

All You Need is Love:  
Science and Theology in Madeleine L'Engle's Time Trilogy

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## **All You Need is Love:**

### **Science and Theology in Madeleine L'Engle's Time Trilogy**

What is a tesseract? What are farandolaes? These are topics covered in university level physics and biology classes, but millions of young adults could easily give the answer to these questions thanks to Madeleine L'Engle's Time Trilogy. The Time Trilogy is a three books: A Wrinkle in Time, published in 1962, A Wind in the Door, published in 1973, and A Swiftly Tilting Planet, published in 1978. The book follows the stories of the Murray and O'Keefe families as they visit distant planets, visit distant times, and even visit the cells within a human being. Beloved by millions for years, the books seem like simple fantasy, but are deeply rooted in both real science and spiritual beliefs, and it is these elements, displayed in the characters of the books and their actions, that have made these books appealing to generations.

#### **Who is Madeleine L'Engle?**

Madeleine L'Engle Camp was born on November 28, 1918. Her father, a foreign correspondent during World War I, suffered from the effects of mustard gas. He died when L'Engle was eighteen. L'Engle's mother, Madeleine Barnett Camp, was a pianist. Madeleine had a younger brother, who died in infancy, and afterwards that was raised an only child. She considered her childhood lonely. She lived most of her childhood in Switzerland, due to her father's health problems. In school the students teased her for being lame, and her teachers considered her "dull-witted" (Bloom 70).

When she was fourteen, L'Engle moved to Jacksonville, Florida to live with her grandmother, who then sent her to a boarding school in Charleston, South Carolina. Unlike her

schools in Switzerland, L'Engle enjoyed her schooling in South Carolina. She did well and participated heavily in theater. She went on to Smith College, and graduated in 1941. After graduating, she moved to New York City to pursue an acting career. During this time she published her first book: The Small Rain. It was also during this time that she met Hugh Franklin, another actor. They were married in 1946 (Bloom 70).

When Franklin and L'Engle married, they decided to settle down in the country, and moved to Connecticut where they opened a family general store. L'Engle and Franklin raised three children. As she was raising her small family, and helping to run the store, L'Engle wrote some of her classic works, such as A Wrinkle in Time, and Meet the Austins (Bloom 71).

When the children were older, the family moved back to New York City, where L'Engle continued writing. She is an extremely prolific writer, with a large bibliography of books under her belt, and she continues to write today. After the death of her husband, she now lives, and is the librarian, for the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City (Bloom 71).

While A Wrinkle in Time is one of the most beloved modern children's books—and a winner of the John Newberry Award for distinguished children's literature—the book was initially rejected by over 20 publishers (Estes). Most publishers rejected the book because they considered the concepts in the book too difficult for children to understand, and other publishers rejected the book because they did not like the religious overtones in the book, especially in terms of Charles Wallace being considered “a type of Christ child” (Zarin ).

In an interview with Carole Chase for The Writer, L'Engle summed up her experiences trying to get A Wrinkle in Time published by saying:

A child is not afraid of new ideas, does not have to worry about the status quo or rocking the boat, is willing to sail into uncharted waters. Those tired old editors

who had a hard time understanding A Wrinkle in Time assumed that children couldn't understand it, either. Even when Farrar, Straus and Giroux, a publisher to which I am devoted, decided to risk taking it, they warned me that they did not expect it to sell well, and they did not think it could possibly be read by anyone under high school age. This is the typical underestimation of the adult as to the capacity of children to understand philosophical, scientific, and theological concepts. But there is no idea that is too difficult for children as long as it underlies a good story. (“Words of Wisdom...”)

Once A Wrinkle in Time was published, it sold much better than Farrar, Straus and Giroux expected. The book went on to win the Newberry Medal, and L'Engle was able to publish the follow up books to the series, A Wind in the Door, and A Swiftly Tilting Planet. In addition, she's recently published a fourth book in the series called Many Waters, which centers around the twins Sandy and Dennys, but the original three books are considered the heart of the Time Trilogy.

### **The Time Trilogy**

**Main Characters:** The tie between the three books in the series is the Murry family. The parents Mr. and Mrs. Murry are both acclaimed scientists, and often their experiments and studies are the scientific base for the books. In A Wrinkle in Time, Mr. Murry's experiments with *tesseract*s transports him across the universe to an evil planet called Camazotz, where he cannot escape. Mrs. Murry is trying to discover what a *tesseract* is, to find out what happened to her husband. In A Wind in the Door, Mr. Murry is studying strange, screaming tears in the universe, while Mrs. Murry is trying to prove the existence of *farandolae*—tiny components of

mitochondria, which in turn are tiny components of living cells. Finally, in A Swiftly Tilting Planet it is Mr. Murry's connection with the president that alerts the family to an impending nuclear attack.

The Murrays have four children. The oldest Meg Murry is the centerpiece of the trilogy. When the trilogy begins, Meg is an awkward young teenager. She is self-critical, and hates her mousy hair, glasses, and braces. She is very intelligent, and extremely good at mathematics, but does not apply herself at school. She is extremely defensive of her youngest brother, Charles Wallace, and it is her love for her little brother that is often a conquering force in the books. When the series reaches A Swiftly Tilting Planet, Meg is a grown adult, confident, and expecting her first child. She's grown to be beautiful, mature, and is no longer the awkward girl of the first books.

The Murrays' middle children are the twins Sandy and Dennys. Throughout the books they are athletic, self-confident, intelligent, well socialized and everything that Meg and Charles Wallace seem to be lacking. They are often a voice of reason among the children, but likewise, are not included in the first two adventures, and are only ancillary in the last. Throughout the books, though, we find that Sandy and Dennys will have adventures once they are grown. In A Wind in the Door, Meg learns that Sandy and Dennys have been chosen to "be Teachers, and it is a High Calling" (L'Engle Wind 66). In A Swiftly Tilting Planet, the twins have grown and are in law and medical schools. The twins' interest in history and literature becomes critical to helping Meg and Charles Wallace figure out the mystery of the *Might Have Been* that the Echthroi are hiding from them. Without their input on literature and history, Meg would not have been able to make the connection between Branwen O'Keefe and Mad Dog Branzillo.

The youngest Murry child is Charles Wallace. In A Wrinkle in Time, he is already highly intelligent, and somehow special in the universe, but he is not well adjusted socially, and is considered dull-witted outside of the family. Inside the family he has a strong connection with his sister, and mother, and is able to read their feelings and moods. Later this ability is revealed to be a primitive form of kything, or communicating without words. Charles Wallace's confidence in his intelligence is sometimes his greatest weakness. In A Wrinkle in Time, it is the reason he succumbs to the power of IT, in A Swiftly Tilting Planet, it causes him to be teased and bullied in school. In the last book, where Charles Wallace is fifteen, it is his ability to let go of this confidence, and place his trust in others that allows him to succeed in saving the world from nuclear annihilation.

In addition to the Murry family, the O'Keefe family is also an important part of the trilogy. Calvin O'Keefe, says he comes from a family where "[t]hey all have runny noses. I'm third from the top of eleven kids. I'm a sport" (L'Engle Wrinkle 28). Calvin, like the twins, is athletic, intelligent and self-confident. Calvin often feels that "'sometimes I get a feeling about things. You might call it a compulsion. [...] When I get this feeling, this compulsion, I always do what it tells me'" (L'Engle Wrinkle 29). It is these compulsions that lead Calvin to connect with the Murry family. Later it is revealed that this is also a form of kything. Calvin's kything ability eventually creates a close tie between Calvin and Meg. In the last book, Calvin and Meg are married, and Calvin is a successful scientist.

Calvin's mother, Mrs. Branwen Zillah O'Keefe, plays a critical role in A Swiftly Tilting Planet. The woman, who seems cold, distant, and mean, seems to be the end result of a horrible marriage, too many kids, and too much hostility in the household. She is bitter and uncooperative, but turns out to be the key to saving the world. The book reveals the source of her

sadness and bitterness, but her willingness to open up to the Murry family reveals that she is not the shell that she appears to be. She is actually a descendant of Zyll and Modoc, two characters the run throughout the story, and it is her link to these, and a family rune that she carries with her, that helps Charles Wallace discover that a mistake was made that brought the wrong two people together.

**Helper Characters:** In each of the books, the characters are aided through their journeys by several guiding beasts or characters. Each book introduces a new fantastical being to guide the children, and the being is often responsible for explaining the concepts in the book to the children (and the reader) in easy-to-understand terms.

In *A Wrinkle in Time*, the children are aided by Mmes. Whatsit, Who, and Which. The ladies start out in the book as eccentric drifters, squatting in an abandoned house, and stealing sheets from the neighbors. Charles Wallace, who initially is the only one who trusts them, but they create an interest when they tell Mrs. Murry that *tesseract*s do exist. They are responsible for transporting the children across the universe to help the children save their father. They teach the children that a *tesseract* is the fifth dimension, a way of squaring time and space. When this happens, a wrinkle is created, allowing travel across the universe in one step. Mrs. Whatsit explains this by having an ant walk across a fold in her skirt—showing that the ant crossed a large distance with just one step. Later, the children see Mrs. Whatsit in her true form:

[...] a marble-white body with powerful flanks, something like a horse but at the same time completely unlike a horse, for from the magnificently modeled body sprang a nobly formed torso, arms and head resembling a man's, but a man with a perfection of dignity and virtue, and exaltation of joy such as Meg had never

before seen. [...] From the shoulders slowly a pair of wings unfolded, wings made of rainbows, of light upon water, of poetry. (L'Engle Wrinkle 58).

The children eventually discover that the three ladies are actually stars that scarified themselves in order to hold back the growing of The Black Thing. Later, when the children have already visited Camazotz, they realize that the three ladies are actually guardian angels, or “messengers of God” (L'Engle Wrinkle 179).

Other helper characters in A Wrinkle in Time include The Happy Medium, who appears as a sort of androgynous carnival fortuneteller, who looks for the goodness in the universe— reasons to laugh and smile. The Happy Medium shows the children not only the level of evil they are up against, but also shows them the good that will result from defeating The Black Thing. In addition to the Happy Medium, the children also encounter healing creatures, one of whom Meg nicknames Aunt Beast. These creatures are described as:

They were the same grey dull color as the flowers. If they hadn't walked upright they would have seemed like animals. [...] They had four arms and far more than five fingers on each hand, and the fingers were not fingers, but long waving tentacles. They had head, and they had faces. [...] Where the features would normally be there were several indentations, and in place of ears and hair were more tentacles. They were tall, Meg realized, as they came closer, far taller than any man. They had no eyes, just soft indentations. (L'Engle Wrinkle 162-163).

The creatures initially frighten everyone, but turn out to be great healers, who nurture and sooth Meg back to health after she is injured by IT and The Black Thing.

Frightful creatures acting as a force for good run throughout the books, and also appear in A Wind in the Door. In this book, one of the helper creatures is Proginoskes, a cherubim who



appears as “hundreds of wings, spreading, folding, stretching—and eyes [...] and small jets of flame” (L’Engle Wind 53). Initially frightening, Progo, as Meg nicknames him, works with Meg to help save Charles Wallace from a devastating illness. Progo introduces Meg her to calling—that Meg is a Namer, or one who gives existence to things through love. Progo is able to transport Meg across time and space through his many eyes, and this is how Meg is able to enter Charles Wallace’s mitochondria, and work to save his life by convincing his farandolae to *Deepen*.

Another helper creature in A Wind in the Door is Blajeny, who is a *Teacher*, and essentially guides Meg, Calvin, Proginoskes and Mr. Jenkins through the book. He is responsible for explaining the songs of the universe, and that size is relative, and that the smallest object—a little farandolae for instance—has an effect on an entire galaxy. Blajeny is a guide, less interactive than the ladies in A Wrinkle in Time, but plays a similar role of keeping the children on task.

An interesting helper character in A Wind in the Door is Mr. Jenkins. He is the principal of Charles Wallace’s school, and has been a thorn in Meg’s side since she was in grade school. He is harsh, cold, and authoritarian, and refuses to help Charles Wallace as he is being teased in school. When Meg is assigned to Name him to save him from being Xed, or erased, by the Echthroi, she cannot possibly understand how she could possibly love someone who is so detestable to her. It is only when she realizes that Mr. Jenkins is human. That he is prone to faults such as jealousy, but he is also prone to merits such as kindness that she is able to Name him, and save him from being destroyed by the Echthroi.

As a result of his experience with the Echthroi, Mr. Jenkins joins the children to save Charles Wallace, and throughout Meg has to kythe to Mr. Jenkins, who is frightened by the

whole ordeal. It is only when Mr. Jenkins shows his love for Meg that Charles Wallace is finally saved. In A Wind in the Door Mr. Jenkins offers the wisdom of an adult to the story, he is able to see the importance of maturity, of following ones role in life, and only because of this perspective are the children able to finally convince Sporos to *Deepen*.

Sporos is a farandolae, more importantly; he is a child farandolae inside of Charles Wallace. When farandolae are young they are free to move about, and Sporos is deceived by the Echthroi that the ability to move about is freedom. Sporos refuses to *Deepen*, and mature into an adult. He does not realize that adult farandolae, which look like trees, are freer because they are able to communicate with the entire universe. He leads the other farandolae to follow him in rejecting the idea of *Deepening*. They run wild through the forest of their elders, and in so doing begin killing the grown farandolae around them. This in turn is killing Charles Wallace. It is only when Mr. Jenkins sacrifices himself to save Meg that Sporos realizes what being mature and selfless are, and he *Deepens* while telling the other young farandolae to do the same. This is what saves Charles Wallace.

A Swiftly Tilting Planet is different from the previous two books in that the majority of the ancillary characters are human. The helper creature in this book are Gaudior, a unicorn that transports Charles Wallace across time to see the repeating pattern of love and hate that has been playing since the dawn of time. Gaudior is able to travel in time, but has difficulty traveling in space, and is only able to travel to his home planet to save Charles Wallace from being attacked by the Echthroi. Gaudior encourages Charles Wallace, and puts Charles Wallace *within* the different families they encounter through the story. Charles Wallace has to find the *Might Have Been* that should have occurred. It is the only way to save the world from nuclear attack.

A stray dog named Ananda helps Meg, who is an observer in this story. The dog somehow strengthens Meg's ability to kythe with Charles Wallace, and see what her brother and Gaudior are doing. Ananda is somehow special because of his actions and understanding, but no other details about the creature are given.

The human characters of the story include Mad Dog Branzillo, the leader of Vespugia, a small South American country. He is the one who is threatening nuclear annihilation. The rest of the characters in the story are the ancestors of Branzillo, all carrying a variation of his name: Branwen, Matthew, Zyll, Zillah, Maddoc, Maddox etc. Charles Wallace visits each of these ancestors, and learns of the repeating pattern that starts with a fight over the love of a Native American woman named Zyll by two Welsh brothers who were exiled to the United States.

One brother, Gwydyr, pursues power and dominance, and the other, Madoc, seeks peace, love and tolerance. The brothers fight, and Madoc wins. Charles Wallace goes through history, from these early Welsh settlers, through Puritan times when Ritchie saves Zylle, from hanging at the hands of a new pastor to the colony. The pattern continues until Victorian times, when one of the brothers moves to a new colony called Vespugia, but the descendant of Zyll never followed. The result is a lost *Might Have Been*, a ruler that is the descendant of the wrong two people.

It is only when Charles Wallace, acting through these human characters gets Zillah to travel to Vespugia to be with Matthew that the *Might Have Been* is set right, and the world is saved.

**The Antagonists:** Unlike the protagonists of these stories, the antagonists in the Time Trilogy seem to always remain amorphous, unformed, and hard to draw boundaries around. In *A Wrinkle in Time* the two evils are The Black Thing, which is a dark shadow that crawls over the universe erasing happiness, love, and goodness from the universe. In the book, Earth is

shadowed by The Black Thing, but throughout history there have been people who have fought it. These include most of our major artists, philosophers and religious figures.

The second antagonist in A Wrinkle in Time is IT, which is the leader of the planet Camazotz. It is a large brain-like structure that controls the entire planet. It does so by convincing people to submit to it, to give in, and allow IT to do all the thinking for them. On Camazotz, everyone is the same, and there is no conflict. Charles Wallace believes that he can communicate and outwit IT, and this allows IT to take over Charles Wallace. In addition, one of IT's henchmen is the Man with Red Eyes, who tries to convince the children to join IT. The Man is the initial voice of IT to the children, and it is the Man's ability to flatter Charles Wallace that helps him succumb to IT.

Both A Wind in the Door and A Swiftly Tilting Planet have the same antagonists—the Echthroi. They are only represented as nothingness—tears in the universe, and the things that start wars and hatred. The closest description of an Echthros comes in A Wind in the Door when Meg uncovers one of the Echthroi Mr. Jenkins in the twins vegetable garden. The creature “rose up into the night like a great, flapping bird, flew screaming across the sky, became a rent, an emptiness, a slash of nothingness” (L'Engle Wind 46). The Echthroi X, or erase from existence, and seem to appear anywhere. The tears that Mr. Murry sees in the universe, the coldness that Charles Wallace feels traveling around with Gaudior are all the Echthroi. Although not stated outright, the Echthroi appear to be related to The Black Thing of A Wrinkle in Time, but they seem to have the same end result—blackness and nothingness.

## Major Themes in the Trilogy

While many consider the Time Trilogy to be science fiction, many also consider it to be much more, including L'Engle herself. Cynthia Zarin, in her introduction to an interview with L'Engle described A Wrinkle in Time as:

Published in 1962, it is—depending on how you look at it—science fiction, a warm tale of family life, a response to the Cold War, a book about a search for a father, a feminist tract, a religious fable, a coming-on-age novel, a work of Satanism, or a prescient meditation on the future of the United States after the Kennedy assassination.

While all of these could be true about not only A Wrinkle in Time, but about all the books in the Time Trilogy, it is the themes of science, religion and coming of age that run throughout the three books, and are their strongest draw across generations.

Science is the glue of the trilogy. All three books deal with science on some level, it is more integral in A Wrinkle in Time and A Wind in the Door, but the science that is a part of the previous two books is what makes time travel possible in A Swiftly Tilting Planet. Interestingly the books easily slide between science disciplines including physics, biology, astronomy and genetics.

In A Wrinkle in Time, the book centers on the idea of *tessering* or traveling in both time and space. A *tesseract* is described as a square, squared again. *Wrinkling* is the ability to bend time and the universe to travel anywhere. It is a concept in both mathematics and physics. L'Engle describes time as pleated, “[w]hen you bring a sheet off the line, you can’t handle it until its folded, and in a sense, I think, the universe can’t exist until its folded—or it’s a story without a book” (Zarin).

This ability to *tesser* carries the characters through the books, in *A Wind in the Door*, the children *tesser* inside Charles Wallace, but also travel through the universe to see the birth of a star. In *A Swiftly Tilting Planet*, Charles Wallace *tessers* in time to see the repeated story of Zyll, Madoc, and Branwen play out in each different time period from the early days of America to Mrs. O'Keefe's childhood.

In *A Wind in the Door* concepts of microbiology are introduced. Mitochondria are small components of cells, and L'Engle stated that she was proud to find out that this book is used by teachers in high school biology to help teach the concept of cell structures (Chase). Likewise, the book also introduces a philosophical and scientific concept that even the smallest object can affect the universe. This is why Charles Wallace's farandolae were important to the entire survival of the universe. This is a concept seen throughout the books, the effect that one person has on the universe is immense—in *A Wrinkle in Time*, saving Mr. Murry helped save Earth from consumption by The Black Thing, and in *A Swiftly Tilting Planet*, a father's reluctance to send his daughter to be married nearly results in the destruction of the planet.

Very subtly, *A Swiftly Tilting Planet*, introduces concepts of genetics. Zyll passes on blue eyes through her family, and each generation has a blue eyed, dark haired child—the chosen child. Likewise, the family pattern repeats over and over again with a brother who sides with love, and another that chooses power. It is very subtle and not stated outright as the scientific concepts are in the other books, but it is there, underlying the entire structure of the book.

Interestingly, L'Engle admits that she never particularly liked science, and that she even took the easiest science requirement she could in college to avoid the subject. It was only as an adult when she came across some of the writings of Albert Einstein that she became interested in science. She says:

With Wrinkle in Time, I just became fascinated with the science of it. I felt that the science was very philosophical. I was reading some Einstein, who said that anyone who was not lost in rapture at the power of mind behind the universe is, and I quote, ‘as good as a burned-out candle.’ And I thought, ‘Oh, wow, I’ve found my predilection.’ Then I began to read more Einstein and Planck. These scientists are dealing with the nature of being, and I was fascinated by them; of course, I had never read them in school. (Estes)

While the books contain some scientific accuracy, most readers are often shocked to encounter the strong religious tones in the books as well. Often, science and religion are in conflict: a scientific discovery is seen as an affront to religious beliefs. L’Engle is easily able to marry the two in her works—science does not conflict with God, it only serves to reveal more about him. In an interview L’Engle revealed her philosophy about science and religion:

Anything we learn about Earth doesn't change God; it doesn't change our concept of God. For instance, when we were forced to accept that Earth is not the center of the universe everything is not revolving around us--that really shook the religious thinking, and so the concept of God was changed. But God didn't change--just what we think. (Estes)

In all of the Time Trilogy books, the children are visited by an otherworldly being, a “pyschopomp, a role generally played by an angel in Christian thought” (Bloom 72). In many cases these pyschopomps are traditional religious figures.

In A Wrinkle in Time, the characters are guardian angels, and when Mrs. Whatsit is flying the children through her home planet she shows the other creatures like her, who are all singing praises to God. In addition, when Calvin first sees the real Mrs. Whatsit, he bows before her, causing Mrs. Whatsit to correct Calvin: “Not to me, Calvin. Never to me. Stand up”

(L'Engle Wrinle 58). In A Wind in the Door the children are joined by a cherubim, another religious figure, whose role is to Name everything that God creates. Finally, in A Swiftly Tilting Planet, a unicorn—a well-known creature in Christian mythology—guides Charles Wallace.

Interestingly, while the helping creatures are important characters in the books, the evil in the books is never fully seen. Nancy-Lou Patterson writes:

In keeping with the Christian thought, these figures of spiritual guidance (Mrs. Whatsit and her friends; the cherubim; and the unicorn) are fully manifested and even multimorphic, while the evil spirits are insubstantial and empty—mere airs and noises—howls, smokes, chills, stinks, and shadows of negation. (Bloom 73).

While science and religion mingle throughout the books, the heart of the books tell about coming of age, and learning to love. In A Wrinkle in Time, Meg learns that her parents are fallible, and despite this, her love for her family is strong enough to conquer evil in the world. She has to confront her feelings of being different, and sees that being like everyone else is not the answer to finding happiness. She learns to love and accept herself for who she is, not what she thinks she be. In the end, it is her love for Charles Wallace, and her acceptance of her faults, that allow her to return to Camazotz and rescue him from the grip of IT.

In A Wind in the Door, the book centers on the idea of *Deepening* or becoming an adult. For Sporos, it means losing his freedom to move about, but gaining the ability to converse with the universe. For Meg, it means learning to love beyond her family, and learning to find good in everyone. Only when she learns to love and understand someone who is different from her that she is able to save herself from the Echthroi, and convince Sporos to *Deepen*.

In A Swiftly Tilting Planet, Meg is already grown, but it is time for Charles Wallace to have his coming of age. It is only when he learns to let go, trust in others, and not rely on his



intelligence, but instead on his feelings that he is finally able to solve who is the *Might Have Been* that he needed to find. Meanwhile, Branwen O'Keefe shows that she is more than a bitter, burned-out woman, and her family history holds the key to the salvation of the universe. This teaches the entire Murry family to look beyond the surface of a person to find what makes that person special in the universe. It is a final lesson in love for the entire family.

L'Engle's Time Trilogy may seem like a fun, fantastical children's series, and for many children it is. But underneath these tales of strange worlds, strange creatures, and girls who feel awkward is an underpinning of science fact and religious philosophy. The two meld together in a world where love is the greatest strength, and anything is possible. And through these three little books millions of children understand learn about a universe with a kind God, and a lot of Newtonian physics.

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