L'Engle, Madeleine

From Chambers Biographical Dictionary

1918-2007

US novelist

Born in New York City, she was educated at Smith College, Northampton, and at the New School for Social Research in New York. A prolific writer for children as well as adults, she imbued her work with explicitly Christian ideas and morals. Her most popular titles include *A Wrinkle in Time* (1962, Newbery medal) and *The Young Unicorns* (1968), part of a popular series about the Austin family. Both of these combine elements of fantasy with tough ethical concerns. In 2001 she published *Madeleine L’Engle Herself: Reflections on a Writing Life*.

Summary Article: L'Engle, Madeleine

From Encyclopedia of Religious and Spiritual Development

Madeleine L'Engle (b. 1918) is a prolific writer whose fictional works address spiritual questions in a manner that appeals to children of many ages. She is best known for her “Time Trilogy,” especially *A Wrinkle in Time* (which won the esteemed Newbery Award in 1963) and for her series about the Austin family (*Meet the Austins, A Ring of Endless Light*, etc.). L'Engle has also written novels for adults, several autobiographical pieces, books on scripture, and collections of prayers—some sixty books in all. Most of her books have remained in print, and L'Engle has inspired love and devotion among millions of readers over the past four decades. Both adults and children regard her as a multitalented and prolific writer. She's also much loved as a teacher, having given many workshops and lecture tours. Perhaps her most significant contribution to children and adolescent spirituality is the way she explores the common ground between Christian belief and science.

L'Engle addresses spirituality through a blend of psychological realism and science fiction. Often her protagonists are awkward young people who are wrestling with important questions of belief and ethics, such as: What is my purpose in life? What does it mean to love well? Who is God? What is God? What happens after death? Why is there suffering in the world? How can I know God?

In their journeys to understanding, her protagonists undergo paranormal experiences. For example, Meg Murry (in *A Wrinkle in Time*, first book in the “Time Trilogy”) is downcast because her father has disappeared for more than a year, presumably kidnapped. Then three eccentric women (possibly angels or witches in disguise) teach Meg how to time travel to another galaxy. This leads to many adventures and eventually to Meg's heroic rescue of her father and her little brother, Charles Wallace Murry.

Another example is Vicky Austin, the 16-year-old in *A Ring of Endless Light* who is wrestling with her own emerging sexuality and with the harsh reality of the deaths of several people she knows. When she discovers a talent for communicating with the dolphins that swim near her summer home (telepathy), they lead her to a deeper faith in God. Perhaps because she herself was an awkward, lonely child, L'Engle often portrays misfits and outsiders who grow into heroes.

https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/l_engle_madeleine
L'Engle's work expresses her devotion to the Christian tradition and her deep love of, and delight in, the Bible. Her beliefs are orthodox, but often with an innovative, contemporary spin that affirms the common ground between science and Christianity. Christian themes include a loving, guiding God; the centrality of love and forgiveness; God's presence in the ordinary; the importance of moral choices; Christians as “light bearers”; the dignity of all people; and the importance of justice. Her work appeals to readers of many traditions, including Roman Catholics, Evangelicals, and many who are not Christian. Indeed, most of her fans probably do not think of her as a religious writer.

L'Engle also conveys a deep love of the arts and science. She believes that great artists, musicians, and scientists are as important to deepening spirituality as are great evangelists. Many of her characters are scientists, and scientific facts play important roles in her plots. For example, in writing *A Wrinkle in Time*, she researched quantum physics to accurately portray Meg Murry traveling through a tesseract or “time wrinkle” to another galaxy. Her theological ideas have been compared to those of Teilhard de Chardin. She sees God as the great Mystery and Creator, a source of endless fascination.

L'Engle's fiction also reflects her concerns for social justice. She is especially concerned about the environment, women's equality, and peace. She often shows a battle between good and evil on a cosmic scale, with children playing decisive moral roles. Personal spirituality naturally flows into political action.

L'Engle's concern about justice for women makes her books of special interest to girls and young women. Among science fiction novels, *A Wrinkle in Time* (1962) was ahead of its time in featuring a strong girl protagonist, Meg Murry. Meg's mother is well educated—with two doctorates and a Nobel Prize in science. In more recent years, L'Engle has written about her deepening concern for inclusive language for equal opportunities for women in church and society.

Another valuable aspect of L'Engle’s novels is the fact that they feature intact loving families that young readers find appealing, families that include pets with distinct personalities. The Austin, Murry, and O'Keefe families each appear in several different works, so that readers can see characters grow into adulthood over decades. These families are exemplary yet realistic. Parents love their children and are also well-developed individuals in their own right. The children have chores, are loyal to siblings, enjoy family meals, and are well disciplined, even as they also disobey and bicker at times. L'Engle also portrays loving intergenerational relationships. For example, in the Austin series, Vicky Austin regards her grandfather as a mentor and confidant. He shares her love of language and her Christian faith, and treats her with deep respect, even though she is sixty years younger.

L'Engle has been described as a mystic, a “universe disturber,” and a “boundary breaker.” L'Engle believes that the imagination, story, myth, and even “magic” are essential avenues to understanding God. Her work has been censored by religious conservatives who object to her portrayal of imagination as a positive force, witches, and magic.

Born in 1918, Madeleine L'Engle has lived in New York or Connecticut most of her life. She was married for more than forty years to actor Hugh Franklin, who died in 1986. In addition to being a writer, she has spent many years at home raising her three children. In her eighties, she continues to write and speak to enthusiastic audiences of all ages. (She has also been known under the names Madeleine Franklin and Madeleine L'Engle Camp.)

Her most important works include “The Time Trilogy”: *A Wrinkle in Time* (1962); *A Wind in the Door*
(1973); and *A Swiftly Tilting Planet* (1978).

A more complete listing of her works can be found at these Web sites:

- “Madeleine L’Engle Bibliography” (her own Web site), [www.madeleinelengle.com/books/biblio_car.htm](http://www.madeleinelengle.com/books/biblio_car.htm).

**FURTHER READING**


Thomas, Trudelle