

When my book *Presenting Madeleine L'Engle* was published in 1992 (Twayne/Macmillan), I was introduced to the kinds of attacks that Madeleine has suffered for years, including some rather similar to the surreal scenario that leads off my essay. I rarely recognized the Madeleine described in these attacks. The person these Christians were attacking was not the person I had met or the author of the books I had written about. These critics rarely understood the ways that fiction conveys meaning, and they held, I believe, a rather narrow view of what Christian fiction should look like. So my intention here is to nibble away at the subject, to talk a bit about Madeleine's fiction in an extended conversation about the nature of fiction that embodies Christian faith.

Donald R Hettinga

Published originally in a *festschrift* for L'Engle's 80th birthday, *The Swiftly Tilting Worlds of Madeleine L'Engle*. Ed. Luci Shaw. Wheaton, IL: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1998. This document is a scanned facsimile of the original publication; some lines at the top or bottom of columns may fall on different pages than they did in the original layout.

All rights reserved. Donald R. Hettinga
Dept. of English
1795 Knollcrest Circle S.E.
Calvin College
Grand Rapids, MI 49546
hett@calvin.edu



11 A Great Cloud of Witnesses

Donald R. Hettinga

It probably would not surprise anyone if I were to begin by saying that through my reading of Madeleine L'Engle's fiction I have found myself in unusual worlds. It is a commonplace of fantasy fiction that readers depart this world for the pleasures and problems of other realms. But what has surprised me is that these trips are not to realms of L'Engle's creation. What happens is this: I feel myself transported through time and place—not to Uriel where in *A Wrinkle in Time* glorious creatures sing continuous praise to God their maker, nor to the orb in *A Swiftly Tilting Planet* where time-traveling unicorns are hatched to drink and serve the wind. The place I arrive has more of the feel of that seventeenth-century village where a Pastor Mortmain stirred a cauldron of hate and suspicion. Yet while the emotional atmosphere matches L'Engle's account of that witchhunt, the setting I find myself in is much more modern.

The walls are heavily paneled in dark walnut. I sit in a leather chair behind a long oak table and face my interrogators on the panel of the House Committee on Un-American Activities. To the side is a gallery of photographers, with flashbulbs poised to capture my response

to the question that echoes from Senator McCarthy: "Are you now or have you ever been an advocate of Madeleine L'Engle's fiction?"

Before I can answer, the walls morph back from walnut to the pastel concrete of more familiar environs, a college classroom or a church multi-purpose room, and I find myself in what is too often a reality—a room full of Christian readers who believe or have been told to believe that one of our most significant contemporary writers—a writer who professes to that same faith they profess—is a dangerous heretic.

Should we be cross with people for taking her books so seriously? I do not think so. We might be cross with their bad readings of her books and cross with their less than charitable discourse about her books and her person but not with the fact that they are taking them seriously. It is ludicrous for defenders of literature to say, as they sometimes do in the midst of a controversy, "Oh, it's just a book. It's only a story. It's not going to hurt anyone." Books *do* change people's lives. Stories *do* matter. And so we ought to care about the legacy of any books, any stories. We ought to think carefully about the worlds we enter, the characters and values we entertain there and that entertain us.

My students these days would be very quick to point out that whether or not the child cares about the source of the magic in a book, we (we who write, guide, teach, evaluate, etc.) ought to. And they would be right, of course, particularly in speaking about those of us who participate in Christian communities and particularly when we are talking about a writer like L'Engle who gives us books that show us something about the nature of the universe as well as something about the nature of God in relation to that universe. She has said repeatedly what she said early on in *A Circle of Quiet*, that "one cannot discuss structure in writing without discussing structure in all life; it is impossible to talk about

why anybody writes a book or paints a picture or composes a symphony without talking about the nature of the universe."¹ And her critics on the evangelical right are quick to remind their audiences that L'Engle's fantasy fiction is susceptible to theological inquisition because she herself writes that her fantasy is her theology.

That being the case, should not we Christians garland ourselves with garlic (or at least put on the spectacles of scripture) before picking up these books bearing the images of demonic heads and astral spirit guides, not to mention New Age symbols like rainbows and unicorns? And when we hear from others or when we come upon a page in *A Wrinkle in Time* that mentions Jesus as well as Einstein, Buddha, Schweitzer, Curie, and others as fighters on the same team against evil, should not we cry for censorship or simply—as an elementary teacher in my city did—stop reading the book, telling ourselves or our audience (a fourth-grade class in this example) that this book is a bad book because it misrepresents God. After all, not only does Jesus himself suggest that it would be better for any of us to take a dip with a millstone than to mislead a young person about God; even the patriarch of Western democracy—Plato—suggests that books that might mislead young people about the nature of the gods should be censored in his ideal republic.

Yet, I would assert that when we think carefully about the worlds that L'Engle has given us, we see an array of worlds—fantastic or otherwise—that mirror the problems and possibilities of our own. And if we reflect on those worlds we can see, I believe, a lengthy queue of characters who embody Christian values. Antagonistic readers have made much of L'Engle's comment that her fantasies are her theology, coming to her fiction then with the expectation that the novels can be read like volumes of systematic theology, and, of course, such readers are then perplexed or put off by the characters and

events of the fiction that live and breathe, succeed and fail, dream and despair according to the fictional realities of the works of art in which they appear. Yet if we look at the examples of the characters in that queue we can see evidence of a theology that centers on a triune, sovereign but loving God, who calls believers to an active role in a cosmic battle against evil, but who forgives them when they fail and atones for their failure with the substitutionary sacrifice of the eternal Christ. In short, if we read the novels as novels, and not as theological discourse, and if we approach them with openness instead of with the mindset of prosecuting attorneys, we can see a fairly orthodox, evangelical Christian worldview; we can see, I think, what L'Engle in *Walking on Water* said that we ought to be able to see in the corpus of a writer who is a Christian—not a certifiable number of references to Jesus, not characters that live exemplary Christian lives, but a clear vision of what that writer believes about God and the nature of the universe.

Think about the worlds that we enter in the time trilogy. Fantasy L'Engle has said, gives her the opportunity to talk about the way the world ought to be as well as the way that it is, and so she can show us the creation both before the fall and after. Why, in *A Wrinkle in Time*, do the questors need to stop on the planet Uriel before encountering the evil that has imprisoned Mr. Murry on the planet Camazotz? Quite simply, the protagonists and the readers need to see the nature of good in order to fully comprehend the magnitude of evil. But it is the nature of this Edenic planet that speaks much about L'Engle's view of creation. Here the created beings and, indeed, the very planet itself sing continuous praise and thanksgiving to theft creator. The closest translation for humans, readers learn, is a triumphant psalm from Isaiah 42.

But that music and dance do not just appear in this

one novel. Whenever L'Engle wants readers to see the world the way it ought to be, she uses this music that is akin to the medieval concept of the music of the spheres—a music and dance that embodies both the harmonies and goodness of creation and simultaneously glorifies the Creator. It is the sound of the obedient Sporos within the mitochondrion in *A Wind in the Door*; it is the healing dance of the dolphins in *A Ring of Endless Light*; it is the sound of the stars in *Many Waters* and the sound of the wind in *A Swiftly Tilting Planet*. These fictional worlds suggest an author who believes that a good God created a world that was good.

But if in the theology of L'Engle's fiction the world originally was created good, it has also clearly fallen and is under attack by forces of evil, which, though they do not conform to the pop-medieval stereotypes of Frank Peretti's fiction, do embody real spiritual forces. The Murrays, the O'Keefes, the Austins, the Reniers—and even Camilla Dickinson and Katherine Vigneras—do not in their various plots and adventures battle simply against flesh and blood, or even against phobias, repressions, and insecurities, but against powers and principalities that are actively involved in the business of the physical realm.

These powers work to negate God's work. If God's work is creation and affirmation—he makes *and names* his creatures—then the work of his antithesis is negation, getting created beings to deny theft identity as creatures of God. After all, the word *diabolical* means "to tear apart." Such is the work of the black thing in *A Wrinkle in Time* that transforms creatures from individuals with unique gifts and peculiarities, individuals motivated by love and thanksgiving, to robotic automatons who lack consciousness, passion, and emotion. Such is the work of the Echthroi—the fallen angels—in *A Wind in the Door* and in *A Swiftly Tilting Planet* that offer false visions of reality to pull victims into a nothingness.

Such is the work of the nephilim in *Many Waters*. Such is the work of the spirits of hurt and bitterness that harden Polly O'Keefe's heart in *A House Like a Lotus*. Such is the work of the spirits of hate and despair that attack Vicky Austin in *The Moon by Night* and in *A Ring of Endless Light*, and Stella Renier in *The Other Side of the Sun*. If, as so many L'Engle characters discover, God has numbered all his creation, the forces of evil like nothing better than to play math games with what he has numbered, math games that use zero as a multiplier, math games that leave their victims wondering what Vicky Austin is wondering in this passage from *A Ring of Endless Light*: "What for? Why be conscious in a world like this? Why bother/it doesn't matter/because nothing matters."

A part of the power of L'Engle's portrayal of this cosmic battle is her refusal to let battle be simply cosmic or merely spiritual. Instead, the spiritual attacks come in very real circumstances, in situations that mirror the complexity of human experience and the ambivalent impulses of an individual psyche. Meg Murry is tempted with what she always wanted-to simply fit in, to have a world where everything is normal. Charles Wallace Murry is tempted to hubris because of his native gifts of extraordinary intelligence and extra-sensory perception. The Echthroi and the nephilim tempt their victims with the pleasurable swirl of hedonism, a temptation that L'Engle's fiction suggests (in metaphorical terms that any evangelical Christian would recognize) is a natural developmental stage: "The temptation for farandola or for man or for star is to stay an immature pleasure seeker," declares the cherubim Proginoskes in *A Wind in the Door* "When we seek our own pleasure as the ultimate good we place ourselves as the center of the universe. A fan or a man or a star has his place in the universe, but nothing created us the center."³

One danger faced by any author portraying such cosmic conflicts is that the conventions of the genre coupled with

the belief in a moral dichotomy tempt the author into creating characters that are fiat, into drafting plots that are predictable, plots that, as reviewer George Woods complains about other fantasy writers, try too hard to pass along a moral message: "When you start reading the books, you find one damn quest after another. It's always the battle between good and evil, between the forces of light and dark—forever. As soon as the hero finishes one quest, he's given another one."⁴ While the quests in L'Engle's novels are many, L'Engle avoids the repetitiousness of which Wood complains in part by creating characters that are troubled by pain or have doubts that compete with their faith. When Polly O'Keefe is challenged about her beliefs in *An Acceptable Time*, she realizes that she has no well-packaged answers for her questioner; "I don't know, either," she acknowledges, "about the Creator I believe made everything."⁵ But it is exactly this dimension of doubt in a character, this kind of questioning, that allows L'Engle's fiction to move beyond fantasy formulas. Polly's admission that she "felt nothing but rebellion" in her own heart and her honest questioning of Christ's presence in the midst of her own difficulties make her character credible to contemporary readers in a way that a more self-assured expression of faith might not. Her complex feelings here make her subsequent acceptance of Christ's sacrifice all the more powerful: "A thousand years away, that blood had been freely given. That was enough. She did not have to understand."⁶ By creating a Polly who believes but cannot quite understand her belief, or a Stella Renier who is an atheist forced to acknowledge the reality of powers and principalities beyond the empirical world, or a Camilla Dickinson who is called upon to exercise love in the face of overwhelming evil and brokenness, L'Engle takes readers beyond the banalities of the formulaic fiction that too many writers, Christian or otherwise, succumb to.

But in crafting such characters is L'Engle simply showing, as some fundamentalist Christian readers might say, her true colors? Is not this what we might expect from someone who has an office in the Cathedral of St. John the Divine? And in praising such portrayals of ambivalent faith are we falling prey to a modernist aesthetic that privileges doubt over certainty? I think not. It seems to me, rather, that the governing aesthetic principle behind both the creation of the characters and an appreciation of the stories of such characters is honesty.

If we believe that one obligation of the writer who is also a Christian is to tell the truth, then the truth has to include Christians who, like Polly, find themselves sometimes overwhelmed in the midst of crisis and somehow unable to articulate what they believe. Arid if we believe in this responsibility to tell the truth, we must recognize that the truth includes Christians like Pastor Mortmain in *A Swiftly Tilting Planet* who exercise all sorts of evil under the banner of Christ, and that it includes nonbelievers like Joshua in *The Arm of the Starfish* who do the work of Christ even when they find it impossible to profess the tenets of an organized religion.

Moreover, if we hope that one result of fiction written by writers who are Christians is that readers of all ilks might see the truth, the power, and the possibilities of God's kingdom, then we need to seriously consider how this kind of truth-telling about characters might serve that purpose. L'Engle's *The Other Side of the Sun* presents an excellent opportunity to see how an honest portrayal of characters in all of their various stages of faith or doubt and confusion of faith can present a powerfully Christian view of the world and of the nature of good and evil even though the protagonist professes to be an atheist and even though she never prays "the sinner's prayer."

The world that Stella Renier, the daughter of an Oxford philosopher, enters when she joins her new husband's

family in an isolated coastal community in the southern United States is as alien to most contemporary readers as it was to her. It is alien in part because of the social setting, a time and place in which the wounds of the Civil War were still festering, a world in which African-American vigilante riders coursed the night in unhappy mimicry of white-hooded Ku Klux Klan riders.

But more significantly, it is alien because of the spiritual landscape of the southern United States, a landscape in which voodoo haunts the swamps that surround the Christian community, a landscape in which a parasol-bearing Anglican white woman will drive her buggy into the scrub to consult a black fortune-teller she considers less than human, a landscape in which a Bible-believing black woman, brought to America by a white slaver, can hold on to the promises of the Scripture but can still feel the pull of the tarot cards and the African magic from her past. For a Christian writer not named O'Connor to place an empirically educated character in such a setting in a novel published by a secular publishing house a handful of years after a national magazine told popular culture that God was dead takes a bit of chutzpa.

Is this what L'Engle meant in *Walking on Water* when she said that she wanted to create for her readers art that "shows a light so Lovely that they want with all their hearts to know the source of it"?⁷ This is a novel in which one group of nominal Christians plans a mass kidnapping to ship black citizens to Africa on a flotilla of white-owned pleasure craft, and this is a novel that chronicles the failure of a more sincerely crafted Christian community designed to redress the evils of slavery. This is a novel in which the heroine apparently saves her unborn baby only by flinging a voodoo doll into a fire. This is a novel in which one of the figures of virtue, an elderly aunt of Stella's, shoots, at a climactic moment, a young black man that

she loves as a son in order to prevent his lynching by Klansmen. This is a novel that shows virtuous action rewarded with death, that presents the family as a repository of silliness, a nest of bickering best avoided by the sensible, heroic characters.

Would it not have been a better witness to the faith if L'Engle had focused on the kind of family that prayed together as it faced difficulties, a family firmly grounded in Scripture? Why show Nyssa, a failed Christian community, instead of a successful mission? Would it not have been better if Stella could have quoted the words of Christ to save her from the voodoo, if she could have exercised spiritual authority over the demons attacking her and bound them in the name of Jesus? Would it not have been a clearer testimony if Honoria, the ex-wife of the slaver, had burned her tarot cards and had nothing to do with things of darkness? Why show Clive, Honoria's current husband, always standing with his Bible, yet impotent to protect anyone? And why have Aunt Olivia kill Ron? Why have a character break one of the Lord's commandments and try to twist it into heroism, into an act of love? How does that show that "we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us"?

The answer to this latter question and to most of the others is that these events show exactly how we can do all things through Christ, with an emphasis on the plural personal pronoun *we*. The novel suggests that it is not simply one person who can do all things in the power of Christ—that would imply a kind of perfection that is not feasible. The "witness" of such a fiction would be, I think, a rather destructive one. Christian readers would see how far they fall short of such perfection and would feel condemned by the ideal held out by the novel. Non-Christian readers would observe the disjunction between reality and the world of the novel and be quick to remark on what to them would appear as yet another instance of Christian hypocrisy. What we see instead are individuals who might fail as they try to act upon their faith but individuals who act,

nonetheless, and whose collective actions reveal something of how individual gifts and actions complement each other within the body of Christ.

The witness of such a fiction is honest and, hence, more powerful. Christian readers can see the results of passivity and the dangers of fear. They can see how Olivia's lack of action early on may have contributed to the horrific scene in which she kills Ron. They can see how Stella's fear of commitment brings great danger to the community and to her unborn child. They can see, in short, that each individual must choose between action on behalf of what is good and action on behalf of what is evil. Not to choose *is* to choose for evil or, at least, to open the door to evil. The theme is a consistent one in L'Engle's work. Stella Renier cannot pretend that the voodoo and the racist riders do not exist any more than Polly O'Keefe can ignore the human sacrifice in *An Acceptable Time* or Adam Eddington the evil conspiracy in *The Arm of the Starfish*. Non-Christian readers can see the power of faith as James, Honoria, Clive, Ron, and Stella strive against the manifestations of evil. The plausibility of their personal struggles makes their ultimate victory more convincing.

Fiction must tell the truth. Fiction written by Christians ought to tell the truth about the brokenness in the world, *and* it ought to give us a glimpse of what it will mean for the lion to lie down with the lamb. Yet it ought to, as Katherine Paterson has said, show us that "hope is more than happiness"; it ought to, as this novel suggests (as, really, all of L'Engle's fiction suggests), show us that "only on love's terrible other side is found the place where lion and lamb abide." Christian fiction can display the glory of God's creation, the treasure of God's grace, but it can only honestly do so in earthen vessels. We can see the cracks in the facades of these characters, but we can also see the glory of God's light shining through them. That is what L'Engle

gives us in Stella and Meg, in Felix and Frank, in Canon Tallis and Bishop Colubra. And that is L'Engle's gift.

The gift that L'Engle gives us in these earthen vessels, the gift that she presents to us through this "great cloud of witnesses," is that of St. Paul's assurance that although we who are sons and daughters of God may be "hard pressed on every side," we will not be "crushed." The gift is that of Lancelot Andrews's assertion in L'Engle's recent novel that "all the wickedness in the world which man may do or think is no more to the mercy of God than a live coal dropped in the sea." The gift is L'Engle's reminder that we, like Vicky Austin, are caught and held within a ring of endless light.

Author Biography

Donald R. Hettinga lives in western Michigan, where he teaches children's literature and writing at Calvin College. He is the author of several books including *Presenting Madeleine L'Engle, Sitting at the Feet of the Past: Retelling the North American Folktale for Children*, *In the World: Reading and Writing as a Christian* and has edited a volume on British children's literature in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*. He is currently working on a biography of Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm for which he received the 1998 Ezra Jack Keats DeGrummond Fellowship.

¹ Madeleine L'Engle, *A Circle of Quiet* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980), 62-63.

² Madeleine UEngle, *A Ring of Endless Light* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980), 321.

³ Madeleine L'Engle, *A Wind in the Door* (New York; Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1973) 178.

⁴ George Woods, "The State of the Field in Contemporary Children's Fantasy: An Interview with George Woods," *Lion and the Unicorn* 1.2 (1977): 5-6.

⁵ Madeleine L'Engle, *An Acceptable Time* (New York; Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1989), 282.

⁶ Madeleine L'Engle, *An AcceptableTime*, 304.

⁷ Madeleine L'Engle, *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith and Art* (Wheaton: Shaw, 1980), 122.