### Science Fiction Book Club Interview with author Julie Phillips June 2019

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.

Martin Dudley: Any update on the Tiptree Le Guin Russ letters collection mentioned last year?

No, sorry. My co-editor and I are being slow.

Martin Dudley: I read "On the Last Afternoon" yesterday (Tiptree/Sheldon) and it is littered with phrases that look like quotations (e.g. O rich and sounding voices of the air—I come! I come!—), but I could only track one down as being a line by Jeffers, the poet. Was this a deliberate choice - to create phrases that seem to come from literature, but are not actually. Or am I mistaken and they are quite obscure actual quotations?

Probably actual quotations. Try playing around with an internet search. The "rich and sounding voices" is from Lionel Johnson's "Mystic and Cavalier," a depressing poem that made a big impression on Alli when she first read it. <a href="https://www.bartleby.com/103/54.html">https://www.bartleby.com/103/54.html</a>

She knew it because it was in the Untermeyer overview of British and American poetry that she took with her to boot camp. When I was working on the book I had a midcentury Untermeyer that had belonged to my great-aunt. It was helpful.

I think Alli probably met Robinson Jeffers when she lived in Carmel, but I don't know a whole lot about that time.

David Hyde: Will you be writing about Ursula's relationship with Philip K. Dick? John Grayshaw: In our previous interview you listed several friends that Le Guin developed that were helpful to her career: Virginia Kidd, Philip K. Dick, Harlan Ellison, Robert Silverberg, and Terry Carr. Can you briefly tell us about each of these friendships?

David: Yes. I don't know all that much yet about her friendship with Dick. They didn't correspond intensely, unless there are letters I haven't seen yet, and they never met. Le Guin was close to Virginia Kidd, of course, though mostly by mail; and to Bob, and to Harlan (who told me one of his proudest moments was once making Ursula laugh so hard that milk came out of her nose). But other friendships, many of them outside of SF, were just as important to her. And unfortunately there's no other SF correspondence I've seen so far that comes close to the one she had with Tip.

## Jim McClanahan: What impact did being the daughter of Alfred Kroeber, the father of American Anthropology, have on her literary style?

He taught her distance, I suspect—though I think she had to unlearn some of that in her apprentice work. And of course anthropology had tons of influence on her subject matter. Myth and magic are some of the subjects of anthropology, and learning to balance them with rationalism—I think you can see her father's influence there.

I'm still working out the answer to this question.

# Amy Binns: Her Earthsea books propose a whole new religion/way of looking at death. What were her religious influences?

Taoism, and later animism to some extent. I'm not sure what influenced her decision to bring reincarnation to Earthsea. She went through a period in the late '70s when she read the *Mahabharata* and learned about Hinduism, and later she looked into Buddhism; and she incorporated Taoism into her late novel *The Telling*, which pits fundamentalism against an indigenous religion that values balance and learning. So those might be the sources of her decision to set the dead free in *The Other Wind*. She was interested in religion but wasn't a believer.

## François Peneaud: Why did Ursula Le Guin write science-fiction? What did it bring to her goals as a writer?

This is a very good question with a long answer. What I said about it in The New Yorker in 2016 was:

"I just didn't know what to do with my stuff until I stumbled into science fiction and fantasy," Le Guin says. "And then, of course, *they* knew what to do with it." "They" were the editors, fans, and fellow-authors who gave her an audience for her work. If science fiction was down-market, it was at least a market. More than that, genre supplied a ready-made set of tools, including spaceships, planets, and aliens, plus a realm—the future—that set no limits on the imagination. She found that science fiction suited what she called, in a letter to her mother, her "peculiar" talent, and she felt a lightheartedness in her writing that had to do with letting go of ambitions and constraints.

In the fall of 1966, when she was thirty-seven, Le Guin began "A Wizard of Earthsea." In the next few years—which also saw her march against the Vietnam War and dance in a conga line with Allen Ginsberg, when he came to Portland to read Vedas for peace—she produced her great early work, including, in quick succession, "The Left Hand of Darkness," "The Lathe of Heaven," "The Farthest Shore," and "The Dispossessed," her ambitious novel of anarchist utopia.

Science fiction opened her up further to writing from alien points of view—composing the political manifesto of an ant, wondering what it would be like if humans had the seasonal sexuality of birds, imagining love in a society in which a marriage involves four people. Le Guin

says her ambition has always been "not just trying to get into other minds but other beings." She adds, "Somewhere in the nineteenth century a line got drawn: you can't do this for grownups. But fantasy and science fiction just kind of walked around the line."

Another use of the fantastic for Le Guin was to bring her ethical concerns into her fiction without becoming didactic. And it let her avoid the masculinist literary world of the 1950s, whose subjects were not her subjects.

When she started writing she didn't even have someone like Borges as a literary model, because he wasn't yet translated into English. Calvino was just starting to be translated. That always amazes me, that these writers we take for granted weren't available to her.

François Peneaud: Another one, maybe the same one: Was her tendency to break down conventions (sexual, political...) in her SF writings a reflection of her views regarding the world she lived in?

Yes. Very much so.

Ken Riehl: Did she have any favorite poets who influenced her or provided inspiration in her writing?

She read tons. Her influences were many.

In her youth she liked a lot of unfashionable 19<sup>th</sup> century poets, such as Shelley and Housman. In a 1983 interview she said that the older poets who'd meant most to her as an adult were Roethke, Rilke, Yeats, and Victor Hugo (whom she read in French). Elsewhere she said that part of her writing on dreams in *The Lathe of Heaven* was influenced by Hugo's poetry.

She liked Dylan Thomas (and was thrilled to hear him read in New York in 1952). She didn't care for some of the older American poets (Whitman, Stevens, Frost, Pound, Eliot) or to the confessional poetry of her generation (Robert Lowell, Sylvia Path). In that same '83 interview she said, "When I learned that women were writing a new kind of poetry in this decade and the last, it became an unceasing source of pleasure and inspiration. So is Native American poetry both from the old oral traditions and that being written by Linda Hogan, Joy Harjo, Wendy Rose, Paula Gunn Allen, and others."

Joy Harjo just became America's new Poet Laureate. Ursula would have been pleased.

Molly Greenspring: Le Guin's work has been called 'feminist science fiction', do you think this is true and if so how?

I think it's true. I don't think I can answer the "how" in a short space.

John Grayshaw: Who were some of the authors that influenced Le Guin's work? Who did she read when she was growing up?

This is another really good question with a long answer.

## John Grayshaw: What were some of the most surprising/interesting things you've found in your research of Le Guin?

Here's a recent one: I just reread Mary Renault's *The King Must Die*, her 1958 retelling of the Theseus-Ariadne story, and was astonished by the resemblances between it and Earthsea, especially *The Tombs of Atuan*. Islands, ships, numinous places, priestesses conducting sinister rites, labyrinth, dramatic final earthquake—I'm sure she must have read it, and that it made its way, probably unconsciously, into Earthsea.

On another subject, I think of Le Guin as a West Coast person, so I was surprised when she told me she would have liked to stay in Georgia, where she lived for two years, 1954-56, while Charles was finishing his thesis. She liked Charles's family and the culture there, which was very different from what she was used to—I think she felt slightly anthropological about it. She also saw the shadow side of a segregated society, of course. Ultimately they felt they couldn't live under Jim Crow, but Ursula regretted having to leave.

Sometimes you run into dead ends, too. Le Guin loved Philip Glass and once said she wished he would make an opera of one of her books. A couple months ago he did a signing in my local bookstore, so I asked him if he'd ever considered an opera based on Le Guin. He said, "Who?"

#### John Grayshaw: What were some of the funniest things you've found in your research of Le Guin?

Her cartoons. Some of her letters. When she wasn't being serious she could be very, very funny. Her late essays are often funny. If you want to get a taste of that, you should read *No Time to Spare*, a collection of her blog posts.

#### John Grayshaw: Why are several of Le Guin's protagonists people of color?

Here's an excerpt from an introduction to *A Wizard of Earthsea* that Ursula wrote in 2012. In the European fantasy tradition, she writes,

the principal characters were men. If the story was heroic, the hero was a white man; most dark-skinned people were inferior or evil. [...]

In [some] ways my story didn't follow the tradition. Its subversive elements attracted little attention, no doubt because I was deliberately sneaky about them. A great many white readers in 1967 were not ready to accept a brown-skinned hero. But they weren't expecting one. I didn't make an issue of it, and you have to be well into the book before you realise that Ged, like most of the characters, isn't white.

His people, the Archipelagans, are various shades of copper and brown, shading into black in the South and East Reaches. The light-skinned people among them have far-northern or Kargish ancestors. The Kargish raiders in the first chapter are white. Serret, who both as girl and woman betrays Ged, is white. Ged is copper-brown and his friend Vetch is black. I was bucking the racist tradition, 'making a statement' -- but I made it quietly, and it went almost unnoticed.

Alas, I had no power, at that time, to combat the flat refusal of many cover departments to put people of color on a book jacket.

#### John Grayshaw: What were Le Guin's hobbies other than writing?

In her blog post "No Time to Spare" she wrote that in 2011 Harvard sent her a 60<sup>th</sup> reunion questionnaire. (She went to Radcliffe, but Radcliffe became Harvard.) One of the questions was, "What do you do in your spare time?" She wrote:

I am free, but my time is not. My time is fully and vitally occupied with sleep, with daydreaming, with doing business and writing friends and family on email, with reading, with writing poetry, with writing prose, with thinking, with forgetting, with embroidering, with cooking and eating a meal and cleaning up the kitchen, with construing Virgil, with meeting friends, with talking with my husband, with going out to shop for groceries, with walking if I can walk and traveling if we are traveling, with sitting Vipassana sometimes, with watching a movie sometimes, with doing the Eight Precious Chinese exercises when I can, with lying down for an afternoon rest with a volume of Krazy Kat to read and my own slightly crazy cat occupying the region between my upper thighs and mid-calves, where he arranges himself and goes instantly and deeply to sleep. None of this is spare time. I can't spare it. What is Harvard thinking of? I am going to be eightyone next week. I have no time to spare.

I would add that she and Charles both loved music and had season tickets to the Portland Symphony and the opera. In the summer they went to the Oregon Shakespeare Festival in Ashland and spent time in Eastern Oregon. When Charles's parents were still alive they often went to see them in Macon, Georgia, in the summer, sometimes road-tripping across the country.

And of course she read constantly. She and Charles used to have a drink and read to each other before dinner—biographies, histories, novels.

John Grayshaw: In an interview Le Guin talked about her first novel she said it was an Orsinia novel and "may a curse fall upon any academic who digs it out and publishes it." Then according to Wikipedia, between 1951 and 1961 Le Guin wrote 5 Orsinia novels, all rejected by publishers. Can you tell us more about this, are there 5 unpublished Le Guin novels sitting in that archive in the University of Oregon?

As far as I know she wrote two non-Orsinian novels and two Orsinian novels, the first one, called "A Descendance," and the one that was eventually published as *Malafrena*. (I should fix that in Wikipedia.

I'm sure she said it in an interview, but that doesn't mean it's true.) I'm not sure what she did with them. I hope to find out.

John Grayshaw: Are you working on other writing projects or focused on the Le Guin biography?

Yes. I'm still working on the book I was working on last year, about creativity and mothering. Who knows, it may eventually get done... But I'm also researching and writing about Le Guin.

John Grayshaw: You said you just got back from a Le Guin Symposium in Paris. What was it like? What was your talk about? How was it received?

Well, it was in Paris, so that was great. It was mainly young academics—mostly from the UK, Northern Europe and the US, plus a couple from India—talking about Le Guin, ecology, ethics, time, the Anthropocene, and so on. They pretty much covered the spectrum of her work, including papers on her later fiction and her essays. Brian Attebery gave a keynote speech on *Always Coming Home* as the "hinge" in Le Guin's work between her early and her later fiction. Isabelle Stengers gave the other keynote, in French; she's a really interesting Belgian philosopher of science. Unfortunately my French wasn't up to it. There was an entire panel in French on *fiction panier*, or Carrier Bag Fiction, that I was also sorry to have to miss.

I talked about Le Guin's year in Paris, about how studying French and going to Paris led her to writing her first fiction and abandoning academia. I quoted from her love letters to her husband Charles (with cartoons). Academics don't take biographers seriously, but there was one beautiful passage in a love letter that I think made some of us tear up a little.

At the end of one of the three days of programming, a few of us went to the Hotel de Seine, where Ursula and Charles lived together in Paris. We stood outside and took pictures. It felt like a little pilgrimage.

John Grayshaw: You wrote after Le Guin's death that "our job now, it seems to me, is to make this that day before her revolution." What sort of revolution would Le Guin have wanted?

John Grayshaw: What is Le Guin's legacy?

These are questions with very, very long answers. I talked a little bit about her legacy here: <a href="http://www.bookslut.com/features/2012\_12\_019664.php">http://www.bookslut.com/features/2012\_12\_019664.php</a>. But I wrote that piece in 2012, and critics and academics have done a lot more thinking about Le Guin since then, and have been working to create a really exciting critical context for her work.

About the revolution she would have wanted, I think you can find it in her work, and in people's responses to her work. I believe it's a revolution of questions more than answers.