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THE DISPOSSESSED: 50 YEARS SINCE 50 YEARS HENCE

A Journey Towards Utopian Science Fiction

SUBSECTION BY UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

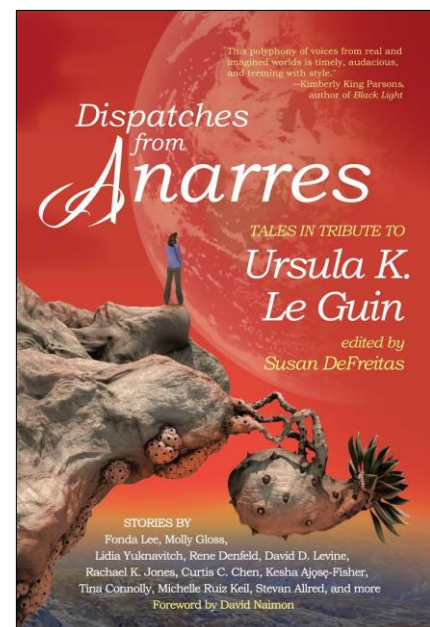
THEMATIC SECTION

DeFreitas, Susan (ed.). *Dispatches From Anarres: Tales in Tribute to Ursula K. Le Guin*. Forest Avenue Press, 2021

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Portland, a city in the state of Oregon, USA, is probably best known for its beautiful parks and somewhat eccentric people, whose local mantra, “Keep Portland Weird”, may be their best introduction to newcomers. It was also the home of late science and speculative fiction writer Ursula K. Le Guin. One could go on, and most likely never finish, discussing how she inspired the literary world from one hemisphere to the other. In a research paper entitled “The Influence of Ursula K. Le Guin” for Portland State University (Spring 2021), author Bailey Potter explains how Le Guin broadened the science fiction genre, being one of the best representations of the New Wave Science Fiction movement during the 1960s and 1970s. However, how has she inspired the writers who lived in the same city as her – the ones who walked the same streets, woke up to the same surroundings, and perhaps even crossed her path?

Thanks to Susan DeFreitas, independent editor, and writer, we have the answer to that question in the



Le Guin often wrote about the importance of the imagination and put forth a philosophy that, interestingly, did not place the imagination in opposition to the real. Can a book be truly called ‘realistic’ if it does not include the imaginative, given that our imaginative faculties are so central to what makes us human?

David Naimon
“Foreword”

form of an anthology entitled *Dispatches from Anarres: Tales in Tribute to Ursula K. Le Guin*, first published in November 2021. Named after the anarchist utopian society 'Anarres' in Le Guin's novel *The Dispossessed*, this anthology compiles thirty-one short stories from twenty-nine different minds – all with a tie to Portland – composing an amalgam of beautiful but divergent creations that share their tribute to Ursula K. Le Guin by portraying how she inspired them to follow the trail she blazed in the American literary world.

In an interview with *Think Out Loud*, a public show for *Oregon Public Broadcasting* that aired on the 4th of March 2022, Susan DeFreitas explained that, despite having requested stories that included a bit of Le Guin's care with themes such as feminism, pacifism, anarchism, her revolutionary take on utopianism, among many others, DeFreitas knew every story would be its own. Moreover, just as Le Guin left us with more than twenty novels, a dozen volumes of short stories, works of poetry, and many essays, so could twenty-nine different minds take infinite interpretations of the unique inspiration they have taken out of her work. Thus, DeFreitas divided the book into three parts, each with its distinct purpose: for the first part, "Magelight", she selected eight short stories that leaned towards fantasy; for the second, "Returning to the Root", she compiled eleven stories that focus on speculative fiction, which, even though it is a broader term that encompasses many different genres within itself, each story tries to change the laws of our current society and explore its outcomes; and lastly, "On Time and Darkness" is composed by twelve tales more inclined towards the "classic" science fiction – which can only lead to curiosity, considering how much the genre has changed since Le Guin started publishing, and since the New Wave movement, known for its experimentation with other areas such as social sciences.

To conclude each part, there is an Interlude, followed by an "Ib & Nib" tale, with two charismatic characters written by Stevan Allred. This literary strategy makes it both a fun pause and a comedic relief, as these stories are similar to popular children's fables. It also operates as a sort of "reset button" for the mind to change scenery and prepare for the next part. In addition, the book features a foreword by David Naimon, who had masterly interviewed Le Guin and later published *Ursula K. Le Guin: Conversations on Writing* (2018). At the end of each story, there is also a short statement clarifying the author's motivation for what they wrote, whether it is a recollection of the first time they picked up a Le Guin book or a simple explanation of how their story can be tied to her work. Whatever the case, these statements work as a thank-you note to the late author.

The book's first part, "Magelight", is introduced with a stanza from 'The Creation of Eà', from Le Guin's *A Wizard of Earthsea*. It features stories that range from young characters trying to avenge their parents' sacrifice against an oppressing society; ostracised characters who have unique magic that can save their society from domineering forces; women who become reptiles to escape the prison that their daily lives have become, and much more. The story entitled "The Night Bazaar for Women Becoming Reptiles", by Rachel K. Jones, is one that almost begs for a whole novel. Very much like Le Guin's view on Taoism, this moving tale shows that good and evil are not always antagonist entities, but complex (and sometimes interdependent) forces. In the already mentioned March 2022 interview with *Think out Loud*, Jones explains that she took inspiration from Le Guin's understanding of contemporary utopianism, of how no society is perfect because, in a plural diverse society, it is impossible to solve intersectional problems by presenting simple solutions. She says, "[Le Guin] was just this quintessential anthropologist in how she looked at societies (...) The whole reason that we don't have easy answers even within our own societies is because there isn't really one thing that works for everyone." Jones's story shows us the need to first question what is good for ourselves, and the importance of leaving if we cannot find whatever we are looking for in what surrounds us. Jones's beautiful prose provides a unique gem that introduces characters living in a culture very different from our own, with very different needs, and the story's weird and transformative content, as well as its meaning, is far more profound than it first appears.

The second part, "Returning to the Root", opens with some verses of Le Guin's rendition of *Lao Tzu: Tao Te Ching: A Book about the Way and the Power of the Way*. Its stories range from a tale within a colony of bees, another about the possibility of finding oneself during the apocalypse, the importance of past lives, and also a new perspective of Le Guin's short story "The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas". The title of this short story is just as straightforward as the original: "The Ones Who Don't Walk Away", by Rene Denfeld, takes the stand of one of the sacrificed children of Omelas. As the oppressed and essential cornerstone of Omelas's prosperity and utopian façade, in Denfeld's story, the child is given a voice. This perspective deconstructs the false appearance of Omelas's happiness, while the narrative ventures an answer to what happens once that child grows up. It is worth saying that this story is just as heart-wrenching as Le Guin's.

“Finding Joan”, by Hugo Award winner David D. Levine, is also a remarkable tale of speculative fiction, that follows Joan who, getting back from a meditation retreat in a cave-system over the weekend, finds out that the world as we know it has ended due to a gamma ray burst. This energetic galactic event – which occurring, according to the text, “would mean the end of life on Earth, [although] the chance of that happening had been considered remote” – has turned Earth into a barren wasteland, destroying almost entirely the ozone layer, turning our planet into a deadly field utterly unprotected from radiation (165, 2021). Joan, a woman in her late fifties, goes against all odds and chooses to find herself amidst this cataclysmic event. Despite its unconventionality, she decides that now that she is free from her former obligations – such as having a profession and managing life with a partner – she has been given the perfect opportunity to tackle the things that she had always wanted to do for pleasure, but never had the time for – like reconnecting with literature. Although some of her decisions may frustrate the readers, by the end of the story, one cannot help but feel pleasantly surprised. This journey about an unlikely protagonist driving us through a dying world shows us how inner peace can be found in the most improbable forms. Joan does not turn into an altruist warrior destined to help others; instead, she works on her inner self, finds power in books, and shows us that, sometimes, it is possible to find hope in hopelessness.

“On Time and Darkness” is the last section of this anthology. It opens with a quote from Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness*, and its twelve stories feature a myriad of characters, from an emotionally torn puppet, a character whose job is to taste food for millions of bodiless people, or even a girl who transforms into a neuron, among several others.

“Hard Choices”, by Tina Connolly, included in this part, is a curious narrative. As the title implies, it is composed of choices that the reader must make. Connolly explains that this interactive short story was inspired by the complexity of Le Guin’s characters and the challenging decisions they must make – as depicted in *The Dispossessed* with Shevek, who is faced with difficult quests and hard choices during his journey between Anarres and Urras. Connolly designed the narrative as follows: 1) each paragraph starts with a letter, from A to Z, and 2) at the end of each paragraph, the reader is invited to jump to a letter-led paragraph, depending on the action they think the character must take. Here lies Connolly’s plot twist: the reader hops from paragraph to paragraph without knowing if



their choices will truly make a difference or if the end will inevitably be the same despite the character's apparent agency in choosing divergent paths.

While much could be said about the remaining stories, readers will benefit from knowing as little as possible about what they will encounter. This anthology stands out for its remarkable diversity in content and style. Reading it is in itself an adventure; readers will encounter a spectrum of emotions – from joy and hope to fear and sorrow. Every tale vividly showcases the boundless creativity and ingenuity of the human mind, continually surprising and engaging those who delve into the worlds crafted within these pages.

This review opens with a question on how Le Guin may have inspired the creative writing of the ones closer to her geographically, just like DeFreitas had done while compiling this anthology. In their notes, some of the authors claim that they had the chance to meet her personally. Such is the case of Lidia Yuknavitch, bestselling author, whose story “Neuron” was inspired by a conversation with Le Guin herself. Sonia Orin Lyris wrote at the end of her short “When Strangers Meet” that “Ursula Le Guin’s worlds and wisdom shaped [her] from childhood (...) [Le Guin] met [her] with a gentle graciousness that changed [her] as surely as any of her stories ever had. Without her [Lyris] would not be the writer [she is] today.” (295, 2021). Others had only the pleasure of finding her among the library shelves, but even then their connection to Le Guin’s worlds and characters proved magical. At the end of “Each Cool Silver Orb a Gift”, author Nicole Rosevear writes: “My earliest memory of Ursula Le Guin’s writing is pulling *The Tombs of Atuan* from the shelves of the local library. (...) I can still picture this cover, and I remember sitting down to start reading it, tucked between the library stacks, before I’d even checked it out. Something about this protagonist spoke directly to that younger me, (...) and set the stage for my future interactions with her work.” (344, 2021)

The homage this anthology presents goes beyond the simple borrowing of Le Guin’s ideas and themes, since it also plows some of the fruit her work has planted; it is a portrayal of her legacy. *Dispatches From Anarres* is an eye-opener, a beacon that illuminates the corners Le Guin touched with her varied work, as every story is so different from the next, but always with a nod to what connects them.

To the readers who have not yet had the chance to delve into a book by Ursula K. Le Guin, this anthology may spark the curiosity to do so, for in her endless tales and intricate worlds, she fiercely pioneered the trespass of all the traditional borders of the

genre, and revolutionised its canonical tropes. Once again resorting to “The Influence of Ursula K. Le Guin” (Spring 2021) for Portland State University, author Bailey Potter states that “(...) 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 (...)” (3, 2021) are some of the best examples of her influence, that are mirrored in this collection.

To those who are fans of Le Guin and mourn the end of her storytelling, may this book fill up the desire to rereading her stories. Though not her work, in this collection, readers will find stories that resonate with Le Guin’s own creations, references and themes familiar to her worlds, and it will feel like meeting an old friend, after a long time... a very missed, but never forgotten, friend.

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