

Review of *City of Illusions*

Le Guin's attempts at elevated prose usually fall flat on me, but there are a few exquisite lines in this novel, starting on the very first page:

In the darkness that faces outward from the sun a mute spirit woke. Wholly involved in chaos, he knew no pattern. He had no language, and did not know the darkness to be night.¹

The previous two books made allusions to a mysterious “Enemy” of which the League of All Worlds was terrified. In those, it was just a plot device to motivate the League's erratic behavior toward the technologically undeveloped worlds on which the novels centered. Here, the Enemy is the focus, and I found the mystery and its resolution—complicated by a main character with memory loss, waking on a world with history loss—surprisingly satisfying.

The Shing are initially presented as evil invaders. Then it's suggested that they are, in fact, just some locals who invented a story about a great Enemy in order to unite humanity and end the destructive civil wars that had really caused civilization to collapse. Then that story itself is revealed to be a lie devised by the nefarious invaders. Neither turn is really surprising, but it works well because the middle step seems so much more like what you'd expect from Le Guin: a story about the roots of our problems being within ourselves.

And I did enjoy the conceit of an evil empire that has an absolute commitment to never killing anyone.

They were afraid to kill and afraid to die, and called their fear Reverence for Life.²

The book also touches on one of my favorite themes, personal identity. The Shing want the protagonist to undergo a procedure that will restore his lost memories and personality, at the cost of losing the six years of memories and personality he acquired in the mean time. To him, this seems like a violation of their law against killing.

¹Ursula K. Le Guin and Brian Attebery, *Hainish Novels & Stories*, vol. 1, Library of America 296-297 (New York, N.Y: The Library of America, 2017), 225.

²Ibid., 1:382.

A couple other quotes I liked:

...he knew himself so little that all his acts were also acts of self-discovery.³

...his problem was not really that of creating a unity, only of comprehending it.⁴

³Ibid., 1:256.

⁴Ibid., 1:363.