

## NOTES FROM: *The Lathe of Heaven*, by Ursula K. Le Guin

**SUMMARY:** This is an *incredible* work of science fiction by Ursula K. Le Guin, one of the best writers (science fiction or otherwise) ever to take up a pen and put it to paper.

*The Lathe of Heaven* is about a man, George Orr (possible reference to George Orwell?) who dreams “effective” dreams, meaning that his dreams have the power to *change reality*. So, for example, he would dream up some alternate history of the world, and the “real” world would *shift while he was asleep* to reflect the reality of his dream.

He starts seeing a psychologist, Dr. Haber, who then tries to control George’s dreams for his own purposes. Things, as you can probably guess, quickly get out of hand.

Le Guin was just a *master* of fiction, and so many passages in this book are just *beautiful*. In another book of hers, a nonfiction book on writing called *Steering the Craft*, she recommends reading your own work out loud as a way to eliminate words and phrases that sound “off,” or that strike the ear the wrong way, and personally, I *highly* recommend reading the first part of the first chapter of *this book* out loud, because you can obviously tell that’s *exactly* what *she* did.

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“Current-borne, wave-flung, tugged hugely by the whole might of ocean, the jellyfish drifts in the tidal abyss. The light shines through it, and the dark enters it. Borne, flung, tugged from anywhere to anywhere, for in the deep sea there is no compass but nearer and farther, higher and lower, the jellyfish hangs and sways; pulses move slight and quick within it, as the vast diurnal pulses beat in the moon-driven sea. Hanging, swaying, pulsing, the most vulnerable and insubstantial creature, it has for its defense the violence and power of the whole ocean, to which it has entrusted its being, its going, and its will. But here rise the stubborn continents. The shelves of gravel and the cliffs of rock break from water baldly into air, that dry, terrible outer space of radiance and instability, where there is no support for life. And now, now the currents mislead and the waves betray, breaking their endless circle, to leap up in loud foam against rock and air, breaking...What will the creature made all of sea-drift do on the dry sand of daylight; what will the mind do, each morning, waking?”

Chuang-Tse: “The portal of God is non-existence.”

“To let understanding stop at what cannot be understood is a high attainment. Those who cannot do it will be destroyed on the lathe of heaven.”

“The doctor was not, he thought, really sure that anyone else existed, and wanted to prove they did by helping them.”

“The creative and therapeutic resources of the brain – whether waking or sleeping or dreaming – are practically infinite. If we can just find the keys to all the locks. The power of dreaming alone is quite undreamt of!”

“No good. No way out. Orr was where he had been for months – alone: knowing he was insane and knowing he was not insane, simultaneously and intensely. It was enough to drive him insane.”

“Above the heads of those now riding the GPRT train in the Broadway Tunnel were tons of rock and gravel, tons of water running, the piles of wharves and the keels of ocean-going ships, the huge concrete supports of elevated freeway bridges and approaches, a convoy of steamer trucks laden with frozen battery-produced chickens, one jet plane at 34,000 feet, the stars at 4.3+ light-years. George Orr, pale in the flickering fluorescent glare of the train car in the infrafluvial dark, swayed as he stood holding a swaying steel handle on a strap among a thousand other souls. He felt the heaviness upon him, the weight bearing down endlessly. He thought, I am living in a nightmare, from which time to time I wake in sleep.”

“He arrived at ideas the slow way, never skating over the clear, hard ice of logic, nor soaring on the slipstreams of imagination, but slogging, plodding along on the heavy ground of existence.”

“Anyway, so what if he was crazy? What sane person could live in this world and not be crazy?”

“Did you ever happen to think, Dr. Haber, that there, there might be other people who dream the way I do? That reality’s being changed out from under us, replaced, renewed, all the time – only we don’t know it? Only the dreamer knows it, and those who know his dream. If that’s true, I guess we’re lucky not knowing it. This is confusing enough.”

“I don’t know. Things don’t have purposes, as if the universe were a machine, where every part has a useful function. What’s the function of a galaxy? I don’t know if our life has a purpose and I don’t see that it matters. What does matter is that we’re a part. Like a thread in a cloth or a grass-blade in a field. It *is* and we *are*. What we do is like the wind blowing on the grass.”

“That Haber could have thus got out of communication with himself was rather hard for Orr to conceive; his own mind was so resistant to such divisions that he was slow to recognize them in others. But he had learned that they existed. He had grown up in a country run by politicians who sent the pilots to man the bombers to kill the babies to make the world safe for children to grow up in.”

“He never spoke with any bitterness at all, no matter how awful the things he said. Are there really people without resentment, without hate? she wondered. People who never go cross-grained to the universe? Who recognize evil, and resist evil, and yet are utterly unaffected by it? Of course there are. Countless, the living and the dead. Those who have returned in pure compassion to the wheel, those who follow the way that cannot be followed without knowing they follow it, the sharecropper’s wife in Alabama and the lama in Tibet and the entomologist in Peru and the millworker in Odessa and the greengrocer in London and the goatherd in Nigeria and the old, old man sharpening a stick by a dry streambed somewhere in Australia, and all the others. There is not one of us who has not known them. There are enough of them, enough to keep us going. Perhaps.”

“She went to the door and stood half inside, half outside for a while, listening to the creek shouting and hollering eternal praise! eternal praise! It was incredible that it had kept up that tremendous noise for hundreds of years before she was even born, and would go on doing it until the mountains moved.”