



Ursula K. Le Guin on the porch of her Portland home.

PHOTO BY SUE ZALOKAR

## The otherworldly and utterly Portland

BY SUE ZALOKAR  
STAFF WRITER

Ursula K. Le Guin started writing when she was five and has been publishing her work since the 1960s. Throughout her career, she has delved into some of the most insightful, political, ecological and socially important topics of our time. She has created utopian worlds and utopian societies. She boldly challenged gender barriers by simply doing what she was born to do: write.

Her first major work of science fiction, "The Left Hand of Darkness," is considered epoch-making in the field for its radical investigation of gender roles and its moral and literary complexity. At a time when women were barely represented in the writing world, specifically in the genre of Science Fiction, Le Guin was taking top honors for her novels. Three of Le Guin's books have been finalists for the American Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize, and among the many honors she has earned, her writing has received a National Book Award, five Hugo Awards and five Nebula Awards.

In Paris in 1953 she married Charles A. Le Guin, a historian, and since 1958 they have lived in Portland. They have three children and four grandchildren.

After some correspondence, Le Guin invited me to her home to talk. I arrived bearing fresh-picked berries from Sauvie Island. She took me into her study and showed me the view she had of the eruption of Mt. St. Helens in 1980.

**Ursula K. Le Guin:** It was the biggest thing I've ever seen and I don't want to see anything that big again. It was just inconceivable. It was kind of overcast in the morning, after the eruption, but (before that) the clouds were burned off and there was this pillar of – it looked like smoke – but it was really mostly dirt being blown upward by the heat of the eruption. I think it was 80,000 feet. It was awful and beautiful

# Ursula K. Le Guin

and it went on and on. The column, it moved very slowly. You could see it sort of swirling and there was lightning in it, striking all of the time. It was something else.

**Sue Zalokar:** *I can only imagine. I don't know much about the history of the eruption. Did you have much warning?*

**U.K.L.:** There was lots of warning. The mountain had been rumbling and shaking and dumping black matter on her snow all spring. It was really bad luck. They thought she'd gone into a sort of a quiet phase and so they told people they could go that weekend to their cabins, run in and get their belongings out. Well, that was the weekend she blew. So that's why there were 60 to 70 people killed. You can't predict a volcano.

I got really fascinated with the volcano. About a year and few months after the eruption, the whole mountain was called "The Red Zone." You could go part way up and then above that, you had to have a permit to go in and the only people that were going in were loggers dragging dead trees out. The roads were destroyed, there were just logging roads. Me, a photographer and an artist, got a permit to go in (to the Red Zone) as a poet, a photographer and an artist.

**S.Z.:** *Awesome.*

**U.K.L.:** How about that? I hardly ever pull strings, but we pulled a few and we got a day pass into the Red Zone. We drove around in this awful, unspeakable landscape of ash. Nothing but ash and dead trees. And the trees, just like grey corpses, all pointing

the same direction where the blast of the eruption blew them down.

Twenty-five years later, a few years ago, I went back to that same area, which they thought would take at least 100 years to come back and regrow. It's all green. There are trees coming up and flowers blooming like mad, birds, deer, elk. That mountain, she makes herself over and over. It's quite a story.

**S.Z.:** *Was there a specific piece of writing that came out of that experience in the Red Zone?*

**U.K.L.:** Yes. I wrote poems called "In the Red Zone" and I wrote a piece with the same title.

**S.Z.:** *What distinguishes experience from imagination in writing and is one more essential to the process of writing than the other?*

**U.K.L.:** Well, imagination is based on experience. The way everything in the world is made out of the elements combined in endless ways, everything in the mind is made out of bits of experienced reality combined in endless ways. So a child's imagination deepens with living, with wider experience of reality. And so does a writer's. But the imagination needs training in how to combine, how to invent, how to understand, just as much as the thinking mind does. We get that training mostly by reading and writing fiction and poetry.

**S.Z.:** *Your father, Alfred L. Kroeber, was an anthropologist and your mother, Theodora*

See LE GUIN, page 5