

The Farthest Shore Short Guide

The Farthest Shore by Ursula K. Le Guin

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Overview

In *The Farthest Shore*, the last novel in Le Guin's Earthsea Trilogy, the mythical world of Earthsea is threatened with annihilation. All the arts and crafts of human life are slipping into decay; people are losing the will to live and to create. Foremost among the eroding powers is the master power of magic.

The arch-mage of the school of wizards, Ged, sets out with Arren, a young prince destined to rule Earthsea, to discover what is happening to their world and prevent its destruction. They eventually discover that the cause of the "unmaking" of their world is the wizard Cob, whose fear of death is so strong that he would destroy Earthsea to preserve his own life. On their search, they encounter pirates, prophets, and dragons.

Le Guin has created a double adventure story centered on the problem of death. While the magician Ged and Prince Arren search for the source of the destruction, Ged helps Arren learn what he must know to become king. The climax of both adventures is the encounter with the fear of death.

Like the first two novels in the trilogy, *The Farthest Shore* shows a young person in the process of growing to adulthood. Each book deals with a major feature of maturing. *A Wizard of Earthsea* portrays the young magician Ged learning to handle his "shadow self," those aspects of his personality that are frightening and sometimes overpowering. *The Tombs of Atuan* looks at the special problems a young woman may have in a rigorously sexist society.

In *The Farthest Shore*, Le Guin presents Arren with perhaps the most difficult challenge of life—how to live well despite the fact that one must die.

The Farthest Shore completes the trilogy by showing the fulfillment of Ged's career as a wizard. By guiding Arren to his kingship, Ged carries through the larger quest that began when he discovered half of the broken ring of order while fleeing his shadow in the first volume. In the second volume, he rescues Tenar in the process of finding the ring's other half and, thereby, restoring the lost rune of unity. As an extended fable, the first two volumes concern dealing with one's divided self, and the third book confronts the most serious problem of attaining maturity. Eighteen years after completing *The Farthest Shore*, Le Guin extended the story of Earthsea with *Tehanu: The Last Book of Earthsea* (1990). A central issue of this book is what the hero does when his destiny is fulfilled and his power is at an end.

About the Author

Ursula Kroeber Le Guin was born on October 21, 1929, in Berkeley, California. Her parents were the noted anthropologist, Alfred L. Kroeber and Theodora K. Kroeber, author of the young adult classic *Ishi: Last of His Tribe* (1964). Because of her parents' occupations, Le Guin's childhood was rich in the kinds of material she came to use in her fiction: myths, legends, and accounts of other cultures. The influence of this background is evident in nearly all of her work, but is especially apparent in her underrated masterpiece, *Alimys Coming Home*.

Le Guin graduated from Radcliffe College in 1951 and the following year earned a master's degree in French and Italian literature at Columbia University. While working on her doctorate degree, she won a Fulbright Fellowship and travelled to France. There she met a fellow American Fulbright scholar, Charles A. Le Guin. They were soon married in Paris. Upon their return from Europe, Le Guin taught French at Mercer University in Macon, Georgia. She and her husband have two daughters, Elisabeth, born in 1957, and Caroline, born in 1959, and a son, Theodore, born in 1964.

Le Guin sold her first story, "April in Paris," to *Fantastic* magazine in 1962.

She subsequently published several well-received novels. In 1969 she achieved a major literary breakthrough, winning a Nebula Award for *The Left Hand of Darkness* and the Boston GlobeHorn Book Award for *A Wizard of Earthsea*. *The Left Hand of Darkness* was honored with a 1970 Hugo Award.

The second and third books of Le Guin's Earthsea Trilogy earned her further praise—*The Tombs of Atuan* received a Newbery Honor Book citation, and *The Farthest Shore* received a National Book Award for children's literature. Her growing critical reputation led to appointments as writer-in-residence at several workshops and creative writing programs. Her essays on fantasy, science fiction, and other subjects have been collected in *The Language of the Night* (1979) and *Dancing at the Edge of the World*. In 1990, Le Guin published a sequel to the Earthsea Trilogy, titled *Tehanu: The Last Book of Earthsea*.

Setting

Earthsea is a mythical world of many small island nations surrounded by an unknown sea. It has a border with the world of the dead. Earthsea's economy and politics seem medieval, with trade and barter between nations governed mainly by kings or ruling families. In a few areas magic substitutes for the benefits of modern technology, such as medicine and weather control. But such progress has not affected other social systems such as transportation, industry, or warfare; these remain medieval.

Le Guin explains the creation and existence of this world in the first book of the trilogy, *A Wizard of Earthsea*. There Ged explains that the shining of the stars is the repetition of a long word of which the name of every essential thing in creation is a syllable. All of creation is contained in and made by words. Out of the darkness of nonbeing comes the light of being. Everything exists for a time, then returns to its source in nonbeing.

Because the cosmos is speaking a word that is creation, magic is possible.

The wizard (or mage) can participate in and, to some extent, manipulate creation by learning the syllables of the long word and then speaking them at appropriate times. Magic in Earthsea essentially involves learning the words of the original language of creation. Learning these words does not confer simple power on the wizard, however, for it is possible to misuse magic words and upset the balance of creation. The magician might well produce the opposite of what he intends. Or a selfish man of power may destroy creation altogether while attempting to achieve something impossible, like immortality. Immortality, for any individual, is impossible in this world because it would interrupt the dynamic interchange between being and nonbeing, between light and darkness, that keeps the cosmos in motion and makes life and change possible.

Dragons are the oldest living creatures in Earthsea. They speak the original language of creation and usually do not concern themselves with human activities. However, when Cob begins to unmake the world, they too are endangered. The dragons call upon Ged to help them as they begin to lose their power of speech and their will to live.

Social Sensitivity

Though teachers play an important role in all three of the Earthsea books, this novel places special emphasis on the role of the wise mentor. Learning to overcome the fear of death requires a teacher steeped in the wisdom of the culture. In many ways Ged is presented as a model teacher, one who carefully chooses what to say, what to demonstrate, when to debate, and when to allow students the time to digest and test what they have learned.

This book suggests that teachers should inspire their students with love, but should also teach them the "hard words," the truly difficult truths painstakingly gathered by the wisdom of traditional culture. For Le Guin, the central truth seems to be that humanity must live and seek happiness in the world that is given. For her, human happiness arises from a freely chosen and social alliance on the side of creation. People are happy when they are creating the works and institutions that are essential for peace and well-being. In so doing, they oppose the natural forces of nonbeing that continuously break down what is made.

Though this world view will probably be unfamiliar to most younger readers, this should not detract from the book's interest or value. A teacher may avoid discussing the religious ideas raised in this novel, but a more creative approach would be to challenge students to understand these ideas and then to criticize them, consider alternatives, or even defend Le Guin's implicit world view. Such an approach should improve reading and thinking skills while encouraging students to examine their own values. Considering mortality is especially difficult for young people. This novel works much like traditional fairy tales in offering a gentle opening for thought and discussion about this central philosophical and moral problem.



Literary Qualities

As in the other Earthsea novels, Le Guin sets up a thematic opposition between being and nonbeing. Arren must choose between serving being and serving nonbeing. His plight is similar to that of Ged in *A Wizard of Earthsea* and Tenar in *The Tombs of Atuan*. Although he wants to serve Ged, whom he loves, Arren is strongly tempted by the immortality that Cob offers. Ged's teachings in the course of their adventures help to make clear the values and ideas attached to these symbolic poles. Le Guin also infuses the landscapes of Earthsea with symbolic meanings, most notably in the "dry land," but also in almost every area the pair visits from Hort Town to the Children of the Open Sea.

The story is told mainly from Arren's point of view. This has the initial effect of obscuring the tenderness of Ged's feelings for the young prince. But as the love between the two matures, this early obscurity is dispelled by a moving revelation of their affection in the land of the dead.

Like most of Le Guin's work, *The Farthest Shore* is beautifully written and invites reading aloud. Her story of a *Illustration by Gail Garraty for The Farthest Shore by Ursula K. Le Guin. Atheneum: New York (1972).*

young man's maturation through a physical and spiritual adventure makes this an especially attractive book for thoughtful young readers.



Themes and Characters

Young Prince Arren takes his first steps out of childhood when he begins to love the wizard Ged. At that point he gives himself to adult concerns: love, honor, wisdom, and danger. He also gives himself to a quest—to accompany Ged in redeeming a decaying world.

From that moment, Arren begins to grow into the prince who can fulfill the prophecy that he will be the first king in eight hundred years to rule all of Earthsea in peace. The prophecy states that the next such king must "cross the dark land living and come to the far shores of the day." This means he must pass through the dry land of the dead, crossing the wall of stone that leads into it, and then the mountains of pain that lead out. Traditionally, only a mage can get to this place and return, because travelling there is a matter of spiritual as well as physical movement. In fact, it is never perfectly clear whether this "place" has an actual physical existence.

Though crossing this landscape suggests many meanings, one of the most important for Arren is the need to face and overcome the despair of realizing that he will die.

In his journey through this dark land Arren learns the powers and limitations of magic, about when to act and when to contemplate, and about his own strengths and weaknesses. One of the most important lessons concerns the nature of evil. In various ways Ged teaches him that evil is a web that people weave by their choices and actions.

The world view that pervades Le Guin's work—a blend of Jungian psychology and Taoism—is evident in her earliest published fiction. In her essays, most notably "The Child and the Shadow," Le Guin discusses the influence of Carl Jung's psychological theories on her own thought. Literary critics have detailed her use of Taoism, especially the Tao Te Ching, which contains the teachings attributed to Lao Tzu, an ancient Chinese philosopher. She discusses this aspect of her philosophy in her essay "Dreams Must Explain Themselves." Although these ideas often underlie her stories, they are rarely obtrusive. Readers can enjoy Le Guin's works purely as fantastic entertainment. The intellectual underpinning, however, enables her works to achieve a psychological and philosophical depth not often encountered in the genre.

In the Taoist world of Earthsea, evil is not part of creation. The world is in a balance between making and unmaking, between being and nonbeing. Evil flows only from human actions that subvert this balance. Humanity's function is to preserve the balance by creating the order and beauty within which people can live reasonably happy lives and fulfill their natural destinies. When any individual attempts to serve himself or herself by serving nonbeing, then evil results.

This view of evil becomes especially important when Arren, in his dreams, begins to succumb to the magician Cob's promise of immortality. Tempted by Cob's offer, Arren despairs over his own coming death. But deep down he realizes that the promise is



empty. To gain immortality he would have to surrender himself. Arren would have to give up his secret name, the name of his essential identity, in order to claim immortality. He would cease to be an individual.

Ged teaches that it is natural for people to desire immortality. Humanity is on the side of being and opposed to nonbeing, so why should people gladly embrace death? In fact, only those who have succumbed to Cob's offer willfully seek to die. Ged teaches that human happiness and meaning arise from serving being. He teaches, furthermore, that death contributes to the meaning of life, for life's shortness binds humanity together in the effort to create order and beauty.

Ged, Arren, and Cob are the main characters. At the height of his powers, Ged functions as a wise teacher and as a powerful magician. Arren's encounter with Cob will be the crucial test by which he may become king over Earthsea. Free of the ultimate fear of death and of an uncontrolled desire for immortality, Arren will be able to rule without becoming corrupted by his power. He will not be tempted to use his great authority to serve himself.

Arren, as a young man learning to be a king, is like most young heroes in fantasy adventure. He differs mainly in his thoughtfulness. Loving Ged is enough to make him heroic, but he must also learn the consequences of evil acts and defeat his fear of death. Both are necessary to complete his self-understanding.

As the force of evil, Cob is fully represented in the idea of a wizard who is overwhelmed by the fear of death. The implications of his choice wholly define his personality and his actions.



Topics for Discussion

1. Arren grows into a good young king in this novel. What things must he learn before he can become the sort of king that Earthsea hopes for?

2. What are the rules governing magic in Earthsea? What can magic do, and what is impossible with magic? Why?

3. How would you describe the relationship between Ged and Arren?

Why is this relationship so important?

What major changes does it undergo in the course of the story?

4. Cob is so afraid of death that he will destroy the world to become immortal.

Why is he so afraid of death? What has Ged done to help Cob deal with this fear?

5. What does Ged mean in "Sea Dreams" when he says "Death and life are like the two sides of my hand?"

6. Why do Cob's actions lead to people forgetting their skills and dragons their language? Taken together, what do the effects of Cob's actions add up to?

7. Why does Arren fall under Cob's influence? How does he escape Cob's power?

8. How does Ged defeat Cob? What meanings do you see in this defeat?

9. Why does Ged take Arren along on this quest? Is it true that Arren hinders more than he helps?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. If you have read either or both of the other books in The Earthsea Trilogy, compare Arren with young Ged and/or Tenar in the ways they grow. What meanings do you see in these similarities and differences?

2. A Wizard of Earthsea opens by announcing that Ged is a great hero of Earthsea's past. Discuss Ged as a hero.

What qualities count as heroism in Earthsea? If you have read the other books in this trilogy, write a discussion of his development. How has he come to be such a hero?

3. Write a summary of the main ideas Arren learns while on this quest. These ideas should form a kind of education manual for young rulers. Discuss the value and importance of these ideas to ruling well in Earthsea, in our own world, or even in a school.

4. It is difficult to understand why Cob's success at achieving immortality should lead to the destruction of his world. How would you explain the connections between these two events?

5. A story in The Wind's Twelve Quarters, "Darkness Box," has similarities to The Farthest Shore. Read the story and write about an interesting and important way in which the two are related.

6. Le Guin uses several rich symbolic settings, for example: Hort Town, the raft village, and the dry land. Choose one of these settings or another that interests you. Write an explanation of some of the meanings Le Guin attempts to convey by means of this setting.

7. There are many ways, religious and nonreligious, for dealing with the fact that all humans must die. Le Guin's view in this novel is that people do not really live on in any conscious form after their deaths. According to Ged, why should people try to live good lives if they are just going to die finally anyway?

9. Do you agree or disagree with the ideas about death and life that Ged expresses? Choose one or two ideas to state clearly, then give and explain your main reasons for agreeing or disagreeing.



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Related Titles

The Farthest Shore is the last of three books making up The Earthsea Trilogy.

In each one Ged is a major character, though The Tombs of Atuan is told from the point of view of a young woman as she approaches adulthood. Each of these volumes received important literary awards, and each is as interesting, profound, and artful as the last.

A Wizard of Earthsea shows how, as a boy, Ged discovers and deals with his shadow, a dark force he releases into the world. By confronting this shadow, he learns how to be an adult. The Tombs of Atuan follows the maturation of Tenar, a young woman who is trained as a priestess in a society that has become increasingly sexist. Though issues of gender are kept in the background, they are central to understanding Tenar's situation. Men are rigidly associated with being and women with nonbeing. A woman priestess is, therefore, trained to serve the forces of darkness—and part of this training involves the utter surrender of her identity.

Tehanu: The Last Book of Earthsea continues the Earthsea series, but from a new angle. Beginning where The Farthest Shore ends, it tells the story of Tenar, who has lived on Gont since leaving Atuan. There she has married, raised a family, lost her husband and seen her children grow up. Just as she is starting a new life, Ged arrives, his magic power gone and near death from his struggle with Cob. Tenar becomes his teacher, showing him how to begin again and, thereby, modeling how Earthsea as a whole must begin again to recognize the importance of women's special powers to foster the arts of peace. This learning is necessary because, by helping bring order into Earthsea, Ged has reduced the need for masculine heroism and increased the need for a balanced female and male approach to organizing social life. Though this book deals with painful subjects, it also contains more humor than the earlier volumes.

In addition to these novels, Le Guin has published three stories in The Wind's Twelve Quarters that are related to the Earthsea novels. "The Word of Unbinding" elaborates on the situation at the end of The Farthest Shore. A duel between good and evil wizards leads to a confrontation in the land of death.

"The Rule of Names" is a comic tale of a duel between wizards in which the knowing of true names is crucial. "Darkness Box," though not set in Earthsea, directly treats the themes of the necessary balance of light and dark, being and nonbeing.

All of these works draw the reader into a delightful and beautiful world. Le Guin is an accomplished and thoughtful writer. Her fiction encourages serious thought about the universal problems of achieving maturity, but it never loses sight of the pleasures of wonder and adventure.

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Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

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