# The Wind's Twelve Quarters Short Guide

## The Wind's Twelve Quarters by Ursula K. Le Guin

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The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". 

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". 

# Contents

# Overview

The Wind's Twelve Quarters was published in 1975, collecting into a retrospective Le Guin's short stories that had been published over the previous twelve years. The stories are: "Semley's Necklace," "April in Paris," "The Masters," "Darkness Box," "The Word of Unbinding," "The Rule of Names," "Winter's King," "The Good Trip," "Nine Lives," "Things," "A Trip to the Head," "Vaster Than Empires and More Slow," "The Stars Below," "The Field of Vision," "Direction of the Road," "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas," and "The Day before the Revolution."

In "Semley's Necklace," Semley is a young noble of the planet Fomalhaut II, as poor in material goods as the noble husband who "loves no gold but the gold of her hair." Semley goes on a quest for the lost treasure of her family, among the Fiia and the Clayfolk and the Starlords. She makes a relativistic journey to the museum planet of the Starlords, a trip that takes her one long night but lasts seventeen years for the planet she returns to at last.

"April in Paris" brings together four lonely people on an island in Paris. Each is brought from a different century by a magic spell, finding what they need most in their new company.

"Darkness Box" is set in a sunless fantasy world, where gryphons fly and dead soldiers come alive again to follow their prince, until he opens a small box washed up by the sea, restoring time and daylight as well the darkness and mortality that his father the king had trapped in the box.

"The Word of Unbinding" tells of the struggles of the wizard Festin, imprisoned by an invading wizard who ruins islands and all that live there.

"The Rule of Names" shows that a comical, inept wizard may have a true name, showing him to be something far different from what his village neighbors expect.

In "Winter's King," the young King Argaven of Karhide on Gethen is kidnaped, drugged, and brainwashed so that she (the Gethenians are all androgynes) will, subconsciously, rule the country in a way so as to favor the fraction who kidnaped her. She escapes from this plot by traveling to another planet of the Hainish Ekumen, where her mind is restored. After an education as a diplomat of the Ekumen, she returns to Gethen. Her heir—an infant when she left, but now old due to Argaven's relativistic journey—is an incompetent ruler. So, backed by both the Ekumen and the Karhidish people, King Argaven resumes her reign.

"The Good Trip" is a story about a man who has had to watch his wife slowly go insane. He is now on drugs, but this time he goes off on a better trip—without the drugs— which reaches not only to his wife's mind in the sanatorium but also their future together, well and content.

When "Nine Lives" begins, Martin and Pugh have been isolated on the sterile planet Libra, setting up a mining operation there.

Then a working team arrives: five men and five women, all cloned from the same man.

The ten-clone is very efficient, but does have some peculiarities unique to clones.

When nine of the ten are killed in an accident, the only survivor has to learn how to cope with being alone, as singleton humans are all alone.

In "Things," the end is nigh on an island.

Nothing new is being built, made, grown or bred, including children. The Ragers are killing off the animals and burning the fields. "It is well to be free of Things." But there is one man who still has a dream of the islands said to exist somewhere out there. And so he tips his huge stock of bricks into the sea—much to the Ragers' pleasure. But secretly, under water, he arranges the bricks into an underwater causeway, a sea road.

"A Trip to the Head" is a strange, surrealistic tale of someone who has lost the names of things and does not know who he or she is or what he is looking for. But then again, neither does her or his companion.

"Vaster Than Empires and More Slow" tells of ten misfit explorers sent to investigate an unreasonably distant planet. The strangest of the crew is Osden, an empath who feels exactly what everybody else really thinks about him and each other. The planet they come to has no animal life, just one interconnected mess of plants, trees, and vines of different kinds. This huge biosphere learns from them fear of the Other, but comes to accept Osden.

In "The Stars Below" an astronomer, Guennar, hides in the cellar when his observatory is burned to the ground. He is hidden by a friend in a mine, and survives there when the few miners come to trust him. His search for knowledge continues, even underground, and eventually before disappearing, he tells the miners where he has seen stars in the rock, a great wealth of silver undiscovered.

"The Field of Vision" tells of astronauts returning with strange effects from a visit in a mysterious 600 million-year-old city on Mars. One of them sees things and another hears things. After a long struggle, they learn to make sense of their sounds and visions. They see and hear the immanence of God in everything.

"Direction of the Road" is an old oak tree's story about itself, growing beside a road as a living being interacting as it is perceived by all who pass.

In "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas," the narrator speaks to the reader, asking him or her to imagine Omelas, city of joy, and the scapegoat whose misery keeps all the rest in peace and plenty. But then, there are some who cannot stand the thought of the suffering child—the ones who walk away from Omelas.

The final story in this collection is "The Day before the Revolution," in which readers are introduced to Laia Aseio Odo, hero and founder of a political philosophy. She is seventy-two, living in an Odonian collec. rive, and putting together in her mind all her memories of life.

# About the Author

Ursula K. Le Guin was born on October 21, 1929, in Berkeley, California. Her parents were the famed anthropologist Alfred Louis Kroeber and Theodora (Kracaw) Kroeber, who authored the ethnology classic Ishi in Two Worlds and several children's books published by Parnassus Press. The bond of empathy and respect that existed between Alfred Kroeber and the Amerindians he studied led to his friendship with Ishi, the last remaining aboriginal raised without contact with "Americans" and the subject of Theodora Kroeber's classic book. The Kroebers raised all their children according to their progressive and non-sexist beliefs.

Young Ursula had two older brothers, Theodore Charles and Karl, and an older half-brother, Clifton, from her mother's previous marriage to Clifton Spencer Brown.

Throughout her childhood, young Ursula was exposed to Celtic and Teutonic folklore and magic from cultures around the world.

She learned to respect cultural diversity and human unity, and appreciate the virtues and vices of the academic community.

Young Ursula was inspired as well by authors such as Hans Christian Andersen, Lord Dunsany, Padraic Colum, and J. R. R. Tolkien (a writer to whom she is often favorably compared), and by the anthropological views of Sir James Frazer, whose 469 Golden Bough first thrilled her as a child when she discovered a juvenile adaptation written by his wife.

Le Guin wrote her first fantasy story at nine, about a man persecuted by evil elves, and she submitted her first science fiction work, a story about time travel that she wrote when she was ten or eleven, to Amazing Stories. It was rejected, but Amazing Stories was to publish her first science fiction story, "April in Paris," over twenty years later. Lord Dunsany's A Dreamer's Tales, which she encountered at age twelve, was a revelation to her. She recalls that moment in her nonfiction collection The Language of the Night: "What I hadn't realized, I guess, is that people were still making up myths. One made up stories oneself, of course; but here was a grownup doing it, for grownups, without a single apology to common sense, without an explanation, just dropping us straight into the Inner Lands....

I had discovered my native country."

Unlike the earlier generation of "Golden Age" science fiction writers who learned their craft on the job, writing for pulp magazines, this writer calls herself "an intellectual born and bred." Ursula Kroeber graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Radcliffe in 1951 and earned her master's degree in Romance Literatures of the Middle Ages and Renaissance at Columbia University in 1952. She won a Fulbright fellowship to study in Paris, where she met Charles Le Guin and married him in December, 1953.

Keeping in step with her husband's academic itinerary, she left her own post-graduate studies and taught French at Mercer University in Macon, Georgia, in 1954 and at the University of Idaho in 1956. In 1959 the Le Guins settled in Portland, Oregon, where Charles Le Guin teaches history at Portland State University. Together the Le Guins have raised three children, Elizabeth, Caroline, and Theodore.

By the early 1960s, Le Guin had published a few poems and one story in small magazines, but she also had five unpublished novels, written over ten years, mostly set in the imaginary central European country of Orsinia. She turned to science fiction at that point out of a desire to be published, and her work quickly grew in power. Two of her first short stories were set on islands and dealt with, among other things, the rules of magic. In 1967 the publisher of Parnassus Press asked her for a manuscript and suggested to her that she might try her hand at writing for young people, giving her complete freedom to write anything she liked. As she let her imagination roam, Le Guin found herself remembering the islands and magic of her earlier stories, and she began to wonder how wizards—traditionally depicted as wise, white-haired old men—learned their magic arts. From this came A Wizard of Earthsea, Ursula Le Guin's first book for young people, published in 1968.

She has written over twenty-five novels and short story collections, four non-fiction books and several works of poetry. Her best-known and best-loved works, most notably the "Earthsea" series, are on school curriculums across the continent.

Though she identified (in 1976) as her influences eight romantic poets, four English and four Russian novelists, and a handful of contemporary speculative fiction writers, in 1973 she had named as her earliest preferences the Lord Dunsany and the trashiest pulp magazines she could find. She denies all connection with the magazine Astounding Science-Fiction, and indeed her writing bears little resemblance to the works of "Golden Age" authors. The writers she most admires are Charles Dickens, Leo Tolstoy, Tolkien, Virginia Woolf, and the Bronte sisters.

It is obvious that much of her parents' anthropological studies filtered into her young mind, not only from the subjects of her writing but from overt elements like the use of "the Dreamtime" in her novel The Word for World is Forest, and the Jungian elements in her "Earthsea" writing. Le Guin's critical writing for literary journals, fanzines, writers' workshops, and public lectures (much of it collected in The Language of the Night) shows that there is abundant material for academic and formal intellectual study of modern science fiction and fantasy works.

A highly respected author of fantasy fiction, Le Guin expands the scope of the genre by combining conventional elements of science fiction with more traditional literary techniques. When she offers thoughtprovoking speculations on alternative societies and philosophies, she is encouraging commentary on existing cultural beliefs and behaviors. One of the most distinguished authors of our time, she is the winner of numerous awards, including a Newbery Honor, the National Book Award, three Nebula Awards from the Science Fiction Writers of America, and four Hugo Awards from the annual World Science Fiction Convention.

The first science fiction convention Le Guin ever attended was V-Con One in 1975, the annual SF convention held in Vancouver, Canada. Now she is a regular participant in conventions and Internet discussion groups, and a strong supporter of the James Tiptree Memorial Award for exploration of gender roles in science fiction. She is also the judge for the new Ursula K. Le Guin Award for Speculative Fiction.

Le Guin has taught writing workshops at Portland State University and the University of Washington, among other universities. Consonant with her antiwar activism in the 1960s, she worked in the Portland area in the presidential campaigns of Democratic candidates Eugene McCarthy and George McGovern. She lives in a roomy old frame house on the banks of the Willamette River in Portland, Oregon, with her husband, Charles Le Guin.

# Setting

When Le Guin wrote these stories, they appeared first in numerous science fiction and literary magazines and anthologies before being collected in The Wind's Twelve Quarters. Some of these stories are strongly imaginative and fantastic, while others are more mainstream in setting. But in all the stories, Le Guin uses realism and believable settings to depict real-life issues within the realms of the fantastic.

The first of her stories to appear in print was "April in Paris" (September 1962), a time-travel story, more fantasy than science fiction, in which black magic romantically unites four lonely people from different eras.

The second was "The Masters" (February 1963), her first genuine science fiction story, set in a post-catastrophic world where science is proscribed because of the havoc it has wrought. Its heroes are two defiant adventurers brought to inquisitorial justice for secretly studying mathematics.

The third published was "Darkness Box" (November 1963), a moody fantasy, with the child of a witch and the son of a king, gryphons and a talking cat. The king halts time, change, and mortality, at least temporarily, by shutting darkness into a box and throwing it in the sea.

The fourth, "The Word of Unbinding" (January 1964), was, along with a later story, "The Rule of Names," the prelude to the "Earthsea" trilogy. Both stories were set on the islands of Earthsea. "Darkness Box" and "Things" may be set on islands of Earthsea, as well, a reasonable assumption for any of Le Guin's stories written in this decade and set on islands.

Another story, published in Amazing in September 1964, was "The Dowry of Angyar," later retitled "Semley's Necklace," the first of her "Hainish" stories. In this story Le Guin lays out not only four cultures of humanity on the planet later to be known as "Rocannon's World" (in the novel of the same name), but also establishes the consideration of the Hainish people that stars represent all of their scattered brethren.

Le Guin's imaginary worlds tend to be utilitarian, not mere flights of fantasy. They teach the reader, in the Utopian tradition. In the two "Earthsea" stories in The Wind's Twelve Quarters, the lessons are subtle and far below the surface.

"A Trip to the Head" is set in an unspecified forest, a nowhere space that confuses the viewpoint character. For some of these stories, especially "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas," the setting is merely elsewhere, described with a technique reminiscent of Jorge Luis Borges. Remember that "utopia" translates into English literally as "noplace."

In "The Stars Below," a setting much like that in "The Masters," the astronomer learns not only the movements of the stars in the sky, but the ways of the dark places of the deep earth, hidden and forgotten and frightening.

The hospital setting of "The Field of Vision" is quarantined from the wide world of Earth, but it is "a blooming, buzzing confusion" to Hughes after his return from investigating a lost, empty city on Mars.

His perceptions have been forever altered.

In contrast with all the stories that have gone before, "Direction of the Road" is a refreshing pastorale, with a realistic setting by the side of a country road in Oregon and enough activity to engage the reader even though the viewpoint character is an oak tree.

"The Day before the Revolution" is similarly realistic as well, set on the planet Urras but in a city far too much like any major American city (old buildings, busy squares, and ghettoes) to be at all unfamiliar.

By contrasting fantasy with reality in an imaginative fashion, Le Guin has developed her narrative skills which enable her to express alienation, the individual's haunting feeling of belonging neither here nor there, as a fundamental quality of the human condition.

# Social Sensitivity

The ten cloned siblings of John Chow in the story "Nine Lives" are less impossible than they seemed in 1969, when the story first appeared in Playboy magazine, under the byline U.K. Le Guin (the only time the author was ever asked to publish under gender-neutral initials). The cloned siblings' mutual understanding is far more a product of their shared upbringing than their shared genetics alone. In one of Le Guin's few actual speculations about scientific matters or human relations which she does not herself understand, this story proposes that cloned siblings raised together would be totally simpatico, by means of ordinary human communication; that is, with no imaginary extrasensory powers necessary.

This speculation is one of the few times Le Guin puts her foot wrong in this volume.

Yes, Mr. Underhill is a silly little man, and the introspective characters in "A Trip to the Head" and "The Good Trip" are selfindulgent in their search for self-knowledge. But twins, triplets, and other multiple siblings are simply not dependably seamless teams who understand each other perfectly and have no emotional ties to other people. Not dependably enough, at any rate, to make raising clone teams a good investment at three million dollars per cloned sibling. Most of the positive aspects to the teamwork of the cloned siblings of John Chow could be gained by similar fostering of naturally conceived children (probably even unrelated children). There would be negative aspects as well, unrecognized in this story. Le Guin is correct that there would be no cloned armies, only a few exceptional individuals in the cautiously expanding population of Earth, and she is right to treat these ten clones as one selfreinforcing union.

In "The Day before the Revolution" Le Guin makes it clear that the process matters as a person or a nation approaches but never reaches the ideals being attempted.

This reminder earned Le Guin another Hugo Award in 1974, at least partly because the story is inseparable from Le Guin's popular Utopian novel The Dispossessed. From time to time, anarchism is a fashionable philosophy in Western countries. It is a rare anarchist who is as understandable as Laia Odo in this story, going about the business of her last day alive as the world steps into a revolutionary change.

One of the stories in this collection, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas," is a masterpiece, unsurpassed at both creating a fantasy world and shifting in a heartbeat from delight to horror. For inspiring a sense of wonder it is matched only by Theodore Sturgeon's short story "The Silken-Swift" or possibly one of Ray Bradbury's most sensitive pieces from Dandelion Wine. As social commentary it is on a par with James Blish's short story "Who Steals My Purse."

Far too many fantasy stories create unbelievable societies and settings with little or no consideration given to the supports that allow a noble to be rich or a minstrel to have the leisure to create beautiful music. Even fewer manage to infer, not state baldly, that readers ought to be aware of whose miseries support them in luxury. That awareness is

called by Le Guin herself, in the introduction to this story, "the dilemma of the American conscience."

That dilemma is discussed very thoroughly by Logan Hill in his overview of this story for Short Stories for Students. "That the reader consciously collaborates with Le Guin to create this story becomes crucially important. The reader knowingly becomes an accomplice in the writing of this story and as a responsible creator must accept the results. Once the reader has imagined her Utopian Omelas, the narrator slowly begins to take control of the story." Hill goes on to suggest that By forcing the reader to create Omelas with her, she forces us to understand that while we do not live in ideal worlds, we live with ideals every day of our lives, and that even by not walking away, we support the ideals and the society we live in.

That Le Guin cannot imagine a world not based on oppression forces one to face the oppression of one's own society.

Le Guin explains her philosophy of writing fantasy for children in The Language of the Night. She believes that Americans have a moral disapproval of fantasy "which comes from fear" and is related to "our Puritanism, our work ethic, our profitmindedness, and even our sexual mores."

As a result, Americans are taught "to repress their imagination, to reject it as something childish or effeminate, unprofitable, and probably sinful."

Le Guin's own belief is just the opposite: I believe that maturity is not an outgrowing, but a growing up: that an adult is not a dead child, but a child who survived. I believe that all the best faculties of a mature human being exist in the child, and that if these faculties are encouraged in youth they will act well and wisely in the adult, but if they are repressed and denied in the child they will stunt and cripple the adult personality.

For that reason, she believes it is the pleasant duty of librarians, teachers, parents, and writers to stimulate and encourage the humanizing power of the imagination "by giving it the best, absolutely the best and purest, nourishment that it can absorb."

What the child needs to grow up, Le Guin asserted in The Language of the Night, "is reality, the wholeness which exceeds all our virtue and all our vice. He needs knowledge; he needs self-knowledge. He needs to see himself and the shadow he casts. That is something he can face, his own shadow, and he can learn to control it and to be guided by it." Le Guin sees fantasy as a psychic and a moral journey "to self-knowledge, to adulthood, to the light." The goal of that journey is psychic wholeness.

# Literary Qualities

Science fiction is defined differently by each person who reads or writes it, but Le Guin resists making distinctions between science fiction and fantasy. Even so, it is fantasy that she defends more wholeheartedly, arguing in her nonfiction writings on behalf of language rather than technology, of characterizing "the Other" rather than creating alien worlds, and of writing literature for children rather than for adults.

Le Guin is a writer of great versatility and power, as shown by the range of storytelling in this one volume. All her fiction is distinguished by careful craftsmanship, a limpid prose style, realistic detail (shown here in the creation of the imaginary worlds of Gethen, Libra, and the Hainish League, and the depiction of Earth in various present and future guises), profound ethical concerns portrayed here in characters as varied as Odo and Osden and in actions such as arson and witch-burning, and mythical reverberations created through the use of symbolic and archetypal patterns. Her typical story involves a hero's quest for maturity and psychological integration, and her major theme is the need for balance and wholeness.

"A Trip to the Head" started in quiet desperation for the author. At a time when some writers abandon their craft (the Le Guins were in England; she remembers that "it was November and dark at two in the afternoon and raining, and the suitcase containing all my manuscripts had been stolen at the dock in Southampton and I hadn't written anything for months.") Le Guin sat down and began scribbling words, hopelessly. She got about as far as "Try being Amanda,' the other said sourly." A year later, at home in Oregon with her suitcase of manuscripts recovered, she found the scribble on a rainy day and completed it.

This is the kind of story Le Guin describes in her introduction to the story as a "Bung Puller." "The author for one reason or another has been stuck, can't work; and gets started again suddenly, with a pop and a lot of beer comes leaping out of the keg and foaming all over the floor."

Le Guin won the Hugo Award in 1973 for her story "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas," included in this collection. It is less of a story than a meditation on an idea of William James, to the effect that some people could not accept even universal prosperity and happiness if it depended on the deliberate subjection of even a single idiot child to abuse it could barely understand.

Le Guin's introduction to the story quotes James's The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life: "All the higher, more penetrating ideals are revolutionary. They present themselves far less in the guise of effects of past experience than in that of probable causes of future experience, factors to which the environment and the lessons it has so far taught us must learn to bend." Le Guin herself adds, "The application of those two sentences to this story, and to science fiction, and to all thinking about the future, is quite direct."

Logan Hill, in his overview of this story for Short Stories for Students, states that: The story presents not a fully-developed fantastic world but a work-in-progress....

In this story the reader consciously follows the narrator's attempt to create a believable world with Utopian characteristics. The story can be read as a story about storytelling, a story about the act of creating an alternate, plausible reality.

In contrast to the standard assumption that a story must proceed according to a single narrative, Le Guin overtly requires each reader to envision his or her own narrative and his or her own personal Utopia, forcing the reader to consciously create the story with the narrator. The idea of such awesome responsibility is rarely admitted (though it is always the way stories are created), says Hill, before adding: "Le Guin softens her request by writing, in relation to technology, 'Or they could have none of that: it doesn't matter. As you like it.' She eases the readers' sense of responsibility while exploiting it and implicating the reader more thoroughly into the act of writing."

A highly respected author of fantasy fiction, Le Guin is praised for expanding the scope of the genre by combining conventional elements of science fiction with more traditional literary techniques, while offering thought-provoking speculations on alternative societies and philosophies. Her works employ psychic phenomena, including telepathy, clairvoyance, and precognition, and commonly incorporate the philosophies of Taoism and Zen, resulting in themes of reciprocity, unity, and holism. By presenting complex, often paradoxical symbols, images, and allusions, Le Guin stresses the need for individuals and societies to balance such dualities as order with chaos and harmony with rebellion to achieve wholeness.

# Themes and Characters

The first story in the collection, "Semley's Necklace," was actually the eighth story she sold; Le Guin calls this "the most characteristic of my early science fiction and fantasy works, the most romantic of them all." When Semley returns from her relativistic journey, she brings home her family's necklace in triumph only to find that her husband has died in the war, for "he had little armor for his body, and none at all for his spirit." Semley gives the necklace to her now-grown daughter and flees to her husband's grave. In her quest, Semley has learned resolution and triumph, and now she understands regret for desiring her family's rightful treasure, which had been lost in her grandmother's time. She had thought to leave her husband and child for only a few days, and is devastated to learn that her journey lasted years.

Le Guin was a dedicated mother to her children as they grew, as well as being a prolific author. Far from using up her intellect and talents, Le Guin's children were a source of inspiration and human understanding. In her introduction to "Darkness Box," she describes an event that occurred when her daughter Caroline was three years old. "She came to me with a small wooden box in her small hands and said, 'Guess fwat is in this bockus.' I guessed caterpillars, mice, elephants, etc. She shook her head, smiled an unspeakably eldritch smile, opened the box slightly so that I could just see in, and said: 'Darkness.'" That simple exchange started Le Guin writing this story, showing how mortality cannot be rejected just by a king putting it into a box and throwing it away. When darkness and death are given up, time and achievement are cast out as well. The prince counts the cost of darkness and mortality as well-paid if the sun shines again and an end (any end) will come to the interminable war with his brother.

"The Masters" is Le Guin's first story using the figure of the lonely scientist, wishing to learn more in his chosen craft and about the world. Though she used this theme later in other stories and novels with considerably better equipment, this story has the show-stopping line: "He had been trying to measure the distance between the earth and God." Simple trigonometry is an arcane study by heretics, in this story.

In writing these stories, Le Guin employed as a plot element psychic phenomena, including telepathy, clairvoyance, and precognition, and incorporated some of the philosophies of Taoism and Zen, resulting in themes of reciprocity, unity, and holism.

By presenting complex, often paradoxical symbols, images, and allusions, Le Guin stressed the need for individuals and societies to balance such dualities as order with chaos and harmony with rebellion to achieve wholeness.

Le Guin claims that she does not plan her works but must discover them in her subconscious. The discovery of Earthsea began with a story about a wizard, "The Word of Unbinding," published in Fantastic in 1964.

A later story, "The Rule of Names," developed further both the islands of Earthsea and the rules of its magic and introduced a dragon. The whole of the "Earthsea" world is encapsulated in these two stories.

Her "Earthsea" writings have been strongly influenced by Tolkien, George MacDonald, M. R. James, and C. S. Lewis's fantasies, although Le Guin has been praised for her original allegory which has none of the theological quiddities of C. S. Lewis. In fact, Le Guin creates a world without a deity, although magic exists, along with tremendous powers for good and evil. Hers is a modern, existential, humanistic universe where the weight of responsibility rests on the individual to act wisely, for by acting otherwise he or she can imperil the balance of the world. The emphasis of balance—of good and evil, light and dark, life and death—in the "Earthsea" works have led many critics to see the influence of Taoist notions of dynamic equilibrium, of the necessity for a balance of yin and yang, on the author.

Critic Darrell Schweitzer says that Le Guin's "Earthsea" works are "central to twentieth-century fantasy, probably more influential than anything other than The Lord of the Rings, often taken as models by other writers because they create a world as vivid as Tolkien's, but on a smaller, more intimate scale." Schweitzer goes on to add that Le Guin has turned Tolkien's epic into a novel of character, with a smaller, more sharply realized cast; and, for all the Earthsea books were published as ostensible juveniles, they are in every sense more adult, fully willing to admit that even beloved characters fade and die or come to nasty, abrupt ends, where Tolkien hedges mortality in endless appendices, reluctant to let go.

Le Guin emphasizes in some of these stories a favorite theme of hers: the idea that unity is achieved through the interaction and tension of such paired terms as likeness and unlikeness, native and alien, male and female. Her short story "Winter's King" provided the seed for Le Guin's The Left Hand of Darkness, which was the crowning achievement of the Hainish series, marking the author's attainment of a full measure of complexity, characterization, and ingenuity. She has described the novel as, in part, a feminist "thought experiment," exploring what would happen in a society free of sexual role-playing, although her main concern was not with sexuality but with fidelity and betrayal. Even this brief short story, "Winter's King," shows that the human motivations of the King are not bound by gender roles, but rather by love for her child and responsibility for her nation.

Also fitting into the "Hainish" series was the novella "Vaster Than Empires and More Slow." In it, Osden, the misanthropic interplanetary explorer with "wide-range bioempathic receptivity" can finally leave the rejection and pity of other humans behind when he finds contentment in being accepted by the semi-sentient vegetation of an Edenic planet.

The astronomer in "The Stars Below" is traumatized, not only by having his observatory burnt over his head by zealots, but also by going underground in an almost-abandoned mine. Living almost without light, almost without company, he learns the science of geology and what could be called geomancy. He can reveal a hidden vein of silver for

his trusted friends, the miners, but he cannot come up into the wide world of life and humanity, even for a night or for a meal. He is lost in the dark, having become a mystic and learned about things in the dark places of the Earth that are also told in Le Guin's "Earthsea" novel The Tombs of Atuan.

Learning to see the truth about the world is not always to be wished. The two returned astronauts in "The Field of Vision" see and hear the immanence of God in everything, and at least one of the two would dearly prefer to return to normal perceptions of the surfaces of things: "All I have to do is open my eyes and I see the Face of God. And I'd give all my life just to see one human face again, to see a tree, just a tree.... " says the astronaut Hughes.

"They can keep their God, they can keep their Light. I want the world back. I want questions, not the answer."

The surface world is described more clearly in "Direction of the Road." Le Guin herself has pointed out her obsession with trees, and in this story a tree takes the leading role. It is a monologue held by an old oak tree, which tells readers about how it strives to uphold the "Order of Things."

It has much to do: growing and looming high over anybody who passes by, and then diminishing again until the spectator is gone.

In "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas," Le Guin carefully creates for the reader a word picture of the town of Omelas, as the festival of Summer begins. There are happy people everywhere; there is horseracing and rich pastries, music and beer, and Le Guin asks the reader if they can imagine this place, if they can believe in its peace and plenty. Just as the picture is complete, she takes readers to a basement or cellar underneath the city, to a dark cupboard where old, dirty mops are stored.

There, a child is kept in misery, shut away from light and air and human contact. All who live in Omelas know of this child's misery, and have been taken to see it when they reach the age of reason. Through a magical economy, all of Omelas prospers because this child is kept in misery. "The terms are clear. Not even a kind word may be spoken to the child."

All who live in Omelas have come to accept this bargain, but a very few leave when they learn of it, or later after much thought. Le Guin cannot tell readers where they go. It is a place even harder to imagine than Omelas, especially for readers who live in an actual Omelas of their own making and complicity.

A more "realistic" story in this collection is the final story, the portrait of Laia Aseio Odo, the anarchist philosopher who founded the culture of the planet Anarres, in the story "The Day before the Revolution." The story tells of the last day in Odo's life, using flashbacks from her childhood in a working-class slum and her daring political activism as an adult in and out of prison.

Gradually her efforts and inability to live fully in keeping with her egalitarian ideals are shown. It is always "the day before the revolution," but the revolution is never over.

A biographical essay on Le Guin in Science Fiction Writers suggests that "Taoism, Jungian psychology, anarchism, ecology, and human liberation resonate in Le Guin's visions of humankind's potential for unity and balance in the individual, in society, and perhaps in the galaxy." Essentially the same themes dominate Le Guin's Utopian, dystopian, and surrealistic stories that she wrote for this collection, when she was also writing her most celebrated novels of "Earthsea," "Orsinia" and the "Hainish" cycle.

The stories in this collection which did not presage her novels, or fit into the erratic "future history" which all her science fiction books follow, are her early fantasies.

Also included are the later ones Le Guin calls psychomyths: "more or less surrealistic tales, which share with fantasy the quality of taking place outside any history, outside of time, in that region of the living mind which—without invoking any consideration of immortality—seems to be without spatial or temporal limits at all."

# Topics for Discussion

1. What makes a story a fantasy?

2. Is it necessary to set a fantasy in a distant time or place?

3. What is the primary function of a fantasy story, as opposed to a contemporary realistic story?

4. How do you define science fiction and fantasy stories, as opposed to "mainstream" literature?

5. Is it necessary for a story to have a crisis or emergency in order for it to have events and conflict and change?

6. How does a fantasy story teach us to think about our real lives?

7. How has the author incorporated her real-life experiences raising her own children into some of these stories?

8. What are some of the standard mythic story elements which the author has integrated into some of these stories?

9. What ethical and moral issues does Le Guin cover in these stories?

10. How seriously can readers take a story with a fantasy setting? How much do these ideas matter, compared with real life?

# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Outline a fantasy story of your own, one that should end up no more than two thousand words long. Will you begin with an outline, a "brainstorming" page with notes expanding outwards from the center, or a list of free-associations? Make paragraph-long character studies, or small sketches of your characters. Does your story have a theme or a goal? Can you visualize where your story takes place better if you make a sketch map? Display all your materials on a bulletin board near a writing desk. Does the outline help you write your story?

2. Choose one of the stories from The Wind's Twelve Quarters and create a similar bulletin board display to the one described above. Will you outline the story in point form notes, a "brainstorming" page or a list of freeassociations? Make a few paragraphlong character studies or small sketches of the characters. Draw a sketch map of the place where the story occurs. Does the outline and display help you understand the story better?

3. Compare a story from The Wind's Twelve Quarters with a story by an author you admire. Who are the protagonists of these stories? Who are the viewpoint characters? Are these stories primarily driven by the plot, the theme, or the beliefs of the author? What do these stories tell you about the process of fantasy? What do they tell you about real life?

4. In what ways is it apparent to you as a reader that this author is female? American? Caucasian? Educated? How does this affect the stories she tells?

5. Choose one of these stories and summarize it, in the style of the short stories of Ernest Hemingway. How would the vocabulary change in the text and the title? How would the story feel different, even though the same incident and actions occur?

6. Retell one of these stories in the style of a newspaper article. Compose an appropriate headline and quotes from witnesses. What will your news article's lead paragraph be? Will it be short and to the point, with a sidebar summarizing statistics or necessary information, or will it be detailed as if the journalist were trying for a Pulitzer Prize nomination?

7. Read a daily newspaper. Choose a moral or ethical situation which appears in one (or more) article(s) in the newspaper and in a story from this anthology.

(An example would be cloning.) Make a photocopy of the article and of the story and highlight key words. Compare the people in the article with the characters in the story. How do the actions of the people relate to those of the characters? What can you learn from the crafted narrative of a story that you can only guess from a newspaper article? What did Le Guin understand, in the 1960s and 1970s, about this moral or ethical situation? Has much been learned about this issue in thirty or more years to contradict her?

8. Compare "Semley's Necklace" with "The Diamond Necklace" by Guy de Maupassant. What evidence can you find to indicate that Le Guin had read Maupassant's story? What changes has Le Guin rung on the classic story? How are the characters of the husbands (Loisel and Durhal) alike? What is their role in the story? How are both these stories profoundly egalitarian and humanist and feminist? How is the sin of pride explored by these authors? Does it matter that one story has a fantasy setting and the other is realistic?

9. How do Le Guin's characters face the end of the world as they know it? Who falls into despair in her stories, and who rises to battle? Who moves at her or his own center, having found wu wei? What, ultimately, do they achieve?

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A Canadian critic's perspective on Le Guin's fiction.

# Related Titles

The last story in this collection, "The Day before the Revolution," is the tale of the last day in the life of Odo, the philosopher whose beliefs became the core of the world of Anarres in Le Guin's novel The Dispossessed. As a literary one-two punch, the novel is an excellent companion piece to read either before or after this short story collection. Both works are particularly to be recommended as a tonic for adolescent angst and dissatisfaction with world events, politics and "the establishment."

The story "Winter's King" is a good introduction to Le Guin's novel The Left Hand of Darkness, which is a discussion of gender and human nature. It is a classic in the genre and highly recommended by many critics. A very readable novel, not a rant.

The story "Semley's Necklace" introduces the reader to the setting of Rocannon's World, one of Le Guin's early (and less celebrated) novels in her "Hainish" cycle. "Vaster Than Empires and More Slow" also takes place in the Hainish future galactic setting, and introduces two minor characters from the Cetian planet system, where The Dispossessed is set.

This story collection is the best entry point for a study of Le Guin's writings. The reader will know if she or he has any interest in following any of these settings, or characters, or ideas to a more fully-realized creation such as a novel or series of novels.

A teacher with little time to read the collected works of this fine American author can at least begin the study and analysis of Le Guin with this book.

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