

# A Wizard of Earthsea

Ursula K Le Guin, 1968

David Langford goes back to Wizard school

**W**ritten before the fantasy genre began its uncontrollable growth in the '70s, *A Wizard of Earthsea* is the classic example of a boy wizard's magical schooling. It has been much imitated, but never with the pure clarity of Ursula Le Guin's prose.

Earthsea is a vast archipelago of assorted islands, where sea-traders are always glad to carry mages who command the wind and weather. There are unpleasant sea-raiders, too, and our young hero – a born wizard – first shows his power by working a spell of fog to confuse attackers of his little island.

A mentor then takes him in hand, the old mage Ogion, who once tamed an earthquake. Ogion reveals the boy's true name, Ged, but insists on teaching him patience, discipline and runic writing rather than showy magic. "To hear, one must be silent." Goaded by his own eagerness, Ged takes a ship to the school for wizards on Roke Island. This is a place of wonders, where lessons are taught by nine master wizards under the guidance of the Archmage: the Master Hand (illusions and sleights), Windkey (weather), Herbal, Changer, Chanter, Namer, Patterner, Summoner and Doorkeeper.

Most importantly Ged learns the lore of True Names, the secret identities of all people and things. A mage has power over whatever he can name. To enchant the whole ocean, his spell must truly name every bay, cove, inlet, strait – all the sea's endless subdivisions. This is the limitation of magic. Just like Ogion, the Masters keep talking about limits, about the need to preserve balance and avoid unnecessary magic because every spell produces endless ripples of unknown consequences. As in the yin-yang symbol of Taoism, light and darkness must be kept carefully in balance.

Nevertheless Ged can't resist showing off in a forbidden contest of magic with an equally prideful fellow pupil. The consequences are terrible. Something bad enters the world. Our hero, now maimed and subdued, finally graduates from Roke and is sent to deal with a far island's dragon problem. Once he's



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outside the magical wards of Roke, though, the shadow that he conjured stirs again and follows...

His voyages, first fleeing and then pursuing his nemesis, take him to the ends of the world, the ultimate reaches of the sea. It's notable that *Earthsea* doesn't contain anything like the standard Dark Lord of fantasyland. There are bad places where life-hating powers are imprisoned (Ged visits one such in this first book; another dominates the second, *The Tombs of Atuan*), but the shadow that Ged let into the world is something altogether different, and not a thing that can be defeated. It knows his true name. The finale – partly echoing CS Lewis's

third Narnia novel *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* – is mystical, moving and satisfying.

Earthsea's influence has been enormous. Many fantasy writers, like Terry Pratchett in *Equal Rites*, took their cue from Le Guin's warning about the lure of animal shapes: "And no-one knows how many of the dolphins that leap in the waters of the Inmost Sea were men once, wise men, who forgot their wisdom and their name in the joy of the restless sea."

Some readers don't notice that *Earthsea* is also a gentle counterbalance to earlier children's fiction where all the characters are white. Ged is reddish-brown, his best friend Vetch is black, and only the savage Kargish sea-raiders are white-skinned and yellow-haired. So Ursula Le Guin was deeply disappointed by the 2004 adaptation, *Earthsea*: "The makers of the American TV version, while boasting that they were 'colour blind', reduced the coloured population of Earthsea to one and a half. I have blasted them for whitewashing Earthsea, and do not forgive them for it." Studio Ghibli's animated *Tales from Earthsea* (reviewed on page 86) handles this better and has splendid dragons – but too much violence, says Le Guin, while the plot is mostly "incoherent".

*A Wizard of Earthsea* was followed by *The Tombs of Atuan* and *The Farthest Shore*. Further sequels eventually appeared, but not all Earthsea fans enjoyed the feminist revisionism of book four, *Tehanu* (1990). Like *The Lord of the Rings*, the original Earthsea trilogy belongs at the heart of any fantasy library. **David Langford**

*Dave Langford's latest book, The End of Harry Potter?, is now available in paperback (RRP £6.99).*

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>> "*Earthsea* remains one of the major influences of my teen years. The naming of things, the haunting of Ged, the evocative descriptive passages... Still brilliant." **Reikifrog**

>> "Le Guin's world is wholly recognisable and realised. It values craftsmanship and the natural rhythms of living – and shows it by being sublimely crafted and endlessly rewarding." **Lear**

>> "I like the way Le Guin expresses her philosophy without being didactic and over-bearing; a good story with a moral that doesn't bore the reader." **Sassl**

>> "This didn't inspire me to read the other three." **Cally5000**

>> "I really didn't care what happened to any of the characters – a dull, dull read." **Ghyste**

>> "One of the most magic books I've ever read. Everyone who's read *Harry Potter* should give a go to this amazing book." **Gaspar**

>> "A little bleh. Too new agey, touchy-feely. Don't really see how this has got all the praise it did." **darkman**

>> "I loved the human side of Ged, how he spends most of his time screwing up, then trying to fix it. Quite a realised character in a genre of caricatures and stereotypes." **FREEFALL**

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