

LE GUIN, from page 4

Kroeber, was a writer. A friend of the Kroeber family, and a Native American who had lived most of his life out of contact with modern culture, Ishi, lived out the end of his life in civilization and presumably spent a lot of time with your family. What influence did his presence in your world have on you as a young girl and writer if any?

U.K.L.: Ishi died in 1913; I was born in 1929. Ishi was part of my father's world, not mine. But two Native American friends of my father, Juan Dolores of the O'odham people and Robert Spott of the Yurok people, stayed with us in the country when I was a child. I was a lucky white kid with "Indian uncles." I learned a lot from them. Particularly about good manners, dignity, loyalty and patience. And very, very dry jokes.

S.Z.: *You have a curiosity about the social sciences as much as the biological sciences. What steered you toward writing as a young girl? What kept you moving forward through your career and what drives you to write today?*

U.K.L.: My fiction is about the relationships of people within a certain society or culture — which is what most novels are about. Science fiction, in my definition, naturally includes the social sciences like anthro(pology), psych(ology), sociology, and the whole ecological outlook, so it has widened the whole scope of fiction.

I grew up in a family full of readers and writers and books, which helps a whole lot; but nobody steered me toward writing as a kid. I just always wrote and always wanted to write and always knew I'd go on doing it. I think an artistic vocation usually starts with a gift, plus a sense that your gift is an obligation. To put it bluntly, you owe it your life.

S.Z.: *I have heard you speak about digital publishers, specifically Amazon.com. Tell me about the face of publishing: How it has changed, and how it affects writers? And you personally?*

U.K.L.: Oh, golly. Do we have to go there? Now Amazon has bought the U.S. Post Office so that they can deliver what they choose to deliver to their enslaved customers even on Sundays. Well, hot zowie.

I buy books from Powell's and other independent booksellers who don't control what the publishers publish and pay, and who don't punish "disobedient" publishers and authors and readers by delaying delivery for weeks and months or refusing to sell their books at all.

Publishing has changed in the last 20-plus years because international corporations bought out all the major publishers and began handling books as commodities, like potatoes or corn. Amazon is just the big super bully in the commodities market. Well, you know what's happened with potatoes and corn. Toxicity, obesity, tastelessness. Who cares, so long as it sells?

How has all this affected me? It makes me sad and angry. How does it affect younger writers? Well, it gives them a choice: climb onto the corporate juggernaut, quickly produce whatever verbal commodity is selling at the moment, and hope to grab a lot-a-profit real fast. Or, go on doing what writers do: write books, find an independent press or self-publish on line, hope for some readers, hope for some luck.

S.Z.: *Gender. You dissolved gender boundaries by creating a genderless society in*

"The Left Hand of Darkness" in 1969. Have gender roles evolved, in your experience? What are the benefits and advantages of being a woman?

U.K.L.: Now those questions are just too big. I have to cut them down.

In my lifetime, our society has gone from believing that there are two genders absolutely determined by features of the body, to understanding that gender is complex and is determined by many factors, physical, social, cultural and personal. A big, good change.

A benefit of being a woman: You get to have kids, if you want to, and write books if you want to.

S.Z.: *Your writing spans many genres. You are known for your science fiction novels, but which style of writing, in your opinion, best exemplifies your work in its purest form?*

U.K.L.: In its purest form? Poetry.

S.Z.: *Yes, I guess that would be the case. And not in its purest form?*

U.K.L.: I really can't answer. I've been writing ever since I was five and publishing ever since I was 30 years old. I was publishing poetry before that. There's so much. And I do so many kinds of things that I really don't want to say, "This is the ultimate," because there isn't one.

Name any work and I can say something about it. Like "Lavinia" which is my last published novel. I did something in "Lavinia" that I had never done anywhere else. It was very different from anything I have ever done.

I'm amazed by it. It was just like it came to me. "What am I doing? Oh look at that! It's a novel."

This sounds like I am not in control of what I do. Of course, I am.

S.Z.: *You said that you'd done something in writing "Lavinia" that you had not done before. What was it that you did that was so impressive to you?*

U.K.L.: "Lavinia" is partly what they call a meta-text. Which is a text about a text. Lavinia is a character from Virgil's epic, "The Aeneid." She has no speaking part and is really, she's kind of a major part of his story because he and she are destined to be married. They really don't have much choice. Destiny says these two have to marry and found the people who will be the Roman people.

The love story in "The Aeneid" is Dido and Aeneas — that's the famous one. That's all in the past when we come to Lavinia's part. She is this little Italian princess. I just became fascinated: Who was Lavinia? What did she think about all of this? And it was just like she started telling me. (Laughter).

It was an utterly amazing experience. I distrusted it at first, because Lavinia is another author's character. She has her part to play in the Aeneid, and who am I to tell Virgil how to do it?

I love Virgil. I felt at home in his poem. I wasn't invading or setting him straight. I just thought, Well, he couldn't do Lavinia justice, it wouldn't have fitted into his story. But I can.

So I got to play around with Bronze Age

Italy, and the whole Trojan War story, which is so fundamental to our literature. Things are always coming back to the Trojan War! And Aeneas is a survivor of that war, from the losing side.

S.Z.: *I can only imagine. I've never written a novel. Who knows? Maybe I should start with a short story?*

U.K.L.: Probably, although they're really different things. Storytelling takes all forms. Your writing is a form of storytelling and that may be your way of doing it. I couldn't do what you do. There is a kind of arrogance to writing fiction: "I'm going to make the world my way."

S.Z.: *You've created many worlds ...*

U.K.L.: It's a lot of fun. It is. I think that is one reason that people like science fiction and fantasy. It is a slightly new world. You discover that things are a little different than you thought they were. We all like that.

S.Z.: *What are your thoughts on the Supreme Court's decision in the Hobby Lobby case?*

U.K.L.: I want to see five members of the U.S. Supreme Court impeached.

Actually, I have fantasies of several of them going to their Catholic Christian Judgment Seat and their god judging them as they deserve, which would involve their ending up way, way down in Dante's Hell. But we can't wait for that. We need a change now.

S.Z.: *Are there any limits to the science fiction or fantasy genres? If so, what are they?*

they?

U.K.L.: Are there any limits to the universe? Or the imagination?

S.Z.: *What would you say to fledgling writers who are trying to navigate the ever-changing writer's market?*

U.K.L.: I knew you'd ask that. Times are hard, kids.

The chief hope I have at this point is that the situation is changing all the time. Everybody is staggering around in the wake of the invention of the e-book etc., trying to figure out what publishing actually is going to consist of. The corporations aren't going to get us out of this mess. Corporations are deeply stupid. But many writers are not.

Writers, for instance, can stop thinking of writing as a way to get rich.

Corporate capitalism at this stage of its death agony can only control, deform and stupidify everything it touches. We have to operate within capitalism, because at this point it's all there is. But if our minds aren't controlled by it, if we think like free people, writers will figure out how to do our job: To write, get our writing to our readers, and maybe make a living from it.

So what I say to younger writers is: Hang in there! Remember, you're the ones who get the last word.

To Walk In Here

(from *In the Red Zone*, 1983)
By Ursula K. Le Guin

To walk in here is to stop pretending.

What's real? Grey dust,
a dead forest.
Entropy moves quickly to its end.
O desolation!
What's real?
says the fireweed lightly casting
its words upon the wind.

To walk in here is to stop pretending
that what we do matters
all that much. Less in the long run
than the fireweed, to the others.

To ourselves we matter
terribly.

That there will be summer
ever
is the responsibility of others
more careful than ourselves.

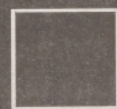
They do not look us in the face.

The gulfs of air
are full of blowing rain
between us and the crater,

the small, cold rain of autumn.



Dignity



Poverty