

Reading Group Guide

1. Madeleine L'Engle's granddaughter Charlotte Jones Voiklis pieced together this story collection from papers tucked away in loose-leaf binders and old manuscript boxes. The stories were safeguarded in L'Engle's "Ivory Tower," hidden away from the world until now. Which story resonated with you most as a reader? Why? How does this collection compare to L'Engle's other adult works?
2. Most of the stories brought together in *The Moment of Tenderness* autobiographical in nature, written by L'Engle when she was an aspiring playwright and novelist: "One doesn't have to be familiar with Madeleine's biography to enjoy them, but it does add a layer of interest and understanding to know that her childhood was marked by loneliness, that her adolescence was spent in the South, that she was an actress and a published writer before she married, and that her early years of motherhood were also years that she described as being a decade of intellectual isolation and professional rejection." Knowing the acclaim L'Engle achieved later on in life as a writer—especially through the publication of *A Wrinkle in Time*—what does the collection teach you about drive, perseverance, insecurity, and internal and external validation? What is your definition of success?
3. In reading and assembling these stories, L'Engle's granddaughter realized that L'Engle experienced profound sadness during her lifetime. This is a powerful, relatable moment: when a child or grandchild realizes, for the first time, that the relatives who came before her had their own dreams and struggles. What does Charlotte's realization teach us about discovery and understanding? Have you ever discovered something about a family member that radically altered how you perceived them?
4. In "The Birthday," circumstances force Cecily to learn about autonomy and independence. Do you remember the moment you first realized your own self-hood? Was this moment empowering? Do you feel Cecily's story has a happy ending?
5. In "The Mountains Shall Stand Forever," Ellen approaches her headmistress, Miss Hubert, and confides in her about the bullying she experiences at the hands of her schoolmates. Miss Hubert, to Ellen's detriment, does nothing. How does this story speak to the often-unfair treatment experienced by victims and other whistleblowers? What, in your opinion, are the greatest consequences of confronting injustice?
6. In "Summer Camp," Lise and Miss Benson bond by sharing their personal grievances. What did you think of Lise's refusal to shake Miss Benson's hand when she left the pond?

7. In “Madame, Or ...,” Madame Septmoncel, speaking to Nancy’s brother, says, ““We tend to forget...in our feministic and emancipated world, that a woman is more than a voter, a stockholder, a highly paid executive. She should also be a work of art. She must have the ability to excite and surprise, to give pleasure and to exert over us a charm that has both sweetness and strength. Otherwise, regardless of her position or bank account, she has failed as a woman.”” How does this idea compare to today’s standards for women? Do you feel societal expectations for women are similar or different? Does this statement complement or conflict with your ideals of femininity? Explain.
8. In “Madame, Or ...,” Nancy is asked about marriage and children. Doesn’t she, like “normal” women, want a family? She replies, ““Am I a normal woman...Or do normal women really want these things? Isn’t it something we’ve been made to think we want simply for the preservation of the species?”” Do you agree or disagree with this statement?
9. Charlotte Jones Voiklis discovered that “Prelude to the First Night Alone” was based on an actual event in her grandmother’s life—the breakup of a friendship that had meant a great deal to her. In the story, L’Engle recasts herself as the character Paul. Why? How have you healed from the breakup of a friendship or partnership?
10. In “Please Wear Your Rubbers,” Vicky desperately tries to land herself an acting role in New York City. When she isn’t hired for a part, she decides to spend her remaining money at the Algonquin Hotel on room service and decadent accommodations. What do you think pushed Vicky to make this reckless decision? Was it ambition? Optimism? Sibling rivalry? Or something else entirely?
11. In “Julio at the Party,” Rebecca tries to defuse the escalating tension between Walter and Julio. How comfortable are you with confrontation, and how important, generally speaking, do you feel it is to either engage in or avoid conflict?
12. What do you think of the mother/daughter dynamic between Angel and Amy in “The Foreign Agent”? In your opinion, why does Angel insist on treating Amy like a much younger child? Why is the character of Roscoe the impetus behind each woman’s decision to work against the other?
13. In “The Moment of Tenderness,” Stella tries to convince herself that she is not in love with Steve, her children’s doctor: “It is not love I want from him, just those little moments of tenderness.” But what is love if not a collection of tender moments? How did you feel when Steve and Stella came to the mutual decision that they should love one another from afar?

14. In “The Foreigners,” Madeleine is the narrator. What do you think of the title of this story, knowing what you do about L’Engle’s life? What does it make you think about the story’s last line: “But where, after we have made the great decision to leave the security of childhood and move on into the vastness of maturity, does anybody ever feel completely at home?”
15. Appearances can be deceiving. In “The Fact of the Matter,” did you feel L’Engle’s blend of fantasy and magical realism was effective in bringing this concept to life?
16. In “Poor Little Saturday,” as the narrator gets to know the witch woman, he perceives her to be a healer, an alchemist, a scientist. He describes her as “the most extraordinary woman [he] had ever seen...[with] no marks of age on her face.” When the witch woman is captured by “insensitive men,” however, her appearance changes: “...it wasn’t the witch woman, my witch woman. It was their idea of a witch woman—someone thousands of years old, a disheveled old creature in rusty black, with long wisps of grey hair, a hooked nose, and four wiry black hairs springing out of the mole on her chin.” How is the witch woman’s physical transformation symbolic of the ignorance and projection that has characterized witch hunts throughout history?
17. In “That Which Is Left,” Martin returns to his childhood home and is horrified to find his parents’ physical and mental states rapidly deteriorating. He takes the role reversal badly and flees the house at the first opportunity. In your own life, how have you dealt with the aging of a beloved parent? In the story, did you empathize more with Matilda or Martin?
18. In “A Sign for a Sparrow,” L’Engle imagines a post-apocalyptic world and offers a vision of the skills and tools that might be necessary for rebuilding. What skills and tools do you think would be important for creating and maintaining a sustainable world?