* stories are told from the feline point of view, with the humans inhabiting the margins. Yet, both the Pard and *Catwings* tales explore that same desire to reach out and communicate with other species which Kipling uses so memorably in *The Jungle Books*.

7. *THE LORD OF THE RINGS* (1954-55) BY J.R.R. TOLKIEN

Annals of the Western Shore, the last series that Le Guin wrote, consists of the novels *Gifts* (2004), *Voices* (2006), and *Powers* (2007). Set in a society of small city states and independent polities with agrarian and craft-based economies, each volume features young adults who grapple with inherited magical powers. In *Gifts*, set in a region reminiscent of the clan-based Scottish Highlands prior to the Jacobite rising of 1745, the “brantor” (or laird) of each Upland domain wields a powerful innate “gift” which he uses to protect his people and livestock from predation by neighboring domains. Nanno Corde, for example, can make the blind see and the deaf hear, but she can just as easily make a sighted person blind or a hearing one deaf. Gry, the daughter of the brantor of Roddmant wonders, “Maybe they were useful for curing people, to begin with. For healing. And then people found out they could be weapons” (Le Guin, *Annals* 124). Gry’s gift is to influence animals. Her mother uses the same gift to call animals for hunters, a practice Gry vehemently opposes. The brantor of Caspromant has the gift of “unmaking,” literally, the ability to pull something apart, from a tangled rope to the organs of a living creature. As Orrec, the scion of Caspromant, reaches puberty, his gift of unmaking is expected to manifest so that he can begin training to succeed his father as brantor, in time. But, as nearby things are suddenly and violently “unmade” without Orrec’s intention, he

decides to hide his powerful gift and never use it lest he inadvertently unmake a person.

Le Guin long considered the use and abuse of power, particularly the powers of adolescents stumbling toward maturity. Orrec's struggle with the gift of unmaking is not unlike Ged's struggle with his magical powers in *A Wizard of Earthsea*. As Ged discovers, his powers can also be used for good or ill. Similarly, in her essay on *The Lord of the Rings*, "The Staring Eye" (1974), Le Guin wrote of Tolkien's One Ring, "Something of great inherent power, even if wholly good in itself, may work destruction if used in ignorance, or at the wrong time" (172).

J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* was a work of great inherent power to Le Guin. Happily, it did not destroy her self-confidence as a writer, although she muses that it could have. She recalled encountering *The Lord of the Rings* for the first time on the new acquisitions shelf of a university library. All three volumes were "centered with a staring black and red Eye" ("Staring Eye" 171). Falling under the gaze of that Eye, she passed by the books more than once before deciding to give them a try. She wrote, "I checked out Volume I and went home with it. Next morning I was there at nine, and checked out the others. I read the three volumes in three days [...] I reread a great deal, but have lost count only with Dickens, Tolstoy, and Tolkien" (172). As a reader, she was swept away by Tolkien's incredible imagination, but for a writer, Tolkien cast a long shadow. She wrote, "I count it lucky that I, personally, did not, and could not have, read Tolkien before I was twenty-five. Because I really wonder if I could have handled it" (172). Le Guin started writing fantasy at the age of nine, and though she read whatever imaginative fiction she could find, she did not try to model her writings on the things she was reading. She wrote, "I had somewhere to go [...] I had to get there by myself. If I had known that one was there before me, one very much greater than myself, I wonder if I would have had the witless courage to go on" (173).

Although Le Guin credits Tolkien as one of her favorite authors, her works resist the sort of naked mimicking of Tolkien commonplace in twentieth-century fantasy. *Earthsea's* Ged, for instance, learns that the true battle is not with a Dark Lord but within himself. Similarly in *Gifts*, the battle between good and evil takes the form of internal struggle as Orrec and Gry try to wield their powers for good rather than use them for destruction.

Tolkien's shadow might rather be felt in Le Guin's expert world-building. Le Guin's secondary worlds do not much resemble Tolkien's, but both authors create complex, utterly-magical yet utterly-believable worlds. Le Guin's Western Shore includes various well-developed cultures, languages, histories, and religions. As with *Earthsea*, Le Guin created her own Western Shore maps. As Orrec and Gry travel across the land in *Voices* (2007) and *Powers* (2008), more

of the landscape opens up to the reader in the same way that Middle-earth opens up on the road with the Fellowship. The secondary world becomes richer as each new culture is encountered.

Gifts won the 2005 PEN Center USA Literary Award for Children's Literature. *Voices* was a 2007 Locus Award finalist in the Best Young Adult Book category and *Powers* won the 2008 Nebula Award for Best Novel. A Library of America omnibus edition of the three novels was released in October 2020 and includes Le Guin's previously unseen hand-drawn maps, as well as scholarly notes and interviews concerning the novels.

8. "THE ONES WHO STAY AND FIGHT" (2018) BY N.K. JEMISIN

In the introduction to her Hugo Award-winning short story, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas," (1973) in *The Wind's Twelve Quarters*, Le Guin wrote,

The central idea of this psychomyth, the scapegoat, turns up in Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*, and several people have asked me, rather suspiciously, why I gave the credit to William James. The fact is, I haven't been able to re-read Dostoyevsky, much as I loved him, since I was twenty-five, and I'd simply forgotten he used the idea. But when I met it in James's "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life," it was with a shock of recognition. ("The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" 251)

Le Guin is referring to American philosopher and psychologist, and brother of author Henry James, William James (1842-1910), who proposed the following in his essay, "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life" (1891):

Or if the hypothesis were offered us of a world in which Messrs. Fourier's and Bellamy's and Morris's Utopias should all be outdone and millions kept permanently happy on the one simple condition that a certain lost soul on the far-off edge of things should lead a life of lonely torture, what except a specifical and independent sort of emotion can it be which would make us immediately feel, even though an impulse arose within us to clutch at the happiness so offered, how hideous a thing would be its enjoyment when deliberately accepted as the fruit of such a bargain? (333).

Le Guin mused, "The dilemma of the American conscience can hardly be better stated" ("Ones Who Walk" 251). Although she claimed she did not sit down to write a story with James in mind, Le Guin credits his hypothesis as the ultimate, if unconscious, source.

The city of Omelas (Salem [Oregon] spelled backwards) is a fair city of jubilant festivals, a congenial climate, a stable economy without slavery, peace without warfare, creature comforts without environmental damage, and “[a] boundless and generous contentment” shared among its people (280). It is a utopia of sorts, except for the dark secret that all this happiness is dependent upon the misery of a single child, locked in a filthy dungeon. Le Guin wrote —

They all know it is there, all the people of Omelas. Some of them have come to see it, others are content merely to know it is there. They all know that it has to be there [...] they all understand that their happiness, the beauty of their city, the tenderness of their friendships, the health of their children, the wisdom of their scholars, the skill of their makers, even the abundance of their harvest and the kindly weather of their skies, depend wholly on this child’s abominable misery. (282)

She did not explain how such a circumstance came to be: whether it was the result of a bargain struck with a perverse wizard, or the required sacrifice to a particular god, or the scientific result of trial and error. The point of the story is that all the citizens of Omelas know about the suffering child. Most accept the situation as necessary, make themselves content with it, and get on with the process of living well. However, there are some who cannot abide the bargain and walk away from Omelas.

In an interview on the publication of her short story collection, *How Long ‘til Black Future Month?* (2018), Hugo and Locus Award-winning author N.K. Jemisin observed, “the thing that I have always loved about Le Guin’s story is that she kind of gut punches you with the fact that this is the reality of living in a modern capitalist society. You are living at the expense of, amid the pain of, a lot of people who have suffered to bring you the wonderful lifestyle that you’ve got” (Bereola). She continued, “That is the exercise that Le Guin is engaging in. Can you have a utopian society without somebody somewhere suffering?” (Bereola).

While the purpose of the present essay is largely to look backward at some of the authors and stories which influenced and inspired Le Guin’s mythopoeia, it seemed appropriate to end with a brief look forward at how Le Guin’s legacy is already influencing and inspiring the mythopoeic and cosmopoeic efforts of others. Jemisin noted, “there’s a slew of stories speaking back to that one. I guess you could call them Omelas stories” (Bereola). Her own contribution, **“The Ones Who Stay and Fight” (2018)**, is what she calls, “a pastiche of and reaction to Le Guin’s [story]” (Jemisin xiii).

Jemisin’s tale begins much like Le Guin’s, with a description of a remarkable city—“Um-Helat” (a conscious echo of “Omelas”)—also a city of peace, prosperity, festivals, a fair climate, and equality. Her narrator says, “Oh,

and there is *such* joy here, friend” (2, emphasis original). The major difference between Le Guin’s Omelas and Jemisin’s Um-Helat is that there is no sacrificial lamb upon whom the happiness of Um-Helat depends. Jemisin calls her city a “postcolonial utopia” (12), while she refers to Omelas as “a tick of a city, fat and happy with its head buried in a tortured child” (5). And yet, Jemisin’s major critique of Le Guin’s story is not the scapegoated child, but the suggestion that, “the only way to create a society that is a better place is to walk away from this one or to go off the grid” (Bereola). Jemisin wonders what might happen if people stayed, instead. She argues, “no, you’ve got to fix it, especially when there’s nowhere to walk away to” (Bereola). Her solution is as thought-provoking as Le Guin’s, and as relevant to contemporary society. Published the same year that Le Guin passed away, Jemisin’s fable seems like a good place to round out this brief look at Ursula’s mythopoeic bookshelf.

CONCLUSIONS

The prolific Ursula K. Le Guin had numerous influences and favorite authors who worked in the mythopoetic and cosmopoietic idioms. This essay examines only a handful. It could have just as easily included Jorge Luis Borges, Italo Calvino, Charles Dickens, Stanislaw Lem, or Mark Twain. In 1976, Le Guin wrote,

My own list of ‘influences’ might go Shelley, Keats, Wordsworth, Leopardi, Hugo, Rilke, Thomas and Roethke in poetry, Dickens, Tolstoy, Turgenev, Chekhov, Pasternak, the Brontës [sic], Woolf, E.M. Forster in prose. Among contemporaries, Solzhenitsyn, Böll, Wilson, Drabble, Calvino, Dick. I wonder why we literati always talk about literary influences? I doubt that any of those writers, even Tolstoy, has helped me make a world out of chaos more than Beethoven, or Schubert, or I.M.W. Turner. (“A Response to the Le Guin Issue”)

The shortlist of authors that nearly made the present essay include Margaret Atwood, George MacDonald, and H.G. Wells.

Le Guin’s relationship with Margaret Atwood (1939-) was, perhaps, not so much one of influence as of friendship and mutual regard. In 2002, Atwood reviewed Le Guin’s collection, *The Birthday of the World and Other Stories* for *The New York Review of Books*. Three of Le Guin’s reviews of Atwood’s books are reprinted in *Words Are My Matter*. In the review for Atwood’s *The Year of the Flood*, Le Guin famously wrote, “Margaret Atwood doesn’t want any of her books called science fiction” (“*Year of the Flood*” 195). Atwood responded, “that has caused a certain amount of uproar [...] scarcely a question period goes by at my public readings without someone asking, usually in injured tones, why I have forsworn the term *science fiction*, as if I’ve sold my children to the salt

mines" (Atwood, "Introduction" 5, emphasis original). But in 2010, the two took part in a public discussion on the writing process where they debated their individual definitions of "science fiction" (Le Guin and Atwood). Later, Atwood reflected on that conversation, "what Le Guin means by 'science fiction' is what I mean by 'speculative fiction,' and what she means by 'fantasy' would include some of what I mean by 'science fiction.' So that clears it all up, more or less" (Atwood, "Introduction" 7). Their relationship is fascinating and certainly worthy of further study, but is there an argument to be made concerning influence in either direction?

Le Guin wrote of *The Princess and the Goblin* by George MacDonald (1824-1905), "This is a great story, and I love it all, but I love the goblins best" ("George MacDonald" 138). There are certainly similarities between MacDonald's goblins and Le Guin's subterranean Gdemiar in "Semley's Necklace." A tenuous connection may also exist with *The Tombs of Atuan* (1970), her sequel to *A Wizard of Earthsea*, in which a young girl seems fated to spend her life serving a harsh god in underground tombs not unlike the subterranean goblin caves which Princess Irene traverses in MacDonald's book. When it comes to goblin caves, it always goes back to MacDonald, but his influence over Le Guin appears to be more tangential than that of other authors discussed above.

Another possible inclusion is H.G. Wells (1866-1946). In her introduction for the Modern Library's 2002 edition of *The Time Machine*, Le Guin mused, "I have no idea how old I was the first time I opened the fat dull-green volume called *Seven Scientific Romances*, or how many times during my childhood and adolescence I reread *The Time Machine*. The lawn among the rhododendrons under the White Sphinx is as familiar to me as the garden of the house I grew up in" ("H.G. Wells" 181). Perhaps a tenuous link can be made between *The Time Machine* and Semly's form of time travel, but Le Guin's concern for the indigenous "Other" makes a more compelling comparison with Bradbury's Martians.

Any list like this one is open to criticism about what was included and what was not. But it is not intended to be comprehensive. Rather, it is a picture book filled with a handful of snap-shots: a few of the works Le Guin acknowledged as being influential or among her favorites, and to which some connections might be traced in her own mythopoeic and cosmopoeic works. As literary scholars and fans begin the long, long work of examining Le Guin's life and letters in retrospect, let us hope this is only one of many visits to Ursula's Bookshelf.

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