

Ursula K. Le Guin (Biographical Sketch)

Ursula Kroeber was born October 21, 1929, in Berkeley, California. Her father was the pioneering anthropologist Alfred L. Kroeber, who earned the first doctorate in anthropology in the United States in 1901, from Columbia University. He went on to establish the second department of anthropology in the United States, at the University of California in Berkeley. Her mother was the writer Theodora Kroeber, best known as the author of *Ishi in Two Worlds*, about the last surviving member of the Yahi tribe of California. Le Guin says she has no memories of Ishi herself, because he died before she was born, but presumably she heard many stories about him. She was the youngest of four children and the only girl; her three brothers were considerably older. Although her childhood corresponded with the Great Depression, her recollections are of a comfortable life. Her parents owned a house in Berkeley "filled with books, music, friends and conversation." The family spent their summers at their ranch in Napa Valley. Le Guin says that she "was brought up to think and to question and to enjoy."

Le Guin attended public schools in Berkeley. She graduated from Radcliffe College (1951), received her M.A. from Columbia University (1952), and began work on a doctorate in French and Italian Renaissance literature. Although her ambition was always to be a writer, her father advised her that she should always have something to fall back on --- so she prepared for an academic career. She received a Fulbright grant in 1953 to study in Paris. On the boat en route to Europe she met Charles A. Le Guin, a historian and fellow Fulbright scholar. They were married in Paris a few months later. The Le Guins settled in Portland, Oregon in 1958, where her husband took a teaching position at Portland State College (now Portland State University), and Le Guin pursued her career as a writer. They raised three children --- Le Guin has observed "One person cannot do two fulltime jobs, but two persons can do three fulltime jobs, if the work is honestly shared." --- and have four grandchildren.

Ursula K. Le Guin writes both poetry and prose in various genres, including realistic fiction, science fiction, fantasy, children's picture books, books for young adults, plays and screenplays, essays, a libretto for an opera and voicetexts. She has published seven books of poetry, twenty-two novels, over a hundred short stories (collected in eleven volumes), four collections of essays, twelve books for children, and four volumes of translations.

Most of Le Guin's major titles have remained continuously in print. Her best known fantasy series, the six *Books of Earthsea*, have sold millions of copies, and have been

translated into sixteen languages. Her first major work of science fiction, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, challenged assumptions about gender, and forced many critics to rethink their habitual disdain for science fiction, and its capacity for moral and literary complexity. Her novels *The Dispossessed* and *Always Coming Home* redefined modern utopian fiction, while her realistic stories for adults and teens reveal her empathy for the pain hidden within lives that seem ordinary and mundane. Her *Catwings* picture books for young children demonstrate that the whimsical does not have to be saccharine or trite. She has won praise for her translation of the Taoist classic, Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching*, the work of forty years of careful study. Her most recent novel, *Lavinia*, retells Virgil's *Aeneid*, giving a voice to the king's daughter destined to wed the exiled Trojan prince and become the foremother of Rome.

Three of Le Guin's books have been finalists for the American Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize, and among many honors she has received are a National Book Award, five Hugo Awards, five Nebula Awards, the Science Fiction Writers of America's Grand Master, the Kafka Award, a Pushcart Prize, the Howard Vursell Award of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the PEN/Malamud Award, the Gandalf Award, the Boston *Globe/Hornbook* Award, and the Margaret Edwards Lifetime Achievement Award.

Le Guin has continually challenged readers and critics by choosing genres often dismissed as popular, trivial, lacking in intellectual content and literary substance, then imbuing them with complexities of character and plot, meticulously structured narratives and compelling moral dilemmas, combined with a precision of language that reveals meaning like a sculptor reveals meaning in stone, or a musician in sound.

Le Guin is also unusual in her willingness to revisit earlier conclusions as her thinking changed and matured, in particularly her growing feminist and environmental awareness. While earlier works portray a more traditional type of heroism, her later works have shifted attention to the unacknowledged and often anonymous courage of women and children.

Le Guin for many years taught writing at workshops around the world, appeared at conferences, gave readings, participated in professional organizations and was active in the cultural life of Portland. She is now retired and limits her public appearances, but is still writing.