

MEETING THE REAL MRS. WHO, MADELEINE L'ENGLE

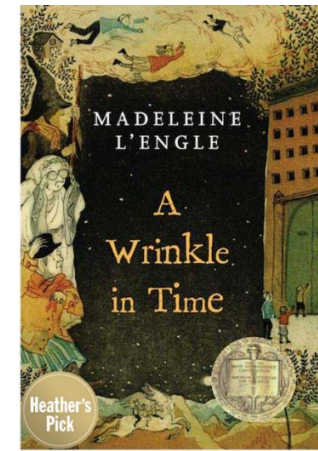
While working as a freelance editor at Content Authoring & Editing Services, I was anxious to start another project for a client but like in any business, there is always slow times. During those slow times, I research authors and think about how they made it big in the vast world of children's books publishing. There are a lot of well-known ones such as Dr. Seuss, Roald Dahl, Judy Blume and who could forget, my favorite, Madeleine L'Engle.



Madeleine's written voice in her writing was sensitive, age appropriate and imaginative. This was perfect for a bookworm like myself who was facing everyday preteen battles like bullying,

puberty and trying to find my place. For a young reader, I was immediately transported away while reading my favorite book called *A Wrinkle in Time*. "*A Wrinkle in Time* is the story of Meg Murry, a high-school-aged girl who is transported on an adventure through time and space with her younger brother Charles Wallace and her friend Calvin O'Keefe to rescue her father, a gifted scientist, from the evil forces that hold him prisoner on another planet."¹ Meg also meets three different celestial beings on her quest – Mrs. Which, Mrs. Who & Mrs. Whatsit.

As luck would have it, my life changed and Ms. L'Engel called me. I was immediately taken aback. Despite many publishers rejecting and hating her story, she pressed on.² She wanted me to review a book contract for her beloved story, her agent and I arranged a time for the two of us to meet at her apartment in New York City³.



As I hopped on the next flight, I tucked in my carry on my beloved book, admiring the newest cover design with its shiny golden letters. Maybe Ms. L'Engle would sign my book, and learn more about the book contract she was offered with my help. Countless questions entered my mind as I sat on the flight, my foot tapping to ease my nerves. I immediately went back to researching some concerns that most children's book authors (including her) faced. Some of the example questions are listed here:

*What of Ms. L'Engle's work is considered fair to use if she chooses to turn *A Wrinkle in Time* in film versus only having it as a children's book?*

Will these works be infringing on any of her moral or economic rights?

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Can the US Copyright Office protect her works? How will that differ from WIPO (World Intellectual Property Office)?

What will we do if any cases involving slander, libel and defamation occur?

As the plane landed, I took a couple breaths and reeled in my busy, overimaginative mind. I reassured myself that the questions I created in my notebook would be ample and would help her see the answers for the book contract she needed help with. See next page to learn what questions she answered.

Stephanie: Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today, I am such a fan of your works and appreciate you taking the time to meet with me to review your book contract.

Ms. L'Engle: You're welcome, Stephanie. I am happy to seek your advice as my agent informed me you are one of the better communications professionals in the publications industry.

Stephanie: Let's dive into some bigger questions regarding your contract and we will learn more about the answers based on the research conducted.

Ms. L'Engle: Perfect. I am ready when you are.

Stephanie: First things first. After reading the case study of *The Life and Times of Janet Malcolm*, it made me think let's start with privacy. When did you feel you had crossed the privacy line? Did you base any characters from in real life?

Ms. L'Engle: Of course! What writers do is take their experiences and turn them into experiences in their stories. But as I'm sure you read online, "B.E. Cullinan noted that⁴..." I "...created characters who "share common joy with a mixed fantasy and science fiction setting."⁴ As well as "modelling the Murry family on..." my "...own."⁴

Stephanie: That must have been fun for your family to see themselves in the story. I wonder if they posted about it on social media, especially now that the book is being considered for film. But above else seeking legal aid to be familiar with the laws involved and get an expert to advise accordingly.

Ms L'Engle: Fun isn't really the right word to describe privacy and law, but luckily no one gave any spoilers and no one caused slander.

Stephanie: Or worse it could have prevented the success of the book like in that case on Poynter's blog, which talked about how a user "retains copyright ownership of anything they post on

Twitter."⁵ Plus, as you said, experts have their place too.

Ms. L'Engle: Speaking of law experts, did you hear about how one filmmaker couldn't even use the happy birthday⁶ song in her film?

Stephanie: I did. It is sad to hear about these things being only usable with a licence. This lends nicely to my next topic. What about fair usage? I was reading on the Children's Book Council⁷ and Fair Use Code⁸'s websites, both advise that most publishers will allow public readings provided the permission is stated at the start of the reading ⁷.

Ms. L'Engle: Fair usage doesn't really concern me as a writer. My publisher does their best to honor the terms in my contract. Plus, especially with the pandemic, reading aloud has to be the constant that children receive, more importantly, sharing a good book with a child is a great way to build imagination.

Stephanie: That is a good point. Plus, reading out loud the adventures that Meg does in the book is exciting when shared. Now for a bigger topic, copyright. We all know we cannot copyright an idea but...

Ms. L'Engle: What about copyright?

Stephanie: Have you considered how the original rights will change economic rights should the book become a film? I see in

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your contract, in clause F, that the amount paid is around 75% of the amount received from the publisher. Do you think that is reasonable?

Ms. L'Engle: Yes and no to both questions,

Stephanie: Yes, the book contract has provided me a reasonable amount and economic rights won't apply until someone else wants to capitalize on the film's profit. No, because had I chose to go with a self-publishing route, I hear some "self-publishing houses will pay more than 40-60% on royalties on the retail price of a single book"⁹

Stephanie: That seems more accurate, but we can certainly confirm the percentage with the publisher since the amounts differ so much. Talking about your contract, it seems like there are four major questions that comes to mind.

Ms. L'Engle: Such as?

Stephanie: Firstly, have you considered what the publisher will give you?

Ms. L'Engle: Give me a clue, please.

Stephanie: In clause 3, the publisher wants to have permission to reproduce the materials for promotional and accessible materials. But obviously, any binding or printing costs will be at their expense.

Ms. L'Engle: They must know authors don't make millions!

Stephanie: Have you considered what you will keep or retain? This is somewhat of a trick question.

Ms. L'Engle: Beyond the works copyright, I am not sure. What do you think?

Stephanie: Just like it said in clause 2, copyright and manuscripts. Next question. What will you be giving the publisher?

Ms. L'Engle: What will you want me to give the publisher?

Stephanie: Nothing extraordinary. It states mostly reasonable stuff in clause 11. The guarantee that the works are original. The works must not violate any existing copyright or have any libellous statements or ruin any person(s) privacy. Do you know when you will expect the contract to come back?

Ms. L'Engle: I know from working with other publishers, that they expect that the contract is in effect throughout the term of the copyright. I don't think this has changed.

Stephanie: That's true just like in clause 13 on the contract. But, don't forget that if the publisher fails to keep the said work in print, the contract becomes no longer valid after six months.

Ms. L'Engle: Well, Stephanie. This all has given me so much to consider before signing this book contract. I can't thank you enough for taking the time to help me out with this. I thank you once again.

Stephanie: You are most welcome. I admire your writing and thank you for giving me the gift of *A Wrinkle in Time* when I needed it most.

Ms. L'Engle: Do you have any other questions for me at this time?

Stephanie: I have one last one. It is something entirely unrelated, simply of my own curiosity.

Ms. L'Engle: Go on, dear, I am listening.

Stephanie: What is your advice for other young Megs or writers out there in publishing land?

Ms. L'Engle: "You have to write the book that wants to written. And if the book will be too difficult for grown-ups, then you will write it for children."¹⁰

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