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Winner of the HUGO and NEBULA AWARDS for
Best Science Fiction Novel of the Year

URSULA K. LE GUIN



THE LEFT HAND OF DARKNESS

'[A] science fiction masterpiece.' —*Newsweek*

Annotation

Nebula Best Novel winner (1970)

Hugo Best Novel winner (1970)

“The Left Hand of Darkness” explores the themes of sexual identity, incest, xenophobia, fidelity, and betrayal in a tale of an Earth ambassador, Genly Ai, who is sent to the planet of Gethen, whose inhabitants are androgynous. Through his relationship with a native, Estraven, Ai gains understanding both of the consequences of his fixed sexual orientation and of Gethenian life. As in many of her works, Le Guin incorporates a social message in her science fiction tale. Scholes feels that “the great power of the book comes from the way it interweaves all its levels and combines all its voices and values into an ordered, balanced, whole.”

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The Left Hand of Darkness
by Ursula Le Guin

For Charles, sine quo non

Introduction

Science fiction is often described, and even defined, as extrapolative. The science fiction writer is supposed to take a trend or phenomenon of the here-and-now, purify and intensify it for dramatic effect, and extend it into the future. “If this goes on, this is what will happen.” A prediction is made. Method and results much resemble those of a scientist who feeds large doses of a purified and concentrated food additive to mice, in order to predict what may happen to people who eat it in small quantities for a long time. The outcome seems almost inevitably to be cancer. So does the outcome of extrapolation. Strictly extrapolative works of science fiction generally arrive about where the Club of Rome arrives: somewhere between the gradual extinction of human liberty and the total extinction of terrestrial life.

This may explain why many people who do not read science fiction describe it as ‘escapist,’ but when questioned further, admit they do not read it because ‘it’s so depressing.’

Almost anything carried to its logical extreme becomes depressing, if not carcinogenic.

Fortunately, though extrapolation is an element in science fiction, it isn’t the name of the game by any means. It is far too rationalist and simplistic to satisfy the imaginative mind, whether the writer’s or the reader’s. Variables are the spice of life.

This book is not extrapolative. If you like you can read it, and a lot of other science fiction, as a thought-experiment. Let’s say (says Mary Shelley) that a young doctor creates a human being in his laboratory; let’s say (says Philip K. Dick) that the Allies lost the second world war; let’s say this or that is such and so, and see what happens... In a story so conceived, the moral complexity proper to the modern novel need not be sacrificed, nor is there any built-in dead end; thought and intuition can move freely within bounds set only by the terms of the experiment, which may be very large indeed.

The purpose of a thought-experiment, as the term was used by Schrodinger and other physicists, is not to predict the future—indeed Schrodinger’s most famous thought-experiment goes to show that the

‘future,’ on the quantum level, *cannot* be predicted—but to describe reality, the present world.

Science fiction is not predictive; it is descriptive.

Predictions are uttered by prophets (free of charge); by clairvoyants (who usually charge a fee, and are therefore more honored in their day than prophets); and by futurologists (salaried). Prediction is the business of prophets, clairvoyants, and futurologists. It is not the business of novelists. A novelist’s business is lying.

The weather bureau will tell you what next Tuesday will be like, and the Rand Corporation will tell you what the twenty-first century will be like. I don’t recommend that you turn to the writers of fiction for such information. It’s none of their business. All they’re trying to do is tell you what they’re like, and what you’re like—what’s going on—what the weather is now, today, this moment, the rain, the sunlight, look! Open your eyes; listen, listen. That is what the novelists say. But they don’t tell you what you will see and hear. All they can tell you is what they have seen and heard, in their time in this world, a third of it spent in sleep and dreaming, another third of it spent in telling lies.

“The truth against the world!”—Yes. Certainly. Fiction writers, at least in their braver moments, do desire the truth: to know it, speak it, serve it. But they go about it in a peculiar and devious way, which consists in inventing persons, places, and events which never did and never will exist or occur, and telling about these fictions in detail and at length and with a great deal of emotion, and then when they are done writing down this pack of lies, they say, There! That’s the truth!

They may use all kinds of facts to support their tissue of lies. They may describe the Marshalsea Prison, which was a real place, or the battle of Borodino, which really was fought, or the process of cloning, which really takes place in laboratories, or the deterioration of a personality, which is described in real textbooks of psychology; and so on. This weight of verifiable place-event-phenomenon-behavior makes the reader forget that he is reading a pure invention, a history that never took place anywhere but in that unlocalisable region, the author’s mind. In fact, while we read a novel, we are insane—bonkers. We believe in the existence of people who aren’t there, we hear their voices, we watch the battle of Borodino with them, we may even become Napoleon. Sanity returns (in most cases) when the book is closed.

Is it any wonder that no truly respectable society has ever trusted its artists?

But our society, being troubled and bewildered, seeking guidance, sometimes puts an entirely mistaken trust in its artists, using them as prophets and futurologists.

I do not say that artists cannot be seers, inspired: that the *awen* cannot come upon them, and the god speak through them. Who would be an artist if they did not believe that that happens? if they did not *know* it happens, because, they have felt the god within them use their tongue, their hands? Maybe only once, once in their lives. But once is enough.

Nor would I say that the artist alone is so burdened and so privileged. The scientist is another who prepares, who makes ready, working day and night, sleeping and awake, for inspiration. As Pythagoras knew, the god may speak in the forms of geometry as well as in the shapes of dreams; in the harmony of pure thought as well as in the harmony of sounds; in numbers as well as in words.

But it is words that make the trouble and confusion. We are asked now to consider words as useful in only one way: as signs. Our philosophers, some of them, would have us agree that a word (sentence, statement) has value only in so far as it has one single meaning, points to one fact which is comprehensible to the rational intellect, logically sound, and—ideally—quantifiable.

Apollo, the god of light, of reason, of proportion, harmony, number—Apollo blinds those who press too close in worship. Don't look straight at the sun. Go into a dark bar for a bit and have a beer with Dionysios, every now and then.

I talk about the gods, I am an atheist. But I am an artist too, and therefore a liar. Distrust everything I say. I am telling the truth. The only truth I can understand or express is, logically defined, a lie. Psychologically defined, a symbol. Aesthetically defined, a metaphor.

Oh, it's lovely to be invited to participate in Futurological Congresses where Systems Science displays its grand apocalyptic graphs, to be asked to tell the newspapers what America will be like in 2001, and all that, but it's a terrible mistake. I write science fiction, and science fiction isn't about the future. I don't know any more about the future than you do, and very likely less.

This book is not about the future. Yes, it begins by announcing that it's set in the 'Ekumenical Year 1490-97,' but surely you don't *believe* that?

Yes, indeed the people in it are androgynous, but that doesn't mean that I'm predicting that in a millennium or so we will all be androgynous, or announcing that I think we damned well ought to be androgynous. I'm merely observing, in the peculiar, devious, and thought-experimental manner proper to science fiction, that if you look at us at certain odd times of day in certain weathers, we already are. I am not predicting, or prescribing. I am describing. I am describing certain aspects of psychological reality in the novelist's way, which is by inventing elaborately circumstantial lies.

In reading a novel, any novel, we have to know perfectly well that the whole thing is nonsense, and then, while reading, believe every word of it. Finally, when we're done with it, we may find—if it's a good novel—that we're a bit different from what we were before we read it, that we have been changed a little, as if by having met a new face, crossed a street we never crossed before. But it's very hard to *say* just what we learned, how we were changed.

The artist deals with what cannot be said in words.

The artist whose medium is fiction does this *in words*. The novelist says in words what cannot be said in words.

Words can be used thus paradoxically because they have, along with a semiotic usage, a symbolic or metaphoric usage. (They also have a sound—a fact the linguistic positivists take no interest in. A sentence or paragraph is like a chord or harmonic sequence in music: its meaning may be more clearly understood by the attentive ear, even though it is read in silence, than by the attentive intellect).

All fiction is metaphor. Science fiction is metaphor. What sets it apart from older forms of fiction seems to be its use of new metaphors, drawn from certain great dominants of our contemporary life—science, all the sciences, and technology, and the relativistic and the historical outlook, among them. Space travel is one of these metaphors; so is an alternative society, an alternative biology; the future is another. The future, in fiction, is a metaphor.

A metaphor for what?

If I could have said it non-metaphorically, I would not have written all these words, this novel; and Genly Ai would never have sat down at my

desk and used up my ink and typewriter ribbon in informing me, and you,
rather solemnly, that the truth is a matter of the imagination.

Ursula K. Le Guin

1. A Parade in Erhenrang

From the Archives of Hain. Transcript of Ansible Document 01-01101-934-2-Gethen: To the Stabile on Ollul: Report from Genly Ai, First Mobile on Gethen/Winter, Hainish Cycle 93, Ekumenical Year 1490-97.

I'll make my report as if I told a story, for I was taught as a child on my homeworld that Truth is a matter of the imagination. The soundest fact may fail or prevail in the style of its telling: like that singular organic jewel of our seas, which grows brighter as one woman wears it and, worn by another, dulls and goes to dust. Facts are no more solid, coherent, round, and real than pearls are. But both are sensitive.

The story is not all mine, nor told by me alone. Indeed I am not sure whose story it is; you can judge better. But it is all one, and if at moments the facts seem to alter with an altered voice, why then you can choose the fact you like best; yet none of them are false, and it is all one story.

It starts on the 44th diurnal of the Year 1491, which on the planet Winter in the nation Karhide was Odhar-hahad Tuwa or the twenty-second day of the third month of spring in the Year One. It is always the Year One here. Only the dating of every past and future year changes each New Year's Day, as one counts backwards or forwards from the unitary Now. So it was spring of the Year One in Erhenrang, capital city of Karhide, and I was in peril of my life, and did not know it.

I was in a parade. I walked just behind the gossiwors and just before the king. It was raining.

Rainclouds over dark towers, rain falling in deep streets, a dark storm-beaten city of stone, through which one vein of gold winds slowly. First come merchants, potentates, and artisans of the City Erhenrang, rank after rank, magnificently clothed, advancing through the rain as comfortably as fish through the sea. Their faces are keen and calm. They do not march in step. This is a parade with no soldiers, not even imitation soldiers.

Next come the lords and mayors and representatives, one person, or five, or forty-five, or four hundred, from each Domain and Co-Domain of Karhide, a vast ornate procession that moves to the music of metal horns