



with astonishing sets and scenes. It's a cascade of wonder.

AND YET THERE is light and shade to the rampant psychedelia. The real world, although stylised and fascinating, is muted and subdued compared to the Other world, and it is, above all, the characters that shine through, and special mention must go to John Hodgman's voice work as Coraline's father. In a film in which voices and models mesh spectacularly, he's a particular high point.

If there's anything wrong with *Coraline* the movie, it's not the purist-baiting addition of Coraline's chum Wybie, who, at the very least, stops the film being one in which a little girl goes around talking to herself a lot. Nor is it the addition of the happy (well, happier) ending, which adds a sweet, delightful coda to the events that precede it. Nope, it's that, for all of the film's dizzying and shiversome flights of fancy and fear, Coraline never really seems to question herself. We see her cry, briefly, on two occasions, but otherwise she seems to boldly stride her way through the movie. On the one hand, this is an entirely salutary example to set to 11-year-old girls everywhere, but on the other, we lose a little in the way of threat, risk, and consequence. But it's a small and pedantic complaint, because otherwise *Coraline* is one of the most impressive, imaginative and entertaining family films we've seen in a while. **Jes Bickham**

LAVINIA

★★★★★

Author: Ursula Le Guin **Publisher:** Gollancz
Price: £14.99 **Released:** 21 May



IT'S NOT OFTEN that you will hear a journalist admit to this, but *Lavinia* is a book I really do not feel appropriately qualified to review. It's not just that it takes inspiration from one of the great texts of European literature – *The Aeneid*, by Virgil, which I fear my minor critical skills provide too small a set of cutlery to properly digest – but that it is such a perfectly balanced blend of feeling, metre and storytelling it is hard to describe.

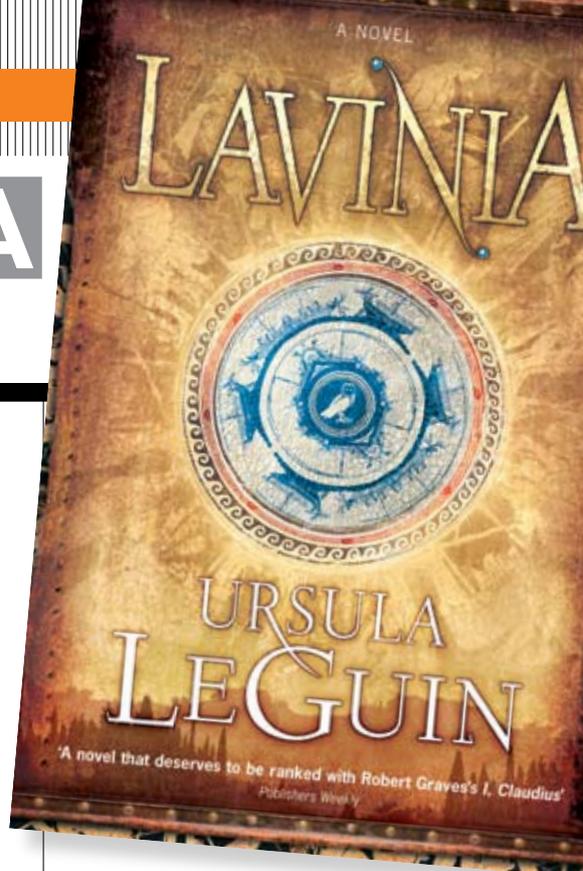
This is a book that is as perfect as an autumn day, or a truly great wine. Of course, it is possible to break down both of these things into their component parts. What is good about an autumn day? The warm feel of the sun through cold air, the clarity of light, the smell of wood smoke, clouds of breath, the crackle of leaves and frost. What is good about a glass of wine? Its blend of flavours, the process of its making, the time in which and the company with whom it is drunk. But this mere listing of attributes does nothing to capture the essence of the experience, even for oneself, let alone to convey the fullness of sensation to another. It takes a poet to do that. Le Guin, like Virgil, is up to the task. This is no simple entertainment, one among many such similar entertainments. This is life itself, coaxed onto the page.

THE AENEID WAS Virgil's attempt to emulate Homer, and to glorify Rome and the Julian clan. The first half of it details the wanderings of Aeneas, one of the few survivors of the sack of Troy, as he seeks out his prophesied homeland (Virgil's *Odyssey*). The second half: the war he fights when he reaches it, with Turnus of the Latins (Virgil's *Illiad*). He marries Lavinia, daughter of the King Laternus, and his heirs go on to found Rome.

Lavinia is barely described in the poem. She is incidental to the grand plot of wars, gods, heroes and destinies. Le Guin flips this on its head – Lavinia becomes the focus, the narrator. The war between Trojans and Latins is the backdrop, the focus becomes life, life that goes on no matter what (though Le Guin envisages an ultimate end by war).

Le Guin is overwhelmingly, frighteningly wise. Core to her penetrating appreciation of life is her deep understanding of what divides, and unites, the genders. She is a feminist, but hers is an inclusive feminism. She has a woman's affection for men, she does not despise them or pity them. She shames us with wisdom and glorifies us with love, we men. We'd do well to pay heed. Her Aeneas is a hero. He is a killer.

He is lauded for being the former, and tortured by guilt for being the latter. He is loved by Lavinia anyway. Le Guin



understands people like few can. We will always need heroes, and we will always have killers. Often, they are the same. She laments war, but unlike some she does not condemn men for it, and nor does she absolve women of guilt for it.

Lavinia carries an air of pensive sorrow for a life run out, while encouraging celebration and an acceptance of those parts that do not bear celebration. In any case, the days roll on, spring turns to summer turns to autumn turns to winter turns to spring again. The characters' individual stories eventually stop, they die, but the seasons never do. The people are remembered, in some way or another, by those that follow, by history, by the landscape. Virgil himself appears, a half-formed wraith from the future of Rome's glory; he is a dream to Lavinia, she a creation of his. Both of them creations of Le Guin.

After we have gone, all that is left of an individual is a story – maybe that is enough. Only life itself is eternal.

BOOK

IS THIS A BOOK, perhaps, about Le Guin's own story? In this way *Lavinia* is reminiscent of Sheri Tepper's *The Margarets*, a long, fond look back over a life well lived. Unlike Aeneas or Dido or Virgil, Lavinia does not enter the afterlife; her existence fades into that of an owl. The owl's cry of "i,i,i" is 'go on' in Latin. It is also a modest echo of the very much capitalised 'I' in Robert Graves' *I, Claudius*, with which this book has been compared. But it could also be Le Guin, calling out for remembrance.

She is telling us that she knows that the world will persist without her, as Lavinia's story continues past the end of Virgil's poem, past the death of Aeneas. It is not a book about great deeds, of turning points or moments; it is about the persistence of life, the passage of time, the sowing of crops, the sorrow of mothers for sons killed, of disagreements and reconciliations. It is a book of bittersweet sorrows, of shared joys. It is an autumn day, it is a fine glass of wine. **Guy Haley**

