

This Day in History... October 21, 1929

Birth of Ursula K. Le Guin

Author Ursula Kroeber Le Guin was born on October 21, 1929, in Berkeley, California. A pioneer in American science fiction writing, she won numerous distinguished awards for her novels, short stories, and teen and children's books.

Le Guin was born to author Theodora Kroeber and anthropologist Alfred Louis Kroeber. With two scholarly parents, the four Kroeber children all developed a love of reading from an early age. Le Guin was especially interested in science fiction and fantasy novels as well as myths and legends.

Le Guin wrote her first story when she was nine and submitted a short story to one of her favorite publications, *Astounding Science Fiction*, when she was eleven. However, after they rejected the piece, she didn't try to submit anything for the next 10 years.

After graduating from Berkeley High School, Le Guin went to Harvard's Radcliffe College, where she earned a Bachelor's degree in Renaissance French and Italian literature. After earning a Master's in French in 1952, she received a Fulbright scholarship to work on her PhD in France. However, after meeting historian Charles Le Guin on the boat trip to Europe, she set aside her plans to get a doctorate. They were married that December and after returning to the US, Charles continued his studies while Ursula taught French and worked as a secretary. After spending time in Georgia and Idaho, they settled in Portland, Oregon.

It wasn't until the late 1950s that Le Guin began her writing career, though her writing time was limited as she raised their three children. She published her first poem, "Folksong from the Montayna Province" in 1959 and her first short story, "An die Musik," in 1961. Both works, as well as five novels she wrote between 1951 and 1961 were all set in the fictional country of Orsinia. These novels were all rejected, however, with the publishers claiming they were inaccessible. After a series of rejections, Le Guin decided to focus on writing science fiction. In the early 1960s, she had several stories published in *Fantastic Science Fiction* and *Amazing Stories*. Many of these stories were set in her fictional Hainish universe and the world of Earthsea.



Le Guin received three Fulbright scholarships during her life – in 1953, 1968, and 1975.

In 1966, Le Guin published her first novel, *Rocannon's World*, followed by *Planet of Exile* and *City of Illusions*, all set in the Hainish universe. While these works received little attention, her next novel, *A Wizard of Earthsea* (1968) marked a turning point in her career. The work received significant critical praise. It was also her first work written specifically for teenagers, at the request of her publisher. Le Guin's next novel, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, was the first to address feminist issues. For this work, she became the first woman in history to receive the Hugo and Nebula awards for best novel. Many critics describe these two novels as Le Guin's masterpieces.

Le Guin continued to receive critical acclaim and awards for works such as *The Lathe of Heaven* (1971), *The Tombs of Atuan* (1971), *The Farthest Shore* (1972), *The Word for World is Forest* (1973), *The Dispossessed* (1974), *The Wind's Twelve Quarters* (1975), "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas," (1973) and "The Day Before the Revolution" (1974).

Le Guin's work from the late 1970s onward, pushed into new styles. These included speculative fiction, as in *The Eye of the Heron* (1978), realistic novels for teens, such as *Very Far Away from Anywhere Else* (1976), and realistic fiction, such as *Malafrena* (1979). Le Guin focused on works for teens and children for much of the 1980s and early 1990s. She continued to write in a variety of fictional styles into the 2000s, though in her later years she turned her attention to essays, poetry, and translation.

Le Guin's writing was different from many other authors at the time. She ignored typical ideas about writing fiction and addressed real-life issues such as race, gender, and sexuality. These concepts made Le Guin's novels relatable to a wide audience and earned her a place among the literary greats. After a career that spanned nearly 60 years, Le Guin died on January 22, 2018. Over the course of her long career, she published over 20 novels, more than 100 short stories, as well as poems, literary criticisms, and children's books. She was called a "major voice" in *American Letters*, but she preferred to be called an "American novelist." In all, she earned eight Hugo, six Nebula, and 22 Locus Awards as well as the National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters.



Le Guin was the 33rd honoree in the Literary Arts Series and her stamp paid the three-ounce rate.



The Library of Congress declared Le Guin a Living Legend in 2000.

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