

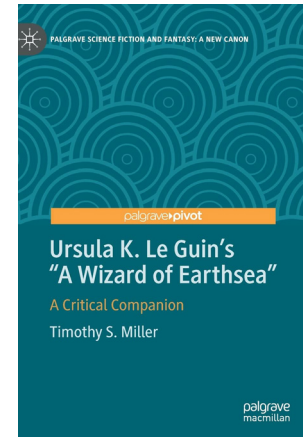
### *Ursula K. Le Guin's A Wizard of Earthsea: A Critical Companion*, by Timothy S. Miller



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Timothy S. Miller. *Ursula K. Le Guin's A Wizard of Earthsea: A Critical Companion*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2023. Palgrave Science Fiction and Fantasy: A New Canon. Ebook. XIII, 98 pg. \$39.99. ISBN 9783031246401.

This book is part of Palgrave's Science Fiction and Fantasy 'New Canon' series, which attempts to "destabilise" the literary canon, scrutinizing the privileges and power dynamics which intertwine such institutions (iv). So, what better author to cover than Ursula K. Le Guin? She is herself part of the canon, but an author who scrutinised privilege and power from the beginning of her career. T.S. Miller, in this instalment of the series, focuses on *A Wizard of Earthsea* (1968), Le Guin's opening book of the much read and celebrated Earthsea series.



Miller, over six chapters, analyses the contribution to and impact of Le Guin's novel on fantasy literature and its role within the canon, exploring the ways in which Le Guin challenged and changed the genre. Chapter one contextualises Le Guin's original publication of *Wizard*, examining her contemporaries, the budding state of secondary world fantasy, and the influence her parents' anthropological background had on her work. Miller marks the various aspects of fantasy heritage which are laced throughout *Wizard's* construction, touching upon Tolkien, Arthurian legend and 'the Magician's apprentice' motif. Alongside this, Miller emphasises how Le Guin's pioneering of the now commonplace subgenre of magical pedagogy and the inspiration she took from indigenous folktales help form the unique novel she created.

Chapters three and five explore race and gender respectively, marking Le Guin's progressive use of representation and characterisation. Miller paints a compelling picture of the—for the time—groundbreaking portrayal of race in her secondary world and how it "decenters whiteness" (34). Le Guin's subtle yet deliberate racialisation of her characters is well detailed. The argument for the presentation of women is perhaps less convincing: *Wizard* celebrates women "in spite of the novel's limitations" (65), yet this celebration largely consists of small scenes which "exalt domesticity" (96).

The fourth chapter covers the parallels with and influences of Daoism and Jungian psychology on the novel, examining both their relationships with Le Guin's writings and the subsequent

critical responses to her work. Le Guin's engagement with Daoist concepts is illustrated, specifically the presence of "Doing not-doing" in Ged's journey, a demonstration of the Daoist principle of inaction (56). Conversely, Miller makes clear that while Le Guin was not influenced by Jung when she wrote the novel, Jungian interpretation lends itself well to Ged's conflict with his shadow-self.

Miller ties together these ranging subjects with the theme of Le Guin's critical approach to fantasy. Her deliberate divergence from the tropes and (often problematic) trends of fantasy literature can be seen to be grounded in a fiercely critical eye which was applied as rigorously in the 2000s as it was in the 1960s. Le Guin's awareness of fantasy literature's lacks and prejudices is essential to her contributions and can clearly be seen in *Wizard*. Miller further highlights the extent of the genre's failings as he details Le Guin's ongoing battle with publishers and production companies to whitewash and tame *Wizard*, even forty years after its original publication.

Le Guin is a much-covered author, her methods and motives having been thoroughly explored over the last fifty years. Miller does a good job of evaluating much of the existing work, and Le Guin's response to it, and highlighting the core ways in which *Wizard* made an original contribution and impact on the fantasy genre. Chapter six concludes by demonstrating the distinct ways in which *Wizard*'s influence can be seen, specifically in the rise of the wizarding school as a motif.

Miller finally argues that Le Guin scholarship's "major weakness" lies in its reliance on Le Guin's own "interpretive protocols" (82). It is an intriguing provocation for future Le Guin scholarship, and can also be understood as, in part, a self-reflection: Le Guin's voice certainly contributes to Miller's presentation. There is a clear and consistent attempt to include Le Guin in these chapters, as her voice is present throughout. We are regularly treated to Le Guin's own thoughts on her works and those of her contemporaries, as well as her reception of the approaches to and interpretations of her works.

If one was to look for any downside to this text it would not be the presence of Le Guin's voice, but rather its tight scope. This is appropriate for this Palgrave series focused on individual canonical texts; nonetheless, at times *Wizard* feels slightly isolated, especially as Miller raises key points which change drastically across the Earthsea series. Miller is aware of this and highlights the change in gender representation in later works, yet this is seemingly done to lighten the criticism of the absence of gender critique in *Wizard*. Le Guin appears well-aware of this absence and clearly acknowledges and challenges the patriarchal world of *Wizard* in the later instalments of Earthsea. However, Le Guin has also recontextualised several other aspects of the world laid out in *Wizard* which Miller does not address.

The philosophy of Daoist inaction is heavily scrutinized by Le Guin as the series progresses, becoming a symbol of stagnation and maintenance of the status quo. Instead, we see an arguably much stronger theme of a call to action, as our protagonists must change the world of Earthsea and topple the inactive School on Roke. This does not undermine the role of Daoism in Earthsea,

yet, as with gender representation, these aspects of Le Guin's work would benefit considerably from contextualisation within the wider series, especially for aspects which Le Guin herself clearly became critical of. Racial representation also shifts considerably in the later novels. Although it is clear how *Wizard* subverts the whiteness of traditional fantasy, racial hierarchy still very much exists in Earthsea, with polarities of good and evil, civilised and savage, being clearly reinforced, merely flipped. Le Guin's later alteration to her presentation of the different races in the second trilogy of the Earthsea series, in which such senses of racial hierarchy are thoroughly dismantled, also indicates the limitations of *Wizard*. The exclusion of such details would be more forgivable if the later texts were not used to qualify the limitations of *Wizard* on the topic of women.

Regardless, Miller's text effectively explores much of *Wizard* and the scholarship surrounding it in a very concise and clarifying way. It functions very well as a summative text and should be valuable addition to Palgrave's series.

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