


Ursula ☼ Franklin ☼ Reader

A review of Ursula Franklin's collection from 4 decades of citizen activism

 Ursula Franklin is one of those successful academics Canada would like to keep in the closet. Not like those Canadians we celebrate in the mainstream, whose success we can share in, whose achievements we can attribute to the great country they grew up in. She's a scientist and a professor at the University of Toronto who has challenged the government on everything from urban planning without citizen involvement, to the conscription of tax money for the development of nuclear and military technology.

"Ursula Franklin?" Canada says, "haven't heard of her; she must live next door, we're the good country no one complains about."

Since the beginning of her career, Ursula has criticized the scientific method as an outdated and patriarchal process for understanding the natural world. She's challenged hierarchical structures in universities and government, and spoke against any kind of reactionism to Sept. 11th only two days after the event on CBC radio.

"No, no, no," Canada says, now blushing, "we wouldn't have a renegade like that working here."

But Franklin has lived here for 58 years, immigrating from Germany after earning her Ph. D. in experimental physics, and as a survivor of a Nazi concentration camp, she has never forgotten the importance of good government, or how to recognize a bad one. Her story, however, begins in ancient China, when prescriptive technologies were first developed.

Holistic technologies, such as the making of clay pots, where potters collect materials, design, shape, and fire the pot all by themselves, could not create China's more advanced crafts, such as large, bronze

caldrons. A bronze caldron needed many workers, and the step by step process needed managers and supervisors, and the capital to build fires hot enough to smelt ore into raw material needed investors, and investors needed an administration to guarantee their money, and the administration needed tax payers to pay their salary, and the tax payers needed an enforcement body to guarantee they'd pay, and everyone had to do exactly what they were supposed to do, at the precise time they were supposed to do it, or else the caldron wouldn't get made.

As a researcher for University of Toronto's Department of Metallurgy and Materials Science, Franklin spent her time studying bronze artifacts from ancient China and considering how these 'high-tech' products changed Chinese society. One of very few women in a rigid, hierarchical institution of science, one of very few pacifists in an institution dedicating its minds to the Cold War, she found – in those artifacts – a better understanding of the dysfunctional society around her.

Franklin coined the term 'prescriptive technology,' that intricate and broad reaching web that made those caldrons.

She saw that prescriptive technologies created a, "culture of compliance, and acceptance of the obligation to conform to detailed instructions because 'things have to fit.'" More importantly, she saw that science and technology are directly related to human rights. Her revelation changed the course of her career – or more correctly – joined Franklin the scientist together with Franklin the feminist, pacifist, and social activist.

The Ursula Franklin Reader: Pacifism as a Map is a collection of articles, documents, lectures, and in-

interviews from 4 decades of her career. In the prelude she writes of her resistance to, "...a thematic grouping or ordering of the papers, which would separate, say, women's issues from peace issues, questions of teaching and learning from consideration of equality, the need to care for the environment from citizens' responsibility or the advancement of human rights."

As a writer, I can attest to the difficulty she must have had in organizing these works into an entertaining yet powerful answer to her thematic question: "How can one live and work as a pacifist in the here and now and help to structure a society in which oppression, violence, and wars would diminish and cooperation, equality, and justice would arise."

The topics of her papers are as broad and varied as her audiences, and more than a few begin with Franklin introducing herself as an outsider: "I am a Quaker, a feminist, and a physicist; my perspectives may differ significantly from those of others attending the symposium." But her message is universal: "Peace is the absence of fear. Peace is the presence of justice."

Through decades of involvement in citizen politics and urban planning, she has witnessed a smothering of citizen voices beneath the megaphones of commercial enterprise: "We aren't governed, there is no one to mediate powers for the benefit of all. We are mangled." Many of her talks try to reclaim that voice: "Advocacy in the urban habitat now turns to advocacy for the urban habitat."

Franklin's belief that peace can't exist without justice on every level of government and society is what connects her larger theme with community level issues, and makes her collection of works a kind of guide book for concerned citizens.

Her arguments are clear and she has a knack for imagery; whether comparing her growth model to the production model for education; the arms race to a neighborhood full of vicious attack dogs, or comparing social ecology to wilderness ecology, and their common need for diversity. Even her choice of words is out of consideration for the reader: "I do not find it helpful to speak about 'target audiences', since I do not want to shoot the people who come to my lectures, I actually want to talk to them."

The Ursula Franklin Reader: Pacifism as a Map is a good read, a valuable reference book, and a long awaited portrait of a great Canadian thinker. Despite a world that seems less and less interested in justice (as I finish this review the news has just announced the execution of Saddam Hussein), Ursula Franklin continues to speak, write, and deliver her message of peace. "I always think it is almost a miracle that in a world that knows so little peace and justice, there is a universal understanding that peace and justice do exist, ought to exist, and are attainable." 🦋