

Madeleine L'Engle on Writing



When she was five years old, Madeleine L'Engle wrote her first story, which, she remembers, wasn't very good. She was in the fifth grade when she first tried writing a novel. She loved writing and continued to write as she grew up.

As a child, L'Engle was sent to boarding school, where she was never very popular as a result of her shy, introspective manner. L'Engle recalls, "I learned to put on protective coloring in order to survive in an atmosphere which was alien; and I learned to concentrate. . . . The result of this early lesson in concentration is that I can write anywhere."

Though L'Engle has written more than fifty books in her career—poetry, journals, plays, fiction, and nonfiction—she hasn't always had an easy time writing. As a young wife and mother in Connecticut, she often had very little time to write, so she decided to stop. She tried not writing but couldn't help herself. She describes what happened: "I had to write. I had no choice in the matter. It was not up to me to say I would stop, because I could not. It didn't matter how small or inadequate my talent. If I never had another book published, and it was very clear to me that this was a real possibility, I still had to go on writing."

“Kids ask me where I get my ideas from and I tell them that ideas are everywhere—the trick is learning to recognize them.”

Reading is one way of finding new ideas for stories. L’Engle reads constantly, and especially enjoys reading about science.

“One physicist says that the big question is: Are we alone in the universe or not?” That question has inspired Madeleine L’Engle to explore the cosmos and to think about life on other planets, in other universes.

L’Engle says that she tries to tell a story that is more than just a story. “I am not interested in telling a story that merely entertains.” She goes on to say that “stories have a richness that goes way beyond fact. My writing knows more than I know. What a writer must do is listen to her book. It might take you where you don’t expect to go. That’s what happens when you write stories. You listen and you say ‘aha,’ and you write it down. A lot of it is not planned, not conscious; it happens while you’re doing it. You know more about it after you’re done.”

But first, how does one start? L’Engle has a simple formula: “I start with what I know with all five senses, what I have experienced, and then the imagination takes over and says, ‘But what if—’ and the story is on.”

L’Engle is skilled at keeping readers interested and wanting to read more. “One of the things a storyteller really has to know how to do is to make you want to find out what is going to happen next, make you want to turn the page.”

L'Engle acknowledges that she writes first and foremost for herself. "I write for me. I think that is when we are at our best, when we can tell something that is a struggle within us, its questions, its problems. We work it out through our craft."

She says that one of the things she likes best about writing is that "when there are problems in a book, I can resolve them. In life it's not so easy."

Someone once asked her if she was writing anything at the moment and L'Engle replied, "Of course I'm writing something now. I'm not nice when I'm not writing."

You Be the Author!



- **A new chapter:** Start a story of your own using a last line from one of the chapters. Here are a few to choose from:

“The tesseract—” Mrs. Murry whispered. “What did she mean? How could she have known?”

“That dark Thing we saw,” she said. “Is that what my father is fighting?”

“I can’t stand it any longer,” she sobbed. “Watch now, children, watch!”

“I’ve got another feeling. Not the same kind, a different one, a feeling that if we go into that building we’re going into terrible danger.”

Meg grabbed wildly at Calvin, shrieking, “That isn’t Charles! Charles is gone!”

- Write a story that begins or ends with one of the quotations in the book and that illustrates the point of the quote. For example, “Walls have ears.” What might happen in a story that started—or ended—that way?
- **Nobody’s perfect:** Make a list of your own faults. How do your faults hold you back? How could these same faults help

you? Then, write a story about a person with your faults. In the story, let the character learn to recognize her or his faults and maybe find a way to overcome them or use them.

- **Character sketch:** Mrs. Whatsit is a pretty odd character. Make up your own odd character. Write a few paragraphs clearly describing the person's clothes, behavior, and speech.
- **Meg's diary:** Write a diary entry that Meg might write before her adventure. Write another entry for her after she returns.
- **Fast forward:** Charles Wallace is an extraordinary child. What do you think Charles Wallace will be like when he grows up? Describe him.
- **A planet just for you:** Make up your own planet in another galaxy. Describe the setting and the creatures that live there. What is life like on your imaginary world? What do the inhabitants believe is good and what do they think is evil?