

Madeleine L'Engle, Writer of Children's Classics, Is Dead at 88

Sept. 8, 2007

Madeleine L'Engle, an author whose childhood fables, religious meditations and fanciful science fiction transcended both genre and generation, most memorably in her children's classic "A Wrinkle in Time," died on Thursday in Litchfield, Conn. She was 88.

Her death was announced yesterday by her publisher, Farrar, Straus & Giroux. A spokeswoman said Ms. L'Engle (pronounced LENG-el) had died of natural causes at a nursing home, which she entered three years ago. Before then the author had maintained homes in Manhattan and Goshen, Conn.

"A Wrinkle in Time" was rejected by 26 publishers before editors at Farrar, Straus & Giroux read it and enthusiastically accepted it. It proved to be her masterpiece, winning the John Newbery Medal as the best children's book of 1963 and selling, so far, eight million copies. It is now in its 69th printing.

In the Dictionary of Literary Biography, Marygail G. Parker

notes "a peculiar splendor" in Ms. L'Engle's oeuvre, and some of that splendor is owed to sheer literary range. Her works included poetry, plays, autobiography and books on prayer, and almost all were deeply, quixotically personal.

But it was in her vivid children's characters that readers most clearly glimpsed her passionate search for answers to the questions that mattered most. She sometimes spoke of her writing as if she were taking dictation from her subconscious.

"Of course I'm Meg," Ms. L'Engle said about the beloved protagonist of "A Wrinkle in Time."

The St. James Guide to Children's Writers called Ms. L'Engle "one of the truly important writers of juvenile fiction in recent decades." Such accolades did not come from pulling punches. "Wrinkle" has been one of the most banned books in the United States, accused by religious conservatives of offering an inaccurate portrayal of God and nurturing in the young an unholy belief in myth and fantasy.

Ms. L'Engle, who often wrote about her Christian faith, was taken aback by the attacks. "It seems people are willing to damn the book without reading it," Ms. L'Engle said in an interview with The New York Times in 2001. "Nonsense about witchcraft and fantasy. First I felt horror, then anger, and finally I said, 'Ah, the hell with it.' It's great publicity,

really.”

The book begins, “It was a dark and stormy night,” repeating the line of a 19th-century novelist, Edward George Bulwer-Lytton. “Wrinkle” then takes off. Meg Murry, with help from her psychic baby brother, uses time travel and extrasensory perception to rescue her father, a gifted scientist, from a planet controlled by the Dark Thing. She does so through the power of love.

The book uses concepts that Ms. L’Engle said she had plucked from Einstein’s theory of relativity and Planck’s quantum theory, almost flaunting her frequent assertion that children’s literature is literature too difficult for adults to understand.

“Wrinkle” is part of Ms. L’Engle’s Time series of children’s books, which includes “A Wind in the Door,” “A Swiftly Tilting Planet,” “Many Waters” and “An Acceptable Time.” The series combines elements of science fiction with insights into love and moral purpose.

Ms. L’Engle’s other famous series of books concerned another family. The first installment, “Meet the Austins,” which appeared in 1960, depicted an affectionate family whose members displayed enough warts to make them interesting. (Perhaps not enough for The Times Literary Supplement in London, though; it called the Austins “too

good to be real.”)

By the fourth of the five Austin books, “A Ring of Endless Light,” any hint of Pollyanna was gone. It told of a 16-year-old girl’s first experience with death. Telepathic communication with dolphins eventually helps the girl, Vicky, acquire a new understanding of things.

“The cosmic battle between light and darkness, good and evil, love and indifference, personified in the mythic fantasies of the ‘Wrinkle in Time’ series, here is waged compellingly in its rightful place: within ourselves,” Carol Van Strum wrote in The Washington Post in 1980.

Madeleine L’Engle Camp was born in Manhattan on the snowy night of Nov. 29, 1918. The only child of Madeleine Hall Barnett and Charles Wadsworth Camp, she was named for her great-grandmother, who was also named Madeleine L’Engle.



Madeleine L'Engle at home in New York in 2001. George M. Gutierrez

Her mother came from Jacksonville, Fla., society and was a fine pianist; her father was a World War I veteran who worked as a foreign correspondent and later as drama and music critic for The New York Sun. He also knocked out potboiler novels.

The family lived on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. Her parents had artistic friends, and Madeleine an English nanny. She felt unpopular at school. She said that an elementary school teacher — Miss Pepper or Miss Salt, she couldn't remember which — regarded her as stupid.

Madeleine had written her first story at 5 and retreated into

writing. When she won a poetry contest in the fifth grade, her teacher accused her of plagiarizing. Her mother intervened to prove her innocence, lugging a stack of her stories from home.

When she was 12, Madeleine was sent to a boarding school in Switzerland, Chatelard, and at 15 to Ashley Hall, a boarding school in Charleston, S.C. Later she graduated from Smith College with honors in English. (She did not take science classes, which was often a surprise to readers impressed with her science fiction.)

Returning to New York, Ms. L'Engle began to get small acting parts. Several plays she had written were produced. She published her first novel, "The Small Rain," in 1945. And she met the actor Hugh Franklin while they were touring in a production of Chekhov's "Cherry Orchard." They married in 1946, and their daughter Josephine was born the next year.

In 1951, when Ms. L'Engle became pregnant again, the family moved to the small town of Goshen, where they lived in a 200-year-old country house called Crosswicks, and bought and ran a general store. Their son, Bion, was born in 1952. In 1956, they adopted another daughter, Maria.

Mr. Franklin died in 1986 and Bion in 1999. Ms. L'Engle is survived by her daughters, Josephine F. Jones and Maria Rooney, five grandchildren and five great-grandchildren.

Ms. L'Engle's writing career was going so badly in her 30s that she claimed she almost quit writing at 40. But then "Meet the Austins" was published in 1960, and she was already deeply into "Wrinkle." The inspiration came to her during a 10-week family camping trip.

That was just the start. She once described herself as a French peasant cook who drops a carrot in one pot, a piece of potato in another and an onion and a piece of meat in another.

"At dinnertime, you look and see which pot smells best and pull it forward," she was quoted as saying in a 2001 book, "Madeleine L'Engle (Herself): Reflections on a Writing Life," compiled by Carole F. Chase.

"The same is true with writing," she continued. "There are several pots on my backburners."

Her deeper thoughts on writing were deliciously mysterious. She believed that experience and knowledge were subservient to the subconscious and perhaps larger, spiritual influences.

"I think that fantasy must possess the author and simply use him," she said in an interview with Horn Book magazine in 1983. "I know that is true of 'A Wrinkle in Time.' I cannot possibly tell you how I came to write it. It was simply a book I

had to write. I had no choice.

"It was only after it was written that I realized what some of it meant."

The family moved back to New York, where Hugh Franklin won fame as Dr. Charles Tyler on the popular soap opera "All My Children." For more than three decades, starting in 1966, Ms. L'Engle served as librarian and writer in residence at the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine. One or two of her dogs often accompanied her to the cathedral library.

Much of her later work was autobiographical, although sometimes a bit idealized. Some books, like "A Stone for a Pillow: Journeys With Jacob" (1986) and "The Genesis Trilogy" (2001), combined autobiography and biblical themes. But she often said that her real truths were in her fiction.

"Why does anybody tell a story?" she once asked, even though she knew the answer.

"It does indeed have something to do with faith," she said, "faith that the universe has meaning, that our little human lives are not irrelevant, that what we choose or say or do matters, matters cosmically."

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