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Powers

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Editorial Choice:

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

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Powers is the third volume of Ursula Le Guin's new series, 'Annals of the Western Shore', following the earlier **Gifts** and **Voices**. Comparisons inevitably arise with the incomparable 'Earthsea' sequence, and there are certainly things in common. There is a complete imagined world, with a precise and significant geography, at a roughly medieval stage of technology, learning and social development. There is a central figure with special gifts, like the wizard Ged, who undertakes a long physical and psychic journey. But **Powers** is a very different kind of book, and it demands an older reader.

Its hero is Gav, a ten-year-old boy at the start, a young man at the end. Gav is a slave in Etra, one of several warring City States. An intelligent boy, he is being educated to become the future slave tutor to the children of his owners, in a house where slaves are well treated. Only at the end, when Gav has reached a place of true freedom, does he fully understand that a 'well treated slave' is a contradiction in terms. One terrible event divorces the teenaged Gav from his house and sets him on his long and troubled road to freedom. Gav has 'powers' of his own: an astonishing gift of memory, and visions which foretell the future. His inner powers are set against the outward powers of others - wealth and status, authority, bullying, slave-ownership, charisma. The novel is about the varying forms of human power. Above all, again and again, it is about trust and betrayal.

In **Powers** themes and ideas are more important than plot. Le Guin seems deliberately to play down her story's opportunities for narrative excitement. Everything is slow, subdued, low-key, except what happens in its remarkable young hero's mind and heart. Ostensibly an adventure story for young readers about slavery, escape, flight and ultimate freedom, it is actually a psychological novel for teenagers and adults using one young man's long adolescent trials to explore and illustrate some abstract but important human themes.

Running Order:

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