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Obituary

Ursula K. Le Guin - Rest in Power

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Books, you know, they're not just commodities. The profit motive often is in conflict with the aims of art. We live in capitalism. Its power seems inescapable. So did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings. Resistance and change often begin in art, and very often in our art - the art of words.

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Ursula K. Le Guin in her 2014 speech accepting the National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters

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Ursula K. Le Guin in her 2014 speech accepting the National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters

Ursula K. Le Guin died at her home in Portland, OR on Monday, January 22. Many obituaries have appropriately celebrated and acknowledged Le Guin as a literary artist—fiction writer, poet, and essayist. She was also a committed and generous community activist, a fighter for feminism, peace, freedom of speech, access to knowledge for everyone, and radical democracy.

This biography of Le Guin was written in 2003 by a Portland State University Women's Studies student as part of the "Portland Women City-Builders" project.

Ursula K. Le Guin - Writer, Citizen

In March 2003, Ursula K. Le Guin, world-renowned writer and poet, stands on the streets of downtown Portland, quietly passing out peace literature with other members of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. As war seems more and more inevitable, she is one person, standing with others; both the individual and the group helping to give voice by their presence to the possibility of peace.

Le Guin is a master in the exploration of possibilities both as a writer and as a citizen. As a writer, she has won international acclaim for her fiction and poems that challenge readers to think beyond the confines of their own lives and universes. In her essay, "Is Gender Necessary? Redux" (1976/1987) she talks of her fiction as "thought-experiments" in which "The experiment is performed, the question is asked, in the mind.....One of the essential functions of science fiction, I think, is precisely this kind of question-asking: reversals of a habitual way of thinking, metaphors for what our language has no words for as yet, experiments in imagination." (p. 9). She was the first writer to win both the Nebula and Hugo awards twice, once for *The Left Hand of Darkness* and the second time for *The Dispossessed*.

As a Portland resident and private citizen she articulates the possible through marching in rallies, both large and small, attending public meetings and serving on local boards. In the process, she has given heart to fellow activists, created funding and forums for local writers, and has helped struggling bookstores stay afloat by donating her time for readings and book signings.

Le Guin was born in 1929 into an unusually intellectual and supportive household. Her mother, Theodora Kroeber was a writer. Her father, Alfred Louis Kroeber, a professor at the University of California at Berkeley, was one of the founders of modern anthropology. She grew up in California, then attended Radcliffe College, graduating in 1951, and went on to get a masters degree at Columbia University. She met the historian Charles Le Guin while enroute to France on a Fulbright scholarship, and they married shortly afterward. The Le Guins have lived in Portland for more than four decades, raising their two daughters and a son.

Ursula K. Le Guin - Rest in Power

Le Guin's literary legacy grew out of the many threads of her life, including her own developing consciousness of herself as a woman writer and of the need to develop new words and metaphor as a way of giving voice to women's experiences. She has a special interest in issues that affect women directly. She has, for instance, been an outspoken advocate for abortion rights. In 1982, during a keynote address at a conference of the Portland branch of the National Abortion Rights Action League, she told the story of her own abortion while she was a young undergraduate. That story, "The Princess," was later published in a book of essays, *Dancing at the Edge of the World* (1989) and in *Ms. Magazine* (July 1992)

Creating opportunities for women writers has been one of her key interests. She was the founding president of Soapstone, a retreat for women writers on the Oregon coast. Ruth Gundle, director of Soapstone, says that Le Guin was instrumental in the early years, helping to make crucial decisions and to shape the program. She continues to be a key financial supporter. All of the royalties from Le Guin's popular book for writers, *Steering the Craft, go to Soapstone*.

"She hasn't just lent her name to causes that are important to her," says Gundle. "She has actually joined in and done the work. She attends meetings and takes work home to do. At an all-day retreat, she would sit on the floor with everyone else and discuss whether to have flush toilets or composting toilets." Echoing Gundle, Johanna Brenner, co-founder of In Other Words, a non-profit feminist bookstore, says "There isn't anything that I've asked her to do [to help the bookstore] that she hasn't done."

Le Guin served on the Friends of the Library Board, editing their newsletter for some years, and was involved in Library affairs from the 1980's onward. She served on the Multnomah County Library Advisory Board from 1990 to 1999 and remained a member of the library's internet-access committee until it was dissolved.

During these years, the library was challenged first by organizational troubles with the private board that governed it, leading to its re-affiliation with the County, and then by funding problems so severe that it had to lay off staff and cut back on hours of operation. To raise money, the library might have been tempted to begin charging for library cards, to sell advertising space in the library or to use the reading choices of patrons as a basis for sales campaigns.

"She's been a really powerful voice for maintaining the integrity of the library system," says Penny Hummel, public relations manager for the library. "She has reminded people that a library should be free and open to all; that everyone should have a right to access information and that each individual's access to information should be private. She's world renowned, and when she stands up and says something people listen. We've been very, very lucky to have her participation."

Le Guin also was a member of the group that founded the Oregon Institute of Literary Arts, later renamed Oregon Literary Arts, and served on the board for many years. OLA presents the Oregon Book Awards and the Oregon Fellowship Awards. Carrie Hoops, former executive director of Oregon Literary Arts, says that Le Guin was a pivotal person in the creation of both awards. "She was an outspoken and uncompromising advocate on the part of Oregon writers....She brought to light the struggles of the starting writer. She helped create an understanding that what writers....need is time. "Many states have awards for writers," says Hoops; "Oregon is one of the very few states that offer fellowships for writers."

Portland has a rich and varied literary life and has become known as a good place for writers to live and work. Le Guin's thoughtful contributions have helped build the infrastructure of libraries, bookstores, funding, awards, comradeship and peace that give writers a firm perch for taking flight.

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