



BOOK REVIEW:

Conversations with Madeleine L'Engle

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Most people, if they recognise the name at all, know Madeleine L'Engle as the author of *A Wrinkle in Time*. That is a legacy that practically any author would be grateful to leave behind, but L'Engle has bequeathed a much larger world. In *Conversations with Madeleine L'Engle*, editor Jackie C. Horne has conveniently compiled into one volume for the first time a sampling of interviews L'Engle gave over the course of her career. The collection is part of the Literary Conversations Series published by the University Press of Mississippi, a series that boasts 180 titles featuring the compiled interviews of authors such as Ernest Hemingway, Toni Morrison, Neil Gaiman, and Maurice Sendak. Although all of the interviews compiled in the many volumes of the series have been previously released in various other publications over the years, so an enterprising scholar could certainly track them all down individually, the impetus of the series is convenience; the series' editors have done the tedious work of compiling the choicest sampling of each author's conversations. This particular collection of interviews with L'Engle represents the consistent quality and reliability of the series and gives readers a much-coveted glimpse into the mind of a legendary figure of science fiction and fantasy.

Horne arranges these interviews with L'Engle chronologically from 1967, a few years after the initial publication of *A Wrinkle in Time*, to 2006, a year before her death. Taken from a variety of sources – scholarly journals, radio programs, popular Christian magazines – the thirteen interviews in this collection can consequently appeal to audiences from scholars to fans. More specifically, while children's literature scholars will likely get the most use out

of such a collection of broad-ranging interviews, more casual fans of L'Engle's novels will also enjoy reading her answers and tracing the trajectory of her point of view over the course of four decades.

In addition to being arranged chronologically, the interviews also follow a loose thematic pattern, with certain interviews focusing on topics such as feminism, religion, writing, or science, depending on the intended audience of the interviewing publication. The first selection in the book is from Roy Newquist's 1967 collection *Conversations* and reads more like an autobiography in that Newquist has removed his questions from the transcript and has edited L'Engle's responses together into one continuous narrative. She reminisces about several significant moments and realisations throughout her life up to that point, including experiences at school, her first novel written at just twelve years old, her guilt about not being a good housewife – “I don't sweep in the corners. I can't bake pies. I should stop writing and be a proper housewife and mother” (7) – and her general feelings of self-doubt. She also muses on the problematic categorisation of “children's books” and herself as a children's author. She claims that she does not write books for children but rather for herself, saying “I think anybody who writes for children is being intolerable to children The real children's books are those they go on reading all their lives, books that come to terms with man's place in the universe” (9). She mentions Lewis Carroll, George MacDonald, and C. S. Lewis as positive examples of “real” children's authors. Ultimately, L'Engle's candid vulnerability in this first interview makes it an excellent opening piece to the collection.

Another interview that stands out is her long discussion with Linda Chisolm, which is particularly pertinent to those seeking to analyse the spirituality of L'Engle's fiction because L'Engle discusses the development of her theological views at length, beginning with her reluctant entrance into a Congregational church community in Connecticut where she, her husband, and their children lived in the 1950s. She claims to have been “very much an agnostic” and had explained to the young minister that “yes, I would like to come to church, but he would have to accept the fact that I simply had to live *as though* I believed in God, but I could not say that I did” (33). His unexpected response was to have her teach the high school Sunday school class. She did relish being a part of a supportive community of other young families, something she had never experienced before. Her Congregationalist friends encouraged her to read German theologians in an attempt to convert her fully, but she recalls that her “true theological reading turned out to be my discovery of higher mathematics” (34). After devouring Einstein, Jeans, Eddington, Planck, and Sullivan, she had finally found a God she could believe in. As she explains, “These people talked about a universe in which I felt I could believe in God, whereas the theologians had turned me off” (35). She continues discussing with Chisolm her views about Jesus and Satan, theologians she does like, and how her study of science and mathematics eventually led her to write *A Wrinkle in Time*.

The next three interviews in the collection are from the period in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when L'Engle's frequent speaking engagements at Wheaton College garnered attention from Christian publications. The ones included in this book are from a popular Christian magazine called *Christianity Today*, a program on Episcopal Radio hosted by Ted Baehr called *Searching*, and a biblical historical journal called *Arkenstone*. As a change of pace from

theology, the next interview in the collection is a transcript of one of the several times the author appeared on *The Studs Terkel Program* and is clearly aimed at a more general audience. It focuses on L'Engle's most recent book at the time, *A Ring of Endless Light*, the problem with the assumption associating the term "adult novels" with "porno" (105), and her research on dolphins for the novel. In the course of the conversation, she provocatively suggests that children can understand science better than adults; as evidence, she references the publication process for the admittedly complicated *A Wrinkle in Time*. Multiple "tired old editors" (105) had trouble understanding the book and, therefore, rejected it with the assumption that children would have trouble understanding it as well. L'Engle dismisses this idea as "patronizing" (106) and insists that children are capable of understanding any concept, and want to do so, as long as there is a good story to go with it. This point of view has become foundational to the success of children's science fiction and fantasy genres going forward.

The last few interviews in the collection differ in tone from the earlier conversations for two specific reasons: first, children's literature had come into its own as an academic field; second, L'Engle's health and cognitive abilities had been in steady decline. As an example, Gary Schmidt's 1991 interview for the *ALAN Review* (the journal for the Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of the National Council of Teachers of English) is more focused on the literary aspects of her writing, such as authorial intent, the narrator, and questions of genre; indeed, Schmidt seems awkwardly preoccupied with the role of the narrator in each of L'Engle's novels, broaching the topic in almost every question and discussing the narrators as if they are sentient beings who attempt to control the reader's experience in various ways. He is likely attempting to bring an air of professionalism to what, at the time, was the relatively new and underappreciated field of children's lit scholarship, but he instead comes across as a zealous grad student who has just listened to a life-changing lecture about narrative personas in an Intro to Narratology course. The resultant tone of the interview is decidedly more antagonistic than previous, less scholarly ones; L'Engle actually takes issue with a particular line of questioning that suggests that she, as the author, intentionally manipulates her stories rather than passively channeling the story through herself as a conduit. She insists, "I do not control, own, or dominate my stories. I serve them, and for me they are truth. When I am writing, so often I am given what I need. All I have to do is recognize it" (163). Her answers to Schmidt's questions give the impression that she has not been challenged in quite such a straightforward manner by previous interviewers and feels compelled to defend her writing process, perhaps for one of the first times. However, a positive side-effect of his heavy-handed style is that Schmidt makes L'Engle feel defensive, so she, therefore, ends up walking much farther down the path of deep discussion than she likely was intending to travel in that interview.

The last interview in the collection, and one of L'Engle's last official ones, was conducted by Leonard S. Marcus in 2002, not long after L'Engle had suffered a stroke, and was published in Marcus's 2006 collection *The Wand and the Word: Conversations with Writers of Fantasy*. Because L'Engle was not feeling well, Marcus's softball questions are simple and nostalgic – "What kind of child were you?" (182), "When did you first keep a journal?" (184), "Were you a good student?" (184) – and he gets responses that are the epitome of short and sweet, most amounting to no more than a few lines but still dripping with

concentrated wisdom. Marcus eventually expanded his project through over fifty additional interviews with L'Engle's family, friends, and fans, and he published *Listening for Madeleine: A Portrait of Madeleine L'Engle in Many Voices* in 2012. Although this interview admittedly does not offer much for scholars in the way of new or revelatory information, it is (tonally) a lovely conversation which brings the collection in for a pleasantly soft landing.

Besides the collected interviews, *Conversations with Madeleine L'Engle* offers a few other helpful features, such as a complete list of L'Engle's published works and a timeline of significant biographical events. A distinct highlight of the collection, however, is the insightful introduction by editor Jackie C. Horne. She provides background details about L'Engle's publishing woes, the author's struggles with her conception of God, and how the changing landscape of children's and fantasy literature has affected how readers and scholars interact with L'Engle's novels. For some volumes in the Literary Conversations Series, particularly those featuring well-known names such as Steve Martin and David Foster Wallace, the editor's introduction seems superfluous since at least one full-length scholarly biography for those writers already exists. However, in *Conversations with Madeleine L'Engle*, the introduction and extra features of the collection are particularly necessary because there is currently no official, scholarly biography of L'Engle; there is only a collection of stories about her written by her granddaughters called *Becoming Madeleine* (2018); later that same year, Christian publisher Zondervan also released an account titled *A Light So Lovely: The Spiritual Legacy of Madeleine L'Engle* on how L'Engle's faith influenced her creativity. Ultimately, Horne's thoughtfully curated sampling of reprinted interviews paired with her insights in the introduction make this collection a useful resource for L'Engle scholars and fans alike.

Biography: Sara Hays has a PhD in English from Middle Tennessee State University where she specialised in children's and young adult literature as well as Victorian literature. Her dissertation focused on the novels of young-adult author John Green. Professionally, she has taught on the college level for twelve years and is currently an Assistant Professor of English at Cumberland University in Lebanon, TN, where she teaches courses in children's literature, British literature, and advanced composition.