

Ursula K Le Guin's speech at National Book Awards

'Books aren't just commodities'

Ursula K. Le Guin

2014

In a passionate speech, writer takes aim at publishers who put profit before art

To the givers of this beautiful reward, my thanks, from the heart. My family, my agents, my editors, know that my being here is their doing as well as my own, and that the beautiful reward is theirs as much as mine. And I rejoice in accepting it for, and sharing it with, all the writers who've been excluded from literature for so long – my fellow authors of fantasy and science fiction, writers of the imagination, who for 50 years have watched the beautiful rewards go to the so-called realists.

Hard times are coming, when we'll be wanting the voices of writers who can see alternatives to how we live now, can see through our fear-stricken society and its obsessive technologies to other ways of being, and even imagine real grounds for hope. We'll need writers who can remember freedom – poets, visionaries – realists of a larger reality.

Right now, we need writers who know the difference between production of a market commodity and the practice of an art. Developing written material to suit sales strategies in order to maximise corporate profit and advertising revenue is not the same thing as responsible book publishing or authorship.

Yet I see sales departments given control over editorial. I see my own publishers, in a silly panic of ignorance and greed, charging public libraries for an e-book six or seven times more than they charge customers.⁽¹⁾ We just saw a profiteer try to punish a publisher for disobedience, and writers threatened by corporate fatwa. And I see a lot of us, the producers, who write the books and make the books, accepting this – letting commodity profiteers sell us like deodorant, and tell us what to publish, what to write.

Books aren't just commodities; the profit motive is often in conflict with the aims of art. We live in capitalism, its power seems inescapable – but then, so did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings. Resistance and change often begin in art. Very often in our art, the art of words.

⁽¹⁾ Amazon and publisher Hachette end dispute over online book sales www.theguardian.com

I've had a long career as a writer, and a good one, in good company. Here at the end of it, I don't want to watch American literature get sold down the river. We who live by writing and publishing want and should demand our fair share of the proceeds; but the name of our beautiful reward isn't profit. Its name is freedom.

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