

About Madeleine L'Engle



Madeleine L'Engle doesn't think of herself as a children's book writer. She's just a writer. She writes books that she would want to read.

L'Engle believes kids need heroes like Meg in *A Wrinkle in Time*, because heroes were important to her when she was growing up. "I always needed somebody that I wanted to be as good as," she says, "if not better than."

L'Engle was born Madeleine L'Engle Camp on November 29, 1918. Her mother was a pianist and her father was a journalist and a writer who fought in World War I. His lungs were damaged from mustard gas, a poisonous gas that was used as a weapon in the war. Because of his health problems, the family traveled to places where the air was dry and easy to breathe.

As an only child, L'Engle grew up lonely and always wished for a larger family. She says that's why the families in her novels have lots of children.

Wherever her parents lived they always had many friends—artists, musicians, and writers. "Their lives were very full and they really didn't have time for a child. So I turned to writing to amuse myself."

L'Engle grew up in a house full of books, so reading and writing came naturally. "My parents read aloud to each other every night," says L'Engle. Among the books they read were the works of the French writer Alexandre Dumas. It was from Dumas that L'Engle says she found "a sense of story."

When Madeleine was twelve, the family moved to a town in the French Alps. She was sent to a boarding school, which she hated. When she was fourteen, the family returned to the United States and Madeleine was sent to Ashley Hall, a boarding school in Ashley, South Carolina, which she loved. She was seventeen and still at Ashley Hall when her father died. She went on to spend four years at Smith College, graduating with honors in 1941. In 1981 Smith awarded her a Smith Medal for "service to the community that reflects the purpose of a liberal arts education."

After graduating from Smith, L'Engle moved to the Greenwich Village neighborhood in New York City with three other young women. She still wanted to be a writer, but "I had to pay the bills, so I went to work in the theater."

While she was on tour as an actress, Madeleine wrote her first book, *The Small Rain*. At this time she decided that having three names was more than she needed. So, Madeleine dropped her last name, Camp.

L'Engle knows all about her heritage. The name L'Engle can be traced back to two French brothers, one Catholic and one

Protestant. They fought and the Protestant brother got mad and left France. He changed the original spelling of his name, which was L'Angle, to L'Engle. "I'm descended from the mad brother!" L'Engle says with a laugh.

While she was rehearsing a play, she met an actor named Hugh Franklin. They were married when they were on tour with another play. A short time later, they both decided to give up acting. They moved to rural Connecticut, where they opened a general store.

"It was a very safe place to start raising our kids," L'Engle recalls. "No city lights, no noises at night." They lived in a very small town that is a lot like the town in *A Wrinkle in Time*. In fact, it was while they were living in Connecticut that L'Engle wrote *A Wrinkle in Time*.

Although their store was successful, the Franklins missed New York City. After ten years, they moved back to the city with their three children, settling into a large eight-room apartment overlooking the Hudson River.

Despite the fact that L'Engle was an author who had already published six books, it took more than two years to find a publisher for *A Wrinkle in Time*. Later, after the book was a success, one publisher who had rejected it told her, "I wish I'd had the chance to publish it." L'Engle mailed him a copy of the rejection slip he had sent her.

How does it feel to have such a huge success after trying for so long to find a publisher? “Since it was the book nobody wanted,” says L’Engle, “it feels kind of nice.”

A Wrinkle in Time won the prestigious Newbery Medal in 1963, the year after it was published. It is the first book in what became a four-book series called “The Time Quartet.” Three other books about the Murry family were published after *A Wrinkle in Time*. They are *A Wind in the Door*, *A Swiftly Tilting Planet*, and *Many Waters*. In *A Wind in the Door*, Meg and Calvin, school principal Mr. Jenkins, a farandola, and a cherubim, travel inside one of Charles Wallace’s mitochondria to save him from an evil being. In *A Swiftly Tilting Planet*, newly married Meg takes a telepathic trip with Charles Wallace through time in order to save the world once again. The twins Sandy and Dennys are the heroes in *Many Waters*, in which they time-travel to the time of the biblical Noah.

Another book, *An Acceptable Time*, is sometimes considered part of the Time series because it includes Meg’s parents. But it is really about Polly O’Keefe, Meg’s daughter. It belongs with the four-book series about the O’Keefe family, which also includes *The Arm of the Starfish*, *Dragons in the Water*, and *A House Like a Lotus*.

L’Engle’s longest series is about the Austin family. The series has eight books: *The Twenty-Four Days Before Christmas*, *A Full House*, *Meet the Austins*, *The Anti-Muffins*, *The Moon by Night*, *The Young Unicorns*, *A Ring of Endless Light*, and *Troubling a Star*.

L'Engle has many personal heroes—people she looks to for inspiration and encouragement in her life and work. The composer Johann Sebastian Bach is high on her list. “If I get out of proportion and all confused, if I can sit down and play Bach fugues, he’ll pull me back.” She also loves Mozart and Scarlatti. L'Engle especially likes Albert Einstein and calls him “Saint Albert.”

“He [Einstein] says that anyone who is not lost in rapture at the power of the mind behind the universe is as good as a burned out candle.”

L'Engle has never lost her awe of the universe. This awe helps give her the inspiration to write.

“When I look at the night sky I’m looking at time as well as space,” says the author, “looking at a star seven light-years away, and a star seventy light-years away. . . . It’s so exciting that it makes me want to write . . . so I send Meg to the outer galaxies.”

Now in her mid-eighties, L'Engle is a writer-in-residence and a volunteer librarian at St. John the Divine Cathedral in New York City.

What advice does Madeleine L'Engle have for her readers?

“Be brave! Have courage! Don’t fear! Do what you think you ought to do, even if it’s nontraditional. Be open. Be ready to change.”

Selected Awards

Below you will find a chronological list of the major awards Madeleine L'Engle has won during the course of her writing career.

- John Newbery Medal for *A Wrinkle in Time* (1963)
- Runner-Up, Hans Christian Andersen Award for *A Wrinkle in Time* (1964)
- Sequoyah Children's Book Award for *A Wrinkle in Time* (1965)
- Lewis Carroll Shelf Award for *A Wrinkle in Time* (1965)
- Austrian State Literary Prize for *The Moon by Night* (1969)
- Austrian State Literary Prize for *Camilla* (1971)
- Honor Certificate, New England Round Table of Children's Literature (1974)
- Newbery Honor Book Award for *A Ring of Endless Light* (1980)
- American Book Award for *A Swiftly Tilting Planet* (1980)
- Dorothy Canfield Fisher Children's Book Award for *A Ring of Endless Light* (1981)
- Newbery Honor Book Award for *A Swiftly Tilting Planet* (1981)
- Smith Medal from Smith College (1981)
- University of Southern Mississippi Silver Medallion for "outstanding contribution to the field of children's literature" (1986)
- ALAN Award for outstanding contribution to adolescent literature (1986)
- Margaret A. Edwards Award for "lifetime contribution to young adult literature" (1998)



How *A Wrinkle in Time* Came About

Madeleine L'Engle had written and published several books before writing *A Wrinkle in Time*. Though L'Engle sent *Wrinkle* to many publishers, it kept getting rejected. "I got a few queries saying 'Who is the book for?' I said it's for people; I don't write for an age group, I write for people."

L'Engle explains further, "I write stories because that's how I look for truth. I was looking for truth when I was writing *Wrinkle*. We live in a world where it's very difficult for people to understand that a story can be truthful and not factual."

Most of the objections to the book, she recalls, "were that it would not be able to find an audience, that it was too difficult for children."

A Wrinkle in Time combines elements of science fiction and fantasy with two of L'Engle's special themes—moral responsibility and the power of love, especially family love. But it is also based on science, one of L'Engle's favorite subjects. She reads a lot of science books and uses scientific ideas in her writing.

In *Wrinkle*, tesseracts are used to travel through time and space. L'Engle says the science behind tesseracts is real. "I read a lot

about particle physics and quantum mechanics, and I have a few scientist friends who will let me pick their brains. I came across the word ‘tesseract’ in a science article and kind of got fascinated by it.”

Writers are always told to write about what they know, and L’Engle says she modeled the main character of Meg after herself, because “I’m the only person I know that well.”

During her school life, L’Engle often felt as Meg does, lonely and awkward. She, too, had problems with her teachers. L’Engle also says she is stubborn, just like Meg. There are a few differences between Meg and the author, though. Meg is good in arithmetic and not so good in English. L’Engle was very good in English and didn’t do so well in math.

L’Engle explains, “If I’m writing about a twelve- or fourteen-year-old, I’ve got to be myself at that age.”

One question she is asked a lot is why she began the book with the words “It was a dark and stormy night. . . .” According to L’Engle, the phrase “a dark and stormy night” is one that is used to start lots of scary stories, the kind of stories people told around campfires when L’Engle was growing up. Those words let you know it is going to be a scary story.

When *Wrinkle* was finally published, L’Engle won the Newbery Medal, the most prestigious children’s book award in America.

In her acceptance speech, she explained that the process of writing *A Wrinkle in Time* was a mysterious one:

A writer of fantasy, fairy tale, or myth must inevitably discover that he is not writing out of his own knowledge or experience, but out of something both deeper and wider. I think that fantasy must possess the author and simply use him. I know that this is true of *A Wrinkle in Time*. I can't possibly tell you how I came to write it. It was simply a book I had to write. I had no choice. And it was only *after* it was written that I realized what some of it meant.