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The left hand of darkness review

What if there were no gender - if humans only took on male or female characteristics when they went into heat once a month, and sex was kept separate from everything else? What would a society without the dualism of male and female look like? This was the "thought experiment" Ursula K Le Guin embarked on in her 1970 Hugo award winner, *The Left Hand of Darkness*. It's a normal man who introduces us to these genderless humans: Genly Ai, an envoy from the federation of planets, who has come to this icebound planet, Gethen or "Winter", to break the news that there is life beyond the stars. He brings with him the standard prejudices of a gendered society, essentially seeing the Gethenians as distastefully effeminate men. He notes that though their society is rife with politicking, double-dealing and status anxiety, it has never mobilised into war - "they behaved like animals, in that respect, or like women. They did not behave like men, or ants." A different off-planet investigator makes the very good point that in a society where all can and do fall pregnant, "nobody here is quite so free as a free male anywhere else". But perhaps it's not the lack of a male gender that keeps the peace, but the ice age that has Winter in its grasp: "perhaps they use up their fighting spirit fighting the cold". *The Left Hand of Darkness* has some of the most chilling descriptions of chilly conditions you'll find in fiction; the reader and poor Genly Ai, who like us comes from a milder planet, very rarely get warm. One Gethenian creation myth begins, "In the beginning, there was nothing but ice and the sun." There are many precise and evocative words for snow: *bessa*, soft new-fallen snow; *esyot*, granular snow; *nessrem*, "heavy snowfall on a moderate gale". It is hard work to stay alive. With only a "lowgrade" diet of nuts, grains and fish, Gethenians must constantly refuel; travel is slow and arduous; people are often snowed in, totally cut off from the rest of the world. Isolation and exile are the novel's great subjects; the solitude of snow, a mental space Le Guin calls "the heart of the blizzard". The politician Estraven, who takes up Genly Ai's cause, is exiled from his country - harsh punishment indeed in such a hostile terrain. Genly Ai, who has survived two hard winters on Winter already, is in exile from his home and his whole way of thinking. The most extraordinary part of the book is the section in which the two of them make an arduous three-month trek through arctic wastes to get back to Estraven's country and contact Genly Ai's spaceship. Out on the ice, with only sledge and tent, they are "equals at last, equal, alien, alone". Their survival is a miracle - and also a feat of human ingenuity, planning, and determination. Le Guin describes the howling gales too loud to shout over; the white-outs in which all sense of direction disappears; the rations painfully eked out; how hard it is simply to breathe at 40 or 50 below. In this wilderness the two aliens also find an unlikely love that they don't even try to gender, a moment of connection that transcends time to form the centre of a life: "the enduring moment, the hearth of warmth ... Outside, as always, lies the great darkness, the cold, death's solitude." Le Guin does not sentimentalise, or even consummate, this love; it's not inflated, as love stories so often are, to dominate her themes of society and environment. But it is given its due individual weight. "I'm not trying to say that I was happy, during those weeks of hauling a sledge across an ice-sheet in the dead of winter," writes Genly Ai. "I certainly wasn't happy. Happiness has to do with reason, and only reason earns it. What I was given was the thing you can't earn, and can't keep, and often don't even recognise at the time: I mean joy." The novel fails to surmount one major obstacle: the male pronoun used of the Gethenians. But it does not set out to be prescriptive, or definitive about gender - if it were, it would have dated horribly. Le Guin is much more subtle and ambiguous than that, more interested in questions than answers and aware of what a Gethenian mystic with the gift of foresight calls "the perfect uselessness of knowing the answer to the wrong question". As she puts it in her foreword to the 40th anniversary edition, "I did the best I could, working at the hinge point, the moment the change was happening, when what I wrote was part of the change that was happening." Title: *The Left Hand of Darkness* Author: Ursula K. LeGuin Genre: Science Fiction, Fantasy Publisher: Ace (US) / Orbit (UK) Publication Date: 1969 (US) / November 2009 (UK) Hardcover: 272 pages Stand alone or series: Stand alone novel How did I get this book: Review copy from the publisher (Orbit UK) Why did I read this book: *The Left Hand of Darkness* is a book that I started and attempted to read in high school - but it's one of those books that I'd never finished. So, when I received a copy in the mail courtesy of Orbit to celebrate the book's 40th anniversary, I decided that there was no better time to dive in and finally finish this classic science fiction novel. Summary: (from Orbit UK) Genly Ai is a diplomat of sorts, sent to observe the inhabitants of the snowbound planet of Winter. But the isolated, androgynous people are suspicious of this strange, single-gendered visitor. Tucked away in a remote corner of the universe, they have no knowledge of space travel or of life beyond their own world. So, bringing news of a vast coalition of planets they are invited to join, he is met with fear, mistrust and disbelief. But also something more. For Genly Ai, who sees himself as a bringer of the truth, it is a bittersweet irony that he will discover truths about himself and, in the snow-shrouded strangeness of Winter, find both love and tragedy... Review: Genly Ai, an Envoy of the federation of human worlds called the Ekumen, documents his experiences on the cold, alien world of Winter (or "Gethen" to the local people) in *The Left Hand of Darkness*. For the first two years of his mission in the kingdom of Karhide, Ai is met with suspicion, disbelief, and overwhelming fear. The people of Gethen are not only mistrusting of what they perceive of as tall tales of ships that fly and worlds beyond their own, but they are also nervous as to Ai's physiology too. Every person on Gethen is an androgyne, without an assigned gender save for once a month when they enter *kemmer* (in a hormonal cycle similar to a female's monthly period) - and in *kemmer*, a Gethenian can assume either the female or male gender at complete random (i.e. someone who was a female one month can be a male in the next month by *kemmering*). Genly Ai, with his single, permanent male sexuality is branded as a "pervert," or an anomaly. On the most basic, fundamental level, neither the people of Gethen nor Ai can understand each other. When the King of Karhide brands his advisor Estraven, the person who has been introducing Ai to Karhide society, as a traitor, Ai's diplomatic mission is in serious jeopardy. Bitterly unsuccessful in convincing Karhide to open their world to Ekumen's benevolent mission, Ai turns to the more bureaucratic nation to the north, called Orgoreyn. There, he meets once again with Estraven, and once again is rejected and met with resistance by the corrupt, ambitious Orgoreyn leaders. When Ai is betrayed and thrown into an Orgoreyn prison camp, however, he is rescued by Estraven - who, against all odds, believes in Ai's message about worlds and technology beyond the starry void. Together, Estraven and Ai travel across the Gobrin Ice (a vast glacier of frozen cold) to reach Karhide once more, so that Ai can try yet again to convince the kingdom to join Ekumen. Along the way, Ai finally learns to trust and to see the Gethen people, through Estraven, for who - and what - they really are. Reading *The Left Hand of Darkness* forty years after its publication is an enlightening experience. There is no denying that this is an important, seminal work of fiction - especially in the science fiction arena, as it challenges human notions of gender, gender roles, and sex. What happens when sex is completely removed from the equation? In a world where gender is a fluid, ever-changing feature, where prescribed gender roles do not exist, what remains? We struggle with Genly Ai as he attempts to understand how Gethenians are both male and female at the same time, just as we struggle with Estraven as s/he tries to understand Ai and his Ekumen ways. It's almost impossible to truly review this book without delving into some in-depth essay - such is how incredible, how much of a paradigm shift *The Left Hand of Darkness* is to a reader's mindframe. From a pure literary standpoint, the novel is written beautifully (if somewhat confusing and requires a lot of its readers), with a deceptively straightforward plot. Interspersed throughout the main storyline (which alternates between Ai and Estraven's perspectives) are other stories: tales from Gethen myth and field records from Ai's predecessor. Each tale and each analysis provides invaluable insight to the novel, adding another layer of color to an incredibly well-researched and well-developed world. There are fireside tales about doomed lovers and future-seers, and there are postulations about the origins of the Gethenians and human genetic experimentation. The sheer scope of ideas that *The Left Hand of Darkness* encompasses is...mind-boggling. That said, *The Left Hand of Darkness* is not an easy book to read. Ms. LeGuin's prose is descriptive and graceful, but requires a high level of concentration and memory to understand and keep straight the different peoples and customs throughout. At less than 300 pages, *The Left Hand of Darkness* is nevertheless full to the brim with challenging ideas, themes, and concepts - not only is gender examined at length, but so too are political systems, religion, and the facets of human nature itself. This is a challenging book, and one that could spark a number of essays and in-depth analyses. It might not be sensational or easy to pick up and read in a single sitting (because, let's face it - there is a LOT to digest here) - but that's not a bad thing. Some books are meant to be savored, over time, in doses. *The Left Hand of Darkness* is the kind of book that can only get better upon a second, third, fifteenth, reading. It's a product of its time (published in the same year the Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin walked on the moon), but more impressively, it stands the test of time. *The Left Hand of Darkness* is just as important - if not more important - today as it was in 1969. Revolutionary, insightful, and thought-provoking, this remains a classic novel in the SF canon for good reason. This is a novel to be read, cherished, discussed, and dissected by all. Notable Quotes/Parts: You can read full excerpts of Chapters 9 & 10 online at Ursula K. LeGuin's website, [HERE](#). Additional Thoughts: Now, a bit about the 40th anniversary edition of the book. This edition of *The Left Hand of Darkness* is probably the ONE to buy - it includes an insightful foreword from Ursula LeGuin, the Gethenian calendar and clock, a Karhidish glossary and songs from the domain of Estre, the related short story "Coming of Age in Karhide," and maps of Gethen itself. If you're a sucker for extras - as I certainly am - this is the edition for you. Verdict: If you haven't read it, you should. If you have read it, you should read it again. This Hugo and Nebula award winning novel is an incredible feat of storytelling; it is a classic. Rating: 10 - A Classic. Could it be any other way? Reading Next: *Three Days to Dead* by Kelly Meding FantasyScience FictionUrsula LeGuin

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