



Always Coming Home

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In some ways, this book seems to represent a major departure in the fiction of Ursula K. Le Guin, whose many works of science fiction and fantasy have established her as one of the major contemporary writers in those genres. Unlike most of her earlier works, *ALWAYS COMING HOME* is not set on a distant planet or in an enchanted land, nor are there exotic aliens or wizards featured in her cast of characters.

In many other ways, however, as the title suggests, *ALWAYS COMING HOME* circles back to develop many of the earlier threads of Le Guin's life and art. Her father was an anthropologist, and her mother a nonfiction writer whose best-known work, *ISHI*, focused on the last surviving member of a California Indian tribe. In turn, Le Guin brings the methods of anthropology to bear in fully imagining the tribal cultures which might inhabit California once again in a postindustrial future.

Similarly, as in many of her earlier novels, Le Guin structures her narrative around a journey which involves her protagonist in two contrasting cultures. For the first time, however, her central figure here is a woman, Stone Telling, who is somewhat of an outsider in both cultures because of her mixed parentage. Her mother is of the Kesh--an egalitarian, agrarian, peace-loving culture which centers on celebrations of nature and a philosophy of generous giving. Her father, however, is a roving warrior from the Dayao or Condor culture--a rigidly patriarchal, militaristic culture which is destroying itself and its neighbors through its blind monotheism and greed.

There is little question as to which of these cultures Le Guin abhors and which she endorses. The Dayao are clearly a dark extrapolation from present-day American capitalism, while the Kesh exemplify the economic philosophy of "small is beautiful." Four-fifths of the book is taken up with a detailed study of Kesh culture, including not only examples of its literature (stories, poems, and plays), but also maps, charts, and drawings to accompany a description of its every institution and artifact. A cassette tape of Kesh music and poetry is even included with the book.

For all her Utopian idealism, however, Le Guin always maintains an understated control of her narrative. As a young girl, Stone Telling is no fervent Kesh zealot: She is equally drawn to her father's power and comes to appreciate the Kesh culture only after she is separated from it. Thus, *ALWAYS COMING HOME* will appeal not only to those who are compelled by its ideology and detailed creation of a Utopian culture, but also to those who enjoy a story told with beautiful understatement and an author strong enough to distance herself from her own most strongly held ideas.

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