

Book Reviews

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Dimensions of Madeleine L'Engle: New Critical Approaches, Edited by Suzanne Bray. (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2017), \$29.95 (paperback), 208 pp.

Reading *Dimensions of Madeleine L'Engle* made me want to read more L'Engle. Edited by Suzanne Bray, the collection showcases L'Engle's range as a writer and, in doing so, goes a long way toward accomplishing its primary goals: "to stimulate intellectual discussion about all of L'Engle's work and to show that the vast majority of her writings, not only the best-known children's books, are worthy of academic study" (1). Given these two aims, the success of the book ultimately depends on the criticism it engenders; however, the chapters contain plenty of material for future L'Engle scholars to build upon. *Dimensions* strikes me as an excellent conversation starter.

While each of the book's chapters introduce topics that merit further study, some of the most promising lines of inquiry emerge across chapters. One thread, introduced in Bray's opening chapter, is the significance of place in L'Engle work. *Dimensions* contains fairly extensive biographical information (readers hoping to learn about L'Engle herself will not be disappointed)—and the portrait that emerges is of a writer who viewed her own haunts as important sites of narrative invention. We meet L'Engle the New Yorker, who adored the city despite its flaws and expressed her sentiments about the place through her characters (4–7). Bray observes that, like L'Engle herself, "the majority of Madeleine's characters ... feel at home in the city and find within it a place where they belong" (4). We're also introduced to L'Engle the Southern writer—an even more prominent figure in Bray's collection. L'Engle was critical of the South, and she seems to have felt much more out of place there than in New York City (17–19, 150, 157). Here also Madeleine gave voice to her feelings and attitudes through her characters. "In the texts she devotes to this singular region," Gérald Préher notes, "her characters are often bemused by a place they wish to understand but that remains opaque to them" (158). *Dimensions* implies that reading many of L'Engle's stories involves a form of space travel, transporting us to places she had inhabited and grappled with during her life.

In addition to highlighting the space journeys that L'Engle's stories take us on, *Dimensions* itself engages in a fair bit of time travel. The book situates L'Engle's stories in relation to her past, present, and (as I note by way of conclusion) future.

Gregory G. Peppone discusses L'Engle's works in light of literary

history and, more specifically, Romanticism. He describes L'Engle as an "anti-Romantic Romantic" who was more sympathetic toward "'conservative' Romantics" than she was to "the radical Romantics [who] set out to devise novel forms and genres with which to express their ideas" (117). The approach of Pepetone suggests that studying how L'Engle's writings embrace, discard, or transform features of prior texts and literary traditions may be a promising avenue for future research. The piece by Carol S. Franko on intertextuality gestures in this direction as well, though Franko focuses on the *functions* of other texts in L'Engle's works instead of considering her writings in relation to a specific period of literary history.

The book also brings the work of L'Engle into conversation with the writings of two Wade Center authors: George MacDonald and C.S. Lewis. Building upon L'Engle's recognition of her indebtedness to MacDonald, Sophie Dillinger's piece sets out to explore MacDonald's "literary influence" on L'Engle (90–91). In addition, Naomi Wood "compares the metaphysical science fiction and fantasy" of L'Engle and Lewis (134). While the chapter by Dillinger occasionally seems more like a catalog of similarities between MacDonald and L'Engle than a demonstration of the literary influence of the former on the latter, the chapters by both Dillinger and Wood bring fascinating connections between the authors into relief. (Scholars hoping to explore these connections further may be interested to know that the Madeleine L'Engle Papers are housed in Wheaton College's Special Collections, a short walk away from the Marion E. Wade Center.)

Several of the authors in *Dimensions* also situate L'Engle's work in her own time and context, and contributors are insightful about the ways that she responded to gender norms in her work (2, 41, 46, 164, 168–169, 174). Anne-Frédérique Mochel-Caballero notes that L'Engle "perceived the notion of gender as being socially constructed," and both she and Emily Louise Zimbrick-Rogers discuss how L'Engle's work challenged ways in which gender was constructed (41). However, they also contend that, even as L'Engle resisted some gender norms and stereotypes, she also reinforced others. On this topic in particular, the contributors to this volume construct a sturdy springboard for subsequent scholarship.

Perhaps because *Dimensions* aims to introduce readers to L'Engle's lesser-known works, some of the chapters contain lengthy summaries of her stories. While the profusion of summary may be unavoidable given what the collection attempts to achieve, I found that it made a few of the arguments somewhat difficult to track. (Generally speaking, the shorter chapters of the book offer clearer and more focused arguments than the longer ones.) A second minor critique is that the book focuses less on methodological discussions than the book's subtitle, "New Critical Approaches," would suggest.

Regarding L'Engle's views about the future, *Dimensions* implies that, though she "decried being labeled as a Christian artist," L'Engle was

indeed a hopeful one. Indeed, she was concerned, according to Franko, “with the artist’s responsibility to transform pain into affirmation” (172, 179, 66). Therefore, it is fitting that several of the book’s contributors note the importance of Julian of Norwich’s words to L’Engle and her work: “All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well” (106, 131, 166, 171).

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