



Ursula LeGuin. Photograph courtesy of Harper & Row.

INTERVIEW WITH URSULA LEGUIN

Michael Brayndick

URSULA K. LEGUIN, author of over twenty books including novels, children's books, and collections of short stories and poetry, has received both a Hugo and a Nebula, science fiction's most prestigious awards. *The Farthest Shore* also received a National Book Award.

Always Coming Home, Ursula K. LeGuin's latest novel, is the story of a people of a distant time discovered on the Pacific coast. LeGuin has brought to life the Valley and its people, presenting to the reader their lives, histories, customs, literature, language and art. The book is illustrated with drawings of plants, animals, artifacts, and scenes from the Valley by Margaret Chodos and includes a cassette tape of rituals, poetry and original music by composer Todd Barton.

Always Coming Home was one of the subjects LeGuin discussed with University of Iowa doctoral student Michael Brayndick during her November, 1985, visit to the university campus.

I know you're very popular in the city of Portland. I was wondering how you feel about your rapport with the people of Oregon and whether you feel there's anything special about the Oregon landscape that contributes to your work.

One thing I like about Portland . . . well, I'm glad to hear they like me, but they leave me alone. They let me get my work done. Portland is a very easygoing west coast city where people are rather laid back, and I'm very fond of it. Oregon has about ten totally different landscapes—the wet, rainy west side, the mountains, and the high desert—and all of them are very important to me and have shown up, well, disguised, in a lot of my books.

Could you give one example of the use of the Oregon landscape in your works? I know your new book is. . . .

That's in California. Yes, a very distinct example, the second book of *The Earth-Sea Trilogy*, *The Dunes of Atuon*, is set in the desert. That book came straight from my first visit to the Oregon desert. I had never been to the Oregon desert. I had never been overnight in high desert country. I was only there for two days, and I came home and wrote a book about it. Writers have a lot of nerve.

In one of your essays you said that metaphors of scientific or technological imagery could be used to express something about inner being. I don't know if you remember that particular point, but I was wondering how you get inside a character through technology.

Well, I think when I wrote that, I was probably talking about science fiction, as a genre, or fantasy. Some science fiction writers feel that they're talking about the future and that they're extrapolating about real trends and that they're seeing what's really going to happen or shouldn't happen or ought to happen. I've never felt that. To me all the spaceships and other worlds and stuff are really fictional metaphors for states of mind now.

I'm talking about this world, our world, right now, right here in all my books, but I do it by using these various kinds of metaphors to get a little distance on it so I can see it.

So a spaceship could somehow be a metaphor for an inner struggle for a character?

Okay, let me give you a very good, simple example. I wrote a story called "Intracom" which is about a pregnant girl, but the story appears to be a *Star Trek* parody. We're in this spaceship (it isn't Enterprise; it's called Mary Ann Jones or something) and there's this debate among the crew—all of them are familiar characters, the first mate with the funny ears, and Scotty down in the engine room where everything's going wrong. What all these different voices are, are different voices inside this woman's head as she accepts the fact that she has an alien aboard. See?

I do now. . . . Many people are interested, I think, in your relationship to the critics and how you react to literary criticism—does it have a strong effect on your writing or do you try to ignore it?

It doesn't have that much effect, and I don't read it while I'm writing because it would make me too self-conscious. I look it over when they send me copies; often they don't.

Would you prefer an open dialogue with the critics?

Sometimes, yeah, I'd enjoy that. My relationship with criticism is not emotionally very strong. Let's put it that way.

What do you think critics ought to do? What's their role exactly?

To help readers read. If they feel they're helping the writer write, I think they're wrong, they're mistaken, but I am very, very grateful to critics for helping me read other writers.

Are there times when critics do readings of your own works and point out things you yourself didn't see?

Every now and then they show me, to my surprise, something that I was doing that I wasn't consciously aware of.

*You often talk in your essays about adaptability and pushing at limits as necessary aspects of art. In your new work, *Always Coming Home*, how have you tried to adapt and to push at limits?*

In a lot of different ways. For one thing I've taken the whole novel form and—oh, gosh—done terrible things to it. There is a novel in the book, just a straightforward linear story that moves along, but it's surrounded by all this stuff which isn't going anywhere, which is sort of descriptions or pieces of poetry, plays, short stories, and stuff so that what I'm trying to do, instead of taking the reader on a trip, is to say: "Look here, I built a house. Come into this house, and move around in it," which is different from what we're used to. A lot of people are going to hate it.

So this is a spatial model?

Yes, right, very much.

Would you relate it to collage or collage art in any way?

No, I don't think so. I thought of it sometimes as a little bit like quilt making, where you piece together and make a whole out of many pieces and it is a whole that has a structure, finally.

But each piece is self-contained?

Each piece is self-contained and can be studied by itself. You don't have to look at the whole quilt if you don't want to.

Does the poetry in Always Coming Home play a particular role in the structure of the text?

Well, let's see. It was just one more way of getting the readers involved in this world. I'm asking a lot of the readers in this book. The readers, in a sense, have to help me build up the world around them, and, of course, that's why I wanted the pictures and the music, to give more substance and depth and warmth to this feeling of being inside a different civilization than our own.

So you want them to help in building this house?

Of course. After all, any novel is written by the writer working with the reader. Until the reader reads the book, it doesn't really exist, and perhaps I'm just bringing that out a little more into the open.

The creation of a round, unpredictable, and perhaps even tragic character seems to be, for you, an essential and defining element of the novel form. How did you approach characterization in Always Coming Home?

Well, that's a hard one to answer. I don't know how I approach characterization. It feels more like the characters approach me. They come with a story. Here they are, and they want this story to be written, so I write it down. It sounds a little mystical, but sometimes it's almost like being dictated to.

So the characters in this particular book are created out of their voices rather than out of a series of psychological studies of their motivations and behavior?

Right. Quite right. They came and told me stories or poems or plays.

In your essays you have suggested that tragedy is an important part of characterization in the novel because the tragic outlook can give a more complete or whole truth about life. Would you elaborate on this idea?

Well, I suppose I was arguing against people who say very defensively that literature should entertain and stop there, as if it had no other function. Of course, literature should entertain. That's the first thing it ought to do, but if you stop there, it's going to be pretty trivial and,

essentially, pretty boring because when you're really interested, your deeper feelings get involved. When I read a novel . . . I generally really like a novel that has made me cry. That doesn't mean tragedy, just that my emotions get involved, my feelings get involved. I want that, and I think most readers do.

People often say after your lectures that they're thrilled to hear a real person talking to them from the podium and that they're drawn into the house of your ideas. Terms such as voice, dialogue, conversation, and community are very important in present theories of literary criticism. Are these terms important to you and, if so, why?

Now you see, there, I wish I knew more about contemporary criticism, which I don't. I'm fairly ignorant about it. There must be something in the air that both the critics and the novelists are feeling that leads us to feel that fictional narrative, the novel, has to come back, perhaps, towards something more like orality, more like tale-telling, that we've been missing in literature. I was consciously trying to do that in *Always Coming Home*.

So you feel that, again, as sometimes with critics, more dialogue is needed between the writer and the reader?

Or simply the sound of the human voice rather than the written word read in silence and thought in silence. When you begin thinking about it, to read silently is almost a perverse act. I mean we're dealing with language. I'm not talking against literacy and the written word, but the fact is that the voice is there, and we mustn't pretend that it isn't.

That would be partly why you appreciate Tolkein's voice in his works?

Oh, yes, and the way he writes. Yes, yes. And then, of course, there's the whole thing about real orality, which we're getting now on tapes and radio where the reading voice or the telling voice is coming back very strongly. People really like these tapes where they read books aloud, and storytellers are now quite popular. You know, they go around and simply tell you stories. This whole thing . . . I think it's lovely. I think it's wonderful. I think it's something that's been missing, and it's coming back.

In your new book, Always Coming Home, you've included a cassette tape of music, poetry, and song. Could you explain the function of that tape in the text?

Well, the tape was started after I had worked on the book for over a year. There was a lot of poetry in it, some of which is in songs; there were plays I was writing, all of which had music in them; and a primary metaphor in the book is a dance. The great seasonal festivals are all called dances. I began wanting to hear the music. I got a real yearning to hear the literature. I could hear the words, but I couldn't hear the music. So I asked a composer friend, whom I had come to know and respect, "Would you like to write the music for a non-existent people?" And he said, "Yeah." Just like that. "Sure." He would. He did. So then we had to work very, very hard for him to get into this world with me so his head was in the same place mine was, and he brought our artist—by the way, she was a friend of his—so the three of us had to do some very heavy collaboration, making sure that we were all feeling and seeing and hearing these people alike.

Is this the first time one of your books brought you to this kind of collaboration?

Absolutely. It seems to be a first in fiction. Nobody seems to have involved a composer with fiction. It's funny, you know, because illustrated books are very common, but nobody's ever tried to put music in.

When you talk about dance, is there some kind of essential connection between dance and voice?

Well, could you say, just being very, very metaphorical about it, that poetry is a sort of vocal dance, as dancing is what you do with your body? What you're doing with your voice and your words are very closely related. Dance is a wonderful metaphor to me for all the arts and for thinking, thinking rightly. When you think rightly, you're thinking in a dance. It hangs together. It's coherent.

So rather than dialogue, you might use the metaphor of dance?

Dancing together, yes. What I've finally said about this book, *Always Coming Home*, is that what I was hoping to do was, as it were, to be involved in a dance with the readers.

You've often expressed your support of the feminist movement. What form do you think this movement should take at the present? What goals should it be pursuing?

I wouldn't like to say "should" anything, but I am particularly excited by feminist literary criticism, at the moment. This is what I do—this is sort of where I live, in literature—after all, and I think what the feminist critics are doing in literature is the most exciting thing going on in criticism. Rereading and rediscovering of English literature, in a sense. The new *Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* is a real milestone. It revises English literature. As for the movement as a whole, these are hard times to be a feminist. The mood of the government and of the country is reactionary and often misogynist, and I'm impressed by how the feminists are digging in. The media often seem to want to pretend that feminism was something that's over with, and I've been called a "post-feminist novelist," of all the stupid things. That really makes me mad, but we are not going away. We are right here, digging in, biding our time, and that's about all we can do.

In what ways would you like people to call your new novel a feminist novel?

Well, if it's labelled that as a put-down, that will be too bad. If it dawns slowly on people that the relationship between women and men in the book is somewhat different from the present one that obtains in our civilization, and that it's kind of interestingly different, and that nobody is being supreme over anybody, I'll be happy.

*In your essays and prefaces you discuss the technique of a thought experiment in which the writer sets up a situation and tries, in a sense, to step back and watch the result. Would you call the new culture in *Always Coming Home* a thought experiment in terms of a new relationship between men and women?*

Well, I suppose, to some extent. Not as clear and defined a one as in *Left Hand of Darkness* where I changed only one thing—I made people androgynous. In *Always Coming Home* I change a lot of things, basically. The changes seem rather small, but cumulatively they're immense so that the way they look at the world is enormously different from the way we do.

*Would you say all these changes in *Always Coming Home* are possible or are they ideals?*

Well, they're certainly possible because, you know, a novelist really doesn't invent or make up anything. You take bits and pieces and recombine them. Imagination works always from reality, so I don't think I invented anything that hasn't existed sometime, somewhere.

The world of *Always Coming Home* is much more like the world has been most times, most places, than our present civilization which is aberrant in its obsession with high technology and its extreme population growth and a whole lot of things like that. We're weird. We are the oddballs. In some ways the book just . . . that's one reason it's called *Always Coming Home*—I had a feeling of coming back towards the center.

So in a sense your archeology of the future is a rediscovering of values from the past?

To some extent.

And yet, in that particular book you say you're trying to work in an American ground. Are these values that come out of an earlier American ground than the one we are in presently?

Some of them are, since I used Native American literature very much as a source, a literary model for the book, a model for some of the writing in the book, particularly the oral literature. Of course I was absorbing values and subtle ways of looking at things insofar as I, a white twentieth-century person of European background, can guess at or absorb or hope to understand anything so far from us as the old, California Indian way of being in the world.

Could you give one of your favorite examples from the book of this way of being to which you feel we should be returning?

There aren't any "shoulds" in the book. This is not a Utopia. This is not a "we should be doing this . . ." or "this is the way to be. . . ." I'm just trying to show there are alternatives. Nobody has to live the way we live now. We don't have to keep on going the way we're going. The book clearly, I think, says that. There is no need for us to go on and on and on doing the same things we've been doing for one hundred to two hundred years since the Industrial Revolution. I think we have pretty well run through, indeed, and to go on now is obviously increasingly dumb . . . and fatal. But I'm just offering alternatives and celebrating this place I love very much—all the animals and plants and weathers of this little piece of California which I love deeply, as one loves a piece of ground sometimes.

So here we have a science fiction novel that's celebrating nature. Is that an unusual thing?

I reckon it is, but that's all right. Why not be unusual?

How do you feel about the Nuclear Free Zone movements in places like Portland and Iowa City? Is it enough for writers to help create free zones in our minds and hearts?

I like that. It's all a fiction writer can do as a fiction writer to create free zones in the head and the heart. What a fiction writer or anybody else can do with their other life, with their social, ordinary, daytime, non-writing life, of course, is to be an activist. And in a very small quiet way I have been an activist for a long time and am backing the Nuclear Free Zone movement in Portland strongly because I think it's significant—it's more significant than its critics want us to believe.

So ideas in your works, you hope, will lead to actions and not just more thought or ideas?

Well, I wouldn't go so far as to say that. I have to say I do not think an artist ever should tell people what to do. I think the most an artist can do is show them that they're free, free to act as they see fit. That, I think, art definitely can do.

So no matter how bad things are at the moment, there are still possibilities.

Sure. Where there is life there is hope, to coin a phrase.

In one of your essays you stated that Solzhenitsyn makes you ask yourself the question, "Am I doing right?" I wonder what you meant by that and whether you would want to apply that to your career at the moment?

No, I was talking about Solzhenitsyn who's a very moral and, perhaps, a rather moralistic writer, and he does make you ask that question. I think I increasingly have veered away from that kind of direct moralism into a somewhat . . . I don't want to be a moralist. Of course, I handle ethical problems all the time, but I want to handle them and leave the answers open. Again, just to bring things up and leave myself and the reader free to move freely among ideas and options.

So there's a counterpart of your ideas about society in the structure of your works?

I think so. Right. Just to keep the doors open, not to shut the door; it seems important.