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## Lesson One

### FOCUS: Biography

Examining an author's life can inform and expand the reader's understanding of a novel. Biographical criticism is the practice of analyzing a literary work through the lens of an author's experience. In this lesson, explore the author's life to understand the novel more fully.

Ursula K. Le Guin, born in 1929, spent her childhood in California, mainly in Berkeley, where her anthropologist father (A. L. Kroeber) was a professor, but also in the Napa Valley, where her family owned a ranch. As a child she heard Native American myths as bedtime stories, and later read fairy tales, folktales and fantasy stories with avidity. Such a background may explain, in part, Le Guin's approach to literature: She is a world-builder. Just as an anthropologist reports on an indigenous people in as much detail as possible, so a science fiction or fantasy author will build up an elaborate picture of an alien culture and its inhabitants.

As a writer, Le Guin has chosen to lead a private and quietly ordered life. *A Wizard of Earthsea* stresses that the ideal mage should practice a similar modesty, self-discipline, and mental fortitude.



### Discussion Activities

Listen to The Big Read CD. Have students take notes as they listen. Ask them to present the three most important points they learned from the CD.

Copy the following sections from the Reader's Guide: "Introduction to the Novel" and "Ursula K. Le Guin." Divide the class into two groups, and assign one essay to each group. After reading the essays, discuss the ways knowledge of Le Guin's biography might help us understand this novel.



### Writing Exercise

Read the opening paragraph of *A Wizard of Earthsea* aloud to your students. Ask your students to write a one-page paper on the following related topics: Why does Le Guin tell us that the hero of her book will eventually become an archmage and a dragonlord? What might she gain by thus undercutting a certain amount of suspense?



### Homework

Read Chapter I, which introduces the young Ged—here called Duny. Come to class with two themes that you believe will develop throughout the novel.