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# The Influence of Ursula K. Le Guin

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# **The Influence of Ursula K. Le Guin**

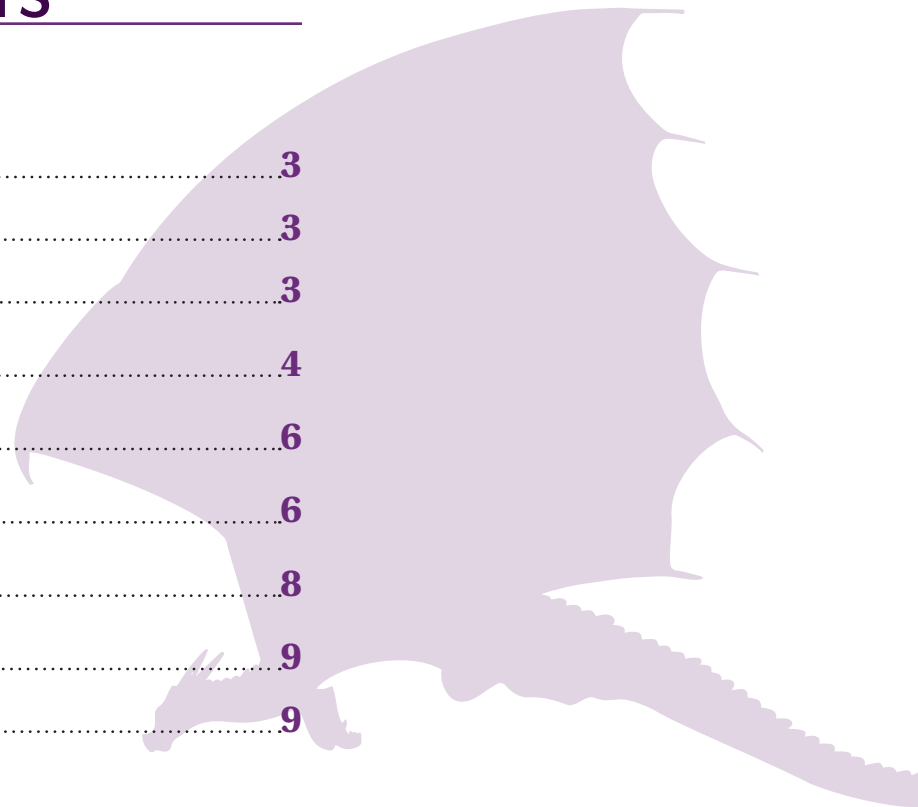
**by Bailey Potter**

**May 2020**

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## BRIEF

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### Research Questions

How were Ursula K. Le Guin and her oeuvre influential to contemporary and future writers? What is her influence on the literary and publishing communities?

### Abstract

The aim of this research study was to examine how Ursula K. Le Guin and her oeuvre were influential to contemporary and future writers, as well as what her influence was on the literary and publishing communities. Study was conducted through a qualitative interview process with seven Portlanders who have in some way been influenced by and/or who personally knew Le Guin. Using the transcripts from the interviews, I separated the information into themes and wrote out each section, synthesizing interviewee answers and using supplemental information to build my results. Ursula K. Le Guin influenced the literary and publishing communities through: The many important themes she was able to bring forth with her writing; her significant improvement and widening of the science fiction and fantasy genres; her inclusion and diversification of her characters within her oeuvre, effectively uplifting and encouraging marginalized voices; her unending support of her regional and indie literary ecosystem; and her generational influence. In addition to these direct influences, Le Guin's attitude regarding the increasing commodification of books and the division between the literary and genre fictions in the canon did not escape my research. All of the above have a part to play in how Le Guin continues to be an inspiration. So please, with great appreciation for the way that her life and her words changed the literary landscape, join me in remembering Ursula K. Le Guin.

## Acknowledgements

I'd first like to thank the wonderful faculty in the Portland State University Book Publishing program for their never-ending support during the stressful past year of the COVID-19 pandemic. Though I was only able to attend class in person for one out of the six terms that I have been a graduate student, I never felt like I was unheard or unappreciated. Specifically, I'd like to thank Ooligan Press Publisher Robyn Crummer-Olson for her steadfast leadership and heartfelt encouragement in my role as Project Manager of the Library Writers Project team, as well as Kathi Inman Berens, who graciously met with me time and time again to discuss my thesis and helped me to shape my research.

I'd also like to thank members of my wonderful support system: my significant other, Fernando Elias, who encouraged me to reach for my dreams and go to graduate school and then ensured that I was successful by insisting that I give myself time for self-care; my mother, Susan Locke, for her unerring pride in my insatiable desire to learn; and last but not least, the lovely community of fellow bibliophiles within Ooligan, specifically Alexandra Gonzales, who entered the program with me in the Winter 2020 and has been a constant friend ever since the first day in Book Editing class; Erica Wright, who was my LWP partner-in-crime-and-fantasy during my time as a project manager; and Wren Haines, for being the dream project manager to hand the LWP team to.

Cover photo of Ursula K. Le Guin was taken by Marian Wood Kolisch.



I took this photo on January 24, 2018, two days after she passed. At the time, I was in Katya Amato's class on Le Guin in my undergrad, reading *A Wizard of Earthsea*.

My thanks to my interviewees, who each told such moving stories about their experiences with Ursula K. Le Guin and/or her oeuvre: Tony Wolk, John Henley, Susan DeFreitas, Laura Stanfill, Molly Gloss, David Naimon, and Gigi Little. A special shout out goes to Laura Stanfill, who trusted me to copyedit *Dispatches From Anarres: Tales in Tribute to Ursula K. Le Guin*, which inspired me to venture on this research journey.

I dedicate this research paper to Katya Amato—who once taught classes on science fiction with Ursula K. Le Guin—who opened my eyes to Le Guin’s work and set me on my path towards the kind of literature and scholarly research that I love. Also for writing me a letter of recommendation for my entry into the Book Publishing program. I hope you rest in peace, and say hi to Lady Death for me (a reference to Neil Gaiman’s graphic novel series *The Sandman* and a character Katya adored).

And, of course, the biggest thank you, acknowledgement, and dedication goes to the one and only Ursula K. Le Guin. As an Oregonian and Portland State alumna nearly twice over, I have long lived in your shadow. You changed the way I view genre, specifically fantasy and science fiction, but also changed my view of the world and my place in it. Thank you for your grace, your spunk, and your poignant attitude regarding the way the publishing industry and literary community are moving into the future. You will always be remembered.





## Introduction

On a quiet street in the sleepy, bookish city of Portland in the Pacific Northwest, Ursula K. Le Guin and her husband raised their family. Though not the city of her birth, it was where she put down her roots, where she loved, laughed, and wrote, and for that, Portland is known as her hometown, a claim that Portlanders are proud of. But she's not just a treasure to us. She's recognized as a trailblazer for past, contemporary, and future writers and bibliophiles across literary circles. Ursula K. Le Guin influenced the literary and publishing communities through: The many important themes she was able to bring forth with her writing; her significant improvement and widening of the science fiction and fantasy genres; her inclusion and diversification of her characters within her oeuvre, effectively uplifting and encouraging marginalized voices; her unending support of her regional and indie literary ecosystem; and her generational influence. In addition to these direct influences, Le Guin's attitude regarding the increasing commodification of books and the division between the literary and genre fictions in the canon did not escape my research. All of the above have a part to play in how Le Guin continues to be an inspiration. So please, with great appreciation for the way that her life and her words changed the literary landscape, join me in remembering Ursula K. Le Guin.



The US Postal Service honors Le Guin with the 33rd stamp in their Literary arts series, complete with her portrait against an icy scene from *The Left Hand of Darkness*.

## Introductory Biography

Ursula K. Le Guin's full biography, description of her life, and list of earned awards can be found on her website. Over the course of more than half a century, this wonderful "author wrote twenty one novels, eleven volumes of short stories, four collections of essays, twelve children's books, six volumes

of poetry, and four of translation.”<sup>1</sup> For the strength and imagination of her work, she was granted “six Nebulas, nine Hugos, and SFWA’s Grand Master,” as well as the Gandalf Award, giving her the title of Grand Master of Fantasy.<sup>2</sup> In 1995, she received the “World Fantasy Award for lifetime achievement” and “was included in the Science Fiction Hall of Fame in 2001.”<sup>3</sup> In 2000, the Library of Congress named Le Guin a Living Legend, welcoming her into a program that honors “individuals who have made significant contributions to America’s diverse cultural, scientific and social heritage.”<sup>4</sup> In 2014, she was given the National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters.<sup>5</sup> In 2016, she joined the short list of living authors to be published by the Library of America, which has published four volumes of her work and promised at least one more.<sup>6</sup> And in 2017, she was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters.<sup>7</sup> When Le Guin passed on in 2018, “at eighty-eight, she was in some ways at the height of her fame, with her novels embraced, her essays celebrated, and her influence acknowledged by a younger generation.”<sup>8</sup> This year, in 2021, the US Postal Service is honoring Le Guin with a postage stamp.<sup>9</sup> Her biography is being written by Julie Phillips, and her literary estate is being run by her dedicated son, Theo Downes-Le Guin. While additional accomplishments will be mentioned throughout, detailed reviews of her many books must be found elsewhere, due to the specific purpose of this research paper.

## Methodology

This research took me on a journey that seemed to have a mind of its own. My original research questions were based on my desire to prove

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1 “Biography,” Ursula K. Le Guin, 2021, <https://www.ursulakleguin.com/biography>.

2 Ursula K. Le Guin, “Biography.”

3 “Le Guin, Ursula K.,” in *SFE: The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, October 9, 2020, [http://sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/le\\_guin\\_ursula\\_k](http://sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/le_guin_ursula_k).

4 Ursula K. Le Guin, “Biography”; Library of Congress, “Awards & Honors | About the Library | Library of Congress,” accessed December 8, 2020, <https://www.loc.gov/about/awards-and-honors/>.

5 Ursula K. Le Guin, “Biography.”

6 David Streitfeld, “Ursula L Guin Has Earned a Rare Honor. Just Don’t Call Her a Sci-Fi Writer,” *New York Times*, August 28, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/29/books/ursula-le-guin-has-earned-a-rare-honor-just-dont-call-her-a-sci-fi-writer.html>.

7 Ursula K. Le Guin, “Biography”; American Academy of Arts and Letters, “About,” accessed December 8, 2020, <https://artsandletters.org/about/>.

8 Julie Phillips, “Ursula K. Le Guin Was a Creator of Worlds,” *National Endowment for the Humanities* 40, no. 1 (Winter 2019), <https://www.neh.gov/article/ursula-k-le-guin-was-creator-worlds#:~:text=Her%20willingness%20to%20ask%20questions,imagination%20in%20conceiving%20social%20change>.

9 Andrew Liptak, “USPS Honors Ursula K. Le Guin With New Postage Stamp,” *Tor.com*, January 19, 2021, <https://www.tor.com/2021/01/19/ursula-k-le-guin-usps-stamp-left-hand-of-darkness/>.



that Ursula K. Le Guin had been all but completely recognized as a classic American novelist and that she met the eligibility requirements to be considered part of the American canon of literature. What I found, however, during my research collection, was that while I *could* make a case for Ursula's entrance to the national literary canon, it didn't feel like my place to do so. What I mean by this is I shouldn't have to attempt to prove this. It should be a given. As I collected more information, especially once I began to interview people who have in some way been influenced or were even friends with Ursula, a different story of her importance unfolded—a story that included many themes that were confirmed by some of my original research but hadn't been immediately obvious as a cumulative concept.

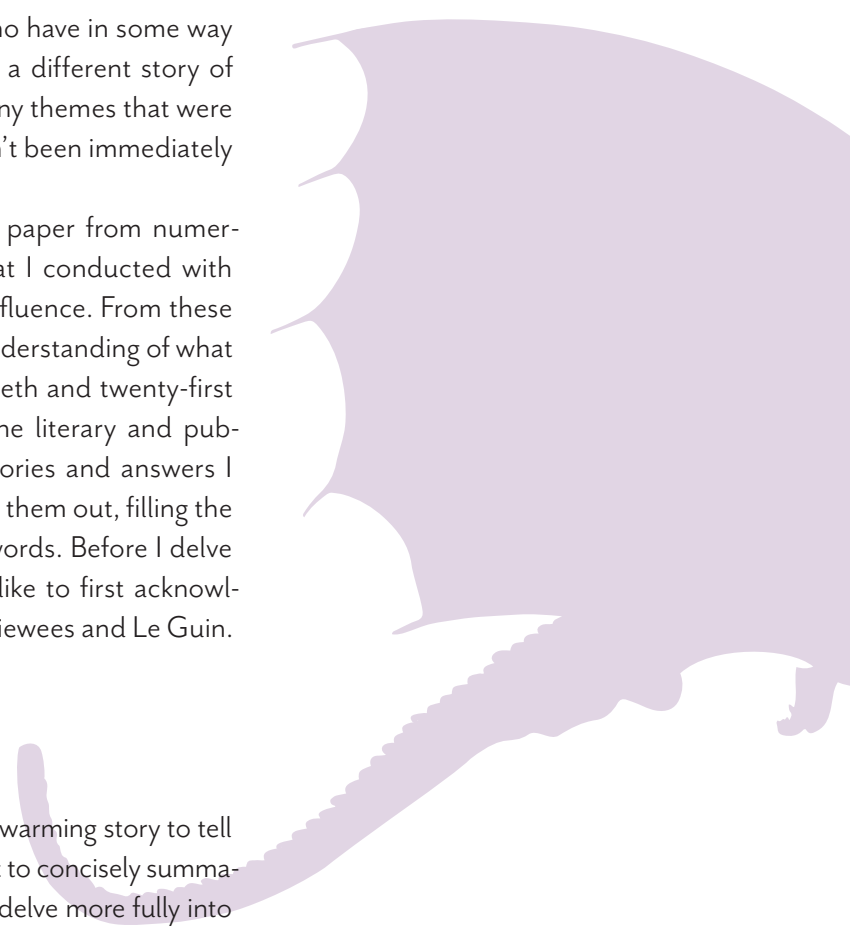
Qualitatively, I collected data for this research paper from numerous sources, but mostly from seven interviews that I conducted with Portlanders who I knew could speak to Le Guin's influence. From these seven interviewees, I developed a more thorough understanding of what Ursula and her work meant to writers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, as well as what her influence was on the literary and publishing communities as a whole. I then split the stories and answers I received in my interviews up into themes and sorted them out, filling the spaces with supplementary research and my own words. Before I delve into these themes that redefined my research, I'd like to first acknowledge the wonderful connections between my interviewees and Le Guin.

## Interviewee Connections

While each person I interviewed had a different heartwarming story to tell about how Le Guin affected their lives, I must attempt to concisely summarize Ursula's influence on each of them here so I can delve more fully into what her work meant to literature and publishing on a larger scale. Two are professors at Portland State University: Tony Wolk, who co-taught science fiction writing classes with Le Guin in 1975, 1981, and 1991, and continues to teach these classes and more today, and John Henley, who teaches the Bestsellers in US Books class in the Book Publishing graduate program and was a long-time bookseller at Powell's.<sup>10</sup> Not only do both professors still use her books in their classes, but both attribute their becoming published authors to Le Guin. Molly Gloss, an award-winning author and professor in an MFA residency program at Pacific University in Oregon, was one of Wolk and Le Guin's students in the aforementioned 1981 writing workshop, where Le Guin pulled her aside and told her she would give

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<sup>10</sup> Tony Wolk (professor, Portland State University), interview with author, January 14, 2021; John Henley (professor, Portland State University), interview with author, January 20, 2021.



Molly's stories to her own literary agent.<sup>11</sup> Ursula remained close with Wolk, Henley, and Gloss for decades, as a writing mentor editing and critiquing their works, as a fellow writer in writing groups and on library boards, and as a dear, dear friend, until her unfortunate passing in 2018.

David Naimon, my fourth interviewee, interviewed and co-wrote a book with Le Guin (*Ursula K. Le Guin: Conversations on Writing*), which was published just after her death. My fifth interviewee, Susan DeFreitas, collected, curated, and edited a collection of short stories from Portland authors in dedication to Le Guin, creating an anthology called *Dispatches From Anarres*, published by Forest Avenue Press. Laura Stanfill, my sixth interviewee, is the publisher of Forest Avenue. Molly Gloss is one of the short story contributors for *Dispatches From Anarres*. My last interviewee was Gigi Little, another short story contributor and the cover designer of *Dispatches*.

I'm honored to now present my findings from my research around the influence of Ursula K. Le Guin on the literary and publishing communities.

## RESULTS

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This next section will aim at discussing my findings from the data I collected in my interviews, with the addition of some relevant supplemental information. For the sake of the repetition of the terms *science fiction* and *fantasy*, I will refer to science fiction as SF and science fiction and fantasy collectively as SFF—speculative fiction is closely connected to SF and so, for the purposes of this research paper, can be included in the references of SF and SFF. This quote from SF author Michael Swanwick kept returning to my mind while I was collecting my data: “trying to measure Le Guin’s importance to the field was like trying to figure out ‘what salt means to the sea’.”<sup>12</sup> There is hardly a corner of literature, ideas, or genre that she did not touch in her lifetime that left a lasting impact.

### Widening of Genre

All seven interviewees, as well as in my research, attested in some way to how Ursula Le Guin directly affected the SFF genres. Gigi Little said that she made SFF “something bigger and more beautiful,” and Susan

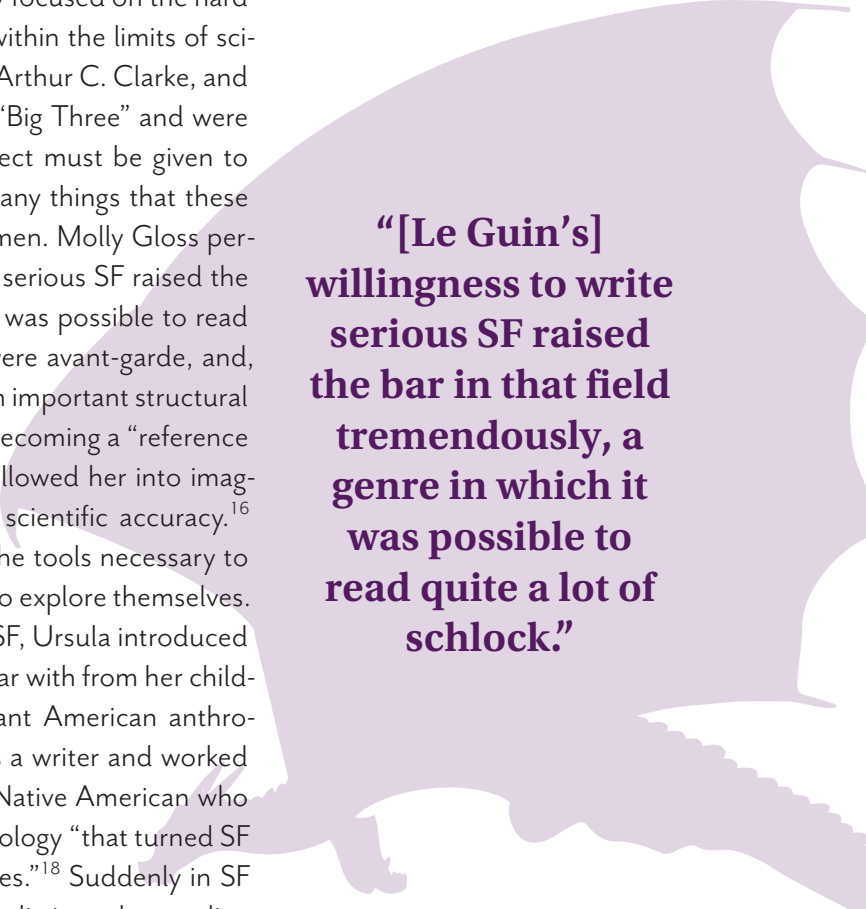
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<sup>11</sup> Gloss, Molly (author of *The Jump-Off Creek* and a short story contributor to *Dispatches From Anarres*), interview with author, February 4, 2021.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Swanwick quoted in Ryan Britt, “Did Ursula Le Guin Change the Course of SFF?,” *Tor.com*, October 20, 2011, <https://www.tor.com/2011/10/20/did-ursula-le-guin-change-the-course-of-sff/>.

DeFreitas said Le Guin was “one of the female writers of her generation who began to imagine a different kind” of SFF.<sup>13</sup> SF of the fifties and sixties when Le Guin entered the scene was largely focused on the hard sciences, aimed at being as accurate as possible within the limits of science, and was led by SF writers like Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke, and Robert Heinlein, who were considered to be the “Big Three” and were scientists as well as writers.<sup>14</sup> Though some respect must be given to these trailblazers in their own right, there were many things that these men did not do well, such as the portrayal of women. Molly Gloss perhaps said it best: “[Le Guin’s] willingness to write serious SF raised the bar in that field tremendously, a genre in which it was possible to read quite a lot of schlock.”<sup>15</sup> Ursula’s earliest works were avant-garde, and, according to David Naimon, ultimately became “an important structural part of the historical evolution of American SFF,” becoming a “reference point in multiple ways” to aspiring writers who followed her into imaginative freedom rather than remain restricted in scientific accuracy.<sup>16</sup> Essentially, she gave writers—as well as readers—the tools necessary to explore SFF, and in doing so, gave them the tools to explore themselves.

Early on, when hard SF was just thought of as SF, Ursula introduced another science, one that she was intimately familiar with from her childhood. Her father, Alfred Kroeber, was a significant American anthropologist, and her mother, Theodora Kroeber, was a writer and worked with her husband to pen the chronicles of Ishi, a Native American who was said to be the last of his tribe.<sup>17</sup> It was anthropology “that turned SF around a corner, from the Asimovian hard sciences.”<sup>18</sup> Suddenly in SF there was depth, history, mythology, and a more holistic understanding of characters and worlds. With this soft science application, there came others like psychology, sociology, political science, and philosophy: Jungian thought, Taoism, anarchy, utopia—she used SFF as a “literature of revolt or social criticism.”<sup>19</sup> Her entrance into the SFF field occurred during the civil rights movements, which she was a huge advocate and supporter of, and her beliefs seeped into her writing: feminism, freedom,



**“[Le Guin’s] willingness to write serious SF raised the bar in that field tremendously, a genre in which it was possible to read quite a lot of schlock.”**

13 Gigi Little (cover designer and short story contributor, *Dispatches From Anarres*), interview with author, January 25, 2021; Susan DeFreitas (editor, *Dispatches From Anarres*), interview with author, February 4, 2021.

14 “The Big Three: Asimov, Clarke and Heinlein,” *An SF and Fantasy Bibliography*, accessed April 30, 2021, <https://www.sfandfantasy.co.uk/php/the-big-3.php>.

15 Gloss, interview.

16 David Naimon (co-author of *Ursula K. Le Guin: Conversations on Writing*), interview by author, February 9, 2021.

17 Molly Gloss, “Ursula K. Le Guin (1929–2018),” *Oregon Encyclopedia*, updated October 21, 2020, [https://www.oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/le\\_guin\\_ursula\\_1929\\_/#.YlxYi7VKhPZ](https://www.oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/le_guin_ursula_1929_/#.YlxYi7VKhPZ).

18 Wolk, interview.

19 Gloss, interview; Henley, interview.

equality, environmental consciousness, anti-war and pro-humanity.<sup>20</sup> This is one of her legacies, the idea that “her work reflects her inner belief system;” like many great authors, she used the facets of her own life and experience, but unlike many of them, the genres she chose to use were SFF, showing “readers and writers that the genre [of] SF has wider dimensions than they had ever imagined.”<sup>21</sup> These dimensions became pieces of her legacy.

Le Guin’s legacy with genre can be found in the things that she stood for in her own life. She was always hopeful for a better world, one where people got along and took care of one another, and, as David Naimon pointed out, “you can see those utopian aspirations in a lot of her work, overlaid on a dystopian possibility.”<sup>22</sup> She showed writers how to use the “love of language, of storytelling,” and the tools of SF to interrogate the “big questions” of life, “to challenge accepted norms not only in society but our own accepted ideas,” such as with gender and racial inequality, capitalism, the personas of plants and animals, and climate change.<sup>23</sup> As she grew into a mature writer, she began to self-interrogate in her own writing, such as the concept of the hero’s journey and how she at first only wrote from a male perspective, and so this humble self-evaluation and desire for personal growth also became her legacy.<sup>24</sup> When Ursula took the stage with these themes of inclusivity, and tools for exploring storytelling and confronting real-world societal issues, “suddenly, the basic storyline of episodic, male-driven, plot-driven, SF [was] no more.”<sup>25</sup> She had unknowingly begun a SFF revolution.

Throughout the decades that have passed and even today, Ursula’s themes have remained relevant, due to the way that she connected her words to the real world, through the questions that she presented to her readers. Her early work still feels contemporary for this reason: the issues that “our time-period is grappling with” as a whole today are much the same as the issues fifty years ago, except that she is no longer the only writer who digs deeper into imaginative literature to explore ideas about how humans could live.<sup>26</sup> As many pointed out in my research, Le Guin began the conversation, and since then, “all [writers] are responding to her legacy even if [they] didn’t grow up with her work.”<sup>27</sup> All it takes is a spark to light the flame of a revolution, and for the revolution of SFF, Ursula was that initial spark in the darkness, lighting the way for other sparks to follow.

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20 Henley, interview; Little, interview; Gloss, interview; Laura Stanfill (publisher, Forest Avenue Press), interview with author, February 11, 2021; Naimon, interview.

21 Stanfill, interview; Wolk, interview.

22 Naimon, interview.

23 Henley, interview; Gloss, interview; Little, interview; Naimon, interview.

24 Naimon, interview; Gloss, interview; DeFreitas, interview.

25 Henley, interview.

26 Gloss, interview; Little, interview.

27 Stanfill, interview.

## Inclusion & Encouragement of Marginalized Voices

Ursula's spark of influence is multifaceted, like a precious stone—and another of those facets lies in her gender and how she built her characters. Firstly, it's crucial to expand on how “the evolution of the novel parallels the evolution of the US and parallels the women's right movement from the American revolution to this day.”<sup>28</sup> In the early 1800s when the novel was evolving, it still wasn't terribly socially acceptable for women to be writers, though it wasn't unheard of, especially when publishers realized that their work was actually profitable.<sup>29</sup> This movement grew over the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, but because they were women in a man's world, their work had a connotation of being written by *mere* women, and their names were often forgotten after their deaths because their work wasn't continuing to be published.<sup>30</sup> This last point—women writers being forgotten, left out of the print, and then out of the conversation, after their death—was a great fear of Ursula's, both on behalf of other women, but also for herself.<sup>31</sup> Many women over the last couple of centuries chose to—or were advised to by their publisher—use a male or gender-neutral pen name. But Ursula proved to her publishers that a woman's SFF work could sell, and sell well under her own name, which echoed the women's literary movement of the previous century.<sup>32</sup> Though women are still occasionally advised by their publishers to write under pen names so that their work will not be gender stereotyped, like JK Rowling and V. E. Schwab, Le Guin also proved to women writers, especially those who dabbled in SFF, that they *could* sign their work using their own name.<sup>33</sup>

Le Guin was a strong advocate for equality, particularly for women, and was a staunch feminist.<sup>34</sup> At least in regard to SFF, with her status as a “woman in a field that was predominantly male,” Ursula “set the pace as a writer for women unlearning silence, fear, and self-doubt.”<sup>35</sup> More than this though, she was writing about things that no writer, man

**“[H]ow many female science fiction and fantasy writers are there, doing it, because she did it?”**

28 Henley, interview.

29 Ibid.

30 Christopher Hager, “1862: The Explosion of Women Writers,” *1862: America Undeceived*, December 20, 2021, <https://commons.trincoll.edu/1862/2012/12/20/1862-the-explosion-of-women-writers/>.

31 Wolk, interview; DeFreitas, interview; Naimon, interview; Gloss, interview.

32 Henley, interview.

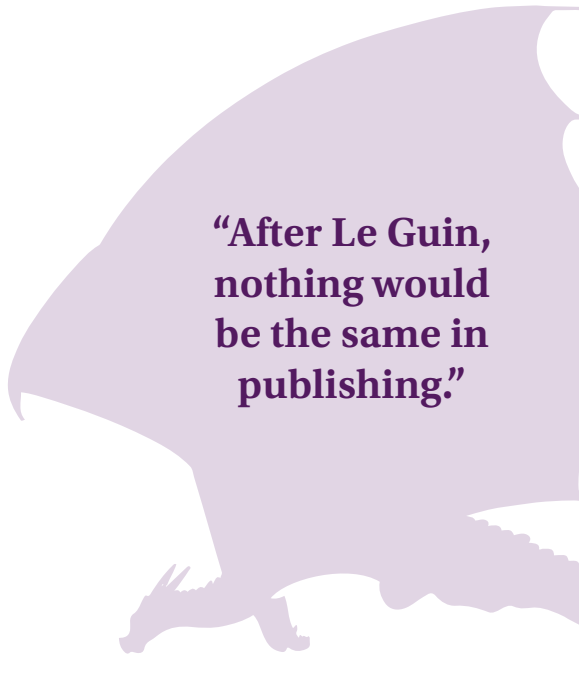
33 Kath, “Author V. E Schwab Talks About Her Experience as a Female Author,” *For Reading Addicts*, July 5, 2020, <http://forreadingaddicts.co.uk/authors/author-v-e-schwab-talks-about-her-experience-as-a-female-author/49385>; Henley, interview.

34 Little, interview; Gloss, interview.

35 Stanfill, interview; Elaine Showalter quoted in “Fellow writers remember Ursula K. Le Guin, 1929–2018,” *Library of America*, January 26, 2018, <https://www.loa.org/news-and-views/1375-fellow-writers-remember-ursula-k-le-guin-1929-2018>.

or woman, had written about. It begs the question: “[H]ow many female science fiction and fantasy writers are there, doing it, because she did it?”<sup>36</sup> The number is unknowable, because it’s still growing, and it’s not just women that she advocated for and inspired.

In addition to many white men and women who were awe-stricken by her work, Ursula influenced entire generations of BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ communities. And though she did so through her advocacy both on and off the page, she quite often wrote protagonists who were nonwhite and/or of unconventional genders or sexual orientation—and that inclusion was perhaps the most important.<sup>37</sup> She “made a space for every speculative fiction geek who did not feel like they fit the stereotypical mold”—Black, Brown, white, female, and queer young writers.<sup>38</sup> By doing this, Ursula did two vital things for the SFF literary community: “first by empowering young minority SFF writers, but also demonstrating to the publishing industry that these kinds of books will sell.”<sup>39</sup> Those young writers have now become adults and we are seeing their impact on the literary community today, such as with bestselling authors Nora K. Jemisin and Luis Urrea.<sup>40</sup> The thing to remember here is Le Guin did not purposefully create waves; she did it because it was simply the right thing to do. To quote her friend, John Henley, “After Le Guin, nothing would be the same in publishing.”<sup>41</sup>



**“After Le Guin,  
nothing would  
be the same in  
publishing.”**

## Genre Fiction vs. Literature (with a Capital ‘L’)

Mimicking the slow evolution of the inclusion of women, BIPOC, and LGBTQIA+ writers being published (and even in publishing), is the devolution of the division between genre literature and literary fiction. There is a certain amount of discomfort that the literary community feels in recognizing and celebrating the authors of SFF genres—not because of the authors themselves, but rather because how these genres were perceived in the twentieth century as mere escapism and not worth the time to read, an opinion that Le Guin constantly rejected. After receiving the National Book Award in 2014, she said, “I rejoice in accepting it for, and sharing it with, all the writers who’ve been excluded from literature for so long—my fellow authors of fantasy and science fiction, writers of the

36 Little, interview.

37 Naimon, interview; Gloss, interview.

38 DeFreitas, interview.

39 Ibid.

40 “The Science Fiction and Fantasy Community Remembers Ursula K. Le Guin,” *Tor.com*, January 24, 2018, <https://www.tor.com/2018/01/24/the-science-fiction-and-fantasy-community-remembers-ursula-k-le-guin/>.

41 Henley, interview.



imagination, who for fifty years have watched the beautiful rewards go to the so-called realists.”<sup>42</sup> This is something that Le Guin fought against not for herself, but for all who deserve to be recognized for all they have contributed to the industry and for their readers across the world. And while the attitude of the literary establishment is changing to be more inclusive, “there is still this snobbishness about genre.”<sup>43</sup> And while this perception persists, the literary canon will likely remain exclusive.

Luckily, the walls between genre and literary fiction are collapsing. As Naimon stated in his interview, “the difference is smaller than it’s ever been, because there’s been a huge breakdown of the barriers of genre and literary fiction, where tons of literary fiction that’s winning the big awards is SFF now.”<sup>44</sup> As a novelist who wrote across all genres and consistently broke the barriers between those genres, Ursula fought against the deliberate separation of genres for decades but also admitted, with hope, in 2016 that though there is still a “lingering problem” around the genre division, “the walls [she] hammered at so long are down. They’re rubble.”<sup>45</sup> In the same breath, she then expanded on how the notion of genres being used today is primarily around marketing and sales: “[W]hen the characteristics of a genre are controlled, systematized, and insisted upon by publishers, or editors, or critics, they become limitations rather than possibilities. Salability, repeatability, expectability replace quality. A literary form degenerates into a formula.”<sup>46</sup> The result of this may be initial high levels of sales and successful marketing plans for publishers and corporations like Amazon, but it’s also to the detriment of writers, booksellers, and readers.

## The Revolt Against Google Books & Amazon

In the last decade of her life, Ursula used her reputation to publicly object to the copyright infringement and the commodification of books that the twenty-first century has been witnessing through the efforts of Google Books and Amazon. “She used a half-century of her reputation to speak out against things she thought were going in the

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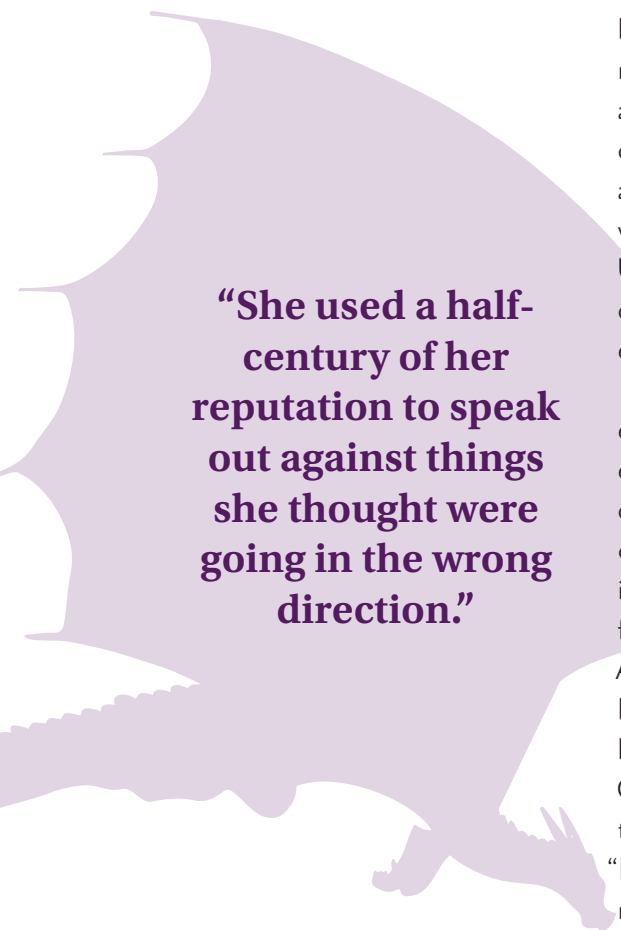
42 “The National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters,” Ursula K. Le Guin, 2021, <https://www.ursulaklequin.com/nbf-medal>.

43 DeFreitas, interview; Stanfill, interview; Henley, interview.

44 Naimon, interview.

45 Stanfill, interview; Ursula K. Le Guin quoted in Michael Cunningham, “Ursula K. Le Guin Talks to Michael Cunningham about Genres, Gender, and Broadening Fiction,” *Electric Lit*, April 1, 2016, <https://electricliterature.com/ursula-k-le-guin-talks-to-michael-cunningham-about-genres-gender-and-broadening-fiction/>.

46 Ursula K. Le Guin quoted in Cunningham, “Ursula K. Le Guin Talks to Michael Cunningham.”



**“She used a half-century of her reputation to speak out against things she thought were going in the wrong direction.”**

wrong direction.”<sup>47</sup> Ursula had been a member of the Authors Guild since 1972, but she resigned when they negotiated the settlement of Google’s Library Project, in which Google planned to digitize millions of books without consulting others in the literary community.<sup>48</sup> At the time, several countries had already protested the settlement and had been exempted from it. Ursula herself led the revolt in the US in 2010, launching a petition in protest and had 367 authors sign it, then submitted it to the judge of the United States court, asking for the US to also “be exempted from the settlement,” and that “the principle of copyright, which is directly threatened by the settlement, be honored and upheld in the United States.”<sup>49</sup> Though Google Books ultimately won the case and was allowed to continue building their digital library, Ursula Le Guin’s stance at the front of the movement was an incredible display of her using her reputation to make a difference in the larger literary community.

Another instance of Ursula using her reputation to protect writers and their work can be found in her stance against Amazon. To an extent, Amazon has changed how publishers think about marketing due to the way Amazon has managed their best seller lists, among other things, and how they have focused on growth capitalism, turning a cultural commodity into a commercial product to be “written fast, sold cheap, dumped fast,” as attention turns to the next thing.<sup>50</sup> Amazon then uses “their success in marketing to control not only bookselling, but book publication.”<sup>51</sup> In 2014 at the National Book Foundation Awards, in her eloquently scalding acceptance speech, Le Guin approached this idea that publishers are reacting to Amazon, letting capitalism and salability win over freedom of expression and art: “Developing written material to suit sales strategies in order to maximise corporate profit and advertising revenue is not the same thing as responsible book publishing or authorship”<sup>52</sup> Not only did she stand up against Amazon and publishers who were mimicking their commodification of books, but she called out the corporation for also driving independent booksellers out of business.<sup>53</sup> Molly Gloss made an excellent observation about Le Guin’s stance against the capitalistic nature the industry is turning to: “her actions proved that even large

47 Naimon, interview.

48 “Petition Concerning the Google Book Settlement,” Ursula K. Le Guin, 2021, <http://www.ursulakleguinarchive.com/GS-Petition.html>.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid.

51 Ibid.

52 Le Guin, “The National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters.”

53 Ursula K. Le Guin, “Up the Amazon with the BS Machine,” *Book View Café*, June 1, 2015, <http://bookviewcafe.com/blog/2015/06/01/up-the-amazon/>.

authors such as herself didn't need to bow down to the expectations of the publishing industry."<sup>54</sup> And her stance of innate guardianship over books did not go unnoticed.



Ursula K. Le Guin in 2014, giving her acceptance speech of the National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters. Photo was taken from the recording of her speech.

From a small press's perspective, such as that of Laura Stanfill's Forest Avenue Press, Ursula's words hit a nerve:

[W]hen she came out with her anti-Amazon stance, it rallied booksellers and authors; those of us who were already anti-Amazon and recognizing its impact on the independent bookstore model were overjoyed that she lent her presence and weight of her words to the cause. Those of us in the world who didn't know, suddenly heard it from an American icon, and I think her words reached people that the ongoing campaigns bookstores were trying to share about 'buy local' couldn't reach.<sup>55</sup>

Today's engagement of her stance and attitude towards the risks of the commodification of books is important for the future of the literary and the publishing communities because hardly anyone enters into the publishing industry for the money—they do it for the love of books. In this, Ursula's influence can be seen in the ripples left by her words.

## Bioregional & Indie Literary Ecosystem

Ursula was an advocate for many things, including the indie literary community in which she found herself regionally. Naimon said in his interview that "she definitely considered herself a bioregional writer... It appealed to her to build a sort of ecosystem of being beholden to the

54 Gloss, interview.

55 Stanfill, interview.

**“she definitely considered herself a bioregional writer... It appealed to her to build a sort of ecosystem of being beholden to the communities that you live in.”**

communities that you live in.”<sup>56</sup> From small presses to libraries and literary nonprofits to bookstores, not to mention indie authors, Ursula used her recognizable influence, time, and attention to support them all.

Though many of the well-established publishers in New York City would have loved to publish her work and would have been able to give her books “a higher distribution or a bigger profile,” Le Guin liked to publish with small presses, often with those on the west coast, in an effort to “keep small presses viable in this capitalistic society.”<sup>57</sup> Small presses highly benefited from publishing her work: her books were guaranteed to be profitable and furthermore, small presses were legitimized in a way by her choosing them due to her status as a prolific author.<sup>58</sup> Her choice to support indie publishers instead of the Big Five to this day “encourages writers to publish their works—even a small book of poetry—through small presses.”<sup>59</sup> Again, this patronage wasn’t for her benefit; it was just the right thing to do, and she knew it.

In 2010, Ursula attended Ooligan’s Write to Publish conference and gave literary advice to young aspiring writers and publishing students alike.<sup>60</sup> “She admired places like Ooligan who gave people a start in that world.”<sup>61</sup> But Ooligan’s event was far from her first local literary symposium. Ursula was an early supporter of as well as “a board member of Literary Arts and the Multnomah County Library.”<sup>62</sup> She also “influenced the careers of countless students through national and international writers’ workshops” and “taught creative writing at Pacific University and Portland State University, at Haystack, and at Fishtrap.”<sup>63</sup> Through decades of her teaching and others who have taught her work, there are now several generations who have grown up on her words, whether they were vicariously given or not.

In addition to supporting small presses, Ursula was a great sympathizer to libraries, and had been ever since she was a little girl. Tony Wolk said that “[s]he felt that she owed a debt to Portland, and especially to the county library.”<sup>64</sup> Gloss noted that she and Ursula worked together at the Multnomah County Library: first they “were both Friends of the Library...and then later on, [they] were both on the board

56 Naimon, interview.

57 Ibid; Gloss, interview.

58 Gloss, interview.

59 Ibid.

60 Jasmine Gower, “Write to Publish, Then and Now,” *Ooligan Press*, February 15, 2017, <https://ooligan.pdx.edu/w2p-2017/>.

61 Gloss, interview.

62 Ibid; Gloss, “Ursula K. Le Guin (1929–2018).”

63 Alicia Cole, “Remembering Ursula K. Le Guin Dark Into Light: Ursula K. Le Guin Obituary,” *Femspec* 18, no. 2, (2018), <http://stats.lib.pdx.edu/proxy.php?url=http://search.proquest.com/proxy.lib.pdx.edu/scholarly-journals/remembering-ursula-k-le-guin-dark-into-light/docview/2151221980/se-2?accountid=13265>.

64 Wolk, interview.

of Friends of the Library, and later yet [they] were both on the library board.”<sup>65</sup> In a speech given in 1997 at a celebration of the renovation of the Multnomah County Library, Le Guin said: “Knowledge sets us free, art sets us free. A great library is freedom.”<sup>66</sup> Libraries have always been there for communities, and Ursula wanted to return the favor, to protect that accessibility, to the point that “she was very active in support for the library when they were facing budget crunches,” and “she was someone that the library executives would turn to for advice about certain things—decisions they were making—they knew she was someone who would always support the library.”<sup>67</sup> Though not often considered to be part of the publishing industry, libraries play a crucial but undermined role in shaping the literary community, not unlike Ursula herself.

Le Guin also liked to specifically blurb indie and debut books, especially those who would “publish a book through a small press, with a small print run,” choosing to endorse unknown writers rather than published authors who didn’t really need her benefaction.<sup>68</sup> In doing so, she set an example for other writers to use their reputation in give back to the literary community, encouraging them to support indie publishers by “getting their own work published” by them as well as “by supplying blurbs to those writers who are just beginning and are being published by a small press.”<sup>69</sup> Ursula liked to play the mentor role, both in her classes and workshops and out of them. Sometimes in her own voice, and sometimes on a page.

## Generational Influence

Le Guin, unknowingly, raised multiple generations through her oeuvre: Baby Boomers and Generation X who grew up reading the books of *Earthsea* and *The Left Hand of Darkness* in the seventies, eighties, and nineties, the Millennials who read *Gifts* and *Voices* and the Generation Z who were raised on the *Catwings* series in the 2000s and 2010s. While Ursula was certainly always read, “[w]hat’s happened recently is the broadening of Le Guin’s audience and readership,” as generations have now grown up on her work and are teaching it to their kids and students, and she’s now being thought of as “one of our great American writers.”<sup>70</sup>

65 Gloss, interview.

66 Ursula K. Le Guin, “My Libraries” in *The Wave in the Mind* (Boulder, CO: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 2004), p. 22.

67 Gloss, interview.

68 Ibid.

69 Ibid.

70 Theodora Goss quoted in “Worlds of Ursula K. Le Guin,” directed by Arwen Curry, documentary filmed in 2018 in Ireland, 68 min, <https://www.amazon.com/Worlds-Ursula-K-Guin/dp/B0823M8BNN>.

Ursula's oeuvre was so thought-provoking and inspirational that there is now a generational effect occurring, with one generation teaching and showing her work to the next.

Today, there are children who are happily growing up on her Catwings series who have no idea how important Ursula and her other work is, but, as Gloss pointed out, "later on, those little kids are going to grow up and they're going to read in some English class...*The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas*, and then they're going wind up reading *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Dispossessed*, and that's our hope for her legacy."<sup>71</sup> And it seems like this very concept was occurring at the time of her death, when "a whole bunch of people discovered her, if not for the first time, they...rediscovered her," so she passed on during "one of her peaks of public visibility."<sup>72</sup> Those who read her words are changed, and some have become writers themselves.

Countless writers have come out of that generation, who, when reading her work as children or young adults, realized that writing SFF can be so much more than providing an escape—it can actually help define reality.<sup>73</sup> This knowledge that Le Guin bestowed on children meant that "she was being read by the people who would grow up to change opinions and change the world."<sup>74</sup> In my research, I found many names or references for those who were inspired to write or were otherwise integrally changed in how they view writing, including "Ursula's brood," "Le Guin's children," her "daughters," and "writers of her ilk."<sup>75</sup> She kept a regular correspondence with many, "willing to act as cheerleader or sympathetic ear or tough critic for innumerable young writers and scholars."<sup>76</sup> One literary critic even said, "She invented us: SFF critics like me but also poets and essayists and picture book writers and novelists...just about anyone whose work looks past the here-and-now."<sup>77</sup> Ursula's influence is still unfolding through these writers who she made space for and encouraged, and through the lines of generational influence that will continue to occur.

It seems like everyone has taken a page out of her book, even if it's through someone else along the way and they haven't realized. Jo Walton

**"all you have to do is get someone to read one book of hers, and she will do the rest."**

71 Gloss, interview.

72 Naimon, interview.

73 *For an incomplete list of writers who have been influenced by Ursula K. Le Guin, please see the Appendix.*

74 Neil Gaiman quoted in "Worlds of Ursula K. Le Guin."

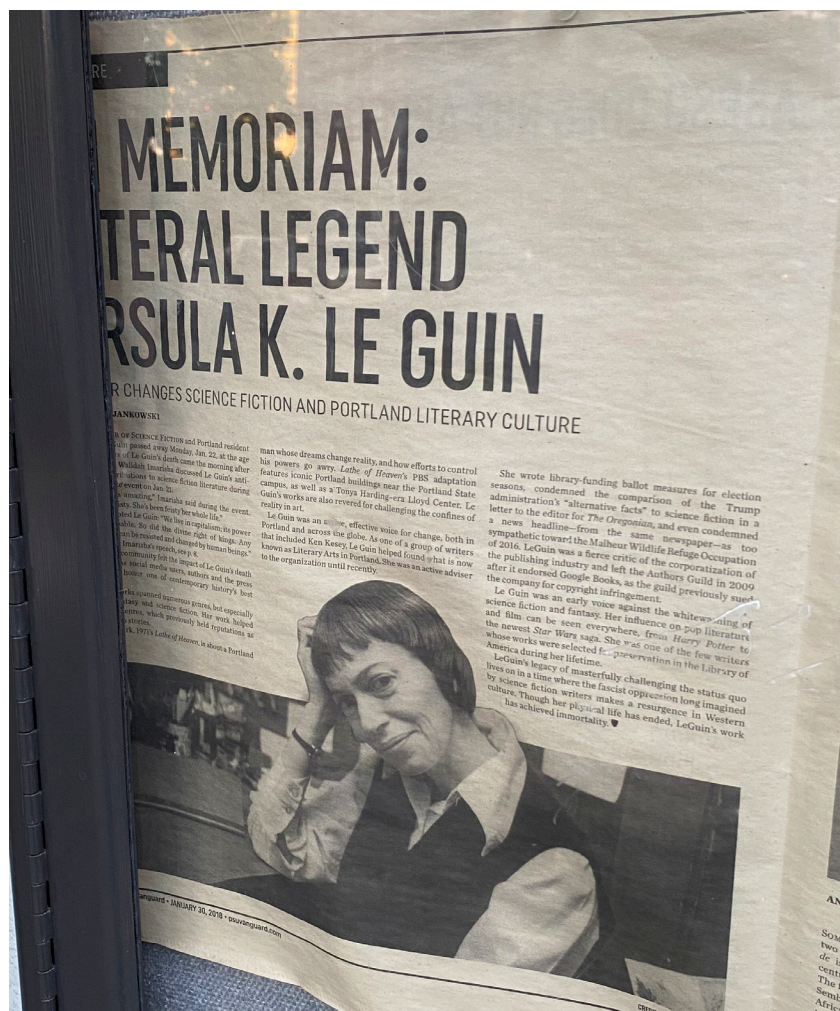
75 DeFreitas, interview; Scott Timberg, "How Ursula K Le Guin Led a Generation Away from Realism," *The Guardian*, May 21, 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2009/may/21/ursula-k-le-guin-realism>; Theodora Goss quoted in Andrew Liptak, "The Fantasy and Science Fiction Community Pays Tribute to Ursula K. Le Guin," *The Verge*, January 24, 2018, <https://www.theverge.com/2018/1/24/16927490/ursula-k-le-guin-okorafor-scalzi-newitz-liu-grossman-vandermeer-remembrance>; Gloss, interview.

76 Brian Attebery quoted in Showalter, "Fellow Writers Remember Ursula K. Le Guin, 1929–2018."

77 *Ibid.*



commented on this, saying “all of us who grew up reading her were influenced. Even people who have never read her have been influenced by her secondary influence, in terms of how much more it’s possible to do because she broke that ground.”<sup>78</sup> Little pointed out that even those who work in publishing seem to have been affected: “I think the publishing world is full of women who seem like her...all the agents, vendors, editors, all the ships in the night in there, have been women!”<sup>79</sup> And if there is by chance someone who has yet to have heard of her, been secondarily influenced or not, “all you have to do is get someone to read one book of hers, and she will do the rest.”<sup>80</sup> Since her first works were published, Ursula has been transforming the foundation of the literary and publishing communities.



This aged newspaper clipping marking Ursula’s passing sits in the box office window of Portland State University’s theater. Photo taken by author.

78 Jo Walton, “Bright the Hawk’s Flight on the Empty Sky: Ursula K. Le Guin,” *Tor.com*, January 24, 2018, <https://www.tor.com/2018/01/24/bright-the-hawks-flight-in-the-empty-sky-ursula-k-le-guin/>.

79 Little, interview.

80 DeFreitas, interview.

## CONCLUSION

Ursula K. Le Guin did much in service of literature and writers, which in turn impacted the literary community and publishing industry: She was the reason the genres of SFF widened to include themes of the soft sciences and more; she made space for and encouraged women, BIPOC, and LGBTQIA+ writers in SFF literature; she fought to break the barriers between genre fiction and literary fiction; she led the rebellion against Google Books and Amazon; cultivated and supported her bioregional and indie literary ecosystem; and created a generational effect with her influence, ensuring that each generation taught her lessons to the next. “So much of her influence of her legacy is bearing fruit now in books that are being published and authors who are coming to the table,” those who have been changed by her words—changed by her.<sup>81</sup>

Portland’s beloved indie bookstore’s marquee in the week following Le Guin’s death. Photographer unknown.



Three years after her death, the city of Portland still mourns their literary giant. Even now, as I look out my apartment window near PSU campus, I can just make out an old Vanguard newspaper clipping in the box office window of the school theater: IN MEMORIAM: LITERAL LEGEND URSULA K. LE GUIN, dated January 30, 2018. I remember too, the marquee of Powell’s that same week: WE’LL MISS YOU URSULA K LE GUIN, a memory that was confirmed by Laura Stanfill’s own story of taking her daughter, a lover of *Catwings*, to see the sign one evening and think about just how far Ursula’s reach had been. I eagerly wait to purchase my own shiny new Ursula K. Le Guin USPS postage stamps. She will not be forgotten, for we carry her in ourselves, in our words, and in the generations to come. Her influence is such that it runs bone deep, coming out as ink on the page, a voice on the wind, and a wave in the mind.<sup>82</sup>

81 DeFreitas, interview.

82 This is a nod to three of Ursula’s books: *The Other Wind*, which examines death, the afterlife, and rebirth; *Voices*, a story about a girl who interprets an oracle through words in books and a poet that sparks a rebellion against the city’s conquerors; and *The Wave in the Mind*, which in itself is a tribute to one of Ursula’s influencers, Virginia Woolf, who wrote the phrase in a letter when talking about writing, style, and rhythm: “A sight, an emotion, creates this wave in the mind, long before it makes words to fit it.” Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann, eds., *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume III, 1923–1928* (Boston, MA: Mariner Books, 1970).

# APPENDIX

## The Influenced<sup>83</sup>

Writers listed here have in one way or another claimed at least one of the following: they were directly influenced by Le Guin, they treasured her and her books, her work made them think differently about life and writing, or they recognized that Ursula was one of the greatest writers of the twentieth century.

|                                 |                       |                     |                          |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|--------------------------|
| Joe Abercrombie                 | Monica Drake          | Ken Liu             | Patrick Rothfuss         |
| TJ Acena                        | Steve Duin            | Gigi Little         | JK Rowling <sup>85</sup> |
| Kesha Ajose-Fisher              | Julia Fierro          | Sonia Orin Lyris    | Salman Rushdie           |
| Stevan Allred                   | Karen Joy Fowler      | Tracy Manaster      | John Scalzi              |
| Margaret Atwood                 | Neil Gaiman           | James Mapes         | Orson Scott Card         |
| Charlie Jane Anders             | Rosa Montero Gayo     | George RR Martin    | Evelyn Sharenov          |
| Jason Arias                     | Molly Gloss           | C.A. McDonald       | Nisi Shawl               |
| Brian Attebery                  | Kathleen Ann Goonan   | Patricia McKillip   | Elaine Showalter         |
| Harold Augenbraum               | Theodora Goss         | Robin McKinley      | Zadie Smith              |
| Iain Banks                      | Lev Grossman          | Adrian McKinty      | Laura Stanfill           |
| Elizabeth Bear                  | Eileen Gunn           | Vonda McIntyre      | Arwen Spicer             |
| adrienne maree brown            | Andrea Hairston       | Jon Michaud         | Cheryl Strayed           |
| Stewart C. Baker                | Maria Dahvana Headley | Lincoln Michel      | Sarah Stockton           |
| Jonah Barrett                   | John Henley           | China Miéville      | Michael Swanwick         |
| Gabrielle Bellot                | Robin Hobb            | David Mitchell      | Luis Urrea               |
| Aliette de Bodard               | Walidah Imarisha      | Mary Anne Mohanraj  | Catherynne M. Valente    |
| Christian A. Brown              | Nora K. Jemisin       | David Naimon        | Jeff VanderMeer          |
| adrienne maree brown            | Rachael K. Jones      | Annalee Newitz      | Jo Walton                |
| Algis Budrys                    | Daniel Heath Justice  | Pam Noles           | Gary K. Wolfe            |
| Octavia E. Butler <sup>84</sup> | Jaroslav Kalfar       | Tim O'Leary         | Tony Wolk                |
| Nat Cassidy                     | Michelle Ruiz Keil    | Joyce Carol Oates   | Lisa Yaszek              |
| Michael Chabon                  | Margaret Killjoy      | Nnedi Okorafor      | Lidia Yuknavitch         |
| Curtis C. Chen                  | Juhea Kim             | Daniel José Older   | Leni Zumas               |
| Myke Cole                       | Cheston Knapp         | Chuck Palahniuk     |                          |
| Tina Connolly                   | Mary Robinette Kowal  | Ada Palmer          | & many, many more.       |
| Carol Cooper                    | Jessie Kwak           | Christopher Paolini |                          |
| Sarah Cypher                    | Jason LaPier          | Ben Parzybok        |                          |
| Diana Abu Jaber                 | Victor LaValle        | Julie Phillips      |                          |
| Mo Daviau                       | Fonda Lee             | Kathlene Postma     |                          |
| Susan Defrietas                 | Jonathan Lethem       | Terry Pratchett     |                          |
| Rene Denfeld                    | David D. Levine       | Anna Quinn          |                          |
| Junot Díaz                      | Shawn Levy            | Joanna Rose         |                          |
| Phillip K. Dick                 | Kelly Link            | Nicole Rosevear     |                          |

83 Liptak, "The Fantasy and Science Fiction Community"; Curry, dir. "Worlds of Ursula K. Le Guin"; Literary of Arts. "Tribute to Ursula K. Le Guin"; "The Science Fiction and Fantasy Community Remembers Ursula K. Le Guin"; Showalter, "Fellow writers remember Ursula K. Le Guin"; all interviews; social media posts; and more.

84 Octavia E Butler is *said* to be influenced by Le Guin.

85 JK Rowling never admitted the influence that Ursula had on her and *Harry Potter*, though there are many articles and other people making the connection. Ursula created the first wizarding school.

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