A I G H T
S O
L O V E L Y

THE SPIRITUAL LEGACY OF

MADELEINE L'ENGLE

Author of A Wrinkle in Time

SARAH

Foreword by Charlotte Jones Voiklis, Madeleine L'Engle's granddaughter

Madeleine was a true bridge builder; and if ever we've needed some, now is the time.

Philip Yancey, author, Vanishing Grace: Bringing Good News to a Deeply Divided World

Many thanks to Sarah for capturing the beauty and complexity of Madeleine L'Engle who influenced millions of readers around the world to always light candles in the darkness.

Catherine Hand, film producer,

A Wrinkle in Time

Science and religion. Faith and fiction. The gift of both/and is the Madeleine L'Engle legacy I, and many a Christian creative, has benefitted from most, and Sarah Arthur's *A Light So Lovely* takes a deep dive into the fullest meaning of L'Engle's beautifully complex perspective, displayed in all of her work, but most famously in *A Wrinkle in Time*. Through Arthur's insight, we see that L'Engle's thinking makes room for the kind of wonder readers will want to hold on to.

Why do we humans insist on codifying who and what God is, and who He is in us? In *A Light So Lovely*, Arthur explores the ways in which Madeleine L'Engle repeatedly pushed against this tendency and, in doing so, created stories that revealed a God without limits, one who we could trust implicitly at any age, and share openly without apology.

Nikki Grimes, New York Times YA and children's bestselling author

I've waited a long time for a book about Madeleine L'Engle's spiritual legacy and A Light So Lovely was entirely worth the wait. In this book, Sarah Arthur explores L'Engle's wide and generous spirituality with her bestselling books, her lectures, her public work, but wisely also with her relationships and her devoted readers' (myself among them!) remembrances, all while placing her within the larger narrative of her time and place. A Light So Lovely beautifully and honestly illuminates one of the most important and creative writers of our time.

Sarah Bessey, author, Out of Sorts and Jesus Feminist

A compelling portrait of an author whose commitment to challenging our labels and categories, to bridging the imagined divide between sacred and secular, is as relevant today as ever.

Sara Zarr, YA author

What fun, and what a delight it is to gain these fresh and careful insights into the life of Madeleine L'Engle, literary icon and dear friend whose imagination and storytelling has become the stuff of legend! Through the narratives of the friends and family who knew and loved her, Sarah Arthur has used her vivid gifts of words and insights to bring Madeleine to life. Read, enjoy, and be enlarged by these stories.

Luci Shaw, author, Thumbprint in the Clay

This book has a secret. It's a magic word—one so small you might overlook it. The word? *And*. It's everywhere in this book, marking how Madeleine L'Engle reconciled what we have divided. Like L'Engle's vision, Arthur's book is for believers *and* unbelievers. Readers *and* writers. Fans of science fiction *and* romance. People of faith and people of science—and those who love both of those languages. Girls, boys, women, men—those in their forties *and* twenties, *and* who are also still five, capable of wide-eyed, childlike faith. This intimate introduction is so full of wisdom, it will rejuvenate newcomers to L'Engle's work *and* her most faithful fans. I'm grateful for Arthur's homage to a personal hero: It's a joy to read *and* a reminder to live with wild imagination.

Jeffrey Overstreet, author, Auralia's Colors and Through a Screen Darkly

An eminently readable, deeply lyrical, and thoroughly necessary examination of a literary luminary in the context of her faith. Arthur helps illuminate not just L'Engle's own writings but the wider promise of the Anglican tradition.

Tara Isabella Burton

In *A Light So Lovely*, Sarah Arthur gives us the heart of Madeline L'Engle's legacy, that the Christian life (like Christ's life) is subversive and beautiful, and that hope is sometimes deceptively ordinary. We need this reminder now more than ever.

**Brian Bantum,** Associate Professor of Theology, Seattle Pacific University

## Also by Sarah Arthur

Between Midnight and Dawn: A Literary Guide to Prayer for Lent, Holy Week, and Eastertide

The Year of Small Things: Radical Faith for the Rest of Us (with Erin F. Wasinger)

Light Upon Light: A Literary Guide to Prayer for Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany

At the Still Point: A Literary Guide to Prayer in Ordinary Time

Mommy Time: 90 Devotions for New Moms

The God-Hungry Imagination: The Art of Storytelling for Post-Modern Youth Ministry

The One Year Coffee with God: 365 Devotions to Perk Up Your Day

Walking Through the Wardrobe: A Devotional Quest into The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe

Dating Mr. Darcy: The Smart Girl's Guide to Sensible Romance

Walking with Bilbo: A Devotional Adventure through The Hobbit

Walking with Frodo: A Devotional Journey through The Lord of the Rings

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For my young sons, Micah and Sam. May you tesser well. \_\_\_\_

I have never yet fully served a book.

But it is my present joy to try.

Madeleine L'Engle

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# **FOREWORD**

## by Charlotte Jones Voiklis

The first time I spoke with Sarah, I cried. While it doesn't take a great deal for me to have tears break the surface these days, as Sarah asked me questions and shared her thoughts about my grandmother, I knew I'd met someone with deep compassion, curiosity, and intellect. We talked about my grandmother's life: her habits, milestones, and challenges, and what we each knew to be her impact on others. As we spoke, what moved me to tears was Sarah's willingness to look at Madeleine and accept her as a full and flawed human being; an icon and iconoclast, not an idol.

In Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith and Art (a 1980 book that, as Sarah demonstrates, shook a generation of evangelical Christians with its expansive view of God's love for all of creation), Madeleine warns that "paradox is a trap for the lazy," and she challenges her readers to embrace "both/and." Sarah takes on the challenge and structures her book as a series of what are commonly thought of as binary choices: sacred/secular, faith/science, fact/fiction, and more.

A Light So Lovely explores what Madeleine L'Engle has

meant to a generation or more of Christians who are searching for something that would restore their faith and who found that something in Madeleine's language of wonder, hope, and joy, often to a rather extraordinary degree. The book combines interviews with artists and friends (and I'm sure I'm not the only one who cried during a conversation with Sarah), close readings and analyses of not just Madeleine's works but of the changing Christian landscape of the past fifty years, and Sarah's own memoir-like interventions and reflections that illustrate how the universal is grasped only in the particular.

The book not only (and beautifully) serves as a guide to Madeleine L'Engle's spiritual legacy for Christians, it also (and intriguingly) can serve as a guide to evangelical Christian culture for the uninitiated. Although Madeleine's religious upbringing and most of her practice was mainline, she found in a variety of religious communities, including evangelical circles, an audience of interlocutors that challenged and enriched her own theological understanding. For the reader whose only exposure to evangelical thought is the most recent flurry of news and analyses, looking at the conversations—sometimes friendly, sometimes vitriolic—that Madeleine and evangelicals engaged in over decades, and the ways in which her writing helped so many of the "wavering, wounded, and wondering," is illuminating. Sarah looks at the "heresy" of universalism, the debates over science and religion, and the ways in which Madeleine's themes of art and joy were received. Sarah's discussion makes the stakes involved in those issues more legible, and I have a deeper understanding of and hope for the excavation of additional common ground.

#### Foreword

Sarah likens the broad body of Madeleine's work to a pod of whales, swimming together, communicating with each other, with the occasional one breaching the surface of the ocean. I love the metaphor, and believe it to be true. The cluster of messages that all of Madeleine's books transmit include: you are loved, you matter, your questions are important, your joy fulfills a promise, fear not. This is indeed good news.

# INTRODUCTION

We draw people to Christ not by loudly discrediting what they believe, by telling them how wrong they are and how right we are, but by showing them a light that is so lovely that they want with all their hearts to know the source of it.

#### Walking on Water

Though I've always been a reader, it was my Wheaton College roommate, Chloe, who introduced me in a serious way to the works of Madeleine L'Engle. This was the early '90s; Madeleine's bestselling novel, A Wrinkle in Time, was already thirty years old; and while I'd heard of it as a teenager, I'd assumed it was purely science fiction, which wasn't my genre. (I'm also pretty sure I'd read her 1965 novel, The Moon by Night, in junior high—I can still visualize the '80s teen-romance edition—but I didn't connect it with the author of Wrinkle at the time.) From Chloe I now learned that young-adult fiction wasn't all L'Engle had written. I began to devour some of L'Engle's nonfiction, including The Rock That Is Higher: Story as Truth, as well as her landmark book on faith

and art, *Walking on Water*. And I quickly realized here was an iconoclast: a Christian who spoke openly about Jesus yet was also a Newbery Medal winner, no less.

I can't overstate the gift Madeleine was to this mainline evangelical. I was raised in small towns by a Presbyterian minister-father and a mother who was a public-school math teacher. Sometime in my elementary years my parents experienced a charismatic renewal that supercharged our faith. It made us curiously bilingual: we were mainliners, but we could speak "evangelical." My engagement with more conservative strands of Christianity came through Christian concerts and camps and bookstores and radio stations; I wanted to *be* Amy Grant. But every day at 5:00 p.m., my parents would turn on National Public Radio's *All Things Considered*, and that too was part of our Christian engagement with the world.

Then I arrived at Wheaton, where I encountered a small but vocal subset of students who insisted that the "things of the world" and "the things of God" were divided into strict binary categories. And God only worked through the latter. Thus, we could only believe this *or* that: only creation *or* evolution, only faith *or* science, only fact *or* fiction, only sacred *or* secular, only conservative *or* liberal, only Scripture *or* nothing, only, only, only. For the first time in my life I was being told—continually, fervently, bluntly—what God *can't* do.

I was baffled. Was this the evangel, the good news?

Enter Madeleine. Here was a Christian author who could function quite unperturbedly from inside paradox, who dared to question the assumption that all things must be either/or. Why can't it be both/and? What is this nonsense about "secular"? Why can't God use those things if God wants to? Why can't

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God speak through this or that person (if God can speak through a donkey, for instance)? Who says?

"Our faith is a faith of vulnerability and hope," she wrote in A Stone for a Pillow, one of her Genesis commentaries, "not a faith of suspicion and hate. When we are looking for other people to be wrong in order that we may prove ourselves right, then we are closing ourselves off from whatever unexpected surprises Christ may be ready to offer us. If we are willing to live by Scripture, we must be willing to live by paradox and contradiction and surprise." I had found a Christian author who spoke my language of wonder, who somehow didn't see things such as scientific discovery or artistic expression as threats to the gospel but rather windows by which we can see God's light from new and exciting angles. Through her relentless, generous, prolific art and her obvious love for Christ, Madeleine managed to challenge the narrow, reactionary, oddly unjoyful posture of some believers to the extraordinary world God made—and to the extraordinary God who made it.

My English professors, I'm thankful to note, had a L'Engle-esque way of engaging paradox too. It was clear they had tremendous respect for her—indeed, to this day many of her papers are housed in the special collections of Wheaton's Buswell Memorial Library. She was still a force, still writing. She made visits to campus, where at one point she signed several books for me. And the more I learned about her, the more I realized, like so many hundreds of thousands of readers, that I had found an icon. Not an idol whom one worships—as Madeleine herself would correct us—but a window, a person whose life and faith points beyond itself to Christ.

My first adult decade was spent in full-time youth ministry, during which I regularly wondered if I could better influence the next generation by writing middle-grade fiction myself rather than collecting parental permission slips for paintball. While reading Madeleine's Crosswicks Journals—A Circle of Quiet, Two-Part Invention, and so on—I continued to feel an affinity with a writer who shared a love for the Anglican-Episcopal liturgy, for living in community, and who insisted on story as a vehicle for truth.

Eventually I shifted to a writing career and a seminary degree, regularly circling back to Madeleine's *Walking on Water*, in which she called the act of writing a form of prayer. "To be an artist means to approach the light, and that means to let go our control, to allow our whole selves to be placed with absolute faith in that which is greater than we are"<sup>2</sup>—a description that named my experience of the creative process *exactly*. Even today, when I read in *A Circle of Quiet* about how tired she was as a mother of small children (like me) trying to balance a writing career (like me), I cry. At times it's hard to tell where her influence leaves off and my own thinking begins.

• • • •

And I'm not alone. Time and again, as I traverse ever-widening, overlapping circles of writers and culture-makers, Madeleine's name comes up as an author who changed the course of someone's journey. In fact, as this project got underway, I began asking people, "Can you point to a moment when Madeleine L'Engle influenced your vocation as an artist? Or saved your stumbling faith? Even saved your life?" And the stories have

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come pouring in, stories of how Madeleine helped a new generation reclaim the light of Christ in an increasingly murky and polarized faith. Thus, central to each chapter of this project are interviews with such people as writer Sarah Bessey (*Jesus Feminist*), artist Makoto Fujimura (*Culture Care*), YA novelist Sara Zarr (*Story of a Girl*), children's and YA author Nikki Grimes (*Bronx Masquerade*), and film critic and novelist Jeffrey Overstreet (*Auralia's Colors*)—and that's just a sampling.

Her spiritual legacy is not limited to my own generation, however. Madeleine herself was part of a group, formed in the '80s, known as the Chrysostom Society, a fellowship of Christian writers that gathered regularly to encourage one another in an often challenging publishing industry. Its membership has changed over the years, but among them have been such literary voices as Philip Yancey, Luci Shaw, Eugene Peterson, Stephen Lawhead, Richard Foster, and Emilie Griffin. Back in 2004, while Madeleine was still alive, I approached some of them at the biannual Festival of Faith and Writing at Calvin College about contributing to a collection of remembrances in her honor. I pictured her like a great ship at night under the stars, lit from bow to stern, passing over the horizon; we needed to point and say, "Watch! Don't miss her! There she goes!" But the timing wasn't right; I wasn't certain I could find a home for such a book. And so I let it drop, the moment passed, the ship slipped away and, on a September day in 2007, she was gone. She was eighty-eight years old.

A dozen years later, it's been fascinating to circle back to some of those same writers and ask, "Who was the Madeleine you knew? What's your favorite story about her? What were her quirks, her blind spots? What was her signature contribution

to the way Christians talk about faith, story, art, and science today?" Remembrances by Philip Yancey and Luci Shaw, in particular—as well as Madeleine's longtime housemate Barbara Braver (not a Chrysostom Society member, but a fine poet in her own right)—have seasoned this project with more than mere personal insights. They've helped us take the long view, to not settle for merely riding along with the contemporary pendulum swings of public vitriol. They encourage us to face our cultural moment the way Madeleine would have: resolutely, lovingly, with an ear for how God is calling us to engage the darkness *in spite of* our weaknesses—or even, like *A Wrinkle in Time*'s Meg Murry, *because* of them.

Here's the ultimate paradox: God uses imperfect people, in every generation, at each unique point in history, to accomplish his purposes. "My grace is sufficient for you," God told the apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 12:9, "for my power is made perfect in weakness." As the rhetoric on social media, in politics, and in social discourse increasingly polarizes us from one another, we aren't allowed to have weaknesses: only power, only the correct ideas, only a bluster and bravado devoid of repentance. And yet that's not how God chooses to act in the world. Born a helpless infant to poor Middle Eastern refugees, God in Christ took on our limitations; power became vulnerability; holiness touched the dirt and stench and darkness of humankind with relentless love. In the words of one of Madeleine's favorite Bible verses, "The light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not" (John 1:5 KJV).

I now understand that Madeleine's embrace of paradox was something unique and new—not just to me, but for an entire generation. For Madeleine, if paradox is at the heart of

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the gospel—what she called "the technical impossibility" that "Jesus of Nazareth was wholly man as well as wholly God"<sup>3</sup>—then we shouldn't be surprised that paradox is precisely where God meets us in the rest of life too. She taught us that God can be at work in the sacred *and* secular, truth *and* story, fact *and* fiction, faith *and* science, religion *and* art—and we must not foreclose on how Christ will choose to work, nor through whom. The disciples were nothing if not surprised by this very thing ("Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" Nathanael asked the disciple Philip in John 1:46). And why, Madeleine would ask us, should we be any different?

It's astounding how a deep dive into the pantheon of her works only shows just how often, and consistently, the above themes echo throughout her life and writing. Each work is like a whale singing its whale song to the others, all together a kind of pod swimming in more or less the same pattern on the same trajectory. Every so often a whale breaches and earns public attention—most notably, of course, A Wrinkle in Time—but below the surface (and Madeleine loved to speak of what's submerged in our subconscious, that massive iceberg), the work is among its thematic peers. One amongst a larger body. Part of a consistent whole.

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My chief task in writing this book not only has been to understand her way of thinking about the intersection of things like story and truth, art and religion, and so on, but also to locate her within a larger narrative. How did she shape the way people of faith today engage and discuss those things? If it weren't for

Madeleine, how would those conversations be different? What were her most lasting contributions?

To that end, I've found it helpful to trace her journey through seven key movements, which provide the shape and structure of this book:

Chapter One—We'll survey her life and works as a whole, attempting to identify her spheres of influence, both as a cherished friend and mentor as well as a complex, flawed human being.

Chapter Two—We'll dive into her story where many readers do, with A Wrinkle in Time—a book that, like Madeleine herself, somehow bridges the often vastly different worlds of sacred and secular in American culture.

Chapter Three—We'll step back and trace her own spiritual formation as a child through the influence of great stories that gave her hints and glimpses of God's truth.

Chapter Four—We'll track the life-changing impact of scientists on her conversion to Christianity when she was a youngish write-at-home mom.

Chapter Five—We'll chart her profound spiritual influence on others during her prolific middle age, particularly her continued assertion that artistic practice is a religious vocation.

Chapter Six—We'll make the difficult turn toward her personal challenges later in life—the loss of her son, among other things—and her troubling propensity to blur fact and fiction.

Chapter Seven—Finally, we'll identify the ways that Madeleine attempted to battle the darkness, especially in her own soul, and to cling with resolute desperation to the light.

Through all of these movements I'll continually circle back to the people who knew her, as well as to a new generation

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influenced by her journey. And I'll ask the question: What does her story mean for us, now, in our own unique moment?

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Even when we take the ten-thousand-foot view, it's hard to map the scope of Madeleine's tremendous spiritual legacy, one that we're only just now, roughly ten years after her death, beginning to grasp. My young sons are growing up in a time when cultural lines are being marked in the sand with both virtual and actual bullets (and yet, is our time any different than other episodes in human history?). Thus, I want my sons to develop L'Engle's ability to embrace paradox, which allowed her to think and believe and say things that both fundamentalists and non-Christians alike insist are impossibilities. I want them to learn how to push their fellow Christians, in particular, to stop telling the world what God can't do.

Her most quotable statement is still urgently true: "We draw people to Christ not by loudly discrediting what they believe, by telling them how wrong they are and how right we are, but by showing them a light that is so lovely that they want with all their hearts to know the source of it." For a new generation that has known nothing but the highly contentious political and religious climate of contemporary American culture, embracing Jesus in paradox is nothing short of good news.

And that's the crux of this book. Madeleine was no stranger to the stresses and battles we find ourselves fighting every day, as Christians, as artists, as thinkers, as human beings. Indeed, she often claimed, "The idea of God is not easy at all. I mean, I have to hang on till my nails are bloody to keep believing

in God . . . If I believe in God wholly and completely for two minutes every seven or eight weeks, I'm doing well." This is an astounding statement. How do you put one foot in front of the other, much less produce a phenomenal corpus of literature, when the road seems so dark? How do you continue to affirm the presence and goodness of God? Those are the questions animating these pages.

So let's strike a match, light a candle. Let's illuminate the life and legacy of this extraordinary woman such that we experience both the grace and the struggle that helped her shape a generation and beyond. Because ultimately it's not her own light we're drawn to, but the light of Christ she lifted up, however imperfectly, to the world. By knowing her better, we might better understand our own particular darknesses, in this unique chapter of American history, and how we're called to be light-bearers too.

#### Chapter One

# ICON and ICONOCLAST

All of us who need icons—and I am convinced that all artists do—also need an iconoclast nearby.

#### A Circle of Quiet

Sitting on my desk is a signed copy of *The Rock That Is Higher* from one of L'Engle's Wheaton College visits. That semester our chapel seating assignments were by first name. Not only was I smack in the middle of maybe seven rows of Sarahs, but also every girl in my balcony row was Sarah Elizabeth (apparently, our conservative parents thought they were being unique in a generation of hippies that named children "River"). For fun we would lean over the balcony and call "Hey, Dave!" and watch several dozen guys in one section all turn and look. All those biblical names . . . we were drowning in unremarkableness.

Into that mix came Madeleine L'Engle, a giantess in a great flapping dress of patchwork colors; I couldn't even properly pronounce her name. If she spoke in chapel or gave a lecture in

an English class, I don't remember it. What I do remember is a tall woman sitting at a table in the bookstore blinking her large eyes like a wise and vigilant owl. She insisted on inscribing the book with my whole name, first and last, because, as one of her characters says in *A Wind in the Door*, "if your name isn't known, then it's a very lonely feeling." Names and naming are of theological significance, Madeleine asserted: it's "one of the impulses behind all art; to give a name to the cosmos we see despite all the chaos." Naming is how we are known and seen in the world, not only by people, but by the God who knows us and makes us unique from one another.

She signed a copy of her 1992 novel *Certain Women* for my mother as well—again, using my mother's first and last name. There is nothing rushed about the handwriting. It's careful, painstaking, elegant. There may have been a hundred people behind me in line, there may be a thousand stories of Madeleine encounters just like mine, but in that moment, one young woman and her mother mattered.

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If we are to understand Madeleine's spiritual legacy, not merely her biography, we must begin with a brief sketch of her life.

Madeleine L'Engle Camp, named for various forbears, was an only child, born in New York City on November 29, 1918, at the end of the Great War. Her father, Charles Wadsworth Camp, was a war veteran and theater reviewer who also wrote potboiler mysteries; her mother, Madeleine Hall Barnett, a pianist. Her parents had been married for at least a decade by the time she came along, "and although I was a very much

# The Spiritual Legacy of Madeleine L'Engle, Author of *A Wrinkle in Time*

By Sarah Arthur

Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time* has captured the imagination of millions – from literary sensation to timeless classic and now a major motion picture. *A Light So Lovely* tells the story of the woman at the center of it all – her imagination, faith, and pattern of defying categories.

Bestselling and beloved author Madeleine L'Engle was known the world round for her imaginative spirit and stories. She was also known to spark controversy. *A Light So Lovely* paints a vivid portrait of this enigmatic icon's spiritual legacy, starting with her inner world and expanding into fresh reflections of her writing. A vibrant, imaginative read, this book pulls back the curtain to illuminate L'Engle's creative journey, her persevering faith, and the inspiring, often unexpected ways these two forces converged.

If you're earnestly searching the space between sacred and secular, miracle and science, faith and art, come and find a kindred spirit and trusted guide in Madeleine.

Available at major retailers including:

