

Feminist author envisions a different and better world

By John Nichols

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Ursula K. Le Guin's heart and mind tell her a better tomorrow is possible. But it is with her feet and her hands that she does the work of shaping that next world.

With her feet, this feminist, socialist and self-described "radical thinker" has marched across four decades for nuclear disarmament and civil rights, for an end to the Vietnam War and a change in U.S. policies toward Central America, for safe and legal abortion and gay and lesbian rights.

With her hands, Le Guin has put on paper some of the most influential science fiction stories of the 20th century. In the pages of books such as "The Left Hand of Darkness" and "The Dispossessed," she has explored futures that might be filled with not only intellectual vigor and literary grace, but also a social conscience.

"Science fiction offers this beautiful opportunity to imagine alternatives," explains Le Guin, who is in Madison this weekend to participate in WisCon 20, the only feminist-oriented science fiction convention in the world.

The annual conference, which began yesterday and runs through Sunday at the Concourse Hotel, features dozens of speeches, readings, discussions and film screenings — all aimed at provoking discussion of the future of gender and relations between the sexes.

Science fiction lets her share it

"I think a lot of folks are afraid of gender and s-e-x," says Le Guin. "That's the value of science fiction writing. It allows us to explore relationships, to imagine different ways of organizing the relationship of the genders."

With her 1968 book, "The Left Hand of Darkness," Le Guin became a pioneering explorer of new geographies of gender. "The word 'gender' barely existed in 1968," recalls Le Guin. "Now we have a vocabulary, a vehicle for exploring these issues. Back then, we didn't."

It is no coincidence that feminists took to science fiction, says Le Guin, who explains, "There was an immediate meeting between science fiction and feminism. They go together — like ham and cheese."

Le Guin's discussion of science fiction as an ideal tool for exploring the most substantive issues of the day may strike some people as surprising. There are, of course, still those non-readers of science fiction who imagine the genre to be an engineer's paradise, filled with rocket ships and weapons of doom.

Le Guin's writing career — which has earned her a National Book Award, four Nebula Awards, four Hugo Awards and a Kafka

Award — has served as evidence of how outdated such impressions are. In her books she has explored not only issues of gender, but also issues of race, economic class and militarism.

"Class and gender are all totally interwoven," she says, in reply to a question about whether one issue is of more importance than another. "You cannot separate gender from economics — not when women still earn something like 59 cents to the dollar that men doing the same job earn. I think ranking these issues in terms of importance is a mistake."

But discussing them is not. In fact, Le Guin is part of a generation of writers who pushed the genre toward a more philosophical and humane dimension.

Born 66 years ago in Berkeley, Le Guin grew up as an anthropologist's daughter, which encouraged her to explore different cultures and to ponder new approaches to solving the world's challenges. Because of her background, she relishes being "pigeonholed" as a "science fiction writer."

"I have been kind of freed by being looked at as 'only' a science fiction writer, because the critics don't know what to make of me," she says. "In science fiction, you don't write to please the academics; in fact, I sometimes write specifically not to please them."

Le Guin feels few qualms about challenging the orthodoxies of her day. For instance, in the midst of



HENRY A. KOSHOLLEK/THE CAPITAL TIMES

Writer Ursula K. Le Guin is in Madison to participate in WisCon 20, the world's only feminist science fiction conference.

Newt Gingrich's "Republican revolution," the author proudly proclaims herself "a radical leftist."

At times, Le Guin's politics can be more confusing to interviewers than her futuristic writing.

"As long ago as the 1950s, she marched in favor of a nuclear test ban, and she threw herself into the anti-war and civil rights demonstrations of the 1960s. 'Name a cause and I've walked behind a banner for it,' says Le Guin. 'My complaint is that we don't march enough anymore. There seems to be a level of discouragement, which we need to dispel.'

In fact, many of the great utopian and science fiction writers throughout history — from William Morris to H.G. Wells — were socialists. That's no coincidence, suggests Le Guin, who notes that

socialists have always believed it is possible to shape a world in which poverty and strife are replaced by abundance and cooperation.

In a time when the Newt Gingriches and the Bob Doles dismiss such notions as fantasies, Le Guin says it is particularly necessary to believe — both from a political and a literary standpoint.

"If we lose hope, we've had it," she says. "If people can't imagine an alternative to the ways we are doing things now, we're in deep, aren't we?"