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The Left Hand of Darkness – Ursula K. LeGuin

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The Left Hand of Darkness

Ursula K. LeGuin

286 pages

published in 1969

Last year I discovered I read why too few science fiction books written by women and started making up for this lack by (re)reading some favourite writers. With the new year and following the example of several fellow science fiction bloggers, I decided to approach this more systemically, by pledging to read at least one science fiction or fantasy book by a female writer each month. *The Left Hand of Darkness* is the first and I choose it because it was a well respected classic novel, winner of both the Hugo and Nebula awards, I had never managed finish before, despite having tried three or four times and as important, it was short.

Since *The Left Hand of Darkness* is such a well known work, over forty years old and discussed and summarised extensively during that time, you can't help but come to it with certain preconceptions about it. The most important of which you'll have to let go if you want to get the shape of the true book. This is not a feminist science fiction novel. It's a novel about gender and gender expectations and the role our assumptions of having two separate sexes each with their own character, strength and weakness play in our societies, but it's not feminist, unless every book about gender is by definition feminist. What you actually get in this story is a fairly traditional view of gender, as I'll try to show.

The Left Hand of Darkness is set on Gethen, or Winter, where its humans are sexless for the best part of each month, but enter into a state of sexuality roughly once every twentyeight days, when they can turn either male or female, depending on circumstances. This is called *Kemmer*; their normal state is *somer*. If there's nobody around who's also in kemmer, nothing happens, but if a receptive partner is found, they synchronise: one becomes male, one female and can concieve, with the female partner staying female until her baby is born and weaned. Who gets to be male and who female can differ from kemmer to kemmer and it's fairly usual to have both fathered and born children. When not in kemmer no sexual characteristics are present and the question of sex is completely absent from daily life in those periods.

Into this world comes Genly Ai, First Envoy of the Ekumen, the eightythree worlds of humanity, to make the existence of these worlds known on Gethen and offer its nations membership in it. The Ekumen always sends its envoys alone, as one man alone clearly cannot be a threat. Genly has landed in Karhide, not so much a nation as a family argument, as said by Thorem Harth rem ir Estraven, its prime minister at the start of the story. Nominally a kingdom, it is actually a mishmash of various political-economic units only lightly held together, with most people's alliance to the heart, the fundamental unit of Gethen social organisation, halfway between a family and a clan. Genly through Estraven has been trying to get an audience with the king, but when this finally happen it does not end well, while Estraven meanwhile is branded a traitor and has to flee to Karhide's main rival country, Orgoreyn, far more developed as a nation. In response

Genly leaves the capital and travels Karhide, before leaving it for Orgoreyn. This is at first far more receptive to his message, but shifts in internal politics land him in a workcamp, from which he's rescued by Estraven and together they flee north, over the ice back towards Karhide.

Most of this story is told by Genly, though several chapters are also narrated by Estraven. In both cases, as in the extracts from folk tales, Ekumen reports on Gethen etc. LeGuin also uses, people are consistently referred to as "he" or "him", instead of a gender neutral "it" or "they". As LeGuin admitted later, this is a mistake, as it does make the Gethian people more male than they are supposed to be. Worse, I got the impression that most of the time when Genly notices their more female aspects, it's shown as a negative. For instance, when Genly is in the work camp, this is what he writes about the guards:

The guards were seldom harsh and never cruel. They tended to be stolid, heavy, and to my eyes effeminate – not in the sense of delicacy, etc., but in just the opposite sense: a gross, bland fleshiness, a bovinity without point or edge.

Excellent writing and you can see exactly what he means, but every time Genly compares a gethenian to a woman, it's in this negative vein. Hardly feminist, but it fits in with some of the other glimpses at LeGuin's worldview from the time, e.g. in the *Earthsea* novels with its distrust of woman's magic. LeGuin here is, consciously or subconsciously, much more conservative in her gender views than she would be.

Despite this *The Left Hand of Darkness* is a great novel, as long as you don't want it to be something it isn't. The gender aspects of it tend to overshadow the other themes in the novel, the creativity LeGuin has invested in making Gethen and especially Karhide real. Her anthropological background must've helped with this. You can see that e.g. shifgrethor, the Karhidian idea of honour and how it can be added to or subtracted from in interactions with others, is inspired by really existing codes of honour, but it's far from the usual orientalist clichés of thinly disguised Japanese in Space™. In the same way I got a real sense of place, a sense that this is a planet and not just a stageset for the hero to have his adventures on.

Not bad for a book I had to force myself to read.

<http://cloggie.org/books2/> / *The Left Hand of Darkness* – Ursula K. LeGuin