

Feature Article



Focusing on Ursula Le Guin, her Earthsea Novels and Fantastic Fiction

Many fantasy fans, young and old, are eagerly awaiting the second *Harry Potter* and *Lord of the Rings* movies due to be released at the end of the year. These movies with their attendant publicity are certain to renew interest in the novels. Snatch the opportunity to promote the fantasy genre as ideal summer reading or plan to explore the genre in the classroom during first term, when enthusiasm for the movies is still fresh in the minds of students.

Extend students beyond Rowling and Tolkein by introducing them to other acclaimed fantasy writers such as Isobelle Carmody, Susan Cooper, Sara Douglass, Kate Forsyth, Diana Wynne Jones, Victor Kelleher, Sophie Masson, Garth Nix, Philip Pullman and others. These authors are often reviewed in *Fiction Focus* and are commonly found in secondary school library collections.

Ursula Le Guin, widely considered a master storyteller is also back in the limelight with the publication of two new *Earthsea* novels. *The Other Wind*, reviewed below, is book five in the series. *Tales from Earthsea*, a collection of stories set in Earthsea, completes the tale and will be available in Australia before the end of the year.

Le Guin's work deserves to be promoted and debated and she is an excellent choice for author studies. The Internet provides access to interesting articles about Le Guin and her writing, suitable for senior students and teachers. Teachers could consider developing a comparative study of Le Guin and Pullman, as information about Pullman is also easy to obtain

online and both authors regard fantasy as a philosophical medium.

► Why Read Fantasy?

If you need a rationale for reading fantasy, consider Maurice Saxby's observations:

Just as poetry and lyric prose operates partly through metaphor, so fantasy is a literature which reflects reality through unreality, life through illusion...It brings the wished for and the imagined into the rational world...Fantasy arises from the human desire to penetrate the unknown and to venture beyond the here and now. (Saxby, 1997 p. 231-2)

He goes on to say:

Fantasy can beguile and amuse...it can add satire to hilarity...(many) authors use fantasy to allow readers to see themselves and their world with a clearer vision for having had glimpses of another world – the world of the imagination... This is one of the greatest gifts a writer can bequeath to an audience of whatever age or circumstance. (ibid, p 246)

In a similar vein, Isobelle Carmody, one of Australia's most highly respected authors of speculative fiction explains:

For me, fantasy is a philosophical medium. That going into another world, that shift in reality, lets me step back, take a breath and wonder, 'Well, what do you think about it all?' Fantasy

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enables me to examine issues more broadly than realism. I can look at concepts, and penetrate issues more profoundly than if I deal with them realistically.

...Take a book like *Animal Farm*: that was, among other things, a story of the betrayal of friendship and ideals. The author could have tackled those subjects using people as protagonists, but he would not have touched me so profoundly...The use of animals confounds my cynicism. Not only because I am unaccustomed to thinking of animals as corrupt but because, like most people, I tend to idealise them. In that setting, corruption is truly shocking...The fantastical setting allows the awfulness of betrayal and corruption to be conveyed far more vividly because it evades mental barriers. (Matthews, 1998 p 21-22)

Moreover, ...fantasy allows me to dip into the rich store of symbol and myth underpinning our cultures. (ibid, p 23)

Thus, fantasy allows readers to more fully understand the world we live in and perhaps more significantly, encourages us to ponder how it could, or should be.

References:

Matthews, Stephen, 'Isabelle Carmody'. **The Eye of The Soul**. The Grange, Qld : Magpies Magazine Pty Ltd, 1998. ISBN 1 875249 02 8

Saxby, Maurice. 'Fantasy: Beyond the Rim of Reality.' **In Books in the Life of a Child Bridges to Literature and Learning**. South Melbourne : Macmillan, 1997. ISBN 0 7329 4520 8



Authors of Fantasy for Students in Early to Late Adolescence (A Selection)

Marion Zimmer Bradley
Isabelle Carmody
Brian Caswell
Susan Cooper
Gary Crew
Kevin Crossley-Holland
Peter Dickinson
Stephen Donaldson

Victor Kelleher
Dave Luckett
Margaret Mahy
Sophie Masson
Anne McCaffrey
Robin McKinlay
William Nicholson
Garth Nix

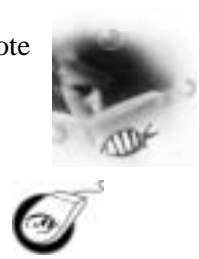
Sara Douglass
David Eddings
Robin Feist
Kate Forsyth
Alan Garner
David Gemmell
Robin Hobb
Diana Wynne Jones
Robert Jordan

Sally Odgers
Debra Oswald
Tamora Pierce
Philip Pullman
Terry Pratchett
J. K. Rowling
Randolph Stow
J. R. R. Tolkien

Looking for Fantasy titles to promote to students?

Search **Focus on Fiction** - Which Book?

www.eddept.wa.edu.au/cmis/eval/fiction/bestbooks



► **The Order of the Books in the Earthsea Series & Bibliographic Details**

Many schools will have the *Earthsea* series in their collection. For those wishing to purchase the books the following editions are still in print. Note that *Tales from Earthsea* will be reviewed in *Fiction Focus* in 2003.

Le Guin, Ursula K. A Wizard of Earthsea. London : Penguin, 1994. 237 p. (Puffin Modern Classics) ISBN 0 14 036460 9
SCIS No: 828013

Le Guin, Ursula K. The Tombs of Atuan. Harmondsworth : Penguin, 1974. 155 p. ISBN 0 14 030632 3
SCIS No: 32704

Le Guin, Ursula K. The Farthest Shore. New York : Bantam, 1975. 197 p. ISBN 0 553 26847 3
SCIS No: 1059549

Le Guin, Ursula K. Tehanu : The Last Book of Earthsea. London : Gollancz, 1990. 219 p. ISBN 0 575 04870 0
SCIS No: 660270
(Note this is no longer the last book of *Earthsea*)

Le Guin, Ursula K. Tales from Earthsea. London : Orion, 2002 (forthcoming). 320 p. ISBN 1 84255 206 6

Le Guin, Ursula K. *The Other Wind*.
 See bibliographic details included with review below.

► **Websites to support a study of Ursula Le Guin & *Earthsea***

❖ **Ursula K. Le Guin**
www.ursulakleguin.com



There is a wealth of information on Ursula Le Guin's homesite. Fans can view and download a map of Earthsea, available in two sizes; read a biographical sketch; browse a bibliography, find the awards Le Guin has received; access answers to frequently asked questions; read an online story as well as interviews, articles, reviews and Le Guin's comments about writing.

Of particular interest to readers of the *Earthsea* series:

- A short explanatory note about the series by Le Guin at:

www.ursulakleguin.com/OtherWind_Note.html



- *The Other Wind* reviews and excerpts:

www.ursulakleguin.com/otherwind_index.html



- *Tales from Earthsea* excerpts:

www.ursulakleguin.com/TalesEarthsea_Excerpt.html



☺ Don't miss the interesting article by Margaret Mahy.

'Two Trilogies and a Mystery: Speculations on the Earthsea Stories.'

www.ursulaleguin.com/Mahy-Earthsea.html



This article was originally published in *Magpies* Vol. 17 No 3, July 2002 and is reproduced on Le Guin's site. It provides an in-depth discussion of the *Earthsea* series, which could be used with senior students and complements the *Fiction Focus* review included in this issue.

❖ **Griffin, Jan M. 'Ursula LeGuin's Magical World of Earthsea.'**



scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/ALAN/spring96/griffin.html

In *The Alan Review*, Spring 1996 Volume 23, Number 3.

An American secondary school teacher examines the first four *Earthsea* books.

❖ 'A Kind of Magic.'

In *The Guardian*, Saturday July 27, 2002.



books.guardian.co.uk

To access the above review of *The Other Wind* go to the books section of *The Guardian* site then type the title into the search box on the left-hand side.

❖ Gevers, Nick. 'Driven by a Different Chauffeur: An Interview With Ursula Le Guin.' November/December 2001. **The SF Site.**



www.sfsite.com/03a/ul123.htm

This interview on the **SF Site** provides an insight into the author and her writing. It will interest teachers and older adolescent readers. Note that the site does contain some advertising.

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► **Review of *The Other Wind***

LE GUIN, Ursula K. *The Other Wind*.

London : Orion, 2002. 246 p. (Earthsea)

ISBN 1 84255 205 8 hbk \$29.95

SCIS No: 1102126

Age 15+ Le Guin has long established her reputation for the excellence of her fantasy writing. Her powers of invention and description, the depth and seriousness of her vision, her genuine love of people and nature and her delicious and subtle sense of humour have been lauded and applauded for many years. She is not afraid to tackle big themes; in fact she loves them. In this novel she is considering what happens to us when we die.

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Readers of the earlier novels will remember that in *The Farthest Shore* Ged and Lebannen travel to the Dry Land, the place where the souls of the dead go, a place where the stars do not move and lovers pass each other unrecognised in the street. This is the fate that awaits everyone in the Hardic lands, including Ged and Tenar, except, that is, for dragons and the inhabitants of the Kargad lands. They are eternally reborn, part of the earth's cycle of death and rebirth. So there is a division in the world, a disturbance in the balance. All is changed and it must be resolved.

Long ago in Earthsea men and dragons had made a choice. Dragons chose the freedom of fire and wind and men chose the yoke of water and earth. Men stole half the dragon's realm beyond the West and made a wall of spells to keep them out. This is the Dry Land where all the Hardic souls go. Now these souls want to be free, moreover, some of the dragons are rebelling and want their realm back; they want to be able to fly on the Other Wind. This is the motive for the action in the novel, set about fifteen years after the events told of in *Tehanu*. It does not focus on a central character but features many familiar characters from the previous novels.

Ged is now a very old man, still hale and hearty and tending his goats on Gont. He appears briefly in the first chapter but takes no part in the action. Tenar is old and grey-haired and spends her time worrying about Tehanu and advising the king. Tehanu is the link between people and dragons but she remains a remote and rather impersonal figure. Irian is a character taken from a short story set in Earthsea. She is also both person and dragon the way Tehanu is but she is a much more vibrant more engaging creation. Lebannen is very grown up now, very wise, very regal, very correct. His flashes of temper and his energy save him from being a prig. Of the two new characters Alder, the bereaved widower is touching but it is Sesarakh, the semi-savage princess from the outlandish Hur-at-Hur who is the really interesting character.

The story is told in five big chapters and switches from person to person so that we get a mosaic of viewpoints and action that builds to a satisfying conclusion with all the loose ends tied up, including the vexed question of who the king should marry. *The Other Wind* is a novel for

those who know Earthsea well, who know the main characters from the previous works and are interested in knowing what is happening to them. This amiable revisiting of old friends is actually a discussion on several philosophical issues and Le Guin's Taoist beliefs are manifest. Her constant theme of resisting action until absolutely necessary underpins this work again. Other themes include the burden of duty — Lebannen has to choose a queen for himself and his people; and as always the consequences of choices — all have to make choices that affect their lives and the lives of others.

The Other Wind is not a story that will appeal to new readers of the first three books in the series. The *Earthsea* series is unlike other fantasy such as *The Dark is Rising* by Susan Cooper or C. S. Lewis's *Narnia*. All the books in the latter two series are written for the same age range. The readers of *Earthsea* however, need to mature along with the characters. *Tehanu*, the fourth in the series written after a long gap, has middle-aged protagonists and deals with the adult themes of child abuse and gender roles. It is not that these themes do not have a place in children's fiction but just that the treatment in *Tehanu* would not appeal to most young readers. In the first three works in the series Ged, Tenar and Lebannen are all adolescents and are central characters. We experience the world of Earthsea through their eyes and explore the problems and issues raised with them. This is not the case in *Tehanu* or in *The Other Wind*.

Although Le Guin does not really write action-packed adventure stories there is plenty of excitement, suspense, drama and humour in the first three novels to satisfy young readers. *The Wizard of Earthsea* opens with an exciting raid by savage sea pirates, on a peaceful, small village. In contrast, the first chapter of *The Other Wind* describes Alder's journey to Ged to recount the dreams he has of his dead, young wife. The important action has already happened and Alder is telling us about it. The story gathers momentum but the tone throughout is sonorous and serious, and the main topic is death. There are many references to past events. I am too familiar with the earlier novels to judge whether *The Other Wind* can work on its own. Part of me cannot help wishing that Le Guin had taken a totally different

approach and told us the story from the inside, from the viewpoint of her splendid new character, the Princess Sesarakh, daughter of the new king of the Kargs, sent as a present or sacrifice, on a state visit to the king of the land of the accursed-sorcerers.

This novel is like stepping back from a richly detailed tapestry and getting a view of the whole. Occasionally you step closer in and see the expression on someone's face or hear the sound of a waterfall, but we can now see the beginning and guess the end of the story of Ged and the people in his world. I highly recommend it to young adults who have read the earlier works as children and of course to all Ursula Le Guin fans.

The Other Wind is said to be the last installment in the *Earthsea* series, although Australian readers can look forward to one more. *Tales from Earthsea*, a collection of stories set in Earthsea will be released in December. I for one shall be sorry to say goodbye to the enchanted world of Earthsea.

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