

Paris Review Interview Excerpts Two of the Greats

Gabriel García Marquez

GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ

I had an idea of what I always wanted to do, but there was something missing and I was not sure what it was until one day I discovered the right tone—the tone that I eventually used in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. It was based on the way my grandmother used to tell her stories. She told things that sounded supernatural and fantastic, but she told them with complete naturalness. When I finally discovered the tone I had to use, I sat down for eighteen months and worked every day.

INTERVIEWER

How did she express the “fantastic” so naturally?

GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ

What was most important was the expression she had on her face. She did not change her expression at all when telling her stories, and everyone was surprised. In previous attempts to write *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, I tried to tell the story without believing in it. I discovered that what I had to do was believe in them myself and write them with the same expression with which my grandmother told them: with a brick face.

** This interview can be found in full here: <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/3196/the-art-of-fiction-no-69-gabriel-garcia-marquez>

Ursula Le Guin

** Although the interviewer and Le Guin refer to Science Fiction, much of Le Guin’s writing falls into the Fantasy genre.

INTERVIEWER

How do you feel about the term science fiction, as connected to your work?

LE GUIN

Well, that’s very complicated, Wray.

INTERVIEWER

I’m sorry. Are you at peace with it? Do you find it reductive?

LE GUIN

I don't think science fiction is a very good name for it, but it's the name that we've got. It is different from other kinds of writing, I suppose, so it deserves a name of its own. But where I can get prickly and combative is if I'm just called a sci-fi writer. I'm not. I'm a novelist and poet. Don't shove me into your damn pigeonhole, where I don't fit, because I'm all over. My tentacles are coming out of the pigeonhole in all directions.

INTERVIEWER

That's how one can identify a sci-fi author, I guess—tentacles coming out of the pigeonhole.

LE GUIN

That's right.

INTERVIEWER

It seems to me there might be authors whose work is more accurately described by the term science fiction than your own—someone like Arthur C. Clarke, for example, whose work is often directly connected to a specific scientific concept. In your fiction, by contrast, hard science is perhaps less important than philosophy or religion or social science.

LE GUIN

The “hard”—science fiction writers dismiss everything except, well, physics, astronomy, and maybe chemistry. Biology, sociology, anthropology—that's not science to them, that's soft stuff. They're not that interested in what human beings do, really. But I am. I draw on the social sciences a great deal. I get a lot of ideas from them, particularly from anthropology. When I create another planet, another world, with a society on it, I try to hint at the complexity of the society I'm creating, instead of just referring to an empire or something like that.

INTERVIEWER

Might that be why your fiction has been more readily admired in so-called literary circles—that it's more engaged with human complexity and psychology?

LE GUIN

It's helped to make my stuff more accessible to people who don't, as they say, read science fiction. But the prejudice against genre has been so strong until recently. It's all changing now, which is wonderful. For most of my career, getting that label—sci-fi—slapped on you was, critically, a kiss of death. It meant you got reviewed in a little box with some cute title about Martians—or tentacles.

INTERVIEWER

In your essay “Telling Is Listening,” you write that a genre novel fulfills certain generic obligations—it's going to take the reader in a certain direction, it will likely have a certain story arc, it will touch on certain things that she or he has come to expect.

LE GUIN

That's right, it will fulfill certain expectations, certain definite expectations. That's what makes it generic.

INTERVIEWER

In the essay you're talking about the appeal of genre for readers. What is the appeal of genre for a writer?

LE GUIN

Somewhat the same. It's like working in any form—in poetry, for example. When you work in form, be it a sonnet or villanelle or whatever, the form is there and you have to fill it. And you have to find how to make that form say what you want to say. But what you find, always—I think any poet who's worked in form will agree with me—is that the form leads you to what you want to say. It is wonderful and mysterious. I think something similar happens in fiction. A genre is a form, in a sense, and that can lead you to ideas that you would not have just thought up if you were working in an undefined field. It must have something to do with the way our minds are constructed.

INTERVIEWER

In *Steering the Craft*, you say—and you seem to be speaking as both a reader and a writer—“I want to recognize something I never saw before.”

LE GUIN

It has something to do with the very nature of fiction. That age-old question, Why don't I just write about what's real? A lot of twentieth-century— and twenty-first-century—American readers think that that's all they want. They want nonfiction. They'll say, I don't read fiction because it isn't real. This is incredibly naive. Fiction is something that only human beings do, and only in certain circumstances. We don't know exactly for what purposes. But one of the things it does is lead you to recognize what you did not know before.

This is what a lot of mystical disciplines are after—simply seeing, really seeing, really being aware. Which means you're recognizing the things around you more deeply, but they also seem new. So the seeing-as-new and recognition are really the same thing.

INTERVIEWER

Could you elaborate on this idea just a little?

LE GUIN

Not adequately! I can only muddle at it. A very good book tells me news, tells me things I didn't know, or didn't know I knew, yet I recognize them— yes, I see, yes, this is how the world is.

Fiction—and poetry and drama— cleanse the doors of perception.

All the arts do this. Music, painting, dance say for us what can't be said in words. But the mystery of literature is that it does say it in words, often straightforward ones.

INTERVIEWER

You seem, over the past few decades, to have grown more interested in fiction directly informed by history. *Lavinia*, your most recent novel, is clearly set in a recognizable period of human history—Italy in the era of Virgil. And your novella *The Wild Girls* has that historical quality as well, though perhaps it's set in an alternate universe.

LE GUIN

No, *The Wild Girls* is very strongly based on the Mississippian culture of America. Some of the peoples down there had a caste system that's very like the one in the story. I took an

anthropological study that I'd known about for a long time and thought, That would make an interesting basis for a story. What would it be like to live in a culture like that? Man, I didn't like it one bit! I was glad to get out.

INTERVIEWER

It's a brutal story.

LE GUIN

Yes, it's a kind of hateful story. My late short stories began getting kind of dry and stony and hard that way. I'm not particularly fond of them. But Lavinia is just the opposite. It's anything but dry and stony and hard. It's very playful. It came to me while I was working on trying to read Virgil in Latin. It resulted from being very absorbed in that pursuit. Here I am, living in Virgil's world already, and here comes this kid, this girl, who is going to tell me her story. Actually, a few pages into the novel, Lavinia addresses the reader directly. I wrote that down, and I just thought, Uh oh, I can't write a novel about Bronze Age Italy! What the hell do I know about Bronze Age Italy? Well, what the hell does anyone know about Bronze Age Italy?

INTERVIEWER

Was it akin to creating a society on another planet?

LE GUIN

Of course. Historical novels and science fiction are very close. You're either re-creating something or modeling it—it's very much the same process. And I did do "research," as people who don't write novels love to call it. There were some things I really needed to know about Bronze Age Italy, or early, early Rome. I had a lot of fun at the bottom of the stacks of the Portland State library, digging out these books that were tremendous imagination-feeders about early Roman religion and stuff like that. But basically, this book is a bit of an act of ventriloquism. Lavinia's telling me what to write.

INTERVIEWER

This was a classic example, then, of what you discuss in one of your essays in *The Wave in the Mind*—a novel beginning with a clear sense of one character.

LE GUIN

With a voice. With a voice in the ear. That first page I wrote, which the novel progressed from, is simply Lavinia speaking to us—including me, apparently.

INTERVIEWER

If there's one clear development that I can detect in your work, it's a shift toward economy.

LE GUIN

Well, I've had a very long career. What I'm aware of is that I've eased up on the formality of the prose. I like using a more colloquial voice to write in these days.

INTERVIEWER

Why do you think that is?

LE GUIN

In the sixties and seventies, the language of serious fantasy was still based largely on the styles of writers of earlier generations—Tolkien, of course, but also Dunsany, Eddison, MacDonald, clear back to Malory. As I began to depart from the heroic or adventure tradition of fantasy, I found a less formal vocabulary and a cadence better suited to what I had to say.

As for my writing voice in general, well, you get old and your language gets like your shoes or your kitchen gear—you don't need fancy stuff any more. You've learned how to just say it. Rereading some of my earlier novels, I often think to myself, I didn't need all that stuff—I didn't have to say that much. I could cut that whole bit. Cut!

I want the story to have a rhythm that keeps moving forward. Because that's the whole point of telling a story. You're on a journey—you're going from here to there. It's got to move. Even if the rhythm is very complicated and subtle, that's what's going to carry the reader. This all sounds a little mystical, I suppose.

** This interview can be found in full here: <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/6253/the-art-of-fiction-no-221-ursula-k-le-guin>