

Dragons in the Waters Short Guide

Dragons in the Waters by Madeleine L'Engle

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Overview

The young hero of the story, thirteen-year-old Simon Bolivar Quentin Phair Renier, is named for his ancestor Quentin Phair and for Simon Bolivar, the South American general who led early nineteenth-century revolutions in Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, Peru, and Colombia. Quentin Phair was a soldier who aided Bolivar in his battles for independence and then returned to South Carolina to start a new life.

Simon and his mysterious cousin, Forsyth Phair, set sail for Venezuela on the ship Orion, planning to return a portrait of Simon Bolivar that had been given to Quentin decades ago. During the voyage a murder is committed, setting into motion an elaborate mystery plot.

Dragons in the Waters is an adventure story that addresses the problems of growing up in an uncertain world. Although the suspense of the murder appears to dominate the story, the maturation of Simon Renier is the actual focus of the plot. Simon's psychological and moral growth ultimately provides the solution to the problems posed by the novel. Simon struggles with the consequences of his choices, learns to take responsibility for his actions, and gradually to accept the imperfections of himself and others.

About the Author

Madeleine L'Engle was born Madeleine L'Engle Camp on November 29, 1918, in New York City. The only child of a well-known journalist and a pianist, she had an unconventional childhood, surrounded from her earliest days by her parents' highly creative friends. She enjoyed solitude and developed a richly imaginative inner life, which she first began to translate into stories when she was five years old.

When she was a teen-ager, her father's poor health forced the family to move to Switzerland, where she attended a boarding school, an experience which she loathed. Nevertheless, her time at the boarding school later served as material for several novels. After graduating with honors from Smith College, she wrote her first novel, *The Small Rain* (1945), while working as an actress in New York City. In 1946 she met actor Hugh Franklin, with whom she was working in a play, and they soon married. After marriage she left the theater to devote her time to writing and family.

For nine years she and her husband lived in a small town in Connecticut, running a general store and raising three children. L'Engle wrote continuously during this period but could get little published. Despite deep dejection, L'Engle persevered. She finally published *Meet the Austins* in 1960, followed by *A Wrinkle in Time*, which won the 1963 Newbery Medal. These books mark the beginnings of two interconnected series of novels about the Austin and Murry families.

Setting

Dragons in the Waters opens at the port of Charleston, South Carolina, but much of the action occurs aboard the *Orion*. The setting moves from civilization into the savagery of the Venezuelan jungle, and finally to the idyllic village of the Quiztanos, where a tribal people live in harmony with the land and water around them.

Flashback scenes and stories-within-stories tell of the poverty-stricken life Simon and his Aunt Leonis led in South Carolina. These stories bring out keen memories of the Civil War and the bitter effects of Reconstruction in the South.

The true story of Quentin Phair's adventures with Bolivar in South America also unfolds through the words of those whom Simon meets in Venezuela. Truth and imagination continually interact, and the reader must learn to discern between the two just as Simon must learn to distinguish his fantasies from reality.

Although none of the events or people Simon encounters is supernatural, the exotic settings and the interweaving of past and present give the story the same "otherworldly" aura found in L'Engle's fantasy books.



Social Sensitivity

The murder in *Dragons in the Waters* takes place offstage, and the description of the body when it is found is not luridly detailed. The worst violence occurs when Simon is kidnapped, but this serves to build suspense by establishing the brutality of the evil characters. The violence also ties in with the theme of maturation: the young people become aware that they do not live in a safe world, that violence and evil do exist, and that they must learn how to respond when confronted with these dangers.

Although L'Engle has stated that religious convictions underlie all of her works, she is implicitly rather than explicitly Christian when dealing with the spiritual conflicts of her characters. For L'Engle, love—an unselfish acceptance of people as individuals—is the most rewarding response in the face of adversity. Similarly, the idyllic Quiztano village presents an alternative to the violence and apathy of modern city life.

Ultimately, the moral and spiritual themes explored in *Dragons in the Waters* offer positive solutions to questions faced by many young adults, such as the coexistence of God and evil, the *Dragons In the Waters* need for a balance between imagination and reality, the problem of death, the quest for human freedom, and the interplay of civilization and nature.



Literary Qualities

L'Engle draws from a number of literary genres and conventions in *Dragons in the Waters*. It is a quest story, a Gothic mystery, and a detective story, all wrapped up in one. As the voyage to Venezuela progresses, it becomes clear that Simon is searching for his family heritage as symbolized by the true story of Quentin Phair. This quest leads him to discover unsettling truths about Quentin, such as his betrayal of those who most trusted and cared for him.

When Simon finds himself running from danger and betraying his own friend, Canon Tallis, he must confront his own, as well as his ancestor's, weaknesses.

The story-within-a-story about Quentin Phair comprises one half of the mystery plot; the other half concerns the shipboard murder and the portrait of Bolivar. This second half of the plot more closely resembles a conventional detective story, except that there seem to be three detectives, or groups of detectives, working together and against one another to solve the mystery—the children, Canon Tallis, and Hurtado, the Venezuelan chief of police. The plotting of the murder mystery is tight and complex, and the mystery of Quentin's past tied to the events of the present give the novel its brooding, Gothic atmosphere.



Themes and Characters

As the plot develops, Simon and his two shipboard friends, Poly and Charles O'Keefe, become the primary focus of the narrative. Simon's Aunt Leonis also plays an important role as Simon's guardian and mentor, and various passengers are woven into the mystery plot. The confusion surrounding the true identity of Simon's cousin, Forsyth Phair, lends suspense to the characterization.

Raised in the backwoods just outside of Charleston, Simon Renier has such old-fashioned manners and patterns of speech that others comment that he does not appear to be from the present century. For five years, Simon has lived with his ninety-year-old Aunt Leonis, who represents "comfort and all-rightness in a precarious world." Simon still mourns the abrupt death of his parents, which has profoundly shaken his belief in God and his faith in the future. Two things help sustain him in this crisis of faith — his Aunt Leonis and a vivid imagination.

Aunt Leonis has lost her entire family (except for Simon), as well as her family's ancestral home and fortune. But she maintains a serenity and faith in the face of misfortune that comforts Simon. She encourages him to use his imagination and is never embarrassed to play games of make-believe with him. Simon loves to pretend that he is his ancestor Quentin Phair, battling with Bolivar to free South America. He idolizes the bravery and ideals of both of these men. Sometimes, however, his imagination gets the upper hand. He withdraws so deeply into his fantasies and memories that he is not aware of the world around him.

Poly and Charles O'Keefe are the children of Meg Murry and Calvin O'Keefe, two of the chief characters from L'Engle's Time Trilogy (*A Wrinkle in Time*, *A Wind in the Door*, and *A Swiftly Tilting Planet*). Poly and Charles first appeared themselves in *The Arm of the Starfish*, set two years earlier than the events of *Dragons in the Waters*. Poly, now fourteen, is very bright and inclined to show off her array of knowledge and her command of foreign languages, but she is likeable nonetheless. Charles, twelve, takes after the uncle he is named for, Charles Wallace Murry, another major character from the Time Trilogy. Charles seems old for his age, and, through his "special dreams" as he calls them, he sees into the past and the future. The three youngsters hold discussions that often border on the cosmic, but their concerns are those of many young people today.

The passengers and crew members of the *Orion* are well characterized. Mr. Theo (who appears in *The Young Unicorns*) offers an unquenchable faith in the logic and order of the universe.

Canon Tallis (who also appears in a number of L'Engle's books) and his friend Hurtado, the shady chief of police in Caracas, are the detectives who solve the mystery. Several of the passengers and crew—including Mr. and Mrs. Smith, Dr. Wordsworth and Dr. Eisenstein, Captain van Leyden and Chief Steward Jan ten Zwick—exhibit villainous qualities that make them likely murder suspects. Of the crew members, Geraldo, the



young assistant steward, takes on a special importance for Poly as the first boy ever to be seriously interested in her.

Simon's ancestor Quentin Phair, although long dead, plays a pivotal role in the book. Most of the problems encountered by the characters stem from promises that Quentin made when he left South America years ago, vowing to return. As events unfold, Simon is shocked to discover that Quentin was not the ideal man he has imagined him to be. In many ways, Simon's task is to fulfill the broken vows of his ancestor, and his voyage turns into one of selfdiscovery. He must not only confront Quentin's shortcomings, but also realize that he possesses many of the same faults himself. In the end, Simon finds the moral strength to confirm the importance of faithfulness and love.

As in most of her books, L'Engle attempts to describe and define the nature of good and evil without painting a simplistic picture of the world. The distinction between good and evil is often difficult for her characters to make, and their motives are more complex in *Dragons in the Waters* than in the *Time Trilogy* books. Nonetheless, individual choices—for good or for evil—are shown to have far-reaching consequences.

The story also stresses the importance of family, the interdependence of people, and the redemptive power of love in a world where hatred and evil seem pervasive.



Topics for Discussion

1. What clues in the first chapter of the story suggest what will happen later on?

2. Why does Simon idolize Quentin Phair at the beginning of the novel?

What happens to his perception of Quentin? How and why does it change?

3. Why is Aunt Leonis such a serene person, given that she has lost so much?

4. Why is Aunt Leonis able to enter Simon's games of make-believe? Why is this considered strange behavior for an adult?

5. What qualities make Forsyth Phair an effective antagonist in the novel?

6. Why does Aunt Leonis criticize Simon, and why does Simon later criticize himself, for running away when the wildcat attacks? What does Simon realize about himself as a result of this incident?

7. Why does Simon decide to stay in the village at the end of the book? Do you agree with Poly that his is a wrong decision? How does this decision fit with the themes of the book?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. In the third chapter, Simon, Aunt Leonis, and Dr. Curds each express different perceptions of God. What are their attitudes, and how do they differ? What view does L'Engle advocate here and in the rest of the story?
2. Trace Simon's change in attitude toward Quentin Phair and explain the significance of the change. What does the change tell you about Simon himself?
3. The account of Quentin Phair's actions is fragmented and comes from different sources. Trace Quentin Phair's actions, their significance, and their impact on the events of *Dragons in the Waters*.
4. Dragons are mentioned in a number of places in the novel: Poly's icon, the good dragon that Simon and Aunt Leonis believe guards their home, the dragon Simon dreams about, and the Port of Dragons. Prepare a report on what you think dragons symbolize in the novel.
5. Both the Quiztanos and the people of the barrio in the Port of Dragons are poor in the material sense, yet the Quiztanos do not seem poor. What is it about the lifestyle and values of the Quiztanos that makes them better-off than the barrio-dwellers?
6. Dr. O'Keefe has been called in to inspect the damage that oil wells are doing to the Lake of the Dragons. Research and report on the threats faced today by South American rain forests and the people who live in them.



For Further Reference

Kingman, Lee, ed. *Newbery and Caldecott Medal Books, 1956-1965*. Boston: Horn Book, 1965. The article on L'Engle includes an excerpt from *A Wrinkle in Time*, her acceptance speech for the Newbery Medal, and a delightful biographical article by her husband, Hugh Franklin.

L'Engle, Madeleine. *Trailing Clouds of Glory: Spiritual Values in Children's Literature*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975. A discussion of the need for children's literature to provide spiritual touchstones, with excerpts from many classic children's books that L'Engle sees as fulfilling this need.

Newquist, Roy. *Conversations*. Skokie, IL: Rand McNally, 1967. A more compact discussion of many of the issues L'Engle touches on in her autobiographical work *A Circle of Quiet*.

Townsend, John Rowe. *A Sense of Story: Essays on Contemporary Writers for Children*. London: Longman, 1971.

The essay on L'Engle is a thematic discussion of the Austin and Murry books and includes an extract from a paper she gave in 1964.

Related Titles

The Murry family books deal with two generations of the family. The first generation appears in *A Wrinkle in Time*, *A Wind in the Door*, *A Swiftly Tilting Planet*, and *Many Waters*. The second generation appears in *The Arm of the Starfish Dragons in the Waters*, and *A House Like a Lotus*. Poly and Charles O'Keefe appear in these last three books, and Poly is the main character of the final one, in which she, like Simon, must confront the pain of a fallen idol and learn the redeeming value of love. The Austin family books also contain some of the same characters and themes that appear in the Murry series.

L'Engle explores her philosophical and religious beliefs in the three autobiographical "Crosswicks Journals": *A Circle of Quiet* (1972), *The Summer of the Great Grandmother* (1974), and *The Irrational Season* (1977). Originally an agnostic, L'Engle traces her doubts about the existence of God, the development of her religious faith, her beliefs about writing and family, and how all these elements in her life fit together.



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Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor

Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design

Amanda Mott

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)

ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)

ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature—Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction—19th century—Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction—20th century—Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3—dc20 96-20771 CIP

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996