

## Madeleine L'Engle

### A writer who struggled to be a Christian

By Nick Richardson

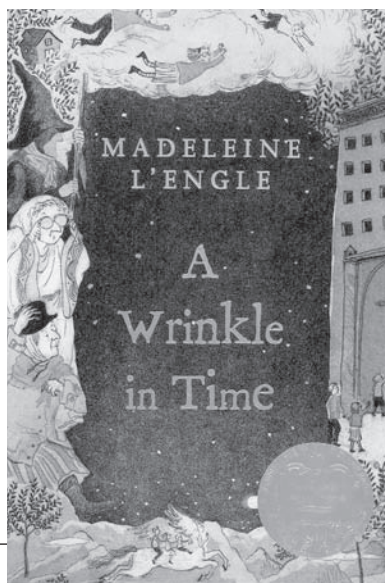
“Religion and science?” said Madeleine L'Engle in a 2000 interview. “One and the same.”

Unsurprisingly perhaps, in the light of a statement like that, L'Engle combined the distinction of being, for many years, writer-in-residence at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, where she attended daily Eucharist, with writing one of the most widely banned books (by religious conservatives) in the United States.

That book, the 1962 children's science fiction classic and Newbery Medal winner *A Wrinkle in Time*, was her masterpiece, selling more than eight million copies and captivating young and old alike. While the banners condemned *Wrinkle* as un-Christian, most of its readers found within it a deep spiritual message, that the power of love is stronger than the power of hate. It was part of a total oeuvre of over 50 published works of inspirational fiction, non-fiction, autobiography, science fiction/fantasy, theology, poetry and drama—all infused with her own distinctive brand of Christianity-inspired but universally-accessible seeking and spirituality.

One might think that a woman who was a practicing Episcopalian, read the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer every morning and evening, and was for many years a much-loved (and physically distinctive) fixture at the Cathedral would have been orthodox in her religion. But L'Engle was determinedly individualistic. There was a reason why the puritans disapproved. She was, in her own words, a “writer struggling to be a Christian.”

L'Engle made it quite clear that she looked with suspicion on the idea of Christian self proclamation. “If anyone asks me ‘Are you a Christian?’ I think it's a little like asking ‘Was your sex life with your husband good?’” she once said. “It's a private question—it's in who we are.” While writing works that are utterly, inescapably informed by her Christianity she always, in fact, disliked being pigeonholed as an exclusively “Christian” writer. “I am a writer,” was her response when asked about it. “No adjective.”



**MADELEINE L'ENGLE CAMP FRANKLIN was born Nov. 29, 1918, in New York City to Charles Camp and Madeleine Barnett Camp. She attended school in Switzerland and South Carolina and was a graduate of Smith College. She lived in Goshen, Conn., and New York City. L'Engle married Hugh Franklin; the couple had three children, two daughters and a son. L'Engle had five grandchildren and five great grandchildren. She was the author of over 60 books, including the award-winning *A Wrinkle in Time*. She died Sept. 6. She was 88.**

**A memorial service was held for L'Engle on Nov. 28 at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine.**



L'Engle was a passionate advocate of the importance of art and imagination. She had an ever-open mind, using all the tools at her disposal—particularly science—to probe constantly for new insights into the central questions of life and death, God and darkness. “Religion is less accepting than science,” she told Bob Abernethy of the PBS program *Religion and Ethics* in 2000. “Science knows things move and change, and religion doesn't want that. So, I am more comfortable with science. At the same time I am not throwing God out of the window.”

In fact, L'Engle drew a sharp distinction between facts and the truth. This distinction was central to her view of the world, and was the underpinning of the fantasy that played so large a part in books like *Wrinkle*. “Nothing that's worth anything as far as living our lives is concerned is in the realm of fact,” she once said. “Jesus was talking about a man with a plank of wood in his eye. It's a true story, it's not factual. It's about people who are slow to recognize their own faults and too quick to point out others' flaws.” This was also her view about the Bible as a whole, “It's not a book of laws and morals – it's a book of stories, about ordinary, unqualified people doing extraordinary things,” she said.

For her, art, and therefore fiction, were vital contributors to the search for truth. L'Engle looked with approval on the exhibitions and performance that are so much a part of life at St. John the Divine. “The arts are thought of fairly kindly [there],” she said. “This is very liberating for a number of young people, because many have come from evangelical backgrounds where art is considered to be non-Christian and wicked.”

In her younger days, at least, it was not just evangelicals who looked on art as wicked: when Madeleine L'Engle married her actor husband Hugh Franklin in 1946, she was thrown out of the *Social Register* because of his disreputable profession.

It's hard to imagine that she much cared.

*Richardson is a communications officer for the diocese.*



Top: Madeleine L'Engle with Garrison Keillor. Center: a promotional photo taken of L'Engle. Bottom: L'Engle with her granddaughters in the library in Diocesan House. Photos from the archives.