

**GIVEN THAT** with this edition *A Wrinkle in Time* celebrates its fiftieth anniversary, it is difficult to believe that the book was almost never published.

In 1960, when the manuscript was making the rounds of publishers, editors did not know what to make of it, and it was roundly rejected by several (the exact number is unknown). The story didn't quite fit into any of the usual categories. Yet, after it came to the attention of John Farrar, and Farrar, Straus and Giroux (then called Farrar, Straus and Cudahy) took a chance on publishing it in 1962, readers of all ages responded enthusiastically. This book that defied the categories has now endured for more than half a century, finding new readers in each generation. What is its secret? And what kind of person could produce such a book?



Madeleine, c. 1920

My grandmother, Madeleine L'Engle, was born in New York City in 1918. Her mother was an accomplished pianist; her father, a journalist and novelist. An only child who was born late in her parents' marriage with its established routines, my grandmother's childhood was both rarified and lonely. By her own account, she did not initially excel at school and preferred the solitary pleasures and consolations

of reading and writing to spending time with her peers.

Her father's lungs bore the marks of having been gassed in World War I, and when his health began to decline the family moved to the French Alps, where the air was thought to be salutary. After a summer of freedom roaming the countryside alone (provisioned, she fondly recalled, with crusty bread, sweet butter, and bitter chocolate), she was, with no prior warning, deposited at a Swiss boarding school. It was a traumatic and formative experience for her, and she wrote about it in *And Both Were Young*. This novel was an early demonstration of what turned out to be her enormous gift for using storytelling to negotiate and transform pain and difficulty.

Three years after sending my grandmother to boarding school, the family returned to the United States and settled in Jacksonville, Florida (where her mother had been born), and my grandmother went to a boarding school for girls in Charleston, South Carolina. This time, she felt at home with her gifts and, in consequence, blossomed.



Madeleine, c. 1935

She graduated from high school and went to Smith College (Betty Friedan was a classmate), where she was active in student government and literary and drama circles. After getting her degree in English, she made her way back to the New York of her childhood and set herself up in a tiny apartment in Greenwich Village. She quickly found work as an understudy and performed bit parts on Broadway, all of which she saw as excellent training for an aspiring novelist and playwright. During these days she wrote and published her first novel, *The Small Rain* (1945), which was followed by her second, *Ilsa* (1946).

During a production of Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* she met a handsome fellow actor, Hugh Franklin, a young man from Oklahoma who was also finding his way in the world



Madeleine and Hugh shortly after their marriage in 1946

of the theater. Their fascination was mutual, and they were married in 1946. In 1947, their first child, my mother, was born, and a year later the new parents made the radical decision to abandon the demands of life in the theater “forever” in favor of a more conventional family life. They bought a house they called Crosswicks in rural Connecticut, ran the local general store, and raised their family. Looking back, I am not sure they were well suited or prepared for this new life. In fact, the next ten years proved to be difficult and painful for my grandmother. Leaving the spark and energy of New York City and the stimulation of the theater for life in a small town with



The general store in Goshen, Connecticut

its fairly rigid standards of behavior and clear norms of housewifery was as hard an adjustment for her as being abandoned at boarding school. However, with characteristic passion, and her innate sense that it was possible to make the best of things,

Gran plunged into village life. She directed the church choir, participated in community theater, and helped with the store. She raised her growing family, as a son and another daughter came along, and she continued to write.

She often said that this period was nothing but rejections. That is not quite true: *And Both Were Young* came out in 1949, *Camilla Dickinson* in 1951, and *A Winter's Love* in 1957. Even so, she was restless and often unhappy and struggled with guilt about the time she spent writing when there was, she felt, nothing much to show for it—no money, no recognition, no real validation to assuage her sense of professional failure. And no perfect pie crusts or sewing skills either.

She recalled that the minister at her church advised her to read the German theologians as an answer to her existential crisis, but, alas, all they did was put her to sleep. Then, by happy chance, she began to read the work of physicists—Albert Einstein, Max Planck, Werner Heisenberg. Their work revealed a new vision of the universe, a less conventional view not visible through our everyday experiences, and this resonated with her own sense of things. In their writings she saw a reverence for the beauty of the laws of the universe and for the complex and ever unfolding understanding of it, which gave her a sense of meaning and belonging. Their vision affirmed her own and became for her an opening into a transcendent reality and informed her unique perspective in *A Wrinkle in Time*.

Much to my grandmother's relief, in 1959 my grandfather decided he would return to acting in New York City in the fall. During that summer, the family went on a ten-week cross-country

camping trip, and it was on this trip that the idea for *A Wrinkle in Time* began to germinate. Driving through the landscape of the Painted Desert, so different from the New England and north Florida of her childhood, the names Mrs Whatsit, Mrs Who, and Mrs Which popped into my grandmother's head, and she told her three children—twelve, ten, and seven—that she would have to write a book about them. When the trip was over, my grandfather restarted his acting career—playing the father in a production of *The Diary of Anne Frank*—and my grandmother stayed behind in Connecticut so her children could start school while their father got settled. The first draft of *A Wrinkle in Time* poured from my grandmother's fingers, written in the three months she was alone with her children.

Her agent at the time, Theron Raines, loved the book and worked with her through two or three drafts. My grandfather also served as a firm and good editor. Gran read chapters and excerpts to her children, and their enthusiasm for “what happens next” also encouraged her. But she did not sit down to write a “children's book” or a “fantasy novel”—she wrote to please herself. A few publishers rejected the book with comments like these:

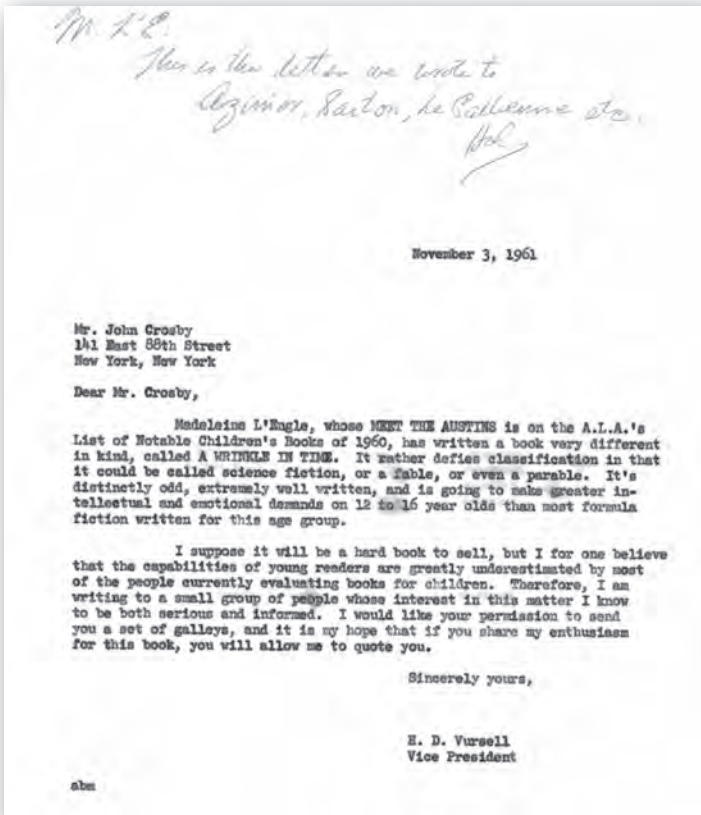
“If it were a short fantasy, that would be different . . . I would advise the author to do a cutting job on it—by half.”  
 “For me there isn't quite enough story value.”  
 “It's something between an adult and juvenile novel.”

She was advised to make the book more accessible so children could understand it, to change the plot, change the characters,

change the book entirely. She was very tempted. The urge to do the publishers' bidding was made more acute when both her agent and her husband suggested that perhaps she ought to give the publishers what they were asking for. Perhaps, they suggested, she was being stubborn. She certainly was stubborn, but if she wrote to please herself and no other outside audience, she also, as she said, was "a servant to the work" and as such had no authority to change the book.

Now back in New York City, with her husband working long and strange theater hours and her children in school, she struggled once again to find her bearings. After a year of rejections by multiple publishers, she asked her agent to return the manuscript, insisting that so much rejection was too painful, and no one was going to understand what the book was trying to do. Then, at a party she gave for her mother during the Christmas holiday, a friend insisted she send the manuscript to John Farrar. He had read and admired her first novel, so Gran was sufficiently encouraged to meet with him. He liked the manuscript, but just to be sure, he sent it to an outside reader for assessment. It came back quickly with this note: "I think this is the worst book I have ever read, it reminds me of *The Wizard of Oz*." To John Farrar's credit, that comment convinced him to publish.

FSG did not have hopes of great sales, but the company risked a low return because it believed in the book, and believed in Madeleine L'Engle as a writer. The editor of the book, Hal Vursell, sent out the following letter soliciting quotes:



Letter from Hal Vursell

Their faith in *Wrinkle* was more than vindicated when it became an immediate critical and popular success, winning the Newbery Medal in 1963.

People often say to me, “She must have been an amazing grandmother.” Of course she was. I remember being proud and eager to claim our relationship in grade school, letting classmates and teachers know “my grandmother wrote that,” and bracing for the wave of incredulity and admiration that would come.

In high school, though, I rejected the interest and curiosity my grandmother's fame attracted, terrified that the scrutiny exposed my own inadequacies and unworthiness.

Nonetheless, we were very close, in ways that grandparents and grandchildren often are. My sister, Léna Roy, and I are just over a year apart in

age, and a sibling and cousins followed much later. We had the opportunity to develop a deep and special relationship with our grandmother. I lived with my grandmother during my late teens and early twenties, moving into her large prewar apartment on the Upper West Side immediately following my high school graduation in 1986. At the time, she and my grandfather were at Crosswicks for the summer, and he died that fall after a short battle with cancer. Over the



Ruth Gagliardo (chairman of the Newbery-Caldecott Awards Committee) and Madeleine, 1963



Léna (left), Madeleine, and Charlotte, c. 1976



Madeleine and Charlotte, 1996

next fifteen years, she freely opened her apartment and life to friends, students, and grandchildren. She was in constant motion.

Though her travel schedule was grueling and her domestic life chaotic, she loved being busy and in demand. She felt a great responsibility to her readers and students. Sometimes I would help her with her scheduling and fan mail. She received up to two hundred letters a week. She read and responded to *every*

letter for as long as she was able, deeply respectful of and responsive to what moved her readers to write to her.

While the majority of the feedback my grandmother received over the years was positive, she also received expressions of fear and even hate. *A Wrinkle in Time* has been one of the most-contested and most-often-banned books in libraries and schools in the United States. Gran was baffled by the charges of some Christian groups that it glorified witchcraft and new age spirituality. On the other hand, she was equally flummoxed by criticism that it was too overtly Christian. For the fundamentalists, the book was certainly “heretical.” For literalists who are fearful of the essential metaphorical nature of language, it was anathema. She antagonized the same crowd that would later want to burn the Harry Potter books.

One of the criticisms that stung her most was readers’ disappointment in what eventually became of Meg—that is, her lack of professional vocation. My grandmother always maintained that her books knew more than she did, and that she wrote to discover and know her characters, not to force them into acting a certain way. Although she never wrote a series in today’s terms (preferring the term “companion books”), she loved her characters and wanted to find out what happened to them. She wrote about the O’Keefes (for, yes, Meg and Calvin marry) in several books beyond the Time Quintet. Meg, Calvin, and their seven children live in remote places, where Calvin can have privacy for his politically sensitive research on cell regeneration. Meg—that brilliant, brave, and fierce girl—acts as his lab assistant and raises the children. This upset many, many readers. When

pressed, my grandmother would maintain that in part the promise of feminism was that if a woman was free to focus her attentions on a career, she was also free to focus on her family.

My grandmother left an unfinished first draft of a novel with the working title *The Eye Begins to See* (after the poem “In a Dark Time” by Theodore Roethke), in which Meg adjusts to her children’s growing up and moving out (Polly, the eldest, is in medical school; Rosy, the youngest, is ten). Meg tries to make sense of her choices and to quell her anxiety about what she is going to do in the next phase of her life, when the daily responsibilities of children at home have ceased:

My father fascinates my children with his discussions of heliopods, little pods of thrown-off sun energy that hit against the outer edges of outer space and bounce back. Fascinates me, too.

“Then there is definition between space and non-space?”

I ask.

“What is non-space, Meg?” my father asks me.

I answer with more questions. “Are there spaces between universes? Can something unmeasurable be non-space?”

“Work on it,” my mother suggests.

There’s never been time, but the time when there is going to be time is approaching.

Now that I am in my forties, I have a lot more sympathy for Meg’s choices and anxieties. She had a great deal to live up to.

Although there is very little by way of cultural references to ground the action of *A Wrinkle in Time* in a specific historical moment, my grandmother wrote during a time when the threat of nuclear war was very real, and the description of the planet Camazotz has often been read as a cautionary tale about Soviet communism or totalitarianism more broadly. But there is no simple allegory or correlation. Apart from the Cold War, the book can also be read as a response to another significant cultural and political vortex. I have always heard echoes of the civil rights movement in Meg's revelation that "*like and equal are not the same thing.*"

Comparing drafts of the manuscript is both instructive and maddening. There is no complete edited manuscript, no dates on the pages or fragments, and it is difficult to reconstruct a chronology of revisions. It appears, however, that the manuscript was basically fixed once it started making the publishing rounds. The original contract for the book has the title "Mrs Whatsit, Mrs Who, and Mrs Which," so the title changed late in the process, and Gran always gave her mother credit for coming up with "A Wrinkle in Time." Other edits range from grammatical (lots of gerunds become verbs, and vice versa), shifts from descriptive to expository narration, and vocabulary and name changes ("killed" becomes "overcome"; Mr. Jennings and Mrs. Newcombe become Mr. Jenkins and Mrs. Buncombe; "delightful" becomes "prodigious"). There is a note on the title page that "tesseract" might not be in the public domain, and that she might substitute "sceortweg" and "scegg." According to another note on a draft, she changed Mrs Whatsit's age from

625,379,152,497 years, 8 months, and 3 days, to 2,379,152,497 years, 8 months, and 3 days because “the universe is only 5 or 6 billion years old, according to Isaac Asimov.” In early drafts Meg and her mother discuss Charles Wallace at greater length. Instead of calling Charles Wallace simply “new” as she does in the final version, Mrs. Murry calls him a “mutant” and suggests that he is the next step in the evolution of human consciousness.

The most significant revisions are to chapters 8 and 9, which take place on the planet Camazotz. In early drafts, more time is spent explaining the mechanics of how communication is possible (how and why do people on Camazotz speak and understand English?) and suggesting the evolutionary history of the alien planet. When Calvin, Meg, and Mr. Murry make their desperate tesser from Camazotz to Ixchel, Mr. Murry tries to explain to Meg and Calvin the nature of the Dark Thing and IT. His thesis has an eerie resonance today, positing that a planet can become dark because of totalitarianism (and specific dictators are named on both sides of the political spectrum). But a planet can also become dark because of “too strong a desire for security . . . the greatest evil there is.” Meg resists her father’s analysis. What’s wrong with wanting to be safe? Mr. Murry insists that “lust for security” forces false choices and a panicked search for safety and conformity. This reminded me that my grandmother would get very annoyed when anyone would talk about “the power of love.” Love, she insisted, is not power, which she considered always coercive. To love is to be vulnerable; and it is only in vulnerability and risk—not safety and security—that we overcome darkness.

These changes and transformations to the various drafts, I think, made the book more subtle, more open to individual imagination and inference, and, hence, more enduring. They made room for the exploration of larger themes without the distraction of details and explanations that might have stifled the individual response and interpretation that has been so rich and long-standing. Many of the book's themes are also startlingly contemporary, speaking directly to a culture and world in upheaval and flux, full of changes that are terrifying because those changes might turn out to be oppressive rather than liberating.

It is understandable that *A Wrinkle in Time* had trouble finding a publisher fifty years ago, given that it remains an anomaly to this day—still defying the categories. That very uniqueness, the way it is set apart from the ordinary, is also why it remains so well read and well loved. Some people are scared of it: the book is still vilified and challenged. At the same time, in today's vastly different landscape of both science fiction and young adult fiction, its blending of scientific and spiritual concepts and its unabashed optimism might seem rather tame or naïve. What made it successful in 1962, however, are the same things that have kept it on reading lists ever since: it offers a well-crafted, suspenseful story with interesting, quirky, and yet relatable characters.

I also think that Gran's exuberant and unambivalent embrace of the imagery and language of both science and spirituality to address questions of meaning is exhilarating and beguiling, and readers of all ages can successfully integrate

them. Additionally, my grandmother gave us protagonists who are heroic not in spite of their imperfections but because of them. For the most part, Meg and Calvin are pretty ordinary. And yet they have the capacity and the strength to make difficult choices, help each other, and save the universe. After all, how many of us are going to discover that we have magical powers or were actually born demigods? Nevertheless, we all might discover one day that we are called to accept our faults, risk being vulnerable, and, in the course of things, overcome darkness.

—Charlotte Jones Voiklis