



Paris Review Interview Excerpt:
Ursula Le Guin

Ursula Le Guin, one of the most celebrated writers in American history, has long been known for shaping the scope of the science fiction genre. In 2014, when she was awarded the Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters, she spoke about the importance of imagination: "Hard times are coming when we will be wanting the voices of writers who can see alternatives to how we live now and can see through our fear-stricken society and its obsessive technologies to other ways of being, and even imagine some real grounds for hope. We will need writers who can remember freedom. Poets, visionaries, the realists of a larger reality."

Below is an excerpt of the *Paris Review's* 2013 interview with Le Guin. You can find the full interview [here](#).

LE GUIN

The "hard"—science fiction writers... [are] 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.

LE GUIN

[Writing fantasy or sci-fi] is 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.

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.

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.

LE GUIN

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.