

Sisters and Science Fiction

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When Ursula K. Le Guin's story "Brothers and Sisters" appeared in a special double issue of The Little Magazine in the spring of 1976, her brother, the literary scholar Karl Kroeber, wrote the following preface.

WHEN the editors of *The Little Magazine* asked me for a fraternal comment on "Brothers and Sisters" they couldn't understand how far beyond mere sibling rivalry they were pressing me to go. Since my father was a distinguished scientist, my first years in academia were dominated by a question to which the answer was, "Yes, he is my father." Scarcely had he died than my mother became famous as an author, and I found myself saying, "Yes, she is my mother." About the time mother turned from public acclaim to a new and exciting marriage, my sister won the National Book Award, and I found a third variant for my identifying phrase. I'm convinced that should my sister disappear (squashed by a malfunctioning UFO?) one of my children would instantly win a Nobel Prize, or kidnap F. Lee Bailey. My remarks, therefore, must be taken as those of a familial Birdboot.

I remark first that my sister's writing has convinced me that (as I had long suspected) literary biography is useless for understanding literature. Boswell on Johnson and Bell on Woolf are delightful, but not helpful. I believe I know where both the general conceptions and many of the details in "Brothers and Sisters" originate. Every story of my sister's is full of references to things and events and relationships I recognize. But to know these sources is to know nothing of significance about the stories as stories. Bad stories often are raw biography. Literary art

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consists in transforming one kind of reality, that of physical experience, into another kind of reality, that of literary experience. Imagining, the process of transforming, is illuminated dimly, if at all, only by the magic of criticism. Writers are often complex people and fascinating subjects for psychological analysis, but a writer is a person to whom writing happens. As Winnie the Pooh put it, “Poetry and Hums aren’t things which you get, they’re things which get *you*. And all you can do is to go where they can find you.”

Especially disadvantageous for biographers are people like my sister who never become writers but who always are writers. I can’t remember a time when my sister wasn’t writing. I doubt that she can. For such a person writing is a mode of being, like talking for most of us, and making melodies for Mozart. Interestingly, not all the best writers are born writers—Shakespeare may not have been: he seems to have begun lazily and quit early, though commendably active in his middle years. But for those who lisp in numbers, the lisp is the significant biographical fact pointing to the mysterious truth that writers in writing about nothing but their own experience produce works not much illuminated by their experience. Writing is like alchemy—only the process of transmutation matters.

So little for biography, now less for genre, because my sister is not a “science fiction writer.” She is an imaginative author whose early work has followed the pattern of “science fiction,” the best (perhaps the only) mode open to an honest fantast unperturbed by the whims of the New York Literary Establishment. “Fantasy” derives from the Greek for “boaster,” it in turn deriving from a verb “to make visible.” Forms such as science fiction are a natural outlet for the “ostentatious,” that is, impudent, risk-taking writer. Critics, of course, prefer safe experimentalists. But the critical establishment’s power needn’t be overrated, since it is primarily negative. Occasionally it supports talent, seldom if ever does it permanently prevent a genuine artist from succeeding. When I saw the first advertisement for my sister’s work in the *New York Review*, I predicted a review of her by my colleague Michael Wood within a year. I underestimated Michael’s sensitivity to popular trends by four months.

The national popularity of science fiction, vampire stories, Gothic romances, and the like *is* impressive. If Bruno Bettelheim is right, this phenomenon might be called THE REVENGE OF DICK AND

JANE. It is at least appropriate that a culture which has exorcized from children's reading all that is genuinely fearful and romantic should be blessed by the high art and moral profundity of *The Exorcist*. Surely Sendak's *Where The Wild Things Are* is charming. "Bluebeard" is distinctly not charming, a sign that Grimm's monsters are real. So real that thousands of psychiatrists every year make thousands of dollars fighting them. Bettelheim's suggestion that our culture impoverishes children's fantasy life deserves practical recognition. His claim that fairy stories enable children to confront, rather than to escape from or be defeated by, fundamental human predicaments—loneliness, jealousy, death—is attractive to anyone who believes that, on a higher level and in a more complex fashion, fine literature is analogously didactic. By imaginatively living through the course of a novel or play one learns useful truths of human existence. The bizarre, absurd, and surreal elements so prevalent in our "serious" fiction too often are but cheap disguises for imaginative poverty of writer and reader. The popularity in our novels of the monologue form seems likewise symptomatic of an enfeeblement of fictionalizing energy, which does not recount but transmutes so that a strong reader (as Bloom would call her) may enjoy re-transforming.

To me, science fiction is best when it exuberantly pretends freakishness to work back toward the essential nature of fiction. One of my sister's early novels treated a planet where "winter" lasted many years. She has never lived in an extremely cold climate, and anyone who has might notice her unfamiliarity with the details of existence dominated by the sub-zero. Yet her descriptions are fictionally effective, for fiction only seems to remind us of actual existence. It invents possibilities of experience which, if we give ourselves to them, that is, respond imaginatively to them, enable us to return to actuality as more competent human (e.g., moral) organisms. So I would urge the fifteen graduate students who doubtless are busy writing dissertations on Le Guin not to seek in Bulgaria for the setting of "Brothers and Sisters." The curious growthless plain of limestone quarries is not East of the Sun and West of the Moon, just a little south of Zembla and north of Graustark.

Similar coordinates are needed to locate the following description.

They went noiselessly over mats of starry moss, rustled through interspersed tracts of leaves, skirted trunks with spreading roots whose mossed rinds made them like hands wearing green gloves; elbowed

old elms and ashes with great forks, in which stood pools of water that overflowed on rainy days and ran down their stems in green cascades. On older trees still than these huge lobes of fungi grew like lungs. Here, as everywhere, the Unfulfilled Intention, which makes life what it is, was as obvious as it could be among the depraved crowds of a city slum. The leaf was deformed, the curve was crippled, the taper was interrupted; the lichen ate the vigor of the stalk, and the ivy slowly strangled to death the promising sapling.

A pilgrim looking for this landscape in southern England is farther off the track than an enthusiast finding prototypes for Theodore Sturgeon. *The Woodlanders* wouldn't be worth reading if it only reported what a dope with a camera could photograph. "Brothers and Sisters" isn't, I think, essentially different from Le Guinian star treks, though its superficial "realism" may indicate my sister's growing confidence that her readers can be trusted to use their imaginations, to appreciate that fictional reality is fantasy.

I hope so, for such confidence would imply a reviving sense for the utility of literature. Here I can call on the testimony of a fellow immigrant to Brooklyn (unimaginative people come *from* Brooklyn): "these things are important not because a/ high-sounding interpretation can be put on them but because they are/ useful." Miss Moore, like Pooh, referred to poetry, but her words are equally applicable to the transformations of prose. As when, talking baseball, she said she was impressed at how the Dodgers' catcher "could throw the ball all the way to second base with just one hand."

In an unambiguous utopia, all novels would be written that way.