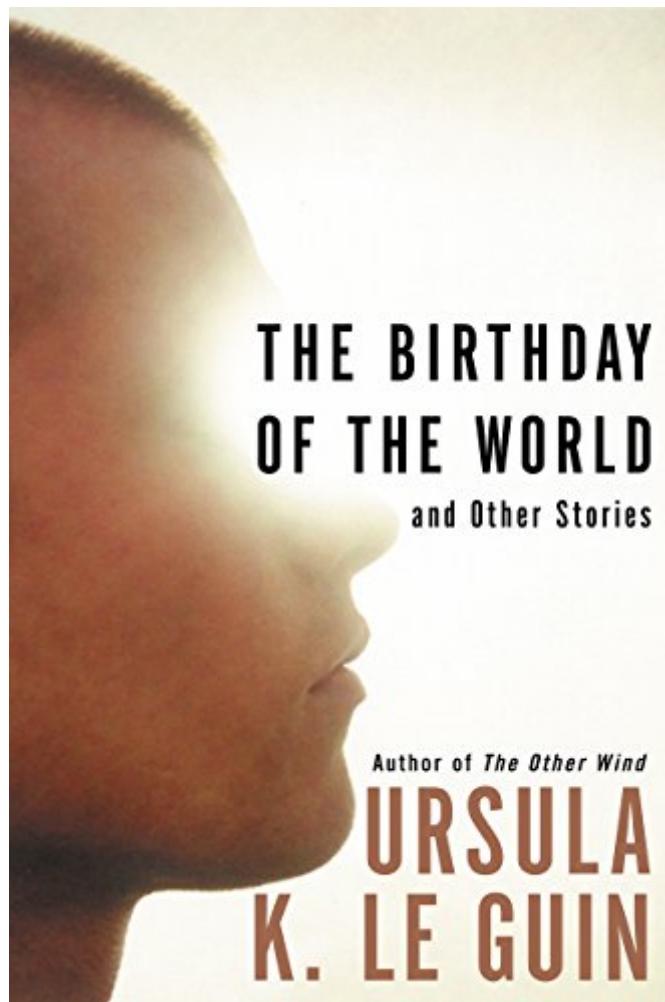


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The Birthday Of The World: And Other Stories



Synopsis

For more than four decades, Ursula K. Le Guin has enthralled readers with her imagination, clarity, and moral vision. The recipient of numerous literary prizes, including the National Book Award, the Kafka Award, and five Hugo and five Nebula Awards, this renowned writer has, in each story and novel, created a provocative, ever-evolving universe filled with diverse worlds and rich characters reminiscent of our earthly selves. Now, in *The Birthday of the World*, this gifted artist returns to these worlds in eight brilliant short works, including a never-before-published novella, each of which probes the essence of humanity. Here are stories that explore complex social interactions and troublesome issues of gender and sex; that define and defy notions of personal relationships and of society itself; that examine loyalty, survival, and introversion; that bring to light the vicissitudes of slavery and the meaning of transformation, religion, and history. The first six tales in this spectacular volume are set in the author's signature world of the Ekumen, "my pseudo-coherent universe with holes in the elbows," as Le Guin describes it -- a world made familiar in her award-winning novel *The Left Hand of Darkness*. The seventh, title story was hailed by *Publishers Weekly* as "remarkable . . . a standout." The final offering in the collection, *Paradises Lost*, is a mesmerizing novella of space exploration and the pursuit of happiness. In her foreword, Ursula K. Le Guin writes, "to create difference-to establish strangeness-then to let the fiery arc of human emotion leap and close the gap: this acrobatics of the imagination fascinates and satisfies me as no other." In *The Birthday of the World*, this gifted literary acrobat exhibits a dazzling array of skills that will fascinate and satisfy us all.

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Customer Reviews

In 1969, LeGuin shattered the standards of science fiction with "The Left Hand of Darkness," an accessible, amazing story set in a universe she had developed in earlier romances. "Left Hand" explored the meaning of sexuality and its implications in an entirely new way. If you haven't read "Left Hand," you should. She has returned to that universe many times since, most recently in "The Telling," but only in "Birthday of the World" does she approach issues of humanity and sexuality and its implications with the brilliance and sheer elegance that she brought to "Left Hand." The short stories of "Birthday" are as good as short science fiction gets. One of LeGuin's many gifts is to tell a fine story, while at the same time holding a mirror to our own world. By creating relationships that are different from our own - sedoretu, a complex marriage system, for example - she allows us to see from a new viewpoint, and more clearly, the express and implied values in our own culture. Don't misunderstand; there is no preaching or lecturing, only a very fine set of stories very well told. Another of her gifts is to take an intellectual structure and wrap a marvellous story around it. In her fantasy novel "Wizard of Earthsea," it was Jungian psychology. Here she takes her background in cultural anthropology to explore the modalities of human relationships. Her storytelling is so deft that you can read these stories for the superb writing that they are and enjoy them immensely. But they work at other levels, too, and seeing the intellectual structure cleverly crafted into the narrative gives the perceptive reader additional pleasure. LeGuin's brilliant characters, her spare writing and her eloquence are as evident here as in her longer writing.

To coin a term for a form of prose that's lacked one, Ursula K. Le Guin has chosen "story-suite" for a collection of short stories that are connected by theme, location, or events. This book mirrors her last SF story-suite, *Four Ways to Forgiveness*, in connectivity by theme but diverges from connectivity by place. At least, it makes wide ranges 'round the setting of many of her SF stories, called her "Hainish Universe." (Le Guin, typical of her self-deprecating humor, talks of her laziness in re-using this setting in her forward.) The theme of these stories is relationships. With ourselves.

With our lovers. With our society. They use various tools to explore this topic and reveal the complexities of being human. Stories range from a first-contact tale with a deeply anthropological tone to a "comedy of manners" among some of the most complicated relationships in the universe. Along the way, we touch on some familiar settings (the world of *Left Hand of Darkness*, that of *Four Ways*) and get a look at some new. The final tale in this collection, a novella entitled *Paradises Lost*, is a bit of a divergence from the rest. It does not reside in the Hainish universe setting but upon a ship bound for a distant planet. Generations are born and die upon the ship as it crosses the vastness of space towards its destination. We watch one of those generations grow up and deal with a crisis of faith. In the end, we are presented with the answer chosen by the characters through whom we see the story. Typical of her skill, however, Le Guin does not present this solution as an absolute. That these people are protagonists does not make them absolutely right; other choices remain valid and are not demonized.

I tend to prefer novels to short story collections. I find short stories to largely be less satisfying and engrossing than novels. However, as a great fan of Ursula K. Le Guin, I could not help but pick up this collection. I recommend this book for fans of Le Guin's novels set in the Hainish universe. 6 of the 8 stories are set in different planets of the universe, some of which have been visited in previous works. If you haven't read Le Guin before, I recommend you pick up some of her earlier works, particularly *The Left Hand of Darkness*, before reading this one, to familiarize yourself with the concepts, because she doesn't fully explain them here. I like to term Le Guin's work as "creative anthropology." Ever since I read some of her nonfiction works about her life, particularly growing up with an anthropologist father, her fiction has made more and more sense to me. Instead of writing about actual societies, she invents societies and gets us inside of them, exposes to us essentialities of human nature via the alienness of different cultures. The stories are not plot-focused; instead you spend a great deal of time just getting to know these different places and people.

"Coming of Age in Karhide" This story is a perfect complement to fans of *The Left Hand of Darkness*, as it takes place on the same planet of Gethen, where no one is either male or female; instead they take on male or female characteristics during "kemmer," 3 days of the month during which they mate. The rest of the time they are genderless and do not have sex. The story concerns the first kemmer of a young child on Gethen. The story is mainly a lighthearted look into Gethenian society, a somewhat different perspective than *The Left Hand of Darkness*.

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