

WRITER ON WRITER

Jennifer Mills rediscovers the anarchic and spiritual world of Ursula K Le Guin

We read books to find out who we are.

I didn't like *A Wizard of Earthsea* when it was assigned in Year 8 English. It seemed just another irrelevant fantasy. I was impatient for adult thinking, frustrated by a conservative environment. The last thing I wanted was dragons.

Of course, it was school I didn't like. Coming back to the *Earthsea* series as an adult, I found my own arrogance reflected in Ged, my own struggle with power in his battle with his shadow. I saw the brilliance of Le Guin's deconstruction of the hero myth, and I caught her wisdom. But I knew more about myself by then; I had read her other novels.

The Dispossessed depicts an anarchist society on Anarres, the barely habitable moon of an earth-like planet, Urras. After generations of strict separation, a physicist returns to Urras to attempt co-operation. It's a political speculation, drawing on arguments about science and social good; but it's also a brilliant study of power and human nature, and one of literature's great novels of exile.

'There's a point, around age twenty,' Bedap said, 'when you have to choose whether to be like everybody else the rest of your life, or to make a virtue of your peculiarities.'

Then, I thought of anarchism and writing as separate selves. I did not know that a novel could be radical politics, spiritual inquiry, and poetry all at once. That it could talk truth to power, and remain vulnerable to doubt. That rather than hold to illusions of

ideological certainty, a good writer wades into the murk of uncertainty. That curiosity is itself political.

At 20, I read *The Dispossessed* with my heart in my throat. At 35, having made my own sacrifices for love and work, I find its power intensified. It is a book that gave me permission to write. This is something we give ourselves, we must keep giving ourselves with every work, each of which, if we are working well, is a fresh risk; but in any writer's life a handful of books will explode her limits and reveal a way through to her true work. *The Dispossessed* showed me what it meant to have that courage.

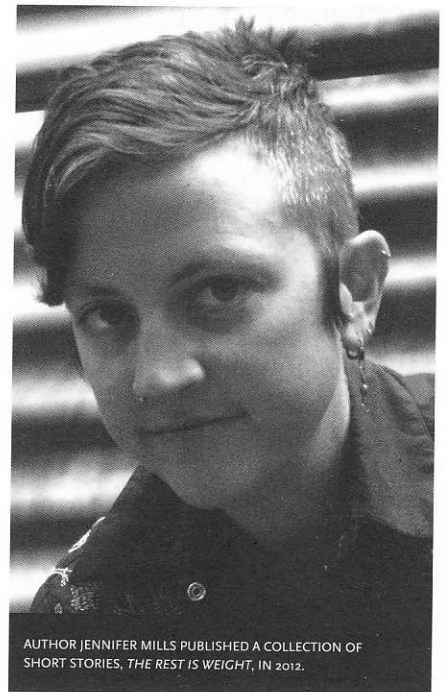
We know that there is no help for us but from one another, that no hand will save us if we do not reach out our hand. And the hand that you reach out is empty, as mine is. You have nothing. You possess nothing. You own nothing. You are free. All you have is what you are, and what you give.

Le Guin's oeuvre is extensive and her curiosity apparently boundless. I return again and again to 'The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas', a brilliant short story in the first-person plural voice about accountability and moral choice. Or to *The Left Hand of Darkness*, her classic speculation on gender and power. Or to *The Lathe of Heaven*, a perfect short novel about a man whose dreams come true. Or *Lavinia*, which plucks a woman from passing mention in Virgil's 'Aeneid' and brings her, and the conflicts between pagan and classical world views, to life. Le Guin is a writer of ideas, and also of great emotional precision. Every sentence is placed with complete care and respect for the power of words.

Writers know words are their way towards truth and freedom, and so they use them with care, with thought, with fear, with delight. By using words well they strengthen their souls ... And their words make the souls of their readers stronger, brighter, deeper.

(*'A Few Words to a Young Writer'*, <www.ursulaklequin.com/WordsYoungWriter.html>)

Le Guin's politics are at the core of her work, but it is that concern for the soul that gives her writing longevity.



AUTHOR JENNIFER MILLS PUBLISHED A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES, *THE REST IS WEIGHT*, IN 2012.

A balance between the social organism and the individual spirit, her anarchism is no righteous set of answers, but an urgent and tireless set of questions.

At 83, Le Guin blogs regularly, offering thoughtful analysis of contemporary problems such as labour rights and digitisation. She is a seeker after understanding of what it means to be human, and in community; an asker of expansively global, and darkly intimate, questions.

I keep Le Guin's words close to remind me that a great book, beyond teaching us how to write, can teach us who we are, and who we might become. How to move beyond opposition, and towards our own clarity of purpose. And how to recognise our dragons.

The opening quote is from: 'Prophets and Mirrors: Science Fiction as a Way of Seeing' in *Language of the Night: Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction*.

Jennifer Mills is author of the novels *Gone* and *The Diamond Anchor*, and the short story collection *The Rest is Weight*. She blogs at <www.jenjen.com.au>.