

Recall This Book

Episode 112

John Plotz, Ursula Le Guin (EF)

Elizabeth Ferry:

Greetings, and welcome to another episode of Recall This Book, Summer 2023. I'm delighted that we finally get to have a conversation with my co-producer and co-host, and friend, John Plotz, about his about-to-be-released book, *Ursula Le Guin's Earthsea (My Reading)*, which is coming out with Oxford University Press. John, when's the release date?

John Plotz:

August 25th.

Elizabeth Ferry:

August 25th. Okay. And also, welcome John. Welcome to the program.

John Plotz:

Thank you.

Elizabeth Ferry:

So, John is a professor at Brandeis University. He's the Barbara Mandel professor of the humanities in the English Department. Is that the correct title, John?

John Plotz:

Yeah. So, people always think it's Barbara Mandrel, which would be much more glamorous.

Elizabeth Ferry:

And he's the author of many different things, including several books, *Portable Property: Victorian Culture on the Move*, *The Crowd: British Literature and Public Politics*, *Semi-Detached: The Aesthetics of Virtual Experience since Dickens*. Also, a children's book, *Time and the Tapestry: A William Morris Adventure*, which I think you sold while sitting next to someone on a plane, which I was super jealous about, and continue to be. As well as many other exciting publications within academia and various kinds of public spheres. So, John, tell us a little bit about the book, and also about how you came to talk to Le Guin.

John Plotz:

Okay, cool. So, Elizabeth, thank you so much. It's so exciting and weird to be on this side of the microphone with you. I love it. I'll also say I've never had a book that had actual gold on its cover the way you have, so there's a lot of things still to aim for. Yeah, so this book is a total labor of love. I was invited to join this series called *My Reading*, which is wonderful books, for example, by Rosemarie Bodenheimer about Beckett. There's a fantastic book about Dickens.

And they basically just said, "Pick a book that changed your life." And you won't be shocked to know that I originally thought about Hannah Arendt, and I thought about Willa Cather too. But really, Le Guin kept with me for reasons that I try to talk about in the book, because of the kind of dual aspect reality that she creates. That is that she's telling stories for adults and for children as well.

I learned in my interview with her that the Earthsea books were actually commissioned literally as the first young adult fantasy

series ever. And that sort of rings true to me in that way that young adults can tip two different registers at once. So, what I wanted to get at with the Earthsea books--and for those of you who haven't read them, I hope you will read them because they're wonderful, even if you're listening to this as an adult, or you'll read them to your kids--but if you have read them, you'll know that they're kind of dragon-based adventure stories. They're about magicians who learn a language that if you can channel it, enables you to change reality by way of words.

And they are quest adventures that began quite simply. And also in kind of as Le Guin herself says, old sexist Western European fantasy tradition, in which the boys go on adventures, and the girls hope for them to come home. And then they evolve. Even in the first trilogy, but especially in the second trilogy, they evolve into something much more complex, and something that reflects Le Guin's own politics, I think. Which are progressive anarchist, not really utopian I would say. But sort of emancipationist, and anarchist, and very feminist.

So, what I say in the book is that I loved the first series, and I still love it, but I never would've written this book if it weren't for the second set of Earthsea books that Le Guin wrote. So, she wrote the first set when she was relatively young in her 30s and 40s. She went back in her 60s, and wrote a second series. It didn't undo the first series, but added a whole new layer to our understanding of this entire world of Earthsea. So, I basically tried to write a book about what it is to look at an author being a re-reader, to look at them going back, and to return to a naive experience they had younger. And have a sort of second, not ironic, but more seasoned and I don't know, comprehensive vision of the world. So, that's the argument for the two-sidedness of Le Guin herself, and the two-sidedness of what it's like to read the books.

Elizabeth Ferry:

One thing I really love about your book, John, is the way in which you have this kind of mirroring quality between, what it's like for her to revisit writing them, but then also what it's like to be a child reading them, or a very young adult, and then what it's like to be a middle-aged person reading them. And how that kind of--Yeah, I agree with you that irony is in the neighborhood of what it is, there's some other word for it--that certain kind of bemusement that seems to produce for Le Guin as a writer, and for you and me too as a reader. So, I thought you captured that really poignantly.

John Plotz:

Thank you. Yeah, I mean, I like your point about that doubleness. And Schiller has this essay called "Naive and the Sentimental Poetry" where he uses the word *sentimental*, which I don't think we use in quite that sense anymore, to capture that notion of going back with a seasoned eye, where you see what it was like to believe originally. It would be like the difference between how Don Quixote believes in the giants in the world, when Sancho Panza, all he believes in is that Quixote believes in them. You're looking at a simpler form of belief. And so I definitely see Le Guin going back that way. But the thing I'll say about Le Guin, that's really great--she has a wonderful essay on the craft of writing fantasy called "From Elfland to Poughkeepsie. And in it, she says that the thing about fantasy novels is that they completely know they're made up, and they never tire of reminding you how invented they are.

Elizabeth Ferry:

Yeah.

John Plotz:

And I think that's a crucial point about fantasy. To the extent that I have an argument in the book, it's actually an argument against J.R.R Tolkien, who says that world-making depends on completely fooling

the reader, deluding them into living in that world. And my idea with Le Guin is much more... well, I call it semi-detachment. I mean, I sort of wrote other things about this in the past. But my idea is that it's two things at once. She wants you there with the heroes, and their goats, and their dragons and all that. But she also wants you to remember this is magic, this is make-believe, and living with both those things.

Elizabeth Ferry:

Yeah. What you're saying about fantasy reminds me a little about things like miniatures, or things that are made at a bigger scale, right?

John Plotz:

Yeah.

Elizabeth Ferry:

When you have a miniature dollhouse, furniture, or a pocket watch that's tiny, but the pleasure comes from the fact that it's so well done. But you always know that it's kind of building a tiny little world, it depends on the consciousness of its artificiality, even as it's trying to get you to momentarily forget about that.

John Plotz:

Yeah, yeah. I think that's a great point. And so I try to talk a little bit in the book about how this sort of belief relates to religious belief. And I think there's a very... Le Guin herself talks about herself as a secularist, or a secular humanist, and that reads true to me. But I think she's not trying to throw religion under the bus. She wants you to understand the impulse to want to hold onto things that you know you can't prove to be true, but you nonetheless want them to be true. And writing fantasy is a good way of thinking about where that impulse comes from, and how we could sustain it. Like what Huizinga calls the "game world." We could have this kind of

enchanted game world. And her problem with religion, which is also my problem with religion, is just the moment that it wants you to forget the gaminess of it. To the extent that it's-

Elizabeth Ferry:

Right. I mean, to the extent that it's authoritarian religion I see as a problem, but-

John Plotz:

Yeah, yeah. Yeah, that's true. One of the things I like about Le Guin as a leftist thinker, and one of the reasons she was always getting into arguments with the other leftist science fiction thinkers of the 1970s, is that Le Guin is an anarchist. She has skepticism about all kinds of mobilization, all kinds of corralling authority structures. So, when I was listening to the interview I did with her, I was really struck by how much she attacks corporations. And this is a very 2023 thing to say, looking back on an interview from 2015. But nowadays, I don't actually think about corporations as the main thing I'm scared of when I think about right-wing power structures in America.

Elizabeth Ferry:

Oh, I do, but-

John Plotz:

Oh, you do? Okay. Well, we could talk about that, that's interesting. But, yeah. Well, yeah, you're on Le Guin's side then, I guess. Because she's really quick to identify it's not just organized religion that's a problem, but it's all sorts of governmental structures, including state socialism. And also the corporate structures that capitalism creates.

Elizabeth Ferry:

Right. I mean, even organized anarchism if you... Or that sort of contradictory phenomenon in *The Dispossessed*. And that's maybe

also why you say she's not a utopian too, right? All of her worlds are kind of complicated, and there's plenty of room for unpleasantness even in sort of imagined political systems that she's sort of approving of.

John Plotz:

Yeah, yeah, completely. So, you're touching on the fact that I think it's useful to think about Le Guin as, writing both fantasy and science fiction. Sometimes they mix, but usually they're somewhat separate. Like, there's these incredible science fiction novels she wrote just while she was writing the first Earthsea book. So, there's *The Left Hand of Darkness*, *The Lathe of Heaven*, and *The Dispossessed*, each of which is sort of exploring a different aspect of what would happen if certain things about our world got fixed. But exactly what you're saying, nonetheless, you're still in a muddle. In *The Left Hand of Darkness*, gender is completely different from the rigidly binary male, female, *feminine mystique* world that Le Guin was writing in in the 1970s. And it's so different that our gender terms don't even really apply to what people are like on this world. Nonetheless, it's not as if the world is super awesome and everybody has everything figured out. It just pushes a different set of problems to the fore.

Elizabeth Ferry:

Right, right. So, tell us about how you reached out to her, and how that came to be.

John Plotz:

So, I sent her a copy of that children's book that I wrote about William Morris, and we discovered a shared love of William Morris, and she was very nice to me, and invited me to come visit with her in Oregon. And so I asked if it was okay if I brought a tape recorder with me for the conversation. She was extremely nice about that. If there are true Le Guin fans listening, you will know that there's, I think at least two complete books of conversations with Ursula.

She's proven her generosity in so many different ways in print, but also in terms of human contact. She used to go to science fiction conventions, she went to fantasy conventions. She met people who were fans or would-be friends, and was always very generous. So, anyway, mine is just probably typical in that way, but it was about three years before she died.

She was in a ruminative frame. She didn't seem nostalgic to me. I wouldn't say she was talking about herself in the past tense, but she was looking back at the arc of her own career, and thinking about how her writing compared to the 19th century writing. Anyway, so it was a lovely conversation. And I think maybe the first clip we're going to hear, she was talking about how names work in the Earthsea books, and how she basically came to write them. So, I was asking her both about maps, because there's a very important map of the Earthsea islands, and also about the names of places. So, should I just play the tape?

Elizabeth Ferry:

Please do, yes.

John Plotz:

When did the map come for you of the Earthsea map? Did you draw it before or?

Ursula K Le Guin:

I wrote a couple of short stories that took place on islands that had wizards. And then I was asked by a publisher to write... We didn't even have the word young adult then, to write a fantasy for older children. I was like, "Oh, no, I can't do that. I've never written for children. I don't know how to do that." But I went home and thought about it, and got the idea of, "How does a wizard become a wizard? Does he go to wizard school?" Wouldn't that be fun? So, there I went, and then I thought, "Okay, where? Oh, it's somewhere. It's those islands that those other stories are. But I need to know more about them." So, I did

literally at that point, sit down, and draw a big map with lots of islands, about which I knew nothing at that point. But I named them happily. And then all through the rest of the six books, I could just travel around and find out what they were like.

John Plotz:

Yeah, yeah. They're wonderful names. All the names were there at the first then?

Ursula K Le Guin:

Names come first with me. I can't write about a character if he or she doesn't have a name, the right name. Yeah, so I had to name all the islands right away. Isn't that weird? I have no understanding what the process there is.

John Plotz:

No, wait a second. It just occurred to me. So, characters in the Earthsea books have use names, and then they have true names. Are the islands' names true names?

Ursula K Le Guin:

They're true names.

John Plotz:

They're true names.

Ursula K Le Guin:

Yeah.

John Plotz:

So, you can do magic with them because-

Ursula K Le Guin:

Oh, yeah.

John Plotz:
... they're the-

Ursula K Le Guin:
Yes.

John Plotz:
Mm, right.

Ursula K Le Guin:
Yeah.

John Plotz:
Right. But it doesn't give you power over an island to know its true name.

Ursula K Le Guin:
Island's a pretty big thing.

John Plotz:
Yeah, it's big. I see. Okay. They have power.

Ursula K Le Guin:
Yes. But a big wizard could probably do something awful or wonderful temporarily to an island by using its name.

John Plotz:
Yes.

Elizabeth Ferry:
Wow, that's great. I mean, I'll just say that one of the things that is most... one of the central ideas of the Earthsea world that I find so cool and compelling is this whole idea of magic as a form of linguistics, of trying to find out that... I mean, all of this... not all of it,

but a large part of the study of it is about finding things' true names, as well as the names being this important part of the rite of passage of a person.

John Plotz:

You get your name.

Elizabeth Ferry:

Yeah, you get your name. And it turns out of dragons also.

John Plotz:

Yeah.

Elizabeth Ferry:

And I just think that's such a brilliant little kind of mechanism at the heart of the world there.

John Plotz:

Yeah, there's the tower of the Namer. And on Roke, there are these various different mages who have the power. And one of them is the Namer, who actually comes from outside of their world. He comes from not the Hardic Lands, but the Kargish Lands. So, there is this sense that names and linguistics can do something for you. Le Guin admits having a soft spot for science, and the people who collect knowledge. She likes lore masters. But I get it. You're talking about something deeper too, because you're talking about the way the world is literally made up out of words, and that's a point about a fantasy novel. There's something-

Elizabeth Ferry:

And that there's different kinds of words. That there's this sort of registers that are more superficial or more kind of common for regular use. And then these more kind of intimate, intensely powerful. And I guess part of what it is is, and just to say for many of

our listeners know. But that Le Guin is the daughter of a very famous kind of founding, or let's say within US anthropology, sort of second generation anthropologist, namely Alfred Kroeber. And her books are deeply anthropological. I would consider her an anthropologist. I think she would agree. And a lot of people-

John Plotz:

An imaginary anthropologist.

Elizabeth Ferry:

An imaginary... Right, a speculative anthropologist.

John Plotz:

Speculative anthropologist. Yeah, sure.

Elizabeth Ferry:

Yeah.

John Plotz:

So are we all, yeah.

Elizabeth Ferry:

One of the things I love about the way that names work in the world, and this is what Marcel Mauss would call a total social fact, is that it has these political uses, it has ritual uses. There's also a whole etiquette around who gets... when do you use someone's name. Or how do you indicate that you know someone's true name, but you're not going to use it. And all the ways in which this kind of internal cultural logic of this world, or actually physical and cultural logic expresses itself in so many different forms.

One thing I wanted to ask you, and that I love about this quote is, it comes up throughout the different parts of the conversation, is her interest in thinking about herself as a certain kind of writer,

different from other kinds of writers. Later, she talks about how she's not very interested in or not very good at plot, that the plot kind of happens. And her whole stance in this is about her sort of like, "Well, I needed to know about it, so I wrote about it," as though that wasn't her creating it.

John Plotz:

Yeah, yeah.

Elizabeth Ferry:

Or that creation is a more complicated process than you might've been thinking. And I wanted to know, how did her thoughtfulness about herself as a writer influence your thinking about yourself as a reader in the book?

John Plotz:

Oh, I see: that's a great point. Okay, so that's another one where I would go back to the notion of the child reader and the adult reader of these books. So, I would say as a child, and I talk about this a little bit in the book, I just was *away*. They worked on me. So, I had that same experience that I think a lot of people nowadays have with Harry Potter, but I had it with Lloyd Alexander too, with the *Taran Wanderer* books. We've talked about that before. But like those books where you just believe in the world. And so what I noticed was more like her being a magician, successfully casting a spell, and I was there. But you're talking about going back, and I would say not just going back to write this book, but when I went and read the second set of Earthsea books (so those are called *Tehanu*, *Tales from Earthsea*, and *The Other Wind*) when I read those all, there was a kind of revolution in my thinking.

It did make me realize, "Oh, I can feel Le Guin, the person here, working through problems of, what does it mean... What does it mean for a problem that exists in the real world, also to exist in the

fantasy world?" It's not about escape. It's about rotating your vision of the world into this other space. And then ultimately, you still have to come back to the world because the world is the world, we live in it.

Elizabeth Ferry:

Right.

John Plotz:

But you can maybe come back with that account in your mind.

Elizabeth Ferry:

Right, right. But yeah, there's more of a sort of lack of ambition or a skepticism about ambition in the later things, that maybe is related to this question about trauma. Yeah.

John Plotz:

Yeah, yeah, yeah. And that also is related to the thing that I think is also there from the beginning, but she says more about it in her later books, and she talks about it more in her science fiction too. Which is, she is skeptical of activity, she's skeptical of accomplishment, of getting stuff done. Which, for me, and this is one of the moments I get a little biographical in the book. As a child of the '70s, you're really brought up to think that you're supposed to go out and do something, make something of yourself.

And a lot of what Le Guin shows in the example of *Wizard of Earthsea*, where the very first actions are actions that he takes, that he has to spend the rest of the book trying to undo. And you can never undo them. And you can't actually undo them. All you can do is find some kind of compensatory action. But if you had never done them in the first place, then you wouldn't have loosed something into the world.

Elizabeth Ferry:

And you actually connect that to thinking about teaching, and about what the relationship of teaching is to action in the world, towards the end of your book.

John Plotz:

Totally. Yeah, I do. I mean, all of us in the academy nowadays, especially at a great place like Brandeis, where there is space to have these discussions, understand that this issue of social justice is so crucial as a question of what the classroom is for. And I push back somewhat, though I don't really wade into the polemics. But I push back against the idea that we as teachers are supposed to be showing our students what the right is, or how to do good in the world. That I think of the classroom more as a space for them to figure out what their relationship is to the actions they want to accomplish. In other words, I don't want to exhort them, I want it to be a space where, if they want to exhort themselves, they can. But I want them to understand the grounds of exhortation, basically. So-

Elizabeth Ferry:

You're a *social inactivist*?

John Plotz:

I'm a social inactivist. Yeah, thank you. Yeah, that's true. Yeah, which makes it easier to sit at home, I guess. No. Yeah, I mean, sometimes inaction is really hard, because sometimes you feel like you absolutely know what the right thing to say to someone is, that will push them down a particular road. And then you have to stop yourself from saying it. So, inaction can be really tiring, in fact.

Elizabeth Ferry:

Yes, yes.

John Plotz:

Yeah. I don't know, Elizabeth, if you had this experience of hanging out with older professors. So, for me, it was my beloved older colleague, Michael Gilmore, who died tragically young. But he and I would sit in dissertation defenses, or chapter discussions. And I would yammer on about the 15 things I thought someone should do, and Timo [Gilmore] would say one sentence, and it was just a sentence of noticing something that they had already done. That would be it. And then the light would go on. And it's not inaction exactly, but it was like he was registering what was working for them.

Elizabeth Ferry:

Great. All right. Well, let's move to the next clip.

John Plotz:

Yeah, totally. So, this is a clip about... I mentioned those three science-fiction novels that she was writing at the same time as the first Earthsea book. So, I think this is her sort of discussing how she thinks about science fiction, and fantasy and relationship to each other. And she's talking about the gender experimental quality of *Left Hand of Darkness*, which is I think really a novel for 2023. Okay, here she goes.

Ursula K Le Guin:

So, I wrote Earthsea and Left Hand of Darkness, and those are clearly [distinct]... And from then on, I kind of was following two paths.

John Plotz:

And so, Dispossessed belongs with Left Hand of Darkness then?

Ursula K Le Guin:

Oh, it's science fiction.

John Plotz:

Yeah, science fiction.

Ursula K Le Guin:

Yeah. Social science fiction.

John Plotz:

And The Lathe of Heaven, I guess is science fiction.

Ursula K Le Guin:

Absolutely science fiction. Yeah.

John Plotz:

Though it's very inward as well. I mean, it has-

Ursula K Le Guin:

Well, I began to be able to use science fiction... Well, in Left Hand of Darkness, I was using science fiction not to solve, but to come at a problem that I realized was very deep in me and everybody else, is, "What is gender? What gender am I?" A question we just hadn't been asking. Look at all the answers that are coming out now.

John Plotz:

Yeah, yeah.

Ursula K Le Guin:

Wonderful.

John Plotz:

Yeah.

Ursula K Le Guin:

We have really deconstructed it.

John Plotz:

I agree. I just think, yeah. Well, at one point, I think at that moment, when Left Hand of Darkness came out, you described feminism as waking up from a very long nap at that moment. And I guess it's really woken up now.

Ursula K Le Guin:

Yeah, there're a lot of people trying to put us back to sleep, I would say.

John Plotz:

That's so wonderful to think about Left Hand of Darkness in terms of the deconstructions of gender that we have now in 2015.

Ursula K Le Guin:

We really didn't even have the word gender.

John Plotz:

As opposed to sex, right?

Ursula K Le Guin:

Yeah. It was, "So what sex are you?" In some respects, we really have come all along, and in a good direction, right?

John Plotz:

Yeah. So, at another point, I think also when you were talking about Left Hand of Darkness, you said that, for long times, you would forget what gender your characters were. Does that fit with that idea, or was that a different idea?

Ursula K Le Guin:

In writing Left Hand?

John Plotz:

Yeah.

Ursula K Le Guin:

Well, I was trying to get inside the Gethenian body and viewpoint, in which gender happens once a month, and is an event. And then you just go back to being human. And I was trying to think that way. And I don't know whether I succeeded. If I said I did, I may have just been boasting.

John Plotz:

That phrase, "gender as event," is really evocative, I think, for *Left Hand of Darkness*, that notion that just to do gender, which is almost like a Judith Butler idea of performing gender. In *Left Hand of Darkness*, you don't actually know which gender you're going to end up being in a given... the moment that you get sexualized or genderized in *Left Hand of Darkness*, depends on who you're around. So, it really is eventual in that sense. It's just a thing that happens. Basically, it's literally in the switch sense. It's like a turn on or a turnoff. What turns you on, and in which direction are you turned on? But I do think Le Guin thinks of that beyond that too. I think she thinks of things... And this probably relates to your anthropological point, which is that she thinks of people relationally, and they bring out different aspects of one another. And you see that.

Elizabeth Ferry:

Another part of the kind of revolutionary dimension of that book in its sort of thinking around gender, I think is, and I'm not a queer theorist or expert in any of these matters. But it puts some daylight in-between gender and sexuality in a way in which people weren't really thinking about it, right?

John Plotz:

Yes.

Elizabeth Ferry:

So, you don't really have sexual desire unless, I mean, it's almost like being in heat, right? There's a sort of monthly cycle in which people become sexualized, and they kind of grow genitalia of one sort or another, right?

John Plotz:

Yes.

Elizabeth Ferry:

And they are super horny during that period, but they don't necessarily only seek out, it's sort of like there's one factor, which is what kit you get assigned that month. And then there's another factor, which is, who do you end up being attracted to at that point? Which could be kind of happenstance, or it could be a lot of other things. And then there's certain things that can make you kind of get fixed. There's certain moments where you become more stabilized in a certain gender, or stabilized in a certain sexuality, but there's no prior script for how that's going to go.

John Plotz:

Totally.

Elizabeth Ferry:

It's really amazing.

John Plotz:

Yeah, I agree. And I think that there's a... I mean, first of all, that really gets at something that is there in *The Dispossessed*, in *The Lathe of Heaven* as well, which is that there's a commitment to fundamental openness in Le Guin, things might go another way. So, one of the quotes I'm obsessed with, in fact, when I redid the manuscript for the book, I realized I'd actually quoted her six times in the manuscript saying this, but I ended up saying it only once, but it's really important. Which is that, "We live in capitalism. Its power

seems immutable, so did the divine right of kings." So, in other words, there's all sorts of things that seem like they have to be the way they are. And gender as it was expressed in the 1970s, yes, definitely there were trans people then. But then it's in that it would be a common conversation to think about being non-binary, or to think about being a trans man, or trans woman, or cis man or cis woman. Those categories didn't seem to register.

But for Le Guin, what she always wants to say is, "Well, wait a minute. It could be." And *The Lathe of Heaven* is amazing that way, because as I think you sort of alluded to, the way *The Lathe of Heaven* works is, this guy has the power to dream the world different, and when he wakes up, whatever he dreamed has become reality. That's like a reflection on what it is to be a fantasy writer, obviously. But it's also, I think, a deeper point for Le Guin, which is this fundamental human thing, which is we have this imaginative capacity to see ourselves, like, are we the antithesis of other animals, or are we one with the other animals? Well, before Darwin, we were the antithesis of other animals. And after Darwin, we're like, "Oh, wait, we are all animals." And those things are both true, but the reality changes around being able to recognize that peacocks, and baboons, and humans are working with the same problems, with a different set of tools. Should we listen to that final Le Guin clip?

Elizabeth Ferry:

Yeah, go for it.

John Plotz:

You have a soft spot in your writing for scholars and scientists.

Ursula K Le Guin:

Oh, yeah.

John Plotz:

Is that fair? Yeah.

Ursula K Le Guin:

I knew them. I grew up amongst them. And I love science as a human undertaking just as much as I love art. Science, rightly done, is so beautiful. I can't understand math. I know it's probably the most beautiful, but...

John Plotz:

Yeah, my wife teaches math, so I have that experience a lot.

Ursula K Le Guin:

I believe what they say, but I can't see it.

John Plotz:

I watch her eyes light up, but I'm not sure why they're lighting up. Yeah.

Ursula K Le Guin:

Thank you for telling me that, for some reason... But geology, for instance, my lord, it's all poetry. It's amazing. And I lived through that great revolution in geology where we discovered about plate tectonic, and that was so exciting to watch it happening. And the new article would come out, "My God, look at it. Oh my God, it's right under Oregon."

John Plotz:

Yeah, right. A new map under our feet. Right, yeah.

Ursula K Le Guin:

Yeah.

John Plotz:

Well, I guess one way I was thinking about it is I feel like there's been waves in progressive thinking, in which science or even scholarship in the academy in general can look like the enemy. Because it's the technology, the exploiters of technology

Ursula K Le Guin:

And the fact is the Academy is largely a wholly-owned subsidiary of various corporations now, and so is science. And so, they do become the enemy. If the corporation is the enemy, I'm afraid, to me, it pretty much is, at this point.

John Plotz:

But you can so easily imagine in your Earthsea, that the Wizard School could become a site of evil, but it never really feels that way. It feels-

Ursula K Le Guin:

There was definitely, I mean, how come no women?

John Plotz:

How come no women, right.

Ursula K Le Guin:

Yeah. And how come no sex for the men?

John Plotz:

Yeah.

Ursula K Le Guin:

What's wrong? I mean, that's something has gone wrong here. It ain't natural.

John Plotz:

But you're gentle on them, aren't you? I mean, I'm not saying you let them off easy, but you do... Rereading the Earthsea books in light of the later Earthsea books, I was thinking that about what these-

Ursula K Le Guin:

Well, people make mistakes for heaven's sake. You can't get my age without realizing that people make mistakes. And blaming them for it gets... What good does that do?

John Plotz:

Yeah. So, that's the question of science and the accumulation of knowledge. And the way in which knowledge gets instrumentalized, and becomes a wholly owned subsidiary. And Elizabeth, you and I are recording this the week that *Oppenheimer* came out. So, forget being a corporate sellout, you can also think about science and technology as going all the way down the road of giving us the tools to do the worst things that we could do to one another.

Elizabeth Ferry:

Right, right. I think her answers have both of that in it. I mean, I love... You're sort of trying to draw her, and she's refusing to be drawn, which I kind of find interesting, right?

John Plotz:

Yeah, yeah.

Elizabeth Ferry:

So, the school on Roke is a great sort of an analogy for the university in that way.

John Plotz:

Absolutely, yeah.

Elizabeth Ferry:

It knows some real things and some important and good things, but it not only doesn't know everything, there's kinds of knowledge and kinds of magic that it not only doesn't know, but it refuses to know. And denigrates, right?

John Plotz:

Yeah, there's this phrase, "Weak as women's magic, wicked as women's magic," which you hear a mantra throughout the books. And then in the second trilogy, you begin to understand the kind of misogynist origins of that, and the falsity of the claim as well.

Elizabeth Ferry:

Right, right. Yeah. And also there's a whole kind of, I think she would describe as sort of masculinist getting the... I mean, it's a wizard staff you get on Roke, for goodness's sake. And all of this kind of... There's an economy of prestige that's related to it, even as there's extremely... the Patterner, in particular, Nemmerle, I think is in one generation. Are these marvelous wizards who are deeply humane, and full of love and generosity, but the kind of system itself has these blind spots, and hubrises, and so on.

John Plotz:

Yeah. So, the other thing that I loved in that quote and in that passage, and I saw you laughing, Elizabeth, at the same time I was laughing, is her description of plate tectonics, I thought was so fabulous. Because, that to me, gets at the point about the imaginative art of science, which is like it's beneath Oregon. Literally, the ground is shifting beneath our feet because of what geology has discovered. And what I think Le Guin was saying there is that, that's where the so-called separateness of creative arts and sciences, you realize the parallel tracks they're running. Because both of them are not claiming to make up something new. They're claiming to show you something that's already always there. You just hadn't been thinking about it the right way.

Elizabeth Ferry:

Yeah.

John Plotz:

I've had to write a couple of short things about dragons recently, and especially dragons in Le Guin, and why I'm getting a dragon tattoo, that kind of thing. And the dragon side of things in Le Guin is really interesting because she needs dragons to represent something that is kind of available inside human culture. Like, it's our own wildness. It's our taste for fantasy. It's something in the second set of Le Guin, of the Earthsea books, she actually goes to show---I won't kind of spoil....

Elizabeth Ferry:

Yeah, I was going to say, "Spoiler alert."

John Plotz:

I won't spoil. I won't spoil. But basically, she shows you moments in which there's an image in which a dragon looks with human eyes, and then you turn over the image, and it's a human looking with dragon eyes. So in other words, she wants you to understand there's a kind of interwovenness, what you were just talking about, the things we think of as farthest away from us, actually, the thought patterns, we have to understand they are the same thought patterns. We have to understand what's familiar. So there's that.

But on the other hand, dragons are still different. I mean, they're still like the octopuses. They are wild and other, and they represent the possibility of true alienness in the world. We have to remember that there are things beyond our own kin. I guess that's it. The notion is, there's nothing that is truly alien to us because we share this universe and this world together. And yet, even though it's not alien to us, it can still be beyond our comprehension for now. And you have to think both those things.

Elizabeth Ferry:

And it's this sort of sense of holding things that are contradictory. Contradictory things can also both be true, many of them. And in fact, all of them are always there. And that that's sort of the way she builds up the stories.

John Plotz:

And can I just say, that's another thing about, I mean, I really admire, Elizabeth, as you know, these people who just don't die, who have a very long career. So, Le Guin had a 60-year writing career. But you could have a 60-year writing career, and remain in one rut. And that is really not true of Le Guin. So, she translated the *Tao Te Ching*, she translated Angélica Gorodischer, who is this wonderful Argentinian fantasy novelist I never would've known about if it hadn't been for Le Guin translating her. She wrote a lot of poetry. She continued to diversify the channels of investigation, so that when... If she claims that she discerns a common thread, it's not because she's only looking at the sort of thing that she already likes. Which is what I worry about myself all the time. I worry that I'm basically cherry-picking my own examples by staying within one space.

Elizabeth Ferry:

Yeah, I worry about that too.

John Plotz:

It's really to Le Guin's credit that she really doesn't do that. She sets herself very hard tasks, and then she tries to figure out where the resonances are.

Elizabeth Ferry:

Yeah. So, maybe this is a moment where we shift to our *recallable Ursulas*.

John Plotz:

It sounds great, yeah.

Elizabeth Ferry:

And normally we do our polite, and have the other person go first. But I'm actually going to go first because it's so deeply connected to the plate tectonics conversation. Because the bit of her work that I want to enthuse about and tell people to run, don't walk to read, is a story that's in Tales of Earthsea, one of the second round of Earthsea books called "The Bones of the Earth." Which is, I hadn't really thought about it this way, until I heard her talking. But it is basically the artistic rendition of plate tectonic theory. So, it's told from the perspective of a wizard on Gont, which is a kind of rocky island that has a Gontish magic, which is rocky. And those, John, you'll know, and other people maybe, that I'm totally obsessed with rocks, and their kind of unknowability, as well as the ways in which we attempt to know them through things like geology and plate tectonics.

So, the wizard and his student are faced with an earthquake, and trying to mobilize this, discredited, or marginalized also *female* knowledge that's kind of rooted in the rocks, because the wizard's teacher was a woman, which is revealed later on. But I mean, it was just, what an example of thinking about, "I'm going to take tectonic theory, and I'm going to sort of consider it philosophically, as what kinds of ritual would be associated with it?" And also the other thing about that story that I just adore, and there are moments of it throughout Le Guin, but it's just the relationship between these two wizards is so funny, and poignant, and sweet.

And the older wizard is kind of irritable. He thinks of himself as irritable, and he is irritable. And there's one part where he's trying to find out an old word. It's been taking him weeks, a true name. And his assistant, who's a young man at this point, who he calls Silence because he never says anything. Suddenly, he says, "You should get

some goats." He's been working on this for weeks, and suddenly you're like, "You should get some goats," right?

John Plotz:

Yeah.

Elizabeth Ferry:

And a few paragraphs later, she writes that in later years, he thought about how he didn't lose his temper when Silence, he calls him Silence, had said this. "And it was though, it was the last satisfying bite of a ripe pear." So, it kind of has everything in this story. It's got science, it's got art, it's got goats, it's got fruit, it's got chickens.

John Plotz:

That's awesome. Yeah, I'm really interested in the goats of Earthsea. I talk a lot about them in the book, actually. I think they represent a different kind of animal counterpart to human beings.

Elizabeth Ferry:

Yeah, I appreciated the extensive attention in your index to goats too.

John Plotz:

Yes.

Elizabeth Ferry:

You recognize that the trace of it is left of the index.

John Plotz:

Yep. Yep. That's awesome. And I totally love that story. All right, so the book I chose is *A Book about the Way and the Power of the Way*, or the Tao Te Ching by Lao Tzu, that Le Guin did a version of it. And I really love her version. And there's one particular poem called "The Uses of Not," which was incredibly important to me. So, I'm just

going to read that poem really quickly. And it's about negative space, I guess you could say. But it's also about how art is more about creating an emptiness for the reader, than it is about creating something positive.

The image is of a pot. "Hollowed out, clay makes a pot. Where the pot's not is where it's useful. Cut doors and windows to make a room. Where the room isn't, there's room for you." Both the pot and the room aren't a thing. They're the space left by the walls around the thing. And I don't know, that just rings true to me for what Le Guin is trying to do. And I think a lot of writers try to do that. I think Willa Cather tries to do it as well. And I think the truth is that many artists are doing that in how they try to invite the reader in. But I love that Le Guin is explicit about it. She knows what it is that she's setting out to do.

Elizabeth Ferry:

Yeah. Yeah, that's wonderful. Thanks, John. And thanks to all our listeners.

John Plotz:

Thank you. Recall This Book was founded by Elizabeth Ferry and me, John Plotz. It's sponsored by Brandeis and the Mandel Humanity Center. Sound editing is by Naomi Cohen, website design and social media by Miranda Peery of the English Department. We're eager to hear your comments, criticisms, and thoughts. If you liked what you hear, please subscribe, rate, and review us on Apple Podcasts or wherever you get your podcasts. From all of us here at RTB, thanks for listening.