Science Fiction Book Club
Interview with author Julie Phillips

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*Julie Phillips is an American biographer and book critic living in Amsterdam. She is currently working on a book on writing and mothering, "*The Baby on the Fire Escape", *as well as a biography of Ursula K. Le Guin. She is the author of "*James Tiptree, Jr.: The Double Life of Alice B. Sheldon," *which received several honors including the National Book Critics Circle Award, the Hugo and Locus Awards, and the Washington State Book Award.*

Le Guin Questions

Javier Ojst: Much respect for Le Guin but I would like to ask why did she seem to not want to be considered a SF writer? A writer that got most of her fame writing in this wonderful genre. "Le Guin won all the major honors of the science-fiction field — including Hugos, Nebulas and Locus awards. But she bristled a bit at being pigeonholed. "I know that I am always called 'the sci-fi writer.' Everybody wants to stick me into that one box, while i really live in several boxes," she said in a widely quoted 2000 interview. -geekwiredotcom...thanks!

Actually Le Guin was very loyal to SF and fantasy. When she accepted the medal from the National Book Foundation, she used her speech to criticize publishers for ignoring genre writers. When Margaret Atwood said she wrote "speculative fiction" rather than SF, Le Guin accused her of turning her back on genre. (See https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/aug/29/margaret-atwood-year-of-flood) Le Guin didn't want to abandon the "genre ghetto" for respectability; she insisted on recognition for SF as a whole.

But it's also true that SF and fantasy aren't the only things she wrote. She published realistic fiction (Searoad), historical fiction (Lavinia, her Orsinian stories, Malafrena), poetry, essays, a new version of the Tao Te Ching. When she said "I live in several boxes," I think that's what she was talking about.

Abe Mayers: What was it that gave Le Guin the confidence to write? Many people want to write but are never able to put a pen to paper, or to stick with it because they lack faith that they can produce something others will read. As a woman, it must have been extra hard, because there were no (or not many) women Sci-Fi writers. How did she get the self-motivation, and courage to write?

Unusually for a woman of her generation, she had a lot of support from her family. Even when she was in her twenties, her mother and father were the first readers for her work, along with her husband Charles. They all believed in her and supported her. Alfred Kroeber even acted as his daughter's agent for her poetry for a little while, sending it out to small magazines. All that that helped her keep going.

Le Guin had a lot of confidence in her talent, too. One of her friends, the Spanish writer Rosa Montero, told me that she thought "the force of her talent" had carried her through, and had given her the "stamina" to go on.

In some ways the long period without publishing may have made her a more original writer. In 2015 she said it gave her "lots of time to practice. Lots of time with no feedback….The writers' peer group had not yet been invented. So it was a kind of a strange art and a strange profession, in that you kind of had to develop it yourself."

(That's from a radio interview; you can hear it at about minute 8:30 on https://www.opb.org/radio/programs/stateofwonder/segment/ursula-le-guin-portugal-the-man-offa-rex-decemberists-grammys/)

And don't forget, she wasn't trying to write science fiction in the beginning. When she did start writing SF, it started selling right away. She'd grown up with three older brothers. I don't think male egos intimidated her much, though she did dislike anyone who she thought acted snooty. That's why, when she accidentally spilled beer down the back of Mrs. Heinlein's dress, she wasn't sorry about it at the time—though I'm not sure that, looking back, she was entirely proud of the person she was.

She was good at finding allies, in SF, too: Virginia Kidd, Philip K. Dick, Harlan Ellison, Robert Silverberg, and Terry Carr were all really helpful to her in her career.

François Peneaud: What was the importance for Le Guin of challenging gender roles and stereotypes in her fiction?

That changed over the years. At the start of her career it wasn't very important. Her characters were men, and she said that she wrote stories that looked like the stories she had read; in other words, they had male protagonists and the women didn't do much. When she wrote *The Left Hand of Darkness* she was obviously thinking a lot about gender, but it wasn't until the mid-1970s that she started seriously thinking about the role of women in her fiction, which led eventually to her rethinking her characters and trying to come up with new stories.

She liked not only challenging gender roles but playing around with sexuality, too. In *Changing Planes* there's a story, "Seasons of the Ansarac," where she asked what a society would be like if humans had a seasonal sexuality, like birds: what if people went back and forth over the course of their lives between living in pairs and living in flocks? In a few of her stories she wrote about the planet O, where a marriage involves four people.

In general she liked to challenge people to think differently. Rethinking gender roles became an important part of that.

John Grayshaw: Since "Lathe of Heaven" is our February Group Read, what do you think is its significance/place in Le Guin's body of work?

In some ways it's very different from most of her other work. It takes place on Earth, in Portland, OR, in the near future—close to home, so to speak. It's much more influenced than her other books by the work of Philip K. Dick, especially the way he, in her words "pull[s] reality out from under the reader all the time."

She also said it was as close as she ever came to writing an “aleatory” work, i.e., one that depends on chance. She told me, “I tried to let George dream and let the dream shape the next necessary stretch of the book. I was trying very much not to control, as it were. So when the aliens arrived and turned out to be giant turtles, there they were. I had to cope with them.”

But it’s also deeply influenced by Taoism, the way so much of her early work was. It’s a story in which the hero’s job is to refuse to act—to refuse to be a hero, essentially. You see that in Earthsea, too. And you can see other recurring themes in *Lathe*: the danger of ignoring the subconscious mind, and the road to hell that is paved with good intentions. While she was working on *Lathe* Le Guin wrote her agent, Virginia Kidd, that she’d seen a headline at a newsstand, maybe in *Psychology Today,* that to her summed up the book. It read: “Don’t Just *Do* Something, Buddha said. *Stand* there!”

Taoism connected Le Guin to Philip K. Dick again, too. In a 2010 blog entry she wrote, “Probably the biggest thing I learned from Phil was...that you can incorporate Eastern mysticism into a Western novel without playing guru or getting woowoo. Matter-of-fact taoism, middle-class yin-yang. He had pulled it off superbly several times. I tried my own version of it in *The Lathe of Heaven*, and it worked for me too.”

She did a lot of reading and research on sleep and dreams in 1967-69, so there are two books that came out of that research and are connected to each other that way: first *The Word for World Is Forest,* then *Lathe.*

John Grayshaw: How important were Taoism and Buddhism to Le Guin? In a 2013 interview she said “Taoism is just part of the structure of my mind by now. And Buddhism is intensely interesting to me”

It’s hard to quantify the influence of Taoism; I think she was more consciously aware of it at the beginning of her career than later. But the idea of balance, and the importance of maintaining a balance, runs right through her work; and achieving emotional balance was important to her in her life, too.

Buddhism came later to her, and she tried meditation late in life (I’m not sure how much). I think Buddhism was a little too structured for her, too much of an organized religion.

John Grayshaw: Did Le Guin prefer Science Fiction or Fantasy or did she love both? She said in a 2017 interview about Fantasy, “But much of it is derivative, you can mash a lot of orcs and unicorns and intergalactic wars together without actually imagining anything.”

She liked both. She just didn’t like hack writing in any genre (and loved to complain about it, possibly because she was also a book reviewer, and critics have to read a lot of bad books).

I wonder why she chose to write some books as SF and some as fantasy, if there were themes she could deal with better in one genre or the other. Are there themes that are peculiar to her SF, or to her fantasy, do you think?

John Grayshaw: In a 1994 Interview Le Guin talked about writing a screenplay version of “The Left Hand of Darkness.” She said that “with 20 years of feminism under my belt, I can now imagine an

androgynous society as being much different and far more interesting than our gendered society." What happened to this screenplay? Why was the film never made? Could it ever be published? How different was the screenplay from the novel?

The draft is in her papers at the University of Oregon, as far as I can see, but I haven't read it yet, so I don't know. I don't know why the film was never made. Left Hand was turned into a stage play a few years ago and has had a few productions.

Last May it was reported that LHD had been optioned again, this time as a limited series. But in film and TV there are no guarantees. There are plans to make a TV series of Tiptree's life and stories, too, but I'm still waiting to see where that goes, if anywhere.

Tiptree Questions

John Grayshaw: Changing the subject to James Tiptree Jr. (Alice B. Sheldon), Did people like Robert Silverberg and Johanna Russ, whom Sheldon played the Tiptree character with even in private letters, feel betrayed when they found out he was a she?

Very, very surprised. But not betrayed. I think Alli Sheldon exaggerated her own sense of abandonment, partly because she herself didn't know how to talk to her friends anymore. But I think most SF people could more or less see the point of pretending to be someone else.

John Grayshaw: What was the fan reaction when the truth came out?

Again, surprise. I hear over and over, from people who read Tiptree before they knew, how surprised they were when they found out.

John Grayshaw: What were Sheldon's thoughts on gay rights and transgender issues? What would she have thought of the societal changes since her death?

She was for gay rights but didn't talk about it much, only to one or two correspondents with whom she really felt safe, like Joanna Russ. She didn't write about transgender issues, which were still fairly new in her lifetime. She clearly had a lot of gender dysphoria, but was she trans? Did she want to be a man physically as well as on paper? It's hard for me to know. Her options would have been so different, if she'd been born later, that I can't imagine her becoming the same person.

But I'm sure she would have embraced gay and trans rights once she got used to the idea. She was much quicker to embrace feminism than Le Guin was, for instance. She had a pretty radical openness to change.

John Grayshaw: Was Sheldon just eccentric or would she be in therapy today or put on medication?

Alli was prescribed antidepressants, including amphetamines. She was also in therapy, but not with someone who was doing her a lot of good. Today she might have had better medication for her cyclothymia (a mild form of bipolar disorder) and possibly a more sympathetic therapist, which I think might have made a huge difference to her.

Alli was a person who was denied a full sexual life and a full work life, whose gifts and being went unrecognized, so that she felt she could express them only by stealth. That doesn't make her "eccentric." She found an unusual strategy for coping, but at least she was able to cope.

John Grayshaw: What was Sheldon's most important work(s) and why? What will she be remembered for in 50 or 100 years?

I'd guess "The Women Men Don't See" and "Houston, Houston," but I can't read the future.

John Grayshaw: What was Le Guin's most important work(s) and why? What will she be remembered for in 50 or 100 years?

Left Hand, *The Dispossessed,* "Omelas" is the easy answer. But different Le Guin books mean so much to different people. I'm pretty sure readers and scholars will keep going back to her whole body of work and finding new meanings in it.

Research Questions

John Grayshaw: How do you research for biographies? Did you have access to an archive of Sheldon or Le Guin's personal papers/manuscripts/correspondence?

When I started researching Alice Sheldon, her literary executor, Jeffrey D. Smith, was keeping her papers in cardboard boxes in his basement in Baltimore. My husband and I made a couple of trips there together, spending a week at a time taking the papers in shopping bags, on the bus, to a copy shop downtown. Fortunately Alli kept carbons of most of her correspondence as Tiptree, so I had both sides to draw on.

A few years ago, Jeff Smith donated the papers to the University of Oregon Library, which also houses Ursula Le Guin's archives. Once papers are in an archive, you don't get to carry them around with you, obviously, but they're available to any scholar who wants to do research.

The Le Guin book will be a very different process. I've done some archival work, but I also spent many hours interviewing her on the phone. Those interviews will probably be the backbone of the book.

John Grayshaw: You talked in a 2006 interview with Matthew Cheney about the possibility of a collection of Tiptree and/or Le Guin letters being published? Is that any closer to a reality 12 years later?

Yes. I have a co-editor, and she and I are making plans for an edition of the Tiptree-Le Guin-Russ letters. It should come out within the next couple of years.