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Madeleine L’Engle

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**BOOKS:** *18 Washington Square, South: A Comedy in One Act* (Boston & Los Angeles: Baker’s Plays, 1944);
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Madeleine L’Engle’s writings reflect her passionate concern with major aspects of life: a happy family life, the right and responsibility of the individual to make choices, the art of writing, death, and God. Because L’Engle writes about such topics in so many different genres—science fiction, suspense, young adult novels, poetry, playwriting, and nonfiction—she defies conventional classification as a writer. Yet because approximately half her works are written for children, she is primarily known as a children’s writer.

There are paradoxes in L’Engle’s writing. Although she is a Christian, some of L’Engle’s most theological works have been written as a reaction against what is thought of in some circles as Christian piety. Her constant grappling with the idea of God and her all-encompassing theology might well offend readers with a very traditional view of Christianity, while her obviously Christian philosophy might antagonize those who tend toward atheism or agnosticism. She writes her most difficult works for children since she believes that children’s minds are open to the excitement of new ideas and that they are able to understand what their parents have rejected or forgotten. Yet no matter how difficult a theme L’Engle writes of, or what personal or universal crisis her characters face, there is an underlying joy in her books, a feeling that her characters will eventually make the best choices.

L’Engle’s life has paralleled her books in many ways. She was born in New York City in 1918. Her father, Charles Wadsworth Camp, was a foreign correspondent. Her mother, Madeleine Barnett Camp, was a southern gentlewoman who had studied music extensively and was talented enough
to have been a concert pianist had she so desired. The southern background and love of classical music exerted a strong influence on L’Engle’s writing. Several of her works portray the staunch tradition of southern gentility and characters imbued with its ideals. Throughout her works, L’Engle’s characters exhibit a great fondness for classical music—for example, Mrs. Austin vacuuming to it, Katherine Forrester studying it, and Adam Eddington whistling it as a code. In her science fiction works, L’Engle’s extraterrestrial beings often speak in voices compared to musical instruments: English horn, woodwind, harp.

L’Engle was an only child (her only brother died as an infant) brought up in the formal English tradition her father wished, with a nanny and governess. Because of the rather solitary childhood, she developed a great love of reading, writing stories, and drawing. Her father had been gassed in World War I; as his physical health deteriorated, his professional work also suffered. His lungs became so afflicted that he could no longer live in New York or any of the other cosmopolitan cities he loved. The family moved to Switzerland, and L’Engle went to the first of a series of boarding schools both in Europe and in the United States. L’Engle graduated from Smith College with honors in 1941 and pursued a career in the theater for the next five years, because she thought it would be good schooling for a writer. Both the boarding schools and theatrical experience provide the dramatic backdrop for L’Engle’s first book, *The Small Rain* (1945).

*The Small Rain* deals with one of L’Engle’s predominant themes: that an artist must constantly discipline herself; otherwise her talent will become dissipated and she will never achieve her greatest potential. It also deals with the theme of the individual making her own choices and the importance those choices will have in her life. L’Engle demonstrates in her first novel the ability to portray strong, believable characters that engage the reader’s interest deeply.

The protagonist of *The Small Rain*, Katherine Forrester, has the talent to become a great concert pianist. She has studied with her mother, a renowned artist who dies in an automobile accident. She has also studied with a brilliant young teacher, Justin Vigneras, at her boarding school in Switzerland. Her music lessons are one of the few aspects of school life that she really enjoys. The only other part of school that is bearable is her friendship with Sarah Courtmont, which is halted when a narrow-minded teacher hints that it may be a lesbian relationship. Katherine also loses her beloved music teacher, who has found a much better position, but she hopes that she may be able to study with him again someday.

When Katherine finally graduates from school, she returns to New York and is able to persuade her mother’s former teacher, now a very old man, to become her teacher. Katherine becomes engaged to a rising young actor named Pete Burns. Her friendship with Sarah is also renewed since Sarah is studying acting in New York. As her life becomes more involved with Pete’s career, and socializing with Sarah and her crowd, Katherine’s time for practicing her music becomes more constricted. She exhausts herself trying to find enough time and energy for both her music and Pete. Finally the old teacher becomes enraged and plays some of Katherine’s mother’s recordings, which Katherine has not heard before. She begins to devote herself utterly to her music and to spend less time with Pete and Sarah.

At the time Katherine makes her decision to dedicate her time to her art, she naively believes she can also have a loving marriage with Pete; as the weeks wear on, she begins to sense that Pete might not understand or allow this. It comes almost as a relief when Pete and Sarah announce they have fallen in love. Although Katherine is hurt, she realizes that this is the best thing that could have happened; she makes plans to return to France to continue her studies with Justin Vigneras. The reader knows long before the novel *A Severed Wasp* (1982), which continues Katherine’s story many years later, that she will have a brilliant career.

L’Engle again looks to the past for the settings of her next three books: *Ilsa* (1946) takes place in the South and provides a memorable portrait of southern family life; *And Both Were Young* (1949), L’Engle’s first “junior” novel, takes place in a Swiss boarding school; and *Camilla Dickinson* (1951) is the story of a sheltered young girl growing up in New York. Although each of these novels introduces enjoyable, unique characters and *Camilla Dickinson* was seen by some critics as the female counterpart to *The Catcher in the Rye*, it is *Ilsa* which portrays the most haunting characters, especially the independent title character. This characterization and L’Engle’s insight into a society based on a rigid set of mores (and the effect of that society on individuals who cannot or will not subscribe to its mores) render it one of L’Engle’s finest works. *Ilsa* is the story of a southern girl growing up in the early decades of the twentieth century. The narrator is Henry Porcher, a shadowy, ineffectual man who
has loved Ilsa from childhood. Ilsa, an outcast as far as most of Porcher's family is concerned, lives a happy and relatively unstructured existence in a cabin on the beach with her father, a distinguished naturalist. Their life-style and attitudes are in direct contrast to the rigid traditions and views observed by the proper Porcher family.

Again, choice is an important theme; unfortunately, Henry is too weak a character to make choices. Ilsa's choices are not wise; she marries Montgomery Woolf, Henry's handsome but spoiled cousin. Monty becomes a churlish man who takes pleasure only in their daughter, Brand, and in his hunting trips and hounds. Ilsa realizes the mistake she has made but remains in the marriage. She must also cope with the problems of her rapidly failing eyesight and her strong attraction to Franz Werner, the handsome leading actor in a summer touring company. When Monty is killed in a hunting accident, he does not leave Ilsa well off financially and she is forced to take in boarders. Brand is growing up to be a strange, bitter young woman. Given the opportunity to leave town with Franz Werner, Ilsa finally makes a right choice. Her experience has given her wisdom, and she knows that although Werner loves her, she would become an insupportable burden to him and their love would not withstand it. In the end, even Henry Porcher has the gumption to make a choice: knowing he will always be under Ilsa's spell if he stays in town, he resolves to take a job elsewhere and try to make a new life for himself.

The characters in this novel, especially Ilsa, exemplify the joy that underlies L'Engle's philosophy. Although they are confronted with difficult problems, they do not become permanently embittered; rather, they learn from experience. L'Engle's strongest characters are neither martyrs nor saints, but human beings who are willing to try new things and laugh at their foibles along the way.

While she was writing these three novels, changes were taking place in L'Engle's life. During a run of The Cherry Orchard she met a young actor named Hugh Franklin; on 26 January 1946 they were married. When Franklin decided to leave the theater "forever" (a time span which lasted nine years), the family moved from New York to Connecticut. In these years L'Engle was busy coping with the disadvantages and delights of a 200-year-old house, helping her husband in the general store they purchased, and mothering their three children, Josephine, Maria, and Bion.

As always, L'Engle devoted as much time as she could to reading and writing. This decade was a time of professional discouragement to her; she could not seem to get anything published. Publishers rejected A Winter's Love, an adult novel, for being "too moral"; they rejected Meet the Austins, a children's book, because it opened with a death; they rejected A Wrinkle in Time because it was a "difficult" book—it failed to fit into either their adult or juvenile marketing slots.

All these rejections are chronicled in L'Engle's first nonfiction book, A Circle of Quiet (1972). An inveterate journal keeper, L'Engle has written this and three other nonfiction works (The Summer of the Great-Grandmother, 1974; The Irrational Season, 1977; and Walking on Water, 1980) largely from journal entries. These books not only give insight into the oeuvre of Madeleine L'Engle, but also into the discipline involved in being a writer. The most recent of these, Walking on Water, discusses at length the interplay between her writing and her Christianity. L'Engle's journals also trace the close parallel of her actual experiences and her writing.

Although the journals provide settings and plots for some of L'Engle's work, it is her reading and constant quest for a theology which provide the themes that dominate her most cosmic works, including the Time trilogy (A Wrinkle in Time, 1962; A Wind in the Door, 1973; and A Swiftly Tilting Planet, 1978) as well as The Arm of the Starfish (1965) and A Ring of Endless Light (1980). In these works L'Engle deals with profound themes in a positive way: the constant battle of good versus evil, and the importance of an individual knowing the differences between the two and from that knowledge making choices that will not only enhance his existence in the cosmos but also affect the entire universe. Once he makes his choices, he must remain committed to them whether it is easy or not.

Meg and Charles Wallace Murry and Calvin O'Keefe have many opportunities to make such choices and commitments in the 1963 Newbery Medal winner A Wrinkle in Time. This book was written while L'Engle was reading Albert Einstein and Max Planck. It was also written as her rebellion against Christian piety; she was trying to discover a theology by which she could live. The fictional character Meg Murry who rails against the ridiculous things she has to learn in school and the Madeleine L'Engle who rails against the narrowness of some forms of Christianity have more similarities than are at first apparent.

The Murry family is suspect in the small New England village where they live. A mother who reputedly makes stew over a Bunsen burner might not know which end of the mop is used to scrub
the floor, no matter how many Nobel Prizes she has. Prickly, weird Meg is quite homely and does not fit in with any group at school. The twins, Sandy and Dennys, give a semblance of being normal since they are good at sports and gardening; but the youngest boy, Charles Wallace, never speaks and is considered to be not quite right in the head. The father has been away for several years, and no one has heard from him for over a year.

Things begin to change for the Murrys, especially Meg and Charles Wallace, when the outlandish character of Mrs. Whatsit shows up at their house one night. Although Mrs. Whatsit has the appearance of an eccentric tramp, she is able to read Meg’s thoughts. She startles Mrs. Murry by reassuring her that there is such a thing as a tesseract (a wrinkle in time). Because Mr. Murry is on a highly classified mission to explore the possible existence of such a thing, Mrs. Murry is taken aback when the strange old lady mentions this. The next afternoon Meg and Charles Wallace are on their way to visit Mrs. Whatsit’s cabin when they meet Calvin O’Keefe, a popular boy in Meg’s high school. Although Calvin is a star athlete, he feels very much alone since he comes from a family where no one cares about him. Charles Wallace recognizes Calvin as a kindred being and allows him to come along with them. It is Calvin, Meg, and Charles Wallace along with Mrs. Whatsit and her friends, Mrs. Which and Mrs. Who—really celestial beings—who make the arduous journey to the planet of Camazotz, where Mr. Murry is held captive. On the way the children learn of the battle which is taking place throughout the universe against the dark, shadowy Thing. They do not quite understand what it is, but they sense it is a great evil. They also know that certain planets are totally within its powers, while certain others have been fighting it off. The list of opponents of the Thing is impressive: it includes Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Shakespeare, Beethoven, Einstein, and Jesus.

The planet of Camazotz proves to be the antithesis of the names mentioned above—strong, creative individuals. It is L’Engle’s symbol for the ills of the world caused by a lack of creativity and individuality. Everything on Camazotz is exactly alike: every house is the same shape, same size, and same color. Children bounce their balls in the same rhythm; all the mothers open and shut their doors at the same time. The children make their way to CENTRAL intelligence, where they learn that the evil force is named IT. Charles Wallace tries to fight IT with his exceptional intelligence, but not even he can withstand its force. He becomes a robotlike creature, mouthing all the thoughts IT wishes him to say.

The children finally find Mr. Murry and together they face IT. IT is a disembodied brain, curiously more awful than any monster imaginable. IT is a masterful symbol for L’Engle’s belief that the human intellect untempered by emotions is a destructive, dangerous force. Without emotions and experiences, the brain is not part of an individual at all; there is no such thing as individuality.

It is only when Meg realizes she has one thing IT does not have that she is able to rescue Charles Wallace and bring them all safely home: she is able to love. By concentrating on her love for Charles Wallace, Meg is able to bring him back to his true identity. At certain points in the novel, choices must be made by these young people, some seemingly small decisions which affect not only their own lives but lives throughout the universe because they are able to defeat IT. Charles Wallace’s invitation to Calvin to visit Mrs. Whatsit, the children’s decision
to make the journey, and Meg's return visit to Camazotz are all small but important decisions which ultimately ensure the right and privilege of each individual in the universe to make choices. Yet all the symbolism and thematic weight of *A Wrinkle in Time* would amount to nothing more than a philosophical tract were the characters not so realistically portrayed. Meg's worries about school and her "awful" looks, Calvin's longing for honest affection rather than mere popularity, and Mrs. Murry's loving concern for her husband greatly affect the reader. L'Engle also depicts vivid scenes on each planet the children visit, and her extraterrestrial beings are strong, unusual characters who contribute to the charm and warmth of the novel. Aunt Beast, the Happy Medium, Mrs. Who, Mrs. What-sit, and Mrs. Which delight the imagination.

In the second book of the trilogy, *A Wind in the Door*, L'Engle expands the theme of love as a powerful opponent against evil by developing the concept of love according to theological guidelines. In the first book, Meg concentrated on her love for Charles Wallace to conquer evil; now she must expand that love to include Mr. Jenkins, the stodgy, unimaginative school principal with whom she has fought many battles. Her decision to love Mr. Jenkins has cosmic implications, because she, Calvin, and Mr. Jenkins embark on a journey to save Charles Wallace, who is a very important being in the order of the cosmos. This journey is traveled not through outer space but through inner space. Meg, Calvin, Mr. Jenkins, and an irascible cherubim named Prognoskes, who resembles a drive of dragons, must convince Sporos, one of Charles Wallace's foras, to "deepen" (mature) so that Charles Wallace will live. Throughout the journey the children must avoid the Echthroi or un-namers of the universe who are behind the attempted destruction of Charles Wallace. In the end, the Echthroi almost destroy them also, and only the sacrifice of Prognoskes saves them. The cherubim shows the ultimate love for his friends by Xing himself to insure their safety.

In this book the theme tends to overpower the characters, weakening the overall effect. The shadowy Blajeny, the teacher of Prognoskes, remains too much of an enigma; Mr. Jenkins is never quite sure why he is asked to come on the journey; and Sporos is such an irritatingly silly little creature that his decision to "deepen," a process requiring some measure of sacrifice, is not quite convincing.

The third book in the Time trilogy, *A Swiftly Tilting Planet*, won the American Book Award in 1980 for Best Children's Paperback. It is even more universal in scope than the first of the books. In it, Charles Wallace and a unicorn named Gaudior are on a quest to avert a nuclear war. L'Engle draws heavily on Welsh mythology to weave the strands of her plot together. Charles Wallace must journey through space and time, still eluding the Echthroi, in order to change the Might-Have-Been. He must determine which branch of the family the South American leader "Mad Dog" Branzillo is descended from. Depending on whether his origins are from the good or the evil ancestors, there may well be a nuclear war within twenty-four hours. Again, the universe will not only survive but thrive because of choices made by individuals: Charles chooses to make the journey on Gaudior, knowing he may lose his life; Meg "kythes" (a form of intuitive, unspoken communication) knowledge from a reference book and from Mrs. O'Keefe to Charles Wallace to help him on his journey; Mrs. O'Keefe gives Charles Wallace the rune to begin with. All these small steps converge to change what may have been a nuclear disaster. The most difficult choices in this book are made by Mrs. O'Keefe, Calvin's strange, disheartened mother, a woman made old before her time by the hard life she has endured. She has suppressed her feelings for years so that she would never again have to endure the pain of losing someone she loves. Now she must use the rune her grandmother gave her and find the letter she and her beloved brother Chuck used to read. This letter provides the necessary connection between the South American leader and the Welsh mythology to insure the proper course of history.

Although the structure of *A Swiftly Tilting Planet* is a bit difficult to follow because of Charles Wallace's nonchronological jumps in time, the writing here is of a quality consistent with that of *A Wrinkle in Time*. L'Engle uses her gift of spinning a story that quickly involves the reader in the action. The characters encountered throughout time are skillfully drawn. The character of Mrs. O'Keefe, who up until this time has been no more than a frowsy complainer, is fully and sympathetically developed. She becomes, in a sense, a character like Ilsa; the difference is that her background and temperament lead her to entirely different reactions from the ones Ilsa has. L'Engle repeats her theme that the most expedient choices are not necessarily the most creative ones.

Although L'Engle uses some broad Christian symbolism in the Time trilogy, such as the unicorn in *A Swiftly Tilting Planet* or the cherubim in *A Wind in the Door*, her most extensive use of Christian symbolism occurs in the suspense novel *The Arm of the*
There are several Christian and cosmic ironies in the book: Canon Tallis, a devoted, honorable ecclesiastic, is pointed out to Adam as being evil; corrupt Dr. Ball (a name similar to the degenerate deity Baal) is introduced as a caring, benevolent clergyman. Joshua, the Christ figure, is really a nonbeliever. In the end, Tyrone Cutter must get from Dr. O'Keefe the knowledge he has planned to use for his own evil purposes. Cutter’s daughter Kali has been attacked by a shark, and only Dr. O'Keefe’s knowledge of the regeneration process can save her arm.

Although L'Engle has been criticized for making her characters too good here, they are consistent with her theme of love conquering evil, and with her character development up to this point. Calvin O'Keefe has made choices throughout the Time trilogy which are consistent with his decision at the book’s conclusion—although it is of interest to note that The Arm of the Starfish was written before the final two books of the Time trilogy. The reader cannot imagine Calvin making a decision other than that of helping Kali, any more than he can imagine this book without Joshua, who becomes a focal character even though he was not in the outline of the manuscript. When Adam woke up in the Ritz Hotel and saw Joshua sitting in his room, there was no one more surprised than Madeleine L’Engle. Her development of Joshua's character is a tribute to her discipline as a writer, since it caused her to rethink the entire book.

If Adam seems somewhat naive in the beginning, he at least learns from his mistakes. He returns as an important character in A Ring of Endless Light, in which he is able to use some of the wisdom he learned from his short experience with Joshua to give comfort to the Austin family. The Austins were introduced in Meet the Austins (1960). In The Moon by Night (1963) they were involved with an unhappy, confused rich boy on their cross-country camping trip before moving to New York for a year. The Young Unicorns (1968) catapulted them into an international plot which included a young blind girl and a fake Episcopalian bishop. A Ring of Endless Light, a Newbery Honor Book, is L'Engle's latest and most profound book about the Austins. Its theme is much more universal than those of the earlier books; it deals with death. L'Engle again affirms her faith in God through the images of resurrection that abound in the novel: butterflies, water, the constant association of Vicky and Adam with light. Zachary, the troubled boy Vicky and her family met the previous summer, is associated with darkness.

Starfish (1965). The young protagonist's name is Adam, and he is going to spend his summer working on the island of Gaea, a paradise which is just now beginning to feel the encroachment of civilization. When Adam finally arrives at this idyllic setting, he is thoroughly confused by the information the young, seductive Kali Cutter has given him. Not only does Adam have to decide whom he should work for in his regenerative starfish experiments; he must also decide who is good and who is evil. Once Adam decides Dr. O'Keefe is representing good, it is not enough for him to remain neutral; he must commit himself to an important mission: to deliver Dr. O'Keefe's papers to the proper people in Lisbon. Joshua, a young man from the American embassy and a dear friend of the O'Keefes, tries to help him accomplish this, but because Adam has withheld a small bit of information from Dr. O'Keefe, Joshua is killed.
But not only does the novel deal with death, it deals with the theme of coming of age. Vicky, who has felt rather inferior and insecure up until now, begins to have a sense of self-worth. She starts to show real maturity through her poetry, her acceptance of responsibilities people thrust on her, and her participation in a special experiment Adam is conducting with dolphins.

The theme of choice is again important. The family chooses to spend the entire summer with the dying grandfather; Zachary chooses to leave the hospital emergency room in the face of so much suffering. Vicky makes the most dramatic choice of all, choosing the light of hope over the darkness of cynicism in a world where little girls die in hospital emergency rooms and dolphins are clubbed to death capriciously. Again, as in all of L'Engle's books, the most creative choice is not necessarily the easiest or safest. And each act may have unforeseen implications; Zachary, for example, willfully sailing in bad conditions, does not realize until too late that his selfishness will cause the death of a good man. As Grandfather says, "If someone kills a butterfly, it could cause an earthquake in a galaxy a trillion light years away."

L'Engle's last three novels are concerned with the religious theme of redemption through love and forgiveness. In her two latest, A Severed Wasp and A House Like a Lotus (1984), she concentrates on this theme in very different ways.

A Severed Wasp, which takes its title from a George Orwell quote concerning modern man's spirituality, is perhaps L'Engle's most complex novel for adults. In the hands of a less gifted storyteller the convoluted plot might approach melodrama. Yet L'Engle weaves all the threads of human faults and foibles together both pleasingly and realistically. Although the characters achieve the redemptive love of forgiveness and enjoy a fuller, more creative life because of it, they have each suffered mightily because of their failures.

Katherine Forrester Vigneras, the protagonist of L'Engle's first novel, The Small Rain, is the character around whom most of the action coalesces in A Severed Wasp. Madame Vigneras has come home to her brownstone on 10th Street in New York's Greenwich Village to live a quiet life after a long and successful career as a concert pianist. Although she is an artist whose music has been of primary importance in her life, she is also a compassionate and understanding human being who becomes embroiled—although sometimes reluctantly—in other people's problems. The cast of characters in her present life includes a retired bishop, Felix Bodeway, whom she knew many years ago; Allie Undercroft, the present Episcopal bishop; Undercroft's wife, Yolande; Dave and Suzy (Austin) Davidson; and other ecclesiastics from the community centered around the great cathedral of St. John the Divine in upper Manhattan. Other characters are Dorcas, a young, pregnant ballet dancer who is deserted by her husband; Llew, a brilliant organist whose wife and baby recently died during the birthing process; Emily Davidson, the young daughter of Suzy and Dave, whose bright talent as a ballet dancer was ended by a hit-and-run accident; and Dr. Mimi Oppenheimer, who evolves from a tenant into a close friend.

Interwoven with Katherine's present life are the memories of her past, the part of her life she feels she must come to terms with. Present incidents trigger flashbacks of relationships which were an integral part of her life: her difficult but loving marriage to composer Justin Vigneras; their healing friendship with the great Roman Catholic Bishop Wolfgang von Stromberg; her relationship with Likas von Hilpert, a former Nazi kommandant. Each of these relationships, although filled with pain as well as love, has taught Katherine wisdom and compassion. She is now able to impart the message of forgiveness and love to some of the souls tortured by guilt and sadness. Felix, Yolande, and Allie realize through their encounters with Katherine that they must seek forgiveness not only from God and others; they must also be able to forgive themselves. It is only when one is able to risk rejection in order to seek absolution that one is free to continue a creative and rich existence, unshackled by guilt and enhanced by the wisdom gained from experience.

This is the theme examined in L'Engle's novel A House Like a Lotus, but from a different perspective: Polly O'Keefe must learn to forgive and love again. The story line focuses mainly on Polly's relationship with the artist Maximiliana Sebastianie Horne. Max (as her friends call her) has come to her home on Benne Seed Island off the Carolina coast to die, although Polly learns that only by accident. Polly's favorite uncle, Sandy, is a great friend of Max's, and he introduces the two. Polly becomes the daughter Max never had; Max becomes the mentor Polly needs. Max, with her artist's eye and soul, gives Polly a new way to view other people and also herself. Through Max's insight, Polly discovers a respect and compassion for her high school English teacher, a heightened admiration for her mother, and a recognition of her own writing and acting talents.
One night, however, Polly is left alone with Max, who has drunk excessive amounts of alcohol in order to cope with the pain of her disease. Max, a lesbian who has lived with her lover, Ursula, for over thirty years, makes a sexual advance toward Polly. Polly considers this the ultimate betrayal and refuses to see or forgive Max.

It is only when Polly journeys to Cyprus for a conference on writing and related arts that she is able to forgive Max. Through her meetings with the irresponsible Zachary, who has appeared in several of the books about the Austins, Polly begins to comprehend that a lapse made by someone who genuinely loves is not a betrayal; it is an honest human failure. Zachary rents a kayak and rows Polly and himself out beyond the safety zone, where they are nearly drowned. It is a willful, careless action; Zachary is too self-centered to love. Polly realizes that flawed though Max is, she cannot wish that Max had never become part of her life. To wish that would diminish part of herself; Max has helped her discover some of the wondrous knowledge she now has.

Although occasionally criticized for being pedantic, L'Engle's books have generally been favorably reviewed. A Wind in the Door and two Austin family books, The Young Unicorns and The Moon by Night, have received mixed comments. Perhaps John Rowe Townsend sums up the critiques best in A Sense of Story as he calls her "a curiously-gifted, curiously-learned, curiously-imperfect writer." In 1984 L'Engle received the Catholic Library Association's Regina Award, given for consistent, sustained quality of work.

The fact that readers appreciate L'Engle's work is apparent through her book sales. In February 1981 American Bookseller ran an article on children's books which included a list of the fifty most popular authors and illustrators. Madeleine L'Engle was in the top ten. The 24 July 1981 issue of Publishers Weekly carried an article on children's bookstores. In a poll conducted with the owners of these nationwide stores, L'Engle was listed as one of the top six best-selling authors.

L'Engle's writing could well be called timeless rather than timely. Her warm portraits of caring families, her fervent belief in the dignity and creativity of each individual, and her sense of the universal importance of particular acts give her work a peculiar splendor. Her victories are bittersweet; in accordance with her great respect for the laws of thermodynamics, her characters do not get something for nothing. But each of her books leaves the reader with joy and hope, and, as L'Engle herself so ably states it, "a vision which includes angels and dragons and unicorns, and all the lovely creatures which our world would put in a box marked 'Children.'"

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(20 March 1937–)

Laura M. Zaidman
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BOOKS: Black American Literature (Portland, Maine: Walsh, 1973);
Literature of the American Revolution (Portland, Maine: Walsh, 1974);
Values and the Family (Portland, Maine: Walsh, 1977);

A Summer to Die, illustrated by Jenni Oliver (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977);
Find a Stranger, Say Goodbye (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978);
Here in Kennebunkport, photographs by Lowry with text by Frederick H. Lewis (Kennebunkport,
Lois Lowry, best known for her six Anastasia Krupnik adventures, has enjoyed popularity with readers and critics alike. Her thirteen books for children, featuring realistic themes and delightful characters, help them answer their own questions about life, self-identity, and human relationships.

The daughter of Robert E. Hammersberg, an army dentist, and Katharine Landis Hammersberg, Lowry was born in Honolulu, lived in Pennsylvania during World War II and in Japan after the war, attended private school in Brooklyn, and then completed two years at Brown University. In 1956, at nineteen, she quit college to marry Donald Grey Lowry. Working part-time so her husband could finish his law degree at Harvard, she had four children by the time she was twenty-five. Lowry later completed her B.A. degree in writing at the University of Maine in 1972. In the 1970s she wrote two textbooks, *Black American Literature* and *Literature of the American Revolution*, and a booklet entitled *Values and the Family* and had various articles and stories published in magazines and newspapers; a professional photographer, she also produced a book of photographs, *Here in Kennebunkport* (1978), with a text by Frederick H. Lewis. She began her career as an author for young adults when a Houghton Mifflin editor read one of Lowry's published short stories about her childhood and asked if she would be interested in writing books for children. Her first novel, *A Summer to Die* (1977), was inspired by her sister's death from cancer in her twenties. The publication of the book marked a period of auspicious beginnings and endings for Lowry. The novel was well received, and she was divorced in 1977 after twenty-one years of marriage.

Lowry now has an apartment on Beacon Hill in Boston and a 150-year-old farmhouse in rural New Hampshire. Her realistic novels, replete with vivid remembrances of her own childhood, reflect a love for the feelings of the past as well as an enthusiasm for the here-and-now drawn from observations of her children.

Although she postponed her childhood aspiration to be a novelist as long as “there were children to raise, education to complete, experience to learn from, and losses to mourn,” her varied experiences contribute a rich diversity of themes to her fiction. She believes teenagers must be prepared to live in a complicated world and must not be overprotected from life's realities. Considering them too “sophisticated nowadays to enjoy a com-