

ANARCHISTS CARE ABOUT BOOKS

THE LEFT HAND OF DARKNESS BY URSULA K. LE GUIN

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POLITICS AND GOVERNMENTS

1. Estraven describes the politics of their country as “not a nation by a family quarrel.” Karhide is brimming with intrigue and politics, but has a very human government. Orgoreyn has a facade of openness and order which hides a darker reality. Both have elements that could describe element of the US government. What are some things we like and dislike about these governments? What can we learn from Genly’s interactions with them?
2. The Ekumen was similar to the United Nations, which anarchists have criticized as being a disingenuous organization using the rhetoric of international solidarity for the sake of geopolitics. Under what conditions would an organization like the Ekumen/UN be a force for good? Is Winter joining the Ekumen a positive thing?

COMMUNICATION

1. Shifgrethor comes from the word for shadow. The book’s center is Estraven and Genly’s relationship. Genly struggles to achieve his goal because he doesn’t trust Estraven; he sees shifgrethor as an obstacle to understanding and finds himself caught up in obscure power struggles. Le Guin also commented that the wintriness of the world’s setting was an extended metaphor for what blocks communication. What can we as anarchists learn about communication from the book’s example?
2. There are a couple instances of “waiving shifgrethor” and speaking directly. These examples indicate moments of intimacy when it was okay to let down one’s pride. In “Coming of Age in Karhide,” the last time one’s parent(s) speak openly to them without shifgrethor is right before they come into kemmer for the first time. What do these examples tell us about status and communication in Karhide?
3. Mindspeak offers a way to communicate directly without lies. This directness shakes Estraven. What does this tell us about Estraven? What does this demonstrate about intimacy on Winter?

SPIRITUALITY

1. What did you think about Yomesh & Haddara religions? (Yomesh monotheistic vs. Haddara vaguely Buddhist/Taoism). Do you feel there is a religious/philosophical/metaphysical stance that resonates with anarchism? What does spirituality have to do with it all, anyway?

GENDER AND SEXUALITY

1. How did you feel about the use of masculine pronouns for androgynous characters? And the centering of heterosexuality? Le Guin first defended herself by saying the novel was an attempt to think about society without gender, but she later said gender was central. What do you think? What does the book say about gender for you? (“Coming of Age in Karhide” defaults to she/her pronouns)
2. Is this depiction of gender utopian? What are things we would improve on if this book were rewritten today?

ANARCHISM: WHAT DOES THIS BOOK HAVE TO DO WITH ANARCHISM?