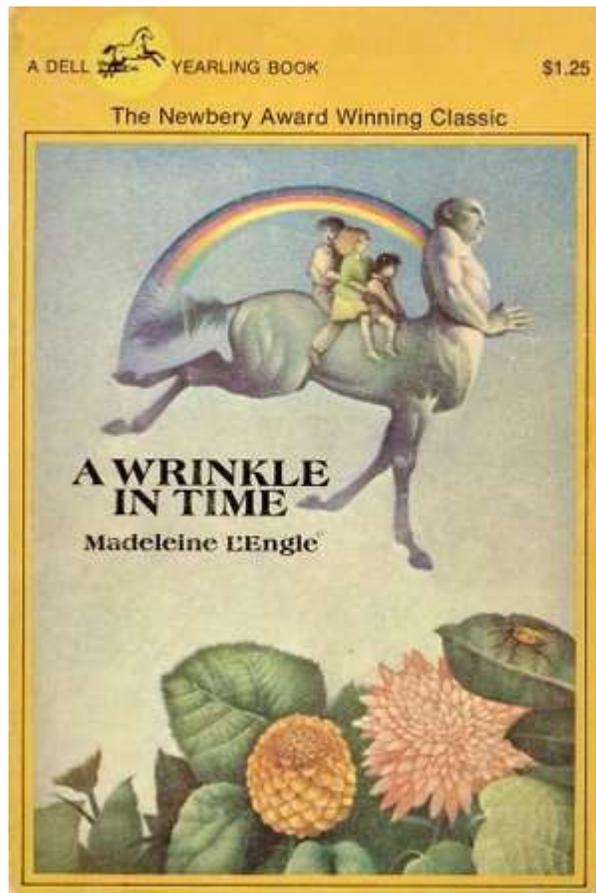


Madeleine L'Engle (1918-2007): *A Wrinkle in Time* (1962)



There are so many things to love about this book. I don't think of myself as a person who easily grasps scientific concepts, but I can understand its explanation of a tesseract. Meg Murry, the heroine, has braces and glasses and a loving but maybe odd family, and she definitely has the powerful, confusing, conflicting feelings of a teenager. There's strange witch women, religious and philosophical discussions, an argument for the importance of art, the difficulties of cross-species communication, abstract physics that turn out to be alarmingly and amazingly concrete, a bit of romance, a cool sci-fi adventure, and a terrifying antagonist. L'Engle manages it all in a little over two hundred pages (in the pictured Dell Yearling paperback edition). Since I'm trying to be better about keeping these posts brief, I'll focus on one particular moment that I remember being struck by when I first read it.

Meg and her friend Calvin have succeeded in finding her lost father on another planet, where he has been held captive. In their escape, however, she is attacked and almost killed by the Black Thing, which renders her body numb and her mind angry and hostile. She is cared for by an alien being, who seems to have some kind of telepathic senses. Once she has begun to recover, Meg wonders what she should call the alien (Chapter 11, "Aunt Beast," page 184 in the pictured edition):

“What should I call you, please?” Meg asked.

“Well, now. First, try not to say any words for just a moment. Think within your own mind. Think of all the things you call people, different kinds of people.”

While Meg thought, the beast murmured to her gently. “No, *mother* is a special, a one-name; and a father you have here. Not just friend, nor teacher, nor brother, nor sister. What is *acquaintance*? What a funny, hard word. Aunt. Maybe. Yes, perhaps that will do. And you think of such odd words about me. *Thing*, and *monster!* *Monster*, what a horrid sort of word. I really do not think I am a monster. *Beast*. That will do. *Aunt Beast.*”

“Aunt Beast,” Meg murmured sleepily, and laughed.

This is the first time I’d run across the explicit consideration of the connotation of words in my reading. It was different from precision in language, which I can remember consciously striving for in fourth grade. The deliberate testing the flavor of a word, assessing its emotional charge and the cloud of associations that cling to it—all this has made this scene one of the most memorable for me.

Later in life, as a literature professor, I would think of this scene when encouraging students to think about the words used in a work we were studying. Now, as a fiction writer, I sift words, weigh nuances, and taste meanings until I am satisfied “that will do.”