

## The Earthsea Trilogy

In 1967 Ursula K. Le Guin was in her late thirties, a mother with three kids under the age of 10, and the author of three science fiction novels that had garnered little critical attention. *A Wizard of Earthsea* appeared in 1968, inaugurating an astonishing burst of literary activity. During the next six years Le Guin published *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) and *The Dispossessed* (1974), each of which won Hugo and Nebula Awards for best science fiction novel of its year. She also continued the story of the wizard Ged in both *The Tombs of Atuan* (1971), which received a Newbery Honor Book Citation, and *The Farthest Shore* (1972), which won the National Book Award for children’s literature. Finally, *The Wind’s Twelve Quarters* (1975) gathered her best short stories up till then, including two early glimpses of Earthsea.

*A Wizard of Earthsea* focuses on the young Ged’s coming of age. *The Tombs of Atuan*, set in an underworld of tunnels, labyrinths and cells, shows us a young priestess named Tenar rejecting the social and psychological repression she has grown up with to break free into her full true self. While *A Wizard of Earthsea* is full of open-air action, as Ged’s adventures take him to many of the islands and cities of the known world, *The Tombs of Atuan* is its opposite: enclosed, claustrophobic, suffocating. In some ways, the two novels interlock like the yin-yang symbol. The bright bold young man Ged needs to confront darkness; the young girl Tenar, who has spent her life in darkness, needs to recognize the light within her.

In the third volume of the trilogy, *The Farthest Shore*, we meet the young prince Arren. Le Guin again continues to explore the theme of maturation by tackling the meaning of death. In *The Farthest Shore* Ged, now the Archmage of Roke, searches

for the reason why Earthsea is losing its vitality, its magic. Ged brings Arren along as his companion on this quest, recognizing in this confused and uncertain young man an exceptional destiny.

At a rare quiet moment before the novel’s climax, Ged observes: “When I was young, I had to choose between the life of being and the life of doing. And I leapt at the latter like a trout to a fly. But each deed you do, each act, binds you to itself and to its consequences, and makes you act again and yet again. Then very seldom do you come upon a space, a time like this, between act and act, when you may stop and simply be. Or wonder who, after all, you are.” At the novel’s end a weary Ged turns away from the world of action to seek that life of simple being—and so passes, it would seem, into the mists of legend.

For nearly twenty years that’s where the Earthsea novels stopped. But then, in 1990, Le Guin unexpectedly returned to the archipelago in *Tehanu*. While this novel again features Ged, Le Guin’s tone had changed, though not, in a sense, her overriding theme. *Tehanu* is also, in part, about the coming of age—of old age. While the first three books reflected on power and how men should use it, *Tehanu* examines powerlessness and both the exploitation and wisdom of women.

Le Guin initially called *Tehanu*, “the last book of Earthsea,” but she admits that she was mistaken. She continued to write stories set in the archipelago—see *Tales from Earthsea* (2001)—as well as the novel *The Other Wind* (2001). These books certainly amplify and enrich Le Guin’s original vision. That said, *A Wizard of Earthsea* remains special: Le Guin calls it “the best put together book” she has ever written.