

Ursula K. Le Guin on Heroines

“Hero” and “heroine” are hard words for me. They’re not words I use very often. Heroism seems to be above all a matter of courage -- and I am such a coward, so physically timid, I wimp out so easily, how can I have the right to judge who is and isn’t a hero or heroine? And that’s another problem I have with the words: why are there two of them? Why can’t a heroic woman just be a hero, the way a woman plumber is just a plumber, not a plumberess or a plumberine?

We women who write used to be referred to as authoresses, but slowly we seem to have become authors. I’m pleased about that. I’d rather be a hero than a heroine, but since I’ll never be either, I’m glad to be an author.

And if I have any heroes to talk about, they’re mostly authors too. The first one is easy. She stands up there on her heroic pedestal pretty much by herself -- except she never would have stood on a pedestal for half a second, she was too shy, and too busy. **Virginia Woolf** has always got a bad press. People just love to tell you how she was over-refined, and snobbish, and sick, and committed suicide and all that. What I see is a woman who worked incredibly hard with incredible energy all her life – look at how much she wrote! and every word of it worth reading! – and by pure courage faced and defeated demons of psychic sickness and despair such as I can scarcely imagine. And she was funny, and loved her husband, and her friends, and London, and life. I admire her more than I can say. She lived a writer’s life heroically in every sense of the word.

Next in my heart comes **Emily Brontë**. Her sister Charlotte too, Charlotte was a most lovable and valiant woman, but I want to praise Emily whose life was so very dark, so very short, so wholly given to serving the genius that drove her -- Emily who wrote

*And if I pray, the only prayer
That moves my lips for me
Is – “Leave the heart that now I bear
And give me liberty.*

*Yes, as my swift days near their goal
Tis all that I implore –
Through life and death, a chainless soul
With courage to endure!*

And my third heroine, that quiet little body scribbling novels in a corner of the room, fond of her sister and her nephews, unmarried, never went anywhere -- what's heroic about **Jane Austen**? Everything. The courage of her indifference to neglect and sexist contempt, the brilliance of her intelligence piercing through the pretenses of her society, her dauntless wit, her unvanquishable commitment to her art. I wish some of our authors who are so good at self-advertisement had half her modesty along with a quarter of her talent.

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