

URSULA LE GUIN: NOVELIST

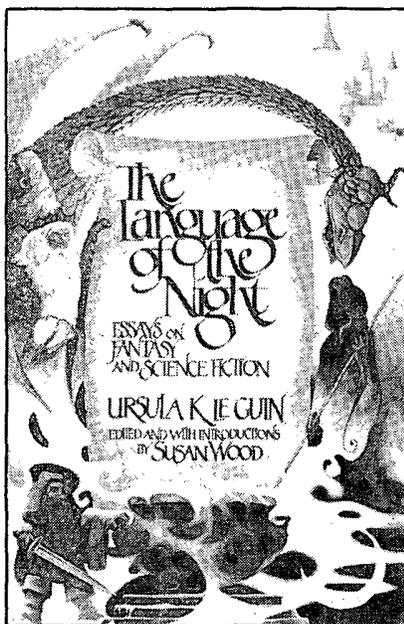
BY JEFF RIGGENBACH

The Language of the Night: Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction

By Ursula K. Le Guin. Edited by Susan Wood.
New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons. 1979.
343 pp. \$9.95.

UNTIL QUITE RECENTLY, TO CALL A piece of literature "science fiction" was to brand it as inconsequential. Of course, to fans of the genre, the term *science fiction* is very nearly what *heavenly father* is to the Christian: the name of all that is holy, all that is due a genuinely religious reverence and devotion. And to the publisher and the bookseller, it is a label that virtually guarantees a certain sale, albeit a modest one, and is therefore a safe bet (which is why science fiction is comparatively easy for a beginning writer to sell). But to the critic, the term *science fiction* is, and for a long time has been, a convenient epithet by means of which an entire group of books may be shunted aside, dismissed, without fear that any rival critic might show up one's hasty judgment by subjecting the books in question to closer and more sympathetic scrutiny.

This is changing—and well it should. For at least a decade now the genius of American literature has been with science fiction to an altogether disproportionate extent. Of the half-dozen Amer-



ican novels of the 1970s that stand a reasonable chance of enduring, of becoming "classics," four or five, depending on how broadly or narrowly the term is construed, are "science fiction." Two—*The Word for World Is Forest* (1972) and *The Dispossessed* (1974)—are by the same novelist, a science fiction writer named Ursula K. Le Guin.

LYING, METAPHORICALLY

Le Guin has been presented with one National Book Award for her children's fantasy, *The Farthest Shore* (1972), and nominated for another for her superb

collection of "mainstream" short stories, *Orsinian Tales* (1976). And she answers the question, Why do you write science fiction? by saying, "Because that is what publishers call my books. Left to myself, I should call them novels."

This may sound like the reply of a writer who has been tempted by the taste of popular success to denigrate and disown the medium that made her success possible, but it is not. Unlike Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., who began denying that he was a science fiction writer as soon as acceptance into the income bracket and intellectual/social milieu of the literary mainstream made it profitable for him to do so, Le Guin describes herself frequently and proudly as a science fiction writer. She only holds the opinion that science fiction is fundamentally just like any other fiction and that as a category it is of more use to publishers and booksellers than to writers and readers.

"It's lovely," she writes, "to be invited to participate in Futurological Congresses, . . . to be asked to tell the newspapers what America will be like in 2001, and all that, but it's a terrible mistake. I write science fiction, and science fiction isn't about the future." What then is it about? Lies. "A novelist's business," says Le Guin, "is lying." But this is not to say, paradoxically enough, that fiction writers are uninterested in truth. On the contrary, they are mainly preoccupied with telling the truth. It's just that "they go about it in a peculiar and devious way, which consists in inventing persons, (Continued on p. 43.)

AN ALL-TOO-POSSIBLE FUTURE

BY F. PAUL WILSON

Schulman's characters face social collapse
and find a way out

Alongside Night

By J. Neil Schulman.
New York: Crown Publishers. 1979.
181 pp. \$8.95.

LET'S NOT CALL THIS SCIENCE FICTION. After all, the publisher isn't, despite the fact that it follows the best "If this goes on..." tradition of the genre. Let's call it near-future fiction and leave it at that, although it's also a coming-of-age novel, a utopian/dystopian novel, and a novel of ideas. It's also a first novel, and it's full of surprises, not all of them confined to the plot.

Briefly, *Alongside Night* concerns Elliot Vreeland, the 17-year-old son of a Nobel Prize-winning economist — one whose theories seem to jibe nicely with the Chicago School. (The Author's Note disclaims any intentional similarities between the economist character and Milton Friedman.)

COLLECTIVIST TROUBLES

Elliot Vreeland's world is Manhattan in the not-too-distant future, in an

America that is falling apart. Decades of fiscal mismanagement and irresponsibility have finally brought the country to the brink of economic collapse. The inflation rate is through the roof, the cost-of-living index was 2,012 percent for the last quarter of the previous year, a taxi ride costs 2,000 blues (New Dollars). Businesses are failing hourly, strikes are rampant, and Elliot, a high school senior, is not even sure there will be any colleges left to attend come September.

But these are merely background problems, a part of everyday life. Elliot's trials begin in earnest when his father, mother, and sister disappear, kidnapped — possibly murdered — by forces of the State. Armed with a .38-caliber Peking revolver and a money belt full of Mexican 50-peso gold pieces, he begins a trek through a future Manhattan on the verge of social collapse.

At first look, the cityscape Schulman presents is a nightmare, totally alien to anything on earth; yet the more you see, the more you realize how uncomfortably close it is to Mayor Koch's town. There are bright spots, however — pockets of civilization made safe by merchant groups who have hired security forces to protect their customers. Eventually, Elliot

connects with the Revolutionary Agorist Cadre, a laissez-faire underground group that has been labeled "terrorist" and "gangster" by the government, and outlawed. Within one of the cadre's safe areas he meets Lorimer, a girl his age who, like most cadre members, goes by a pseudonym and who is more than she seems.

The agorists dine in places like the Tanstaaf Cafe, fly the Gadsden flag, and say things like "A is A." The author has put a lot of effort and ingenuity into little things among the agorists, especially the names of their businesses: *NoState Insurance*, *Anarchobank* (which issues the Bank Anarchocard to qualified customers), the *Black Supermarket*, and so on.

Some will be tempted to compare *Alongside Night* to *Atlas Shrugged*: both works deal with America on the brink and with a libertarian group that has retreated to a secret enclave. But the resemblance stops there. Ayn Rand's book puts forth a set of carefully derived principles and expounds on the philosophy derived from those principles. Schulman takes a completely different approach. His characters make no speeches. Aside from excerpts from a few fictitious

books, there is little discussion of principles. Instead, he lets the social and economic chaos of Elliot Vreeland's world speak for itself. The thrust of *Alongside Night* is entirely empirical. The message is clear in everything we are shown: *collectivism doesn't work*. And if we continue with our current fiscal and social policies, Elliot's world is what we must expect.

Do not let the above lead you to think that there are no ideas here. There are. Plenty of them. None entirely unique to libertarian thought, but many that are potentially shocking to the uninitiated—those who still believe in municipal bonds, the stock market, the FCC, urban renewal, and on and on.

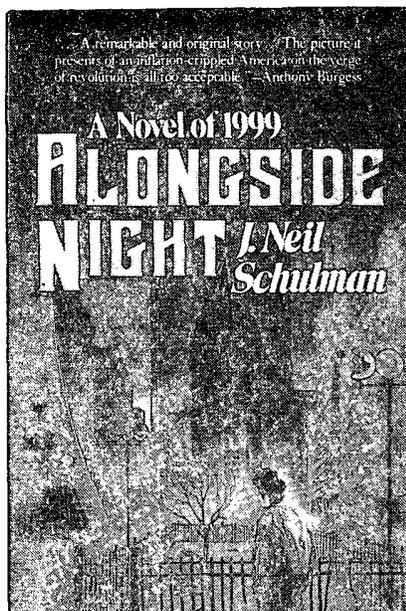
But most important of all, I think, is Schulman's emphasis on, and insistent use of, the term *agora*. It's from the Greek, meaning marketplace, and is, as far as the reading public is concerned, a neutral term. Unlike "capitalism" and even "libertarianism" ("What's that you say? He's a libertine?"), *agora* engenders no knee-jerk responses. It's not even an official *ism*.

FIRST NOVEL TROUBLES

As with any first novel, *Alongside Night* is not without its flaws. Any novel of ideas must walk a tightrope. The ideas are the *raison d'être* for the work, yet it must remain a novel: there must be emotional involvement of sufficient intensity to counterbalance the intellectual content. This isn't easy. It requires an expert sense of balance. Schulman does well for the most part, but after a tense beginning, the adrenalin fades as we move into the middle chapters. There's intellectual stimulation aplenty as we explore the Revolutionary Agorist Cadre and meet the mysterious Lorimer, but emotionally it's a trough.

It could be, however, that I found these sections emotionally flat because of my familiarity with libertarian thought; outsiders, seeing *laissez-faire* economics put to practical use for the first time, may well find the middle chapters riveting. A strong emotional component here might only prove distracting.

The main characters could use further development. Do not misunderstand: they are not stereotypes; none of the major characters is a stereotype. But Elliot is a bit too cool for a teenager whose family has been kidnapped, his father possibly murdered by the State. And Lorimer/Deanne, considering her developmental environment—how did she ever manage to become a libertarian? Neither of them seems to have much of a



The more you see Schulman's nightmarish cityscape, the more you realize how close it is to Mayor Koch's town.

life outside the plot. Elliot obviously likes science fiction—but is it a mere reading preference, or does he have a passion for it? He plays chess well—a passion, or something for idle hours? I didn't feel I knew him too much better at the end of the book than I did at the beginning. Again, this may be a calculated effect on the author's part, but in a novel involving coming of age, I like to be pushed a little deeper under that character's skin.

NO COMPROMISES

These are minor points. The story picks up again in the second half, and there are so many good moments all the way through. Schulman's writing is at its best when he's moving his characters through the streets of Manhattan-to-be, where virtually everyone is a criminal: there are the moral criminals—the muggers, the thieves, the bureaucrats—and there are the statutory criminals—gun owners, gold owners, black marketeers. You get the *feel* of social breakdown. It's unsettling.

Yet it's not all bleak and chaotic. There are touches of humor and glimmers of hope amid the gloom. There is a truly startling moment in part one in which Elliot asks a porn shop counter-man who has been hiding gold for his

father why he hadn't stolen the gold and run off. The man's reply: "I didn't steal the gold 'cause it don't belong to me." After seeing what is going on in the rest of the city, the simple integrity of that statement hits you right between the eyes . . . and stays with you for the rest of the book.

This is a radical novel. It pulls no punches, offers no compromises. It effectively presents a social, moral, and political point of view without polemic, without stridency. Without hysteria, it projects a bleak future for us all, but not without hope, for there's a deep affection for humanity despite all its foibles underlying every sentence. I understand J. Neil Schulman is only 26; I foresee a long and successful writing career ahead of him. I don't know him, but after reading this, his first novel, I'd like to.

Alongside Night offers the libertarian reader a great deal of pleasure, but holds so much more for the nonlibertarian. It will shock those who are unprepared for it. Who knows?—It may even wake a few people up. I hope it sells 20 million copies. □

F. Paul Wilson is a practicing physician and the author of several novels. For Wheels within Wheels, he was recently given the first Prometheus Award—payment in gold for outstanding libertarian sf.

Riggenbach

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places, and events which never did and never will exist or occur, and telling about these fictions in detail and at length and with a great deal of emotion, and then when they are done writing down this pack of lies, they say, There! That's the truth!"

And how can a pack of lies be the truth? By being, not *literally* true, but *metaphorically* true. It is not literally true that Richard Nixon is a monster, but it is metaphorically true; and we can communicate a good deal of truth about Nixon's character by making the statement that he is a monster, which is a lie. So it is too with those longer, "elaborately circumstantial lies" we call novels.

"All fiction is metaphor," Le Guin writes. "Science fiction is metaphor. What sets it apart from older forms of fiction seems to be its use of new metaphors, drawn from certain great dominants of our contemporary life—science, all the sciences, technology, and the relativistic and historical outlook, among them. Space travel is one of these

metaphors; so is an alternative society, an alternative biology; the future is another." Still another is the alternative polity, and it is this one among science fiction's metaphors that Ursula Le Guin has exploited to greatest advantage.

INSIGHT AND CONFUSION

The Dispossessed is an anarchist utopia. *The Word for World Is Forest* is a fable in celebration of countercultural political values: it is antiwar, antibigotry, antimilitarist, and anti-imperialist; and it is easy to understand why the generation that fought so tenaciously against the Vietnam war has enthusiastically adopted this novel. It was in fact written, Le Guin tells us, "in the winter of 1968, during a year's stay in London," with the antiwar movement, in which Le Guin was an active participant, half a world away, and the participant aching for an outlet for her bottled-up ideological fervor. Her 1976 short story, "The Diary of the Rose," is libertarian in still another way (it is almost certainly the most chilling fictional damnation of political psychiatry since *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*), as is her most recent novel, *The Eye of the Heron* (1978).

The fact is, like every other American writer of permanent importance, Le Guin is individualist, antiauthoritarian; and it seems natural to call her—in the broadest and most useful sense—a libertarian. Yet try as we might to slap this label on her, we can't make it stick. In the first place, she won't have it. She has described herself as a "petty bourgeois anarchist," but she has also described exactly what sort of anarchism it is that she considers "the most idealistic, and to me the most interesting, of all political theories":

Not the bomb-in-the-pocket stuff, which is terrorism, whatever name it tries to dignify itself with; not the social-Darwinist economic "libertarianism" of the far right; but anarchism, as prefigured in early Taoist thought, and expounded by Shelley and Kropotkin, Goldman and Goodman. Anarchism's principal target is the authoritarian State (capitalist or socialist); its principal moral-practical theme is cooperation (solidarity, mutual aid).

And, as if this (which appeared four years ago in her collection *The Wind's Twelve Quarters*) weren't enough, she now lumps "libertarianism" (for her, apparently, the quotation marks are part of the spelling) with technocracy and (are you ready for this?) Scientology, as a "reactionary, easy-answer" approach to social problems.

To top it all off, she devotes large chunks of an essay called "The Stalin of the Soul" to inveighing against "censorship by the market." It seems that whenever a writer chooses to concoct a pot-boiler and produce ready cash rather than concoct the book he'd like to concoct if he didn't have to feed his family, he's willingly submitted to censorship. He hasn't yielded to temptation; he hasn't chosen one value (money) over another (artistic self-expression) and acted accordingly; he's submitted to censorship. His case is fully comparable to that of the Russian novelist Yevgeny Zamyatin, whose famous novel, *We* (1921), has been suppressed by law in the Soviet Union for nearly 60 years. Can this be Ursula Le Guin speaking, the same Ursula Le Guin whose anarchist novel, *The Dispossessed*, reflects so much insightful thinking about the way the spontaneous order of the market works to bind communities together?

Libertarian or not, Le Guin is one of our very best fiction writers, and, as this book readily demonstrates, a graceful and provocative essayist to boot. Twenty-four essays are collected here (many of them rescued from the pages of small-

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circulation science fiction fanzines where they would have remained undeservedly obscure), together with an exhaustive checklist of all of Le Guin's published work, so that you can hunt up those of her essays that aren't included in *The Language of the Night*. There aren't that many of them, by the way, and they might have been included if editor Susan Wood had relinquished a few of the 25 pages she spends uselessly and tediously summarizing Le Guin's ideas. The function of an editor is to edit, not to clutter up the place with superfluous, garrulous introductory remarks. □

Jeff Rigenbach is the executive editor of *Libertarian Review* and a radio commentator syndicated through the *Cato Institute's* *Byline* program. He is currently writing a book on the meaning of the '60s.



Pierce

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fiction, published by Macmillan, reveal a strikingly humanistic and—to the extent this is possible at all—even implicitly libertarian attitude. Most of the translated works were originally published during Soviet sf's golden age of the 1960s; sf publishing has been considerably curtailed in this decade and its themes restricted, but the earlier classics are still helping to keep humane values alive in a society where dogmatic puritanism otherwise prevails.

Of course, the authors have to frame their arguments carefully. In *World Soul*, for example, Mikhail Emtsev and Eremai Parnov threaten the world with the "biotosis"—an experiment in a self-reproducing biological polymer that acquires a "consciousness" of its own and begins to bind all mankind into a collective, telepathic communion. Supposedly, this would be the physical expression of the ideas of communism. But no, the heroes of the novel argue with the proponents of such a viewpoint: men must *choose* to work together for the common good, not become mere cogs in a biological automaton. And they lead a struggle for people to learn to control their own wills and overcome the "biotosis."

Several novels by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, including *Prisoners of Power* (originally titled *Inhabited Island*) are now available from Macmillan. *Prisoners* is perhaps the most significant, with its story of a precocious "superman" trying to influence events on a world that has gone through an atomic war and is ruled by a bureaucratic elite vaguely (and necessarily so!) resembling that of the Communist Party. It is the Strugatskys' best effort at world creation (the atmosphere is so dense that the horizon seems to curve up, and the natives believe they live on the *inside* of the only world that exists), and the plot is entertaining and adventurous, with a deliciously ironic twist at the end.

All these are but a few of the recent works that make science fiction worth reading now more than ever before. Science fiction today is a literature that is entertaining and exciting—and *significant*. □

John J. Pierce recently finished a stint as editor of *Galaxy* magazine and is now assistant editor of a trade magazine in the food industry. For several years he contributed an sf column to *REASON*.