

URSULA K.
LE GUIN

CONVERSATIONS
ON WRITING

Copyright © 2018 Ursula K. Le Guin and David Naimon

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission from the publisher except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews. For information, contact Tin House Books, 2617 NW Thurman St., Portland, OR 97210.

Published by Tin House Books, Portland, Oregon, and Brooklyn, New York

Distributed by W. W. Norton & Company

Names: Le Guin, Ursula K., 1929-2018 author, interviewee. | Naimon, David, author, interviewer.

Title: Ursula K. Le Guin : conversations on writing / [Ursula K. Le Guin] with David Naimon.

Description: First U.S. edition. | Portland, OR : Tin House Books, 2018.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018003429 | ISBN 9781941040997 (hardcover)

Subjects: LCSH: Le Guin, Ursula K., 1929—Interviews. | Le Guin, Ursula K., 1929—Authorship. | Women authors, American—20th century—Biography. | Authors, American—20th century—Interviews. | Science fiction—Authorship. | Fantasy fiction—Authorship. |

Authorship. | Literature. | United States—Civilization. Classification:

LCC PS3562.E42 Z46 2018 | DDC 813/.54 [B]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2018003429>

First US Edition 2018

Printed in the USA

Interior design by Jakob Vala

www.tinhouse.com

URSULA K. LE GUIN

CONVERSATIONS
ON WRITING

with DAVID NAIMON



TIN HOUSE BOOKS / Portland, Oregon & Brooklyn, New York

IN MEMORIAM
Ursula K. Le Guin 1929–2018

• • •

The copyeditor used a red pen. Ursula a pencil. Pencil and pen had agreed and disagreed on this manuscript, which Ursula had handed over just a week before. We'd emailed about blurbs just days before. Everything seemed as it should. It was now my turn to chime in where Ursula and the copyeditor disagreed. I was in the midst of doing just that when I learned she'd passed away.

More than a week has gone by and I still haven't been able to do my part. I read tributes to her by the greats—Gaiman, Atwood, Walton—finding myself without words.

I look again at Ursula's—her enthusiastic *yes!*, her matter-of-fact *I disagree*. In these gestures I see how fully present she is, how completely she attends to the task at hand, and I realize that nothing is too small to contain the whole world, to bring forth Ursula's

powerful, opinionated, captivating self. The same Ursula who took on Google and Amazon on behalf of writers, who took on a boy's club in science fiction and fantasy, who now insisted the word *Earth*—the planet, our planet—should begin with a capitalized “E.”

She attended to the big and small in the same way, as part of the same fabric. Realizing this, I've tried to do the same, ministering to language as she herself would've done. I'm still grieving the dream of launching this book with Ursula, us together blessing its journey. I would've been grateful to partake in any project of hers, but I'm particularly honored to be a part of this one, one of the last of her long, remarkable life.

Among the many things that made Ursula stand out as a writer, was how she imagined we could live a better future. It's up to us now, to imagine the world we want, to create the language that reflects it, to honor Ursula by honoring the Earth she has attended to so well.

—David Naimon
February 1, 2018

CONTENTS

Introduction . . . 1

On Fiction . . . 9

On Poetry . . . 51

On Nonfiction . . . 87

Wanda K. Legu

INTRODUCTION
Fear and Loathing
in the Interview

The interviewers I fear most are the ones who've read what the publisher's PR people say about your book, along with some handy pull quotes. They read one of these aloud and say in a sincere voice, "Now, tell us more about what you said here."

Such interviewers get on well with celebrities who have written a book. It doesn't matter if the celebrity didn't actually write the book, since the interviewer hasn't actually read it. All that's wanted is a sound bite.

"Tell us more about this" may also work with serious authors whose book contains information or a message they're eager to repeat in order to make sure it gets delivered.

But it fails with authors who have worked hard to put something complicated into words as well as

URSULA K. LE GUIN

they possibly can. They're happy to hear what they said read aloud, but not happy with the implication that it needs to be said differently or better. "What you wrote about the nightingale is so interesting, Mr. Keats, please tell us more?"

I've been fortunate enough to meet the polar opposite of this uninformed interviewer. A couple of sessions with Bill Moyers set my permanent standard of The Good Interview. It's the one you wish could go on. It's a *conversation* between people who have thought about what they're talking about, and are thinking about it now in the light of what the other person is saying. This leads each of them to say things that they may be just discovering. They may not agree, may even have quite fundamental disagreements, but such differences, spoken and answered without belligerence, can take the conversation to a high level of intensity and honesty.

By now I know within a question or two whether we're heading for frustration or reward. If the signs of doom are clear, going on with it is hard work for both

Conversations on Writing

of us. I think, “How am I supposed to answer *that?*” while the interviewer thinks, “Oh god, another ten seconds of silence and then she says, *Um.*”

The good interview is like a good badminton rally: you know right away that the two of you can keep that birdie in the air, and all you have to do is watch it fly.

Facing each other for the first time in one of KBOO’s lovable, terminally funky recording rooms, David and I were a bit stiff and shy, but we soon got going, and I knew our bird was on the wing.

As a novelist I can talk and do talk shamelessly about fiction, but am shy and amateurish speaking as a poet. People who talk about poetry are usually talking to other poets, and Other Poets are a demanding, fiercely opinionated, often adversarial lot. They can be clannish, too. On performance nights at writing workshops, I’ve sat with prose writers listening intently as the poets read; when it was the prose writers’ turn to read, the poets all got up and left. And then there’s a kind of Poetspeak that goes with the territory,

URSULA K. LE GUIN

but which is not my language. All in all, I was nervous about the poetry interview with David. But that lasted no time. Nothing cures nervousness quicker than getting interested in the conversation.

Having to talk about my nonfiction scares me in a different way. I fear the interviewer is going to discuss the influence on my work of Schopenhauer, or Wittgenstein, or Theodor Adorno, none of whom I have ever read; or will demand my opinion of queer theory, or string theory; or instruct me to tell the audience what Taoism is; or (likeliest of all) will ask me about *The Future of Mankind*. That I know the immensity of my ignorance doesn't mean I like to *display* it. I'm grateful to an interviewer who respects the limits of my learning and my intellect, and who doesn't require me to act the Oracle of Delphi.

And every now and then I meet one who realizes that what I really like to do is *talk shop*.

David likes talking shop too. So that's what we did.

I want to thank KBOO for letting us do it. And for being for fifty years the strongest consistent voice

Conversations on Writing

in Oregon of and for the arts and the freedom and generosity of thought. While America is busy tearing itself apart into factions with rant, lies, and mindless violence, it's in voices like this that you can hear—if you listen—what may yet hold us together.

—Ursula K. Le Guin,
October 6, 2017

ON FICTION

“Children know perfectly well that unicorns aren’t real,” says Ursula K. Le Guin. “But they also know that books about unicorns, if they are good books, are true books.”

That was my experience of reading *Tales of Earthsea* growing up. Magic is commonplace in Earthsea. Wizards walk the earth and dragons fly the skies. Yet the further they took me from “reality” the closer I felt to the real. Ursula K. Le Guin at her heart is a writer not of fiction per se, but of the imagination. And imagination, to her, is not something we merely do in our spare moments, an idle act, but the very faculty that makes us who we are. So much so that she warns us that “people who deny the existence of dragons are often eaten by dragons. From within.”

URSULA K. LE GUIN

Having been transported on the wings of Le Guin's imaginative powers from a young age, I couldn't help but wonder what meeting the "real" Ursula K. Le Guin would be like, how the imagined writer, a wizard who conjured worlds—the magic realm of the *Tales of Earthsea*, the ambisexual planet of Gethen in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, the anarcho-syndicalist society of Anarres in *The Dispossessed*, to name just a few—would compare to the real-world, flesh-and-blood woman in Portland, Oregon, the one who walked the same everyday streets as me, the one I would soon interview about the nuts and bolts craft of writing fiction.

We met at the studios of KBOO, a largely volunteer-run community radio station in Portland's inner eastside, to have this conversation, and my first impression of Ursula there was one of matter-of-fact groundedness. Of someone who didn't suffer fools. Someone whose wealth of experience had not merely accumulated over a long life well-lived, but had become something else altogether, had alchemized into a sort of lived-in wisdom. And with this wisdom there

Conversations on Writing

seemed to be no patience for masks, for pretense. Confirmed again and again as we talked, my first impression of her became my lasting one.

Was there a contradiction between this real, of-this-world Ursula and the imagined otherworldly one? Strangely, there didn't seem to be. The real and the imagined were inseparable, a well-rooted writer whose imagination branched high into the sky. Yet, the more I learned about Ursula's way in the world outside her books, the more it seemed as if it were the unseen, the imaginary within them, that was animating the real, not the other way around.

Despite her stature in the world at large—named a “Grandmaster of Science Fiction” by the Science Fiction & Fantasy Writers of America, and a “Living Legend” by the Library of Congress—she continues to publish with small independent presses, from the anarchist PM Press in Oakland to the feminist science fiction publisher Aqueduct Press in Seattle, as well as appear on stations like KBOO that share with her a certain communitarian ethos and a concern for

URSULA K. LE GUIN

amplifying the voices of the marginalized and under-represented. I can't help but suspect that the imagined worlds of Earthsea, of Gethen, of Anarres, these imagined alternative ways of being, in relation to each other and to the land, are the true, if invisible, animators of these real-world gestures of hers.

And I was soon to discover that even the seemingly most mundane of things—grammar, syntax, sentence structure—even these are animated by something unseen, dare I say, magical, behind and beyond them. That the length of our sentences, their gait, their sound, that our use of tense, of point of view, of pronouns, all have their histories, their stories, their political and cultural implications, and each could be a building block, a concrete gesture, for good or for ill, toward an imagined future world.

—David Naimon



DAVID NAIMON: In most art forms—painting, dancing, music—it seems like imitation is part of the learning process, that it is crucial to honing one’s craft and finding one’s voice. Even the most experimental and innovative painter usually has a period of painting like their predecessors. You don’t shy away from recommending imitation as a way to learn to write but it seems like it is something that writers have traditionally been a little troubled by.

URSULA K. LE GUIN: Maybe not traditionally, but more recently, yes. In the arts, imitation has to be understood by the person doing it as a learning device; otherwise it’s plagiarism. You imitate only to learn, and you don’t publish it. Or if you do, you say, “This is

URSULA K. LE GUIN

an imitation of Hemingway.” But the internet, and competition in college, tends to blur the distinction between imitation and plagiarism, and this blurriness leads teachers to warn people not to imitate—and that’s foolish. You have to learn by reading good stuff and trying to write that way. If a piano player never heard any other piano player, how would he know what to do? We’re not using imitation as it could be used, I think.

DN: You’ve often talked about the importance of sound, that the sound of language is where it all begins, and that language is, at its core, a physical thing.

UKL: I hear what I write. I started writing poetry when I was really young. I always heard it in my head. I realized that a lot of people who write about writing don’t seem to hear it, don’t listen to it, their perception is more theoretical and intellectual. But if it’s happening in your body, if you are hearing what you write, then you can listen for the right cadence, which will help the sentence run clear. And what young writers always

Conversations on Writing

talk about—“finding your voice”—well, you can't find your own voice if you aren't listening for it. The sound of your writing is an essential part of what it's doing. Our teaching of writing tends to ignore it, except maybe in poetry. And so we get prose that goes *clunk, clunk, clunk*. And we don't know what's wrong with it.

DN: You have this wonderful quote from your talk at Portland Arts & Lectures in 2000:

Beneath memory and experience, beneath imagination and invention, beneath words, there are rhythms to which memory and imagination and words all move. The writer's job is to go down deep enough to feel that rhythm, find it, move to it, be moved by it, and let it move memory and imagination to find words.

UKL: That is something that I learned from Virginia Woolf, who talks about it most wonderfully in a letter to her friend Vita. Style, she says, is rhythm—the

URSULA K. LE GUIN

“wave in the mind”—the wave, the rhythm are there before the words, and bring the words to fit it.

DN: You’ve cited Woolf as perhaps the best example of the use of rhythm.

UKL: She’s an amazing example of the use of a long and subtle rhythm in prose. But there are many, many others. I wrote an essay about the rhythm of Tolkien’s writing in *The Lord of the Rings*. Short rhythms repeated form long rhythms; there’s a cyclical repetition in his work which I think is part of why it totally enchants so many of us. We are caught in this rhythm and are happy there.

DN: It’s interesting how you emphasize the importance of understanding grammar and grammar terminology but also the importance of interrogating its rules. You point out that it is a strange phenomenon that grammar is the tool of our trade and yet so many writers steer away from an engagement with it.