

# Meet a Fantasy Legend Ursula K. Le Guin

Thirty years ago—before Harry Potter was ever a household name—author Ursula K. Le Guin spun a fantastical tale about an orphan's adventures at wizard school. The first in a series of four novels, *A Wizard of Earthsea* captured readers' imaginations with its haunting setting, layered history, and rich characters—and earned Le Guin the title Grand Master from the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America.

A prolific writer, Le Guin has published more than 50 books during her writing career. She has written fantasy novels, realistic novels, short stories, poetry, and essays for both adults and young adults. There's no dearth of awards on her shelves; in recent years, she has received a National Book Award, a Newbery Silver Medal Award, and the PEN Center USA Award for Fiction for her young-adult novel *Gifts*.



The daughter of a famous anthropologist and a well-known writer, Le Guin tackles many compelling themes in her works: literature, nature, coming-of-age, the magic of language, and the power of folktales and myths. Her stories often take place in vivid, imaginary worlds—

seaside cities, desolate farmlands, and fantastical archipelagoes that teem with dragons and sorcerers.

This month, Le Guin's novel *Voices*, a sequel to *Gifts*, will hit bookstores. Set in a coastal kingdom where reading and writing are acts punishable by death, the novel is about a 17-year-old who finds solace and power in books.

*Writing* thought this would be a perfect time to interview Le Guin and get a glimpse of the real and imaginary worlds in which she resides. The 76-year-old legend of fantasy writing, we learned, is gutsy, funny, and an inspired storyteller.

**Writing:** What was your favorite childhood book or story?

**Ursula K. Le Guin:** I loved so many books! The house was full of them. I had three older brothers, so all their books were there for me to read. We had folktales and fairy tales and books of legends, English, Japanese, Russian—and retellings of the Greek and Norse myths—and dog stories and horse stories (*Black Beauty* is still the best horse story)—and books about astronomy and geology and the alphabet and clocks—and *The Wind in the Willows* and the Alice books and the Pooh books and *Little Women* and *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* and—I could go on forever. If I could save only one single book of all the books I loved as a child, I guess maybe it would be Rudyard Kipling's *Jungle Book* series.

**Writing:** What is your first writing memory?

**UL:** I wrote poetry first, and my first poem was for my mother, when I was 6. This is it:

*Bears like honey.  
I do too.  
I like you, honey,  
I sure do.*

Having, as you see, mastered the art of poetry, I then went on to story writing. I think I was about 12 when I first submitted a story to a magazine. They rejected it, but they were polite, and I was quite proud of having a genuine rejection slip. ... Although I did get poetry published in my 20s, I couldn't get anybody to publish any of my stories till I was about 30 and had grown very, very tired of rejection slips.

**Writing:** What draws you to faraway, make-believe places? Why do you write about other worlds?

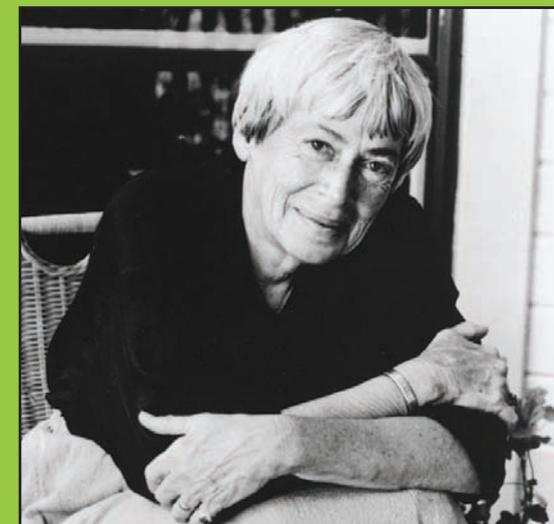
**UL:** They aren't far away to me! They're right here, in my head, where I live. ... I never knew a little kid who told stories about how Mother and Jane went to the grocery store and chose groceries. The kids I know tell stories about how the hero fought the space aliens and how the smart girl got away from the dumb ogre. Well, some of us go on doing that when we grow up—Homer and Virgil and [J.R.R.] Tolkien and [Jose Luis] Borges and people like that.

**Writing:** The ocean is a dominant image in your *Earthsea* books. What does the ocean mean to you?

**UL:** I grew up in sight of the Pacific Ocean, across San Francisco Bay. That's a large presence to grow up in sight of. The ocean and the desert, great vast flat spaces that go on to the horizon—they make all walls seem insignificant. They enlarge the soul.

**Writing:** How do you get your ideas for the worlds you create? Do you draw a map for your stories?

**UL:** Yes, landscape comes with the story, and I draw maps for both my fantasies and my realistic tales. I need to know how far apart things are, in what direction. (Like many kids, I also used to just draw maps and not bother with the stories. A map *is* a story.)



Marion Wood Kolisch. Courtesy: Harcourt

**Writing:** Do you map out your stories—or allow characters and plot to develop over time?

**UL:** I don't know much about plots. I write stories, not plots. I know where the story or the book is going before I start it, and I have a general idea of the way to go. Exactly how I get there I leave up to the characters. But I may do a lot of agonizing, asking questions, making notes, getting lost, and backtracking along the way.

**Writing:** What about sequels?

**UL:** For me, sequels happen after the original book. Sometimes a long, long time after. The fourth book of *Earthsea* came to me 17 years after the third.

**Writing:** When and where do you write?

**UL:** I write in my small study with a west window that looks out on the garden, and a north wall of windows looking out into a redwood tree, and, 60 miles away, my volcano, Mount St. Helens, which erupts every now and then. I work in the morning by preference, but any time I can work, I will work.

“ I think storytelling is the most effective way we have to think about things and to tell each other things. ”

**Writing:** What, in your opinion, are the qualities of powerful writing?

**UL:** I'll mention just one characteristic: Exactness, accuracy of description and language—combined with the suggestion of something in some way greater than what is described. A vivid vision, with implications that go beyond it. A clarity that casts shadows.

**Writing:** Can you explain the concept of “voice” to our readers?

**UL:** Often “voice” means “style,” in the sense of a writer's own particular, irreproducible, uncopied way of writing. In that sense, it's what serious young writers are groping for: their own way of saying what they have to say. They probably won't arrive at it for years, but that's OK; what's important is not to settle for a fake or trendy or imitated voice but to go on trying till you find your own.

**Writing:** In your most recent young-adult novels, *Gifts* and *Voices*, books and stories change the lives of the main characters. Why do stories pop up so much in your work?

**UL:** My stories are more and more often about stories. I think storytelling is the most effective way we have to think about things and to tell each other things: How do you tell wrong from right, how do you do right, why are other people so weird, what's important in life, what's real courage, what's justice, what lasts and what does not? ... Myths are how a people define themselves.

**Writing:** You once said, “The writer cannot do it alone. The unread story is not a story; it is little black marks on wood pulp. The reader, reading it, makes it live.” Can you talk more about the relationship between the writer and the reader?

**UL:** Well, it is a very unusual relationship. Two people: One of us isn't even there, and the other one is ... ignoring everybody and everything except this object in front of her face, a book. The reader has to keep her eyes open and her mind and her heart open; if she does, then the one who isn't there, the writer, can sing poetry to her or tell her a story. It's really, really different

from watching any kind of film, which is essentially just sitting there letting it happen to you. Reading is active collaboration with the text. You and the author make it happen—make a book come alive.

**Writing:** What is your mission as a writer? What do you want your readers to take away from your books?

**UL:** The conviction that they just read a good book. (I'm a writer, not a missionary.) ✍️

Read the transcript of our entire interview with Ursula K. Le Guin at [www.readandwriting.com](http://www.readandwriting.com).

## EXCERPT

### Voices, by Ursula K. Le Guin

The first thing I can remember clearly is writing the way into the secret room.



I am so small I have to reach my arm up to make the signs in the right place on the wall of the corridor. The wall is coated with thick grey plaster, cracked and crumbling in places so the stone shows through. It's almost dark in the corridor. It smells of earth and age, and it's silent. But I'm not afraid. ... I reach up and move my writing finger in the motions I know, in the right place, in the air, not quite touching the surface of the plaster. The door opens in the wall and I go in.

The light in that room is clear and calm, falling from many small skylights of thick glass in the high ceiling. It's a very long room, with shelves down its wall, and books on the shelves. It's my room and I've always known it. ... The secret room is my secret, the place where I can be alone, and not scolded and bothered, and not afraid.

Excerpt from *Voices*, by Ursula K. Le Guin. Copyright © 2006 Ursula K. Le Guin. All rights reserved. Used by permission of Harcourt, Inc.

# WRITING CONTEST Take Me Away



Oliver Burston/Illustration Works

Throughout history, writers have created imaginary worlds. Now it's your turn to take us away ... to a land of make-believe.

Here's how: Create an imaginary town, city, country, or world, with distinct features and landmarks. Then write a short story or a poem set in this imaginary place. You can include an illustration of your imaginary world. (Acceptable forms of illustration include drawings, sketches, photomontages, and collages.)

Four winners will be selected by our guest judge, award-winning fantasy author Ursula K. Le Guin. Each winner will receive a signed copy of one of her books and a cash prize. Winning entries will be published in the April/May issue of *Writing*.

## Rules to Know

- The contest is open to students in grades 5–12. Categories: Junior (grades 5–8) and Senior (grades 9–12). One entry per student, please.
- Poems should not exceed 400 words, and stories should be no longer than 800 words.
- Each entry must include a completed entry form. Incomplete entries will not be accepted.
- All entries must be postmarked by **Nov. 22, 2006**.
- Download an entry form at [weeklyreader.com/writing](http://weeklyreader.com/writing).
- Mail contest entries to:  
*Writing Magazine* “Take Me Away”  
200 First Stamford Place, P.O. Box 120023  
Stamford, CT 06912-0023

## Writing Advice From Ursula K. Le Guin

Try not to use a setting you've seen on film or in an interactive game, and try to avoid the standard fake-medieval fantasy story setting with princesses.

Go for broke: Try to really imagine a place of your own. It can be based almost entirely on a real place you know or have seen. You just make some changes that suit your fancy, you twitch it a little, add some things that weren't really there. ... Or go wild, go to another

planet, another world, and stop and look and say what you see.

Two things to keep in mind:  
One, describe exactly. “It was huge” doesn't tell us how much. How huge? Bigger than what? How long would it take to walk around it, or climb it, or eat it, or wash it? Details!

Two, let one thing lead to another. The more you look, the more you see. Suppose you have a purple glass tower that's 900 stories high. Let us see what it looks like with the

sun on it. What kind of shadow would it cast? Are there birds nesting in the window ledges, like pigeons in New York? What kinds of birds? Do the people who live in the tower feed them, or shoot them, or ask them what the weather is going to be?

You see what I'm asking for? Everything should be clear in detail, and hang together, work together, in the particular moment you're seeing it—the way it does in the real world.

**Teachers: Get a free poster of *Voices*, by Ursula K. Le Guin, for your classroom! To request your free poster, go to [www.HarcourtBooks.com/FreeForTeachers/WeeklyReader](http://www.HarcourtBooks.com/FreeForTeachers/WeeklyReader). Hurry! Quantities are limited!**