



Ursula K. Le Guin

The Dispossessed
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In *The Dispossessed*, you portray the aliens as kind beings compassionate to the novel's hero. Why is it important to you that they receive help from the aliens? Do you think the first aliens we meet will be benevolent?

Do I think the first aliens we meet will be benevolent? No. Honestly, I don't think we're going to meet any aliens, nice or nasty, first or last — not any time soon. Space travel and other world beings are wonderful ideas, very useful to story tellers; you can say things about us and our world by talking about other beings and other worlds — imaginary ones — that you couldn't say any other way. But it has nothing to do with predicting an imminent possibility, and nothing to do with belief. You know, I write about dragons, too, for the same reason, but I don't think dragons exist outside the human mind

... The imagination is our most useful tool, and it's most useful when it isn't taken literally!

So, the aliens being imaginary, being part of a made-up story, they are what the story needs, what fits into the story best.

Did you make a timeline of events before you began writing *The Dispossessed*? How do you keep track of the numerous causes and effects throughout the novel? Did you write it linearly at first and then shift the time around?

I did a lot of work on *The Dispossessed* before I began to write it — reading the pacifist anarchist writers, figuring out how the anarchist society of Anarres might work and what the history of both planets was, and learning a whole lot I didn't know about the study of time, both by philosophers and by physicists. So coming to the story with all that fairly heavy baggage, I had to plan out to some extent where it would all go ... which meant having a fairly clear idea of the shape and movement of the book (I am uncomfortable with the word plot, I don't think most of my stories have plots.)

So I started off with the first chapter where Shevek is a baby trying to own the sunlight, and wrote happily on, expecting not to get to Urras till half way through the book ... Surprise! Chapters about going to Urras, what happened on Urras, kept insisting on crowding in and getting written. I usually write perfectly linearly, a to b to c ... but here came k, and q, and w, all saying, "Write me! write me!" So I argued with myself in my notebook. Wouldn't it be very artsy and self-conscious to write the book in this zigzag fashion — alternating the two time periods, two different worlds — Who do you think you are? William Faulkner? Huh? But the book was right: it had to be written that way. And I wrote it that way. Then the final surprise came from my friend Darko Suvin, who read it in manuscript, and said, "But this has twelve chapters and it has closure, it is (at least apparently) all nicely tied up in a package at the end. This is all wrong for a book about anarchism!" Of course he was right, which is why the book has thirteen chapters, and at the end everything is up in the air — it could go any number of ways — no doors of possibility are shut. That is, of course, essential to the nature of this story and its subject. The doors stay open!

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