Breaking the Rules: A Defense of *A Wrinkle in Time*

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"People underestimate children's ability to understand big concepts," Madeleine L'Engle said in a magazine interview in 1999. Censoring books because they contain ideas that children aren't supposed to think about is, above all, a cruel underestimation of both the children and the ideas. *Writing* good books for children, on the other hand, is all about respecting young readers and daring to speak with them about big ideas. Authors of beloved children's books tend to be people who remember their own child selves well enough not to underestimate their readers or stay cloistered within the narrow confines of controlled vocabulary and safe topics.

I mentioned to two children I know that some adults don't think kids should read *A Wrinkle in Time* and they looked at me, baffled. It was the same bafflement I felt when I was in fourth grade and there was controversy about books by Judy Blume and other authors who wrote openly about growing up. My friends and I were already reading those books avidly, and I didn't understand what the parents thought they were shielding us from. Was it necessary to protect us from a representation of our own feelings and experiences? Did they think we didn't know or think about the things in these books? Had they so little memory or understanding?

The fact is that kids, more often than not, find a way to read what has been cut from an assigned list or even removed from a school library's shelves. If

it's good, and maybe *because* it has been the subject of such fuss, kids will tell each other about it. Censorship is an attempt to silence the words of an author, but what really gets silenced is the chance for authentic and meaningful conversation between adults and children. Forbidding books that children love and find resonant just adds to their growing list of things that adults don't understand and that have to be discussed only with other kids.

In such cases, authors remain among the few adults who do understand and remember, which is probably why they are so cherished (and why they get so many letters from their young readers). For me and my friends, books were so often where our thoughts, feelings, and experiences got confirmed. Good books also took our feelings and transformed them, as art does -- gave them back to us as something new, something that enlarged our understanding of the world and of ourselves. Books became points of reference; in that sense, they became experience.

One day in eighth grade, I stood on a street corner talking with my best friend about the fact that what teachers and rulebooks said about writing didn't always match what was true of the good writing we knew.

"Like that thing about 'don't use one-sentence paragraphs,'" my friend said.

"Right!" I agreed, suddenly remembering something. "What about that dramatic moment at the end of *A Wrinkle in Time*, when Meg is desperately trying to figure out what she has that IT doesn't have, and suddenly she realizes the answer ? *That's* done with one-sentence paragraphs and it's obviously right to do it that way."

Meg, you see, had by then become someone we knew, and the book -- including its language and paragraphing -- was a touchstone, something we could look to as an example.

That climactic scene seems right to me still, all these years later. There is Meg, the book's heroine, trying with all her strength to resist the powerful, controlling brain called IT, which has her beloved baby brother in its clutches. Figuring out what she has that IT doesn't have seems an impossible task, but then it hits her:

> ... as Meg said, automatically, "Mrs. Whatsit loves me; that's what she told me, that she loves me," suddenly she knew.
>
> She knew!
>
> Love.
>
> That was what she had that IT did not have.

And so by concentrating intently on her love for her brother, Meg is able to wrest him from the control of this huge, diabolical brain.

A Wrinkle in Time has always been a book that breaks rules. That's why it took so long for a publisher to accept it originally, why so many children have treasured it for the nearly 40 years it's been in print, and probably why so many people have objected to it.

When I say that *Wrinkle* breaks rules, I don't even remotely mean to suggest that it is a careless or irresponsible book. Quite the contrary. The rules it breaks -- that children can't handle big ideas or complex language, that children's books shouldn't take on the problem of good and evil, that books should fall clearly into categories, and, of course, that writers shouldn't use one-sentences paragraphs -- are rules that are mostly better broken. I remember *Wrinkle* as a book that put words to what I believed and cared about and blasted my mind open to new ideas, both at the same time.

It's a hard book to summarize. It's an adventure story, as Meg Murry, her younger brother Charles Wallace, and their new friend Calvin search the galaxies for the Murrys' missing father, who has been sent on some kind of secret mission and has not been heard from in years. It's a book of physics and mathematics, because Meg's father has been involved in experimental research on tessering, a way of travel that, though it sounds fantastical, actually draws upon theories of the fifth dimension and relativity. It's a book that challenges totalitarianism and mind control, not unlike *Brave New World* and *1984* and Lois Lowry's *The Giver* (which are also frequently censored). It's a book about children who don't fit the norm and how they struggle with the rejection and pain that causes. It's a book about a strong family whose members respect each other's individuality and love each other in spite of their faults and imperfections. It's a book about the heroine's self-discovery, and it is, ultimately, a book of triumph and praise.

Many of the challenges to *A Wrinkle in Time* over the years have been on religious grounds -- that it celebrates mysticism and the occult and that the theology embedded in the story is unorthodox. It's hard to defend the book against these charges because it feels as if critics who make these claims are speaking an entirely different language, or are simply scanning every children's book for certain key words without taking context or essence into account. The characters accused by some readers of being witches are not truly witches in any sense of the term. They are extra-terrestrial beings, probably closer to angels than to anything else in our own lexicon, and in any case hardly corrupting of children's morals (on the contrary, they are clearly on the side of the good and clearly love and care for the children). The book is indeed fantastical, in that it posits ideas like time-travel. But like most good fantasy, it

is grounded in a solid human reality as well. Above all, the book is not a theological tract but a novel, albeit one that clearly comes from the author's deep beliefs and values (but where else should a novel come from)? Anyone who reads Madeleine L'Engle's non-fiction knows how important her Christian faith is to her, so it must have been a strange surprise to her when people of that same faith were among the book's most vocal critics. In any case, I'm not in a position to argue the book's merits from a theological perspective, nor do I think that it makes sense to do so. *A Wrinkle in Time* surely won the Newbery award and became a treasured favorite of so many young readers because it is a great tale, a powerful tale, one that returns us to ourselves with greater awareness. It surely won the award because of kids like the 10-year-olds in the writing workshop I teach, who, the moment they heard me mention the title, exclaimed, "Oh! I loved that book! It was so interesting!"

Here are some specific reasons that the book is of value:

It often leaves kids excited about physics and math and astronomy. Once, in the middle of a ninth grade class, a few of my friends and I leapt up excitedly to demonstrate a concept from *A Wrinkle in Time,* to our teacher's amused delight. Some of the big concepts that Madeleine L'Engle dares to offer her readers are concepts of Einsteinian physics. The unvierse is *interesting,* L'Engle continually seems to be saying. Troubled and full of struggle, but so wondrous too, both in its vastness and in the details.

Then, on the other hand, there is the part of the book that will be familiar to many readers -- Meg's feelings as an awkward adolescent and her steadfast defense of both herself and her younger brother, despite their failure to fit with others their age. Stories in which an unhappy heroine discovers her own value

and discovers that she doesn't have to become like everybody else in order to be loved are always welcome, and as a story of this type, *Wrinkle* is first class. Meg chafes against her faults -- her stubbornness, her impatience -- but in the end it is her faults that save her and Charles Wallace. Combined with her fierce loyalty, Meg's supposed faults give her the determination to resist being controlled and to love her brother for who he truly is, not who others would have him be.

It's ironic that one parent challenging *A Wrinkle in Time* objected to it on the grounds that it indoctrinates readers, because the book stands profoundly *against* indoctrination. The evil of the planet Camazotz, which houses the central brain IT and has imprisoned the children's father, is that it is entirely about conformity. Everyone is controlled by IT and everyone thinks and behaves alike. When one of the planet's inhabitants nervously protests, "All my papers are in order," anyone familiar with totalitarian regimes on our own planet can recognize the allusion. Camazotz is a totalitarian regime in the extreme, and what Meg discovers there -- that *like* and *equal* are not the same, that removing difference and individuality is not and cannot ever be the solution -- is an idea that bears discovering again and again. Adults talk to kids about tolerating difference; *Wrinkle* acknowledges how painful difference often is and how hard tolerating it can be. Yet the book shows very clearly that the alternative is worse. It seems to me that kids instinctively recoil at the idea of Camazotz because they *don't* want to be bouncing their balls in perfect unison or thinking someone else's thoughts. People joke about teenagers' drive to look and act like everyone else, but those are coping strategies more than anything else, and adolescence is at least as much about discovering your true self as it is about trying to join the crowd. Meg wishes she could fit in, too,

since she suffers each day in school for being different. But she doesn't want to fit in at the expense of her own true self and she doesn't want to rule out the possibility of being loved for her true self. The book is among other things about holding out for those two ideals.

Before the group sets out on its intergalactic travels, an ordinary scene in the Murrys' kitchen, with Calvin visiting the family for the first time, shows that even conventionally successful (popular, good at sports) Calvin delights in Meg's idiosyncracies and reveals that he too has never felt that he fit in. When Calvin enthusiastically exclaims, "I'm not alone any more! Do you realize what that means to me?", Meg is skeptical at first. She's sure that *she* is the alone one; Calvin is the one who knows how to be accepted. "But you're good at basketball and things," she protests. "You're good in school. Everybody likes you."

"For all the most unimportant reasons," Calvin says. "There hasn't been anybody, anybody in the world I could talk to. Sure, I can function on the same level as everybody else, I can hold myself down, but it isn't me." And so the idea is introduced early on in the story that trying to blend in and become exactly like everyone else isn't worth the destruction of one's own identity.

Ultimately, Meg neither betrays herself nor ends up alone. She saves her brother and resists IT"'s mind control herself, *and* she finds real and sustaining love from Calvin, her peer, not by muting the parts of herself that are most essentially Meg, but rather by holding on to those essential parts. It's wonderful to let young people know that this is possible.

Like any coming-of-age novel, *Wrinkle* is about the loss of various kinds of innocence. The children see how pervasive evil can be (though one suspects that they had a visceral sense of it already), they see what people are capable of

doing to one another, and Meg learns -- with a thud of realization that many young people will identify with -- that parents cannot, in fact, always make everything all right. Meg definitely does come of age with this realization, but the growth includes a recognition of her own strengths and an ability to love her parents as they have always loved her -- with full awareness of their faults and imperfections.

Despite its direct look at the power of evil, *Wrinkle* is ultimately about the value of persevering. "Do you think we would have brought you here if there were no hope?" one of the guides asks the children early on, and that feels like the essence of what L'Engle is saying too: do you think I would have written a book about darkness if I didn't think human beings, in all our fallible, impatient, stubborn glory, didn't still have hope of fighting it? And so *A Wrinkle in Time* tells us that it is not only superheroes who triumph. It is regular children, regular people, who hold on to what they most clearly know and value, who gather courage to act, who don't necessarily end up more beautiful than when they began but who do, nonetheless, end the book with someone's hand in theirs, because it is possible to be loved anyway, to triumph anyway.

A Wrinkle in Time is about not underestimating ourselves. Of course caring adults want to protect children from danger, but *A Wrinkle in Time* insists that we shouldn't protect simply by closing our eyes or demanding that children close theirs. We protect, as the guides in *Wrinkle* do, by offering what love and strength we can, and by figuring out ways for children to recognize the value of what they know, what they have, what they are. There is nothing to be gained by banning a book that talks about darkness. What helps children are books that acknowledge darkness and then show that it is possible to make light, to make a difference as we set out on our own travels.

References

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