

# Envoy from planet Gethen & other strange worlds

**Pipe-smoking US author Ursula Le Guin brings a unique feminine slant to the man's world of science fiction, says ROBERT FELDMAN. Mother of three, she is visiting Australia next month.**

"WE heard on the static-fuzzed palace bulletin that King Argaven had announced his expectation of an heir. Not another kemmering-son, of which he already had seven, but an heir of the body, a king-son. The king was pregnant."

So it goes on the planet Gethen, where a person has the best of both worlds, with sex reversible each month depending on whim.

Without a mystique of male aggressiveness, there is no war, that activity being sublimated in "shifgrethor" — pride rivalry.

Sexual attraction occurs for only a few days each month when two people happen to reach the same stage simultaneously and grow opposite sexual organs (for example: "He was rapidly going into full phase as a woman . . .")

Such an interesting race of beings, with their strange plumbing and their other fascinating unisex institu-

tions, perhaps could only have sprung from the imagination of a woman.

As it happens Ursula K. Le Guin, the creator of Gethen and other worlds, is headed for the strange planet of Australia to be guest of

honor in August at the world science fiction convention in earthy old Melbourne.

Mrs Le Guin, of Portland, Oregon, is one of the few successful women in what used to be a man's field — science fiction. Her book, "The Left Hand of Darkness," is a best-seller and won the Nebula and Hugo awards, the two top prizes for science fiction. Eleven other books have also earned her a worldwide following.

On the surface, Mrs Le Guin is down-to-earth enough. She is 45 years old, the mother of three children. But she smokes a pipe (a tip-off, perhaps, to extraterrestrial influence?). In her role of Envoy, she is playing it cool.

"I'm a guest of honor and I don't know exactly what guests of honor do," she

admitted. "I think they get up and make a nice, amiable speech. I haven't talked to very many fan groups."

In addition to being in the spotlight at the main show, Mrs Le Guin will also teach a workshop for writers of science fiction and fantasy. At home in Oregon, she conducts a course in the subject at Portland State University, where her husband, Charles, is a professor of French history.

By coincidence, he has also lectured on the history

of Australasia, so of course Professor Le Guin will accompany his wife on this, his first actual visit to the pink land on the map.

Presumably, he will at last be in a position to observe his subject first-hand, gathering data no doubt on the kemmering habits of the natives, potables consumed, the flying-saucer phenomenon called two-up, etc.

Two younger Le Guins, Caroline, 15, and Theodore, 11, will accompany their parents on the trip.

Interviewed by telephone

Interviewed by telephone at her "middle-class, downtown" home in Portland, Mrs Le Guin let on that she first tried her hand at science fiction at the age of ten, with a story about a man who was eaten by elves.

That went unpublished, so she went through with a conventional education, eventually earning a baccalaureate at Radcliffe College (Harvard) and a master's degree in French at Columbia University.

In the midst of work for a doctorate, however, she came to realise that as a woman she would be relegated to teaching first-year students, and promptly dropped out.

Married to a "liberated" man willing to share household and parental chores, Mrs Le Guin was able to continue her writing, however. The succession of





Science fiction writer Ursula Le Guin at her desk.

children (the oldest, Elizabeth, is 18) scarcely interfered, given her determination.

In the early 1960s she began to be published, first with a series of award-winning juvenile stories, then with works in her old genre.

Science fiction had changed. It was getting away from the "hard science" of robots, space operas, and other gimmickry — actual events such as men walking on the moon, had outrun fiction and made it sound ridiculous.

Instead, the "soft" sciences of anthropology, sociology, psychology, etc, came to the fore, proving more challenging and durable to the educated reader. The market grew to include millions of teenagers and university students not previously hooked.

Came a new generation of writers, blurring the boundary between science and straight fiction (Kurt Vonnegut, Anthony Burgess and others). Ursula Le Guin's thoughtful, subtle stories put her in this class.

Her "The Lathe of Heaven" is about a man who discovers his dreams are out of control. What he dreams comes true as he dreams it — a relative killed, a picture changed. Catastrophes occur, too, when he dreams them. In

horror, he goes to a psychiatrist.

The doctor tries hypnosis, discovers that George will dream what he's told, so the psychiatrist plays god. But, as we know from Freud, dreams like to play tricks.

Le Guin cleverly uses this material, prodding the reader's sensibilities. Even her moral — that we cannot stand outside the world and direct it but must be content to be part of the whole — is gracefully developed.

In "The Dispossessed," her most recent book, Le Guin deals with the intellect run amuck. Here she plays off an anarchical idealist society against one like our own where money and status are the ideals.

Rot sets in among the idealists on Anarres, the bleak moon where they settled 170 years ago. Freedom has given way to rigidity, fear has trampled on individuality.

One man, Shevek, hops it back to the old "corrupt" planet, Urras, where he hears his first bird-song, and where he is forced to re-examine his philosophy. The theme is haunting in its relevance, Swiftian in its cutting edge.

Most of Ursula Le Guin's stories bear, peripherally at least, on women's liberation. On Anarres, for example, no

one owns anything, therefore women cannot be viewed as possessions.

Yet all of Mrs Le Guin's principal characters are men.

"I have never been able to write a female main character," she admits. That works out quite well in the marketplace, as most science fiction fans are male anyway.

Mrs Le Guin added "I don't want to write autobiographies. I want to distance myself from my books. That's one of the reasons I write science fiction. I write about aliens. Men are aliens, too."

Not Prof. Le Guin, however. He is his wife's first reader, getting her copy before it goes to the publisher.

Mrs Le Guin works undisturbed daily from 9 am to noon or 1 pm.

"Then there's the house to run," she said. "I enjoy it, and I get tremendous support from my husband.

"It's hard for one person to do two fulltime jobs, but two people can do three fulltime jobs without undue strain, and that's the way it has worked out."

Not for a moment would Ursula Le Guin exchange the good family life in Portland, Oregon, for any of her dream-worlds. They're a nice place to visit, but who wants to live there?