

TRUE VOYAGE IS RETURN WRITING BRIEF

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

You can also read this information at philipholyman.com/true-voyage-is-return

WHY IS THERE A WRITING BRIEF?

Some projects, callouts or competitions give you total freedom to write about absolutely anything you want, which can be great — but that freedom can also be very daunting.

Often, it's useful to have something a bit more specific to respond to, which helps writers to focus their minds, settle on their subject, and refine their ideas.

Having a brief is especially useful for writers who might not feel very confident or who may not feel they have very much experience — and that's why I've set a brief for this project.

WHAT IS THE BRIEF?

It's really simple! The brief invites writers to respond to this four-word phrase: “**True Voyage Is Return**”.

That's it! Told you it was simple!

WHERE DOES THAT PHRASE COME FROM?

It's a quote from [The Dispossessed](#), a novel by the American writer Ursula K. Le Guin. The book was first published in 1974, so it's celebrating its 50th anniversary this year. (On the subject of milestone dates, Ursula K. Le Guin would have celebrated her 95th birthday on 21st October, the third Monday of our project period. We'll definitely be having cake that day!)

If you were in a bookshop, trying to track *The Dispossessed* down, it would probably be shelved in the Science Fiction section.

WHAT'S THE BOOK ABOUT?

Here's a super-short, and hopefully spoiler-free summary:

The planet Urras is a capitalist society and the nearby planet Anarres is an anarchist society. Long ago, Anarres was colonised by people from Urras who wanted to reject the capitalist patriarchal propertarian system and who decided to set up a new society of their own. Life on Anarres is shaped by a totally different set of values, based on the spirit of mutual cooperation and abandoning the notions of personal property or centralised government. Shevek is a physicist on Anarres who wants to experience Urras for himself. (He's inspired by J. Robert Oppenheimer who was a frequent visitor to Le Guin's childhood home.) Against the community's wishes, Shevek goes to Urras, and finds out firsthand what life there is really like.

(There's a LOT more to it than that — but I'm trying really hard not to spoil it for you!)

The book invites us to think about the kind of society we live in, the kind of society we'd like to live in, and how far we're prepared to go in order to create and maintain a world that reflects and upholds our values. It also encourages us to think carefully about the pros and cons of every kind of society or social system, and to avoid thinking that any of them are perfect. It's a brilliant book to read during an election year...!

DO I NEED TO HAVE READ *THE DISPOSSESSED* TO BE ABLE TO TAKE PART IN THIS?

No! Not at all! It's a great book, and I'd definitely recommend it to anyone. (There's a really nice audio version as well for anyone who needs or prefers to listen to a book rather than to read a physical copy. It's available from the usual places like Audible and Spotify, but it'll also be out there in other places if you're more of an audiobook anarchist!)

You absolutely do not have to know anything at all about *The Dispossessed* in order to write something of your own for this project. What I'm most interested in is seeing where the phrase "True Voyage Is Return" leads your imagination, and discovering what you write in response.

DO I HAVE TO WRITE A NOVEL?

No! Not at all! I want the anthology to include a range of literary forms and there's more detailed information about this in the Submissions Terms and Guidance (which you can find at philipholyman.com/true-voyage-is-return) including limits on the length or word count of your piece. Here's a super-quick summary of the kinds of work I'm hoping writers will submit:

- short prose fiction — such as a short story
- short works combining images and text — such as a zine or short graphic novel
- poetry — this could be a single poem or a collection of up to five poems
- theatre writing — such as a short play or a monologue
- narrative non-fiction — such as a memoir, a travelogue or a biography that experiments creatively with language, form or style
- writing for children and young people — such as a picture book or a young adult short story

DO I HAVE TO WRITE SCIENCE FICTION?

No! Not at all! Just because the inspiration for this project came from a work of science fiction, that doesn't mean you have to write one, too.

There are lots of ways that different types of literature get referred to: words such as "genre" or "class" or "category", for example, that help to describe things like the subject or style of a work of literature in broadly recognisable terms. Thriller, romance, horror, and so on, and so on.

These words are nothing more than labels, really — as far as this project is concerned, you can write in any genre or category you like, or in no specific genre or category at all. What's important is that the work you write falls within the scope of the Submissions Terms and Guidance (which you can find at philipholyman.com/true-voyage-is-return)

WHAT DOES “TRUE VOYAGE IS RETURN” ACTUALLY MEAN?

In the context of *The Dispossessed*, the phrase features in the dedication on the gravestone of Odo, the woman who is a key figure in the revolution on Urras and who inspires the founding of the anarchist colony on Anarres:

*Laia Asieo Odo
698 — 769
To be whole is to be part;
true voyage is return*

(Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*)

The concept doesn't get specifically explored or explained again in the book beyond that, but it's an idea which pops up in different ways throughout lots of Ursula K. Le Guin's other works:

*Life is a journey back to where you started from, Le Guin always said.
True voyage is return. When you get there,
you might know a little more than when you began.*

(Ursula K. Le Guin: *The Last Interview and Other Conversations*, edited by David Streitfeld)

Le Guin's short story *The Day Before the Revolution* revisits Laia (Odo from *The Dispossessed*) when she is in her seventies — and variations on the phrase appear in that story twice:

*If you wanted to come home you had to keep going on,
that was what she meant when she wrote "True journey is return,"
but it had never been more than an intuition,
and she was farther than ever now from being able to rationalize it.*

and later...

She had come home; she had never left home. "True voyage is return."

(Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Day Before the Revolution*)

There are lots of Reddit threads about what this phrase means (as there are about pretty much everything), and one commenter, Massive_Customer_930, puts it very nicely:

*Essentially, at the end of a journey when we come back to where we began,
it's only then that we can see how much we've changed — this change being our true
voyage.*

So when you approach this writing brief, there are all sorts of ways you can run with this phrase and respond to it in the piece you write.

One great option is approaching it literally. A character starts out in one place, and then they go to another place. They might have lots of different reasons for doing that. At some point, they go back to the place they started out from. They might have lots of different reasons for doing that, too.

The place they left behind is likely to be different now — subtly different or dramatically different. The same thing goes for the character themselves, too. They are likely to be a very different person now from who they were when they left.

The journey from place to place will cover a span of time — a small interval, like the midnight of one day to the midnight of the next — or a huge period of years, decades, centuries and beyond, from now into the past or the future and back again — or anything in between.

The distance between places can be as small as switching from one seat of a bus to another — or as large as travelling from one galaxy to another. It could involve going to prison and being released (or escaping) — going to hospital and being discharged (with a new baby, or with a terminal prognosis) — trekking around a desert island or journeying around a war zone. Fictional stories like *Gulliver's Travels*, or *Planet of the Apes*. Factual stories like the Apollo 11 Moon mission or Teddy Seymour sailing solo around the world.

And it doesn't have to be a physical journey from A to B and back to A again, of course.

There are all kinds of other journeys a character could go on — emotional journeys, political journeys, spiritual journeys — journeys to do with identity or ideology — journeys from one age or stage of life to another — journeys where the returning character may still be the same in some ways but may also be very different in others.

The main character can be you, or another real person who exists or has existed, or someone completely made up. And your character doesn't have to be human — they could be an animal, an alien, anything you like. And there can be lots of characters, of course — not just one.

What I'm hoping I've made clear is that there's massive amounts of freedom for you to interpret this brief, taking it as a starting point and then going in your own unique direction with it.

The most important thing is for you to have fun, playing around with different ideas and imagining all kinds of possibilities, before you settle on something that really excites you, which gets you writing and leads to you completing a brand-new piece which we can celebrate and share in the anthology.

END