

# MADELINE L'ENGLE

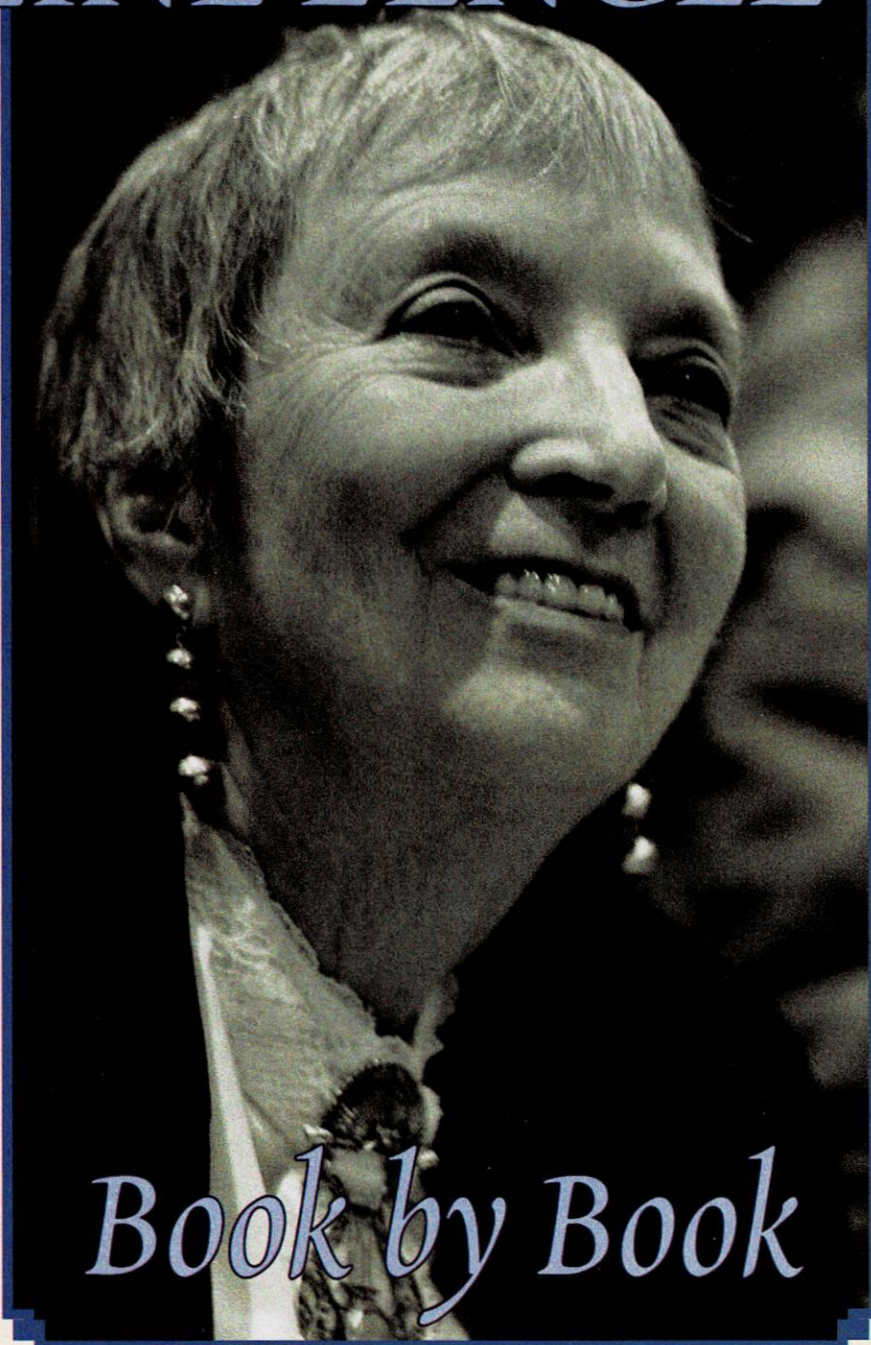
"NOTHING IMPORTANT IS COMPLETELY EXPLICABLE," says Madeleine L'Engle, a beloved contemporary American author, in *A Circle of Quiet* (1972). In her more than 50 fiction and nonfiction books, L'Engle postulates about the inexplicable—issues of time and space, good and evil, the perils of conformity and scientific irresponsibility, and basic human values such as love and morality. Weaving together Christian theology, science fiction, and fantasy to explore these broad themes, she places her characters in times and places far removed from our own. Her Newbery Medal-winning classic *A Wrinkle in Time* (1962), for example, plunged talented children through space to outsmart evil forces. Named the 1998 recipient of the Margaret A. Edwards Award for her lifetime contribution in writing for teens, L'Engle is best known for her young adult fantasy and science fiction novels. She has also written mysteries and memoirs, adult novels and biblical commentary, plays and poetry. Ultimately, L'Engle writes for herself. "I think that is when we are at our best, when we can tell something that is a struggle within us, its questions, its problems. We work it out through our craft" (María Ruiz Scaperlanda, "Madeleine L'Engle: An Epic in Time," *St. Anthony Messenger*, 6/00).

## Where to Start

Newbery Medal winner **A WRINKLE IN TIME** introduces younger readers (ages 9 and older) to the eccentric Murry family and L'Engle's trademark themes: the dangers (and wonders) of science and the importance of faith, love, and family. **A RING OF ENDLESS LIGHT**, part of the Austin family series, blends together spirituality, science, and coming-of-age. For an adult book, start with L'Engle's memoir, **A CIRCLE OF QUIET**, which sheds light on her family and writing life.

## Book by Book

Born in 1918 in New York City as an only child to a foreign correspondent father and musician mother, L'Engle grew up in an adult world of artists, writers, and musicians. Turning to writing and reading for amusement, she embraced books by L. Frank Baum, L. M. Montgomery, E. Nesbit, and George MacDonald, whose fairy tales and Christian theology informed her religious convictions. When she was 12, L'Engle moved with her family to the French Alps, where she attended boarding school while her father recovered from mustard gas poisoning suffered during World War I. Upon returning to the U.S., L'Engle went to boarding school at Ashley Hall in South Carolina, then spent four years studying English at Smith College. After graduating in 1941, L'Engle moved to New York's Greenwich Village, where she started to act and write.





L'Engle wrote her first book, *The Small Rain* (1945), while touring in Thomas Job's *Uncle Harry*. During rehearsals for Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, she met Hugh Franklin, whom she married during a run of Philip Barry's *The Joyous Season*. (L'Engle recounted their loving marriage in 1988's *Two-Part Invention*, published two years after his death.) After retiring from the stage, the couple moved to a farmhouse, Crosswicks, in a small Connecticut town and opened a general store. While raising three children there, L'Engle started the first of the Austin family series, *Meet the Austins* (1960), a fictional take on their country life. A decade later, the family returned to New York City; Hugh resumed acting (becoming Dr. Tyler in the television soap opera *All My Children*), and Madeleine started teaching and writing full time.

L'Engle's first commercial success, *A Wrinkle in Time*, came after more than two dozen publishers rejected the manuscript because they couldn't find a niche for it. L'Engle wrote prolifically through the 1960s and 1970s, continuing the *Time* quartet, penning autobiographical accounts of her faith and family with *The Crosswicks Journals*, and meditating on religious and scientific themes. Today, L'Engle works in New York City, where she is writer-in-residence and part-time librarian at the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine.

## A cosmic kind of religion

L'Engle, a practicing Episcopalian who attends daily Eucharist at the Cathedral, has adopted a wide range of genres, from poetry to adult fiction to children's fantasy. Each work comes from a fertile imagination deeply rooted in Christian spirituality. Yet rather than describe herself as a Christian

writer, she calls herself a "writer who is struggling to be a Christian"—and her works reflect a deep spiritual questioning. L'Engle views writing as an "incarnational," prayer-like process that involves embracing a faith that lies beyond her conscious control. The artist, she said, "should be like Mary who, when the angel told her that she was to bear the Messiah, was obedient to the command" (*Scaperlanda, St. Anthony Messenger*). L'Engle's spiritual guidance often determines the direction of her novels.

L'Engle has written overtly Christian texts. *A Bright Evening Star* (1997), for example, contemplates the incarnation of Jesus. She also develops religious themes in scientific or secular contexts. As a result, Christian literalists call her "new age" and "neo-orthodox," Christian conservatives question her interest in quantum mechanics and particle physics, and secular audiences accuse her of dogmatism. *A Wrinkle in Time* resides on the list of "Most Frequently Banned Books in the 1990s" for its religious heresy and promotion of witchcraft.

Above all, L'Engle refuses to be compartmentalized as a Christian writer. She repudiates the idea of science and religion's incompatibility, a major point of contention for some Christians. "I've always seen the discoveries of science as a way of finding out more about God, more about the universe," she said. "I don't see why [science is] ever a threat" (*Mars Hill Review* 4, Winter/Spring 1996). For her, quantum mechanics *is* theology. "When we discovered that the earth is not the center of the universe, it didn't change God," she said. "It just changed us, and what we think. We have to be willing to allow what we think to change" (*The Other Side*, March/April 1998).

## L'Engle's Major Series

\* Discussed in Major Works

### MURRY FAMILY SERIES (THE TIME QUARTET)

Drs. Kate and Alex Murry have a set of gifted children: Meg, twins Sandy and Dennys, and Charles Wallace. Together, they experience unusual adventures through space and time and manage to save the world—a few times over.

- \* *A Wrinkle in Time* (1962)
- A Wind in the Door* (1973)
- \* *A Swiftly Tilting Planet* (1978)
- \* *Many Waters* (1986)

### O'KEEFE FAMILY SERIES

Meg, who married Dr. Calvin O'Keefe (both from the *Time* quartet) have a brood of seven children. Daughter Polly (later Polly) is the protagonist of most of these tales about science, family loyalty, and good and evil.

- The Arm of the Starfish* (1965)
- Dragons in the Waters* (1976)
- A House Like a Lotus* (1984)
- \* *An Acceptable Time* (1989)

### AUSTIN FAMILY SERIES

In another family, Dr. Wallace Austin, his wife Victoria, and their children John, Suzy, Vicky, and Rob (and ward Maggy Hamilton) experience life, from teenage love to communicating with dolphins. The books center on Vicky's life.

- Meet the Austins* (1960)
- The Moon by Night* (1963)
- The Twenty-Four Days Before Christmas* (1964)
- The Young Unicorns* (1968)
- The Anti-Muffins* (1980)
- \* *A Ring of Endless Light* (1980)
- \* *Troubling a Star* (1994)
- A Full House* (1999)

### VIGNERAS SERIES

These books feature Katherine Forrester Vignerass and her friends

and family, including Dr. Suzy Davidson (née Austin, from the Austin family series—everyone's related, you see), over a half-century. *The Small Rain* (1945; reissued as *Prelude*, 1968)

*A Severed Wasp* (1982)

### CAMILLA DICKINSON SERIES

Camilla falls in love with one man but marries another. These books explore her life over many decades. *Camilla Dickinson* (1951; reissued as *Camilla*, 1965)

*A Live Coal in the Sea* (1996)

### CROSSWICKS JOURNAL SERIES

L'Engle's memoirs reflect on her family, career, religion, friendships, New England retreats, and living in general.

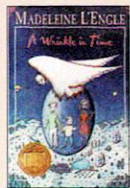
- A Circle of Quiet* (1972)
- The Summer of the Great-Grandmother* (1974)
- The Irrational Season* (1977)
- Two-Part Invention* (1988)



## MAJOR WORKS

### *A Wrinkle in Time* (1962)

♦ NEWBERY MEDAL



Influenced by Christian theology, Albert Einstein, Max Planck's "new" physics of space and time, and what L'Engle calls "post-utopian sciences," *Wrinkle* reflects the author's revolt against traditional Christianity and search for her own religion. More than two dozen publishers rejected the first of the *Time* quartet before Farrar, Straus & Giroux took a risk. The novel became a bestseller.

**THE STORY:** The awkward and misunderstood teenage Meg Murry, her brilliant younger brother Charles, and their popular neighbor Calvin O'Keefe travel through a wrinkle in space and time (via the tesseract) to rescue physicist Dr. Murray, the father of Meg and Charles. With the help of three celestial strangers, the three children arrive at the fifth-dimension planet Camazotz, where Dr. Murry lies captive. There they encounter a cosmic evil that's slowly subsuming the stars around it—and discover the saving power of love.

**"One feels that this book quests desperately for something it never quite touches. It is original, different, exciting—and in some parts frustrating."** SATURDAY REVIEW 5/12/62.

**"Here is a confusion of science, philosophy, satire, religion, literary allusions, and quotations that will no doubt have many critics. ... To children who read and reread C. S. Lewis's fairy tales I think it will be absorbing."** R. H. V., HORN BOOK, 4/62.

**"Miss L'Engle has referred to her book as a parable; but it is first of all an exciting adventure story, with something important added—the overtones that ... will give new meanings with each new reading."** RUTH HILL VIGUERS, IN MARGIN FOR SURPRISE: ABOUT BOOKS, CHILDREN, AND LIBRARIANS (LITTLE, BROWN, 1964).

**"Space and time fantasy can have fully developed character, and yet retain the ingenuity we find in science fiction. Even though the characters have special mental powers, they do not lose their humanness."** REBECCA J. LUKENS, IN A CRITICAL HANDBOOK OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE (SCOTT, FORESMAN, 1976).

**THE BOTTOM LINE:** A classic tale about human derring-do, scientific irresponsibility, conformity, evil, and the redemptive power of love.

### *A Swiftly Tilting Planet* (1978)

♦ AMERICAN BOOK AWARD



In the third book of the *Time* quartet (after *A Wrinkle in Time* and *A Wind in the Door*, where Meg and Calvin enter one of Charles Wallace's mitochondria), the Murry family is a little older—but the same battles between good and evil persist.

**THE STORY:** Charles Wallace—who's the next evolutionary step for humans—is now 15 and shoulders a massive responsibility: he must travel through quantum universes to stop a nuclear-war hungry dictator from destroying the world. Meg, newly married, takes a telepathic journey with her brother, who must pass the ultimate test of faith as he rides a unicorn through time and tries to change a "might-have-been."

**"Unfortunately, the different episodes are not well integrated, and the author's tendency to philosophize interrupts the smooth flow of the narrative. Characterization, though, is carefully handled, and if the book is flawed on a structural level, it is impeccable on an emotional one."**

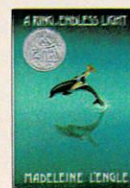
K. M. KLOCKNER, HORN BOOK, 10/78.

**"... well-written, imaginative, and exceedingly complex, evoking the timeless conflict of good and evil with a detective element thrown in. It suffers, I think, from too much suffusing sweetness of familial love, but then sibling irritation—a constant in real life—is rarely acknowledged in what is written for young people today."** P.S. PRESCOTT, NEWSWEEK, 12/18/78.

**THE BOTTOM LINE:** Themes of good versus evil, war versus peace, and individual responsibility—and, of course, a lucid explanation of the quantum theory of multiple universes.

### *A Ring of Endless Light* (1980)

♦ NEWBERY HONOR BOOK



L'Engle began the Austin family series while living in rural Connecticut and raising her children. She based the first, *Meet the Austins* (1960, ALA Notable Children's Book), on her life in the countryside. But she identified more with the 12-year-old Vicky's difficult coming-of-age than the older Mrs. Austin. *A Ring of Endless Light*, the sixth in the series, asks familiar questions about the purpose of science and the meaning of life and death.

**THE STORY:** Fifteen-year-old Vicky Austin's grandfather is dying of leukemia, and Vicky feels confused by her three different suitors. Simultaneously tormented, joyful, and full of grief—but always overwhelmed—Vicky finds solace in poetry and by using her telepathic powers to befriend a pod of dolphins.

**"The author cannot resist packing her novel with all the interests of her agile mind. But she thoroughly respects young readers and presents to them with passion and energy all sorts of theological, scientific, and philosophical ideas ... to support her ultimate theme: that coming to terms with death is an affirmation of wholeness and life."** E.L. HEINS, HORN BOOK, 8/80.

**"[The Austins] are attractive if unreal characters. ... There are no fewer than six deaths (as well as a dolphin's), two near misses, and several references to mass tragedies. ... However**



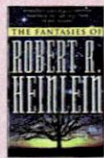
## Tessering your way through the fourth (or fifth) dimension

L'Engle used the tesseract in *A Wrinkle of Time* to explore the notion of higher dimensions—concepts developed long before she started her novel. In 1902, English-born mathematician Charles Hinton probably coined the term “tesseract” to help us visualize the fourth dimension, or what Albert Einstein called time (or space-time). In geometry the tesseract is a hypercube, a four-dimensional version of the cube. Imagine that the tesseract is to the cube as the cube is to the square. (A visual rendition of the tesseract appears in Salvador Dali's 1954 painting *Corpus Hypercubus*, which depicts Christ nailed to a hypercube.)

In *Wrinkle*, L'Engle envisioned the tesseract as a vague doorway that served as an intersection of the folding of space, a kind of instant travel-way. She based her concepts on Einstein's theory of general relativity, which showed that gravity is communicated through the curvature of time and space, and his claim that time constitutes a fourth dimension. If we could travel faster than the speed of

light, we could theoretically travel backwards in time. L'Engle also studied Max Planck's complementary ideas about quantum theory, which hold that matter and energy have a dual nature, sometimes acting like particles and at other times like waves. Both Einstein and Planck's theories, which heavily influenced L'Engle's fantastical fiction, form the theoretical basis of modern physics.

L'Engle was not the first author to use the concept of the tesseract to help explain multidimensional travel. Some classics include:



**...AND HE BUILT A CROOKED HOUSE** | ROBERT HEINLEIN (1940): In this short story, a house built as a three-dimensional projection of a tesseract collapses and becomes a real tesseract.

**TECHNICAL ERROR** | ARTHUR C. CLARKE (1950): In this short story, a technician working on a superconducting electric generator is rotated through the fourth dimension.



**GLORY ROAD** | ROBERT HEINLEIN (1963): A man is transported to other universes; the author refers to the “foldbox,” a four-dimensional suitcase that can hold a truckload of goods but folds in on itself.



**THE NUMBER OF THE BEAST** | ROBERT HEINLEIN (1980): Four men and women find themselves under attack from aliens seeking their quantum secrets. The hypercube principle allows them to travel through dimensions.



**FACTORIZING HUMANITY** | ROBERT J. SAWYER (1998): A psychology professor attempts to unravel extraterrestrial messages; a hypercube plays a role in the author's interpretation of quantum mechanics.



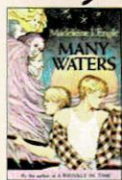
**THE TESSERACT** | ALEX GARLAND (1998): Three sets of characters that violently collide. Garland expands the term to imply his characters' inability to understand the larger forces that affect their lives.

worthy—and fashionable—the theme, it's overdone here.”

PATRICIA DOOLEY, SCHOOL LIBRARY JOURNAL, 9/80.

**THE BOTTOM LINE:** A spiritual coming-of-age story about love, death, and responsibility in the face of tragedy.

## Many Waters (1986)



In the last installment of the Murry family saga that began with *A Wrinkle in Time*, L'Engle draws explicitly on biblical lore.

**THE STORY:** Sandy and Dennys Murry, Meg and Charles Wallace's “normal” twin brothers in an extraordinary family, suddenly find they've traveled back to biblical times—to Noah and his family. Can they use their integrity to reunite an estranged family before the great floods come?

“Analogies between the Flood and the possibility of nuclear destruction are suggested from time to time, but no didactic conclusion is forced out of them. ... Miss L'Engle is above all a skillful storyteller, and every admirer of *A Wrinkle of Time* will have fun with *Many Waters*.”

SUSAN COOPER, NY TIMES BOOK REVIEW, 11/30/86.

“*Many Waters* is rich with fascinating mythological characters .... This novel does not have the richness of events with which L'Engle developed the age-old struggle between good and evil in *A Wrinkle in Time* and *A Swiftly Tilting Planet*.”

EVIE WILSON, VOICE YOUTH ADVOCATES, 12/86.

**THE BOTTOM LINE:** A mix of science fiction and fantasy that draws on history, morals, and religion—and, of course, the difficulties of growing up.

## An Acceptable Time (1989)



In the sequel to *A House Like a Lotus* (part of the O'Keefe family series, and related to the *Time* quartet, due to its overlapping characters), L'Engle once again blends history, physics, and Christian metaphysics into a literary whole.

**THE STORY:** When Polly O'Keefe (daughter of Meg Murry and Calvin O'Keefe, who married some books back) visits her grandparents' (yes, Meg's parents') farm in Connecticut, she travels 3,000 years into the past. Toggling back and forth between the present and past, she tries to make peace between warring Native American tribes.



## Reading L'Engle in Chronological Order

At one time I had hopes of not only placing Madeleine L'Engle's books in chronological order, but also of figuring out approximately what year each one takes place. I gradually came to realize that the latter simply can't be done. Written over the course of more than 50 years, the various books tend to be products of their time, taking place either a few years before the year of publication (especially in the case of the early books) or five to ten years after year of publication (especially the Murry-O'Keefe and Austin books). This inevitably has led to contradictory year-specific references such as "the end of the 20th century" and how long ago man first set foot on the moon. This is why the family trees printed in *Many Waters* and elsewhere refer to *chronos* (year-oriented time) and *kairos* (celestial, non-measurable time).

**IT IS POSSIBLE** to read all of L'Engle's interconnected novels in order as long as you don't worry too much about the exact order of her earliest novels, the exact placement of

*A Live Coal in the Sea* or the proper order of *The Arm of the Starfish* and *The Moon by Night*, which take place at the same time. Generally, though, it's fairly easy to put the three main series of books in order, because of the fairly consistent age references to the Murry, O'Keefe, and Austin children as they grow up from book to book. Most of Madeleine L'Engle's other novels connect with the Murry-O'Keefe family or the Austin family at some point. But if you want to tackle just the books from the three main series chronologically, here's the order in which to read them:

- *A Wrinkle in Time* (Murry family)
- *A Wind in the Door* (Murry family)
- *Many Waters* (Murry family)
- *A Swiftly Tilting Planet* (Murry family)
- *The Twenty-Four Days Before Christmas* (Austin family)
- *A Full House: An Austin Family Christmas* (Austin family)
- *Meet the Austins* (Austin family)
- *The Anti-Muffins* (Austin family)
- *The Moon by Night* (Austin family)
- *The Arm of the Starfish* (O'Keefe family, same summer as *The Moon by Night*)
- *The Young Unicorns* (Austin family)

- *A Ring of Endless Light* (Austin family)
- *Troubling a Star* (Austin family)
- *Dragons in the Waters* (O'Keefe family)
- *A House Like a Lotus* (O'Keefe family)
- *An Acceptable Time* (O'Keefe family)
- *A Severed Wasp* (Austin family, sort of)

### Books that take place before *A Wrinkle in Time* (order approximate):

- *Ilsa* (Porcher family)
- *The Other Side of the Sun* (Renier family)
- *A Small Rain* (Katherine Forrester)
- *The Other Dog* (Touché L'Engle-Franklin and family; no crossovers)
- *And Both Were Young* (Philippa Hunter)
- *Camilla Dickenson* (Camilla)
- *A Winter's Love* (Porcher family, Mimi Oppenheimer)
- *The Love Letters* (Charlotte Napier)

### Books that take place between *An Acceptable Time* and *A Severed Wasp* (order approximate):

- *Certain Women* (Wheaton family)
- *A Live Coal in the Sea* (Camilla)

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**"The physics is bogus, the anthropology appallingly Eurocentric, and the prose studded with horrors ... worst of all, the grandparently role models have become overprotective, terrified of the heroine's sexuality."**

POLLY SHULMAN, VOICE LITERARY SUPPLEMENT, 5/90.

**"Polly and the Bishop's travels are, like Meg's travels a generation before, revelations of the nature of good and evil and of love. [This] will not be the classic that *A Wrinkle in Time* is—it lacks that book's spiritual quality—but it may be enjoyed by mature readers ... who are able to apprehend and appreciate the Christian theology at the heart of L'Engle's work."** SUSAN PERREN, QUILL QUIRE, 6/90.

**THE BOTTOM LINE:** Another look at the transcendent power of love, with a bit of Native American lore thrown in.

## Troubling a Star (1994)



Vicky Austin first appeared in *Meet the Austins*. She's a few years older now—as was L'Engle, who carried the series into its third decade with this book, set in the year following the conclusion of *A Ring of Endless Light*. This is not science fiction, but real science written as fiction.

**THE STORY:** Vicky Austin, now a high school junior and budding poet, visits Antarctica to visit her kind-of-boyfriend Adam Eddington (the young marine biologist in *A Ring of Endless Light*). But threats, intrigue, and mortal danger lie at every turn.

**"This fast-paced story—part mystery, part adventure—will grip readers as 16-year-old Vicky ... is plunged into an international controversy over environmental issues and a struggle for political power. Although she witnesses deception and death, she also renews her appreciation of friendship and love."** SUSAN L. ROGERS, SCHOOL LIBRARY JOURNAL, 10/94.

**"L'Engle is trying to do a lot here; the book is adventure story, international intrigue, love story, travelogue and environmental lesson. ... The parts, though, never quite come together."** KAREN WILLIAMS, CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR, 12/13/94.

**THE BOTTOM LINE:** Another battle between good and evil, with a strong message about human greed and environmental devastation. ■