

Meet the Austins Short Guide

Meet the Austins by Madeleine L'Engle

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Overview

The Austin family series contains four young adult novels, *Meet the Austins*, *Moon by Night*, *The Young Unicorns*, and *A Ring of Endless Light*, and two shorter books for younger children, *The TwentyFour Days Before Christmas* (1964) and *The Anti-Muffins* (1981). The series concerns a family of six: two parents, two boys, and two girls. Authentic enough to have faults as well as virtues, the Austin children will immediately attract readers. Some critics have complained the family is too good to be true, with its understanding parents and highly intelligent children, but such criticism takes into account neither the issues that the books address nor the realistic events within them.

Dr. and Mrs. Austin are reasonable and understanding, the children are very likable, and the family is close without being constrictive. But the books handle serious concerns, such as the death of a close friend of the family, the disruption caused by a spoiled orphan they temporarily adopt, the everyday quarrels among the children, the effects of a bike accident, and the fear that results when the youngest child disappears. The later books in the series deal with other important issues the Austin children encounter as they grow up, such as the doubts and tensions caused by being uprooted and moving to a big city, a teen-ager's confusion over the first boys who are attracted to her, the birth of a younger sibling, and the impending death of a grandparent.

Vicky, the second oldest child in the family, narrates *Meet the Austins* and all the subsequent books in the series except *The Young Unicorns*. Responsible but impulsive, impatient but sympathetic, intelligent but confused by life's complexities, Vicky experiences typical adolescent problems and feelings. The Austin books focus on Vicky's growing up, emphasizing the importance of family love and trust. They trace Vicky's doubts about God's existence and about the justice of the universe as she experiences injustices, and they show her ultimate affirmation of faith.

About the Author

Madeleine L'Engle was born 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 L'Engle was sent to boarding school. Because the school's schedule did not allow her the solitude to which she was accustomed, she loathed it. Her experiences there later served as material for several novels, including her first one, *The Small Rain* (1945), which she wrote while working in New York as an actress after graduating with honors from Smith College. In 1946 she married Hugh Franklin, the leading actor in a play in which she was an understudy. She had worked as an actress only to pay the bills so that she could write, and after her marriage, she left the theater to devote herself full-time to her writing and her 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, and two years later she published *A Wrinkle in Time*, which went on to win the 1963 Newbery Medal. These books mark the beginnings of two interconnected series of novels about the Austin and Murry families.

L'Engle explores her philosophical and religious beliefs and their evolution 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. These three books provide an excellent, insightful discussion of the beliefs that underlie Madeleine L'Engle and her books.

Setting

The setting of each book in the series suits and often affects the issues that the family deals with. *Meet the Austins*, *The Twenty-Four Days Before Christmas*, and *The Anti-Muffins* all take place in the Austin's small hometown of Thornhill, Connecticut, and most of the action occurs at their rambling, twohundred-year-old farmhouse. These three books all deal with home-oriented issues, such as getting along with siblings and friends, learning to be an individual and to make one's own judgments, and taking responsibility for one's actions. All the stories seem more or less contemporary; by patient work, the reader may deduce that they occur during the 1960s.

Social Sensitivity

L'Engle originally had trouble publishing *Meet the Austins* because it starts with a death, an incident that many adults may feel uncomfortable discussing with children. Such people generally underestimate children's curiosity about death, as well as their need to learn how to cope with it. L'Engle shows the confusion that death can cause for children and teen-agers, but her characters also demonstrate healthy ways to handle a deeply troubling situation. A young person who has read a book like *Meet the Austins* will have good models for dealing with the death of a family member or friend, or with friends who have experienced the death of someone close to them.

The novel also addresses the subject of religion; Uncle Hal's death leads Vicky to question her faith in God. L'Engle also portrays the family praying before meals and at bedtime. The emphasis, however, is more spiritual than religious as the narrative is more concerned with the development of the characters' personal beliefs than with their adherence to the tenets of any particular organized religion.

Meet the Austins is carefully nonsexist.

The girls and the boys are equally active.

The Austins assign their children chores that fall along traditional gender lines, but John is not self-conscious about giving Vicky a hand in the kitchen in order to get dinner ready. The children also have ambitious career aims: John plans to go into space and Suzy intends to be a doctor.

Literary Qualities

Meet the Austins is a first-person narrative. Although it is not clear why or under what circumstances Vicky is telling the story, L'Engle effectively captures the tone of a teen-aged girl; Vicky and her siblings talk like real people.

Vicky is aware of how she speaks as a narrator, occasionally commenting if one of her sentences gets complicated or confusing. The loosely plotted story consists of a series of events in the life of a family that reveals the maturation of certain characters. The children are not perfect, and readers see their faults as well as their virtues as they argue with one another one minute and stick up for one another the next. The result is a picture of a warm and human family.



Themes and Characters

Meet the Austins introduces most of the characters and themes that are developed later in the series. At this point in the series, Vicky Austin is twelve years old. At the beginning of the book, Vicky's Uncle Hal, the husband of her mother's college roommate, dies in a plane crash. This death appears monstrously unfair to Vicky and shakes her faith in the benevolence of God and the stability of the universe. As a result of the accident, Maggy, the troubled, orphaned daughter of Uncle Hal's copilot, comes to live with the Austins.

Vicky's inability to feel sorry for Maggy, combined with the changes she sees occurring in her family, causes her to grow increasingly troubled. She blames Maggy for the shifts in the normal pattern of family tensions, especially the extra quarrels among the children. In the middle of her most physically awkward period of adolescence, Vicky feels more than ever the ugly duckling of the family next to her pretty younger sister Suzy and the beautiful Maggy. But Vicky must learn to accept the changes in her family as a normal part of growing up, rather than blaming them on Maggy's presence.

Vicky begins to accept this when she takes responsibility for her own actions and their consequences after breaking her arm in a bike accident. She realizes that she got hurt, not because of Maggy's misbehavior, but because she disobeyed her parents' strict orders against riding her bike alone after dark.

Another example of Vicky's growth is her increasing ability to accept and empathize with Maggy and to love her despite the problems she causes. When Maggy's cousin and grandfather consider taking the child from the Austins, Vicky considers it analogous to throwing Maggy to the lions. She is relieved when she hears that Maggy will stay with the family.

L'Engle fully develops the other members of the Austin family as well. Dr. and Mrs. Austin are realistic parents, affectionate but firm with their children.

They often seem to know everything, but they never pretend to know more than they do, especially when confronted with events beyond their control, such as the death of their friend. Fifteen-year-old John, the oldest boy, is a good-looking science buff; he and Vicky argue often, but he supports her when they are looking out for the younger children.

Like most older brothers, he can be mean sometimes and flaunt his knowledge over his siblings, but he can also be kind and cheer them up when they are complaining and feeling down.

Suzy, three years younger than Vicky, is blonde and pretty and cuddly, a bright and confident girl who loves animals and wants to be a doctor when she grows up. At times Suzy's abilities and looks gall Vicky, who is not sure what her own talents are and who feels awkward and plain next to Suzy. Five-year-old Rob, the baby of the family, can be particularly sweet or amazingly annoying to his older brother and sisters. He plunges



without embarrassment into conversations that seem beyond his age. He alternately infuriates and charms his older sister.

The children's temporary foster sister, Maggy Hamilton, is a spoiled brat when she first arrives. She has been brought up by her mother, who gave her plenty of toys but no love, and later by her father, whom she knew for only a month before he died. Consequently, she has had little stability in her life and is extremely self-centered. The secure environment the Austins provide for her helps her to work out much of her anger and resentment and to begin to think of other people besides herself. Like Vicky, Maggy begins to accept responsibility for her own actions by the end of the book.

The themes that run through *Meet the Austins* concern the family and the individual. L'Engle believes in the importance of a stable family life to give children a sense of security. A loving and accepting family allows children to develop as individuals. Dr. and Mrs. Austin firmly restrict their children's behavior, but they also appreciate the individual gifts of each child and encourage each to develop to his or her potential. The parents foster responsibility in the children by insisting they do homework before playing and by giving each child jobs to do around the house. Despite the inevitable fusses between siblings, the children enjoy close relationships with one another that are firmly based on honesty and loyalty. The novel consciously promotes the values necessary for people to live well with each other in loving and trusting relationships.



Topics for Discussion

1. Describe each member of the Austin family. Why do these different personalities work together as a family?
2. How does Vicky react to her Uncle Hal's death? What worries and confuses her the most?
3. Why can't Vicky feel any empathy for Maggy at first? Does Suzy feel empathy for Maggy?
4. What problems must Maggy cope with besides her parents' deaths? How do those problems affect her behavior?
5. Before Vicky's accident, she blames her brothers and sisters for everything that goes wrong that afternoon. Afterwards, while she is in the hospital, she blames herself. Why does she change her mind? What does her acceptance of the responsibility for her misbehavior show about her?
6. The Austins' practical joke on Uncle Douglas and Sally Hough "boomerangs," as Mrs. Austin says, in a number of ways. Describe the various unexpected results it has.
7. Why is Vicky glad when she finds out that Sally will not take Maggy away from the family?
8. Vicky says that she and John are responsible for the younger children when they are on the beach during their parents' absence. When their dog Colette is hurt, Vicky leaves the beach, telling Maggy and Rob to wait for her there. When Rob gets lost, who is responsible: Vicky, Maggy, or Rob?
9. Has Maggy changed by the end of the book? If so, how has she changed, and what has caused her to change?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Some reviewers have argued that the Austins are too good to be true. Do the Austins seem like a real family to you? What incidents from *Meet the Austins* support your opinion?
2. What values do Dr. and Mrs. Austin consider important? How do they teach these values to their children? What incidents in the book demonstrate the importance of these values?
3. Speaking of "the terrible week," Vicky says, "I don't suppose we'll ever know why it happened, why we were so awful and not the way we like to think of ourselves." How do the Austins like to think of themselves? What reasons can you suggest for their failure to live up to this definition? Can you find a situation in your own life when you had thought of yourself in one way but acted in another? Analyze the reasons behind the difference between your beliefs about yourself and your actions, and compare your reasons with the Austins'.
4. *Meet the Austins*, *The Moon by Night*, and *A Ring of Endless Light* take place over a period of three years. Vicky matures a great deal in those three years.

What does she learn in each book? What signs do you see of her growth between the first and second books? Between the second the third books?

5. *Meet the Austins* is told from Vicky's point of view. Retell one of the scenes involving Maggy from Maggy's point of view.

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Related Titles

Of the other Austin family books, L'Engle wrote two for younger children.

Twenty-Four Days Before Christmas is set five years before *Meet the Austins*, during the Christmas that Vicky is chosen to be the angel in the Christmas pageant. She considers herself the ugly duckling of the family, so the role is very important to her. But her mother is about to have a baby and may be in the hospital for Christmas. The thought of her mother being gone for the holiday is more than Vicky can bear. She learns to be unselfish as she offers to give up what she prizes most in order to have the family together for Christmas.

The Anti-Muffins is a short novel set soon after *Meet the Austins*. The children are all about the same ages as they are in the first book. Although Vicky tells the story, it is mostly about John and Maggy. After Maggy helps to defend John when he is outnumbered in a fight with boys from his Sunday school class who dislike him for being different, John proposes her as a new member of the Anti-Muffin club. The club's purpose is to help its members to resist the dangers of social conformity and do what they believe is right, rather than trying to be the same as everyone else, like muffins in a muffin pan. The club's aim makes explicit a theme that L'Engle constantly encourages in most of her books: the importance of individuals and the development of their personal potential.

Three longer sequels follow *Meet the Austins*. The first one, *The Moon by Night*, is set two years later. Vicky, now almost fifteen, is upset by her family's prospective move from Thornhill to New York City; by her Aunt Elena and Uncle Douglas's marriage, which will take Maggy from the family; and by her older brother's impending departure for college. Everything is changing, much more drastically than in the earlier novel, and the very threads that have held her life together seem to be breaking. As a result of these changes, Vicky feels very confused about herself, her family, and life in general. On a ten-week camping trip across the United States with her family, Vicky meets Zachary Gray, a boy who feels even more confused than she does. Zachary's pessimistic view of the world and other people, his attraction to her, his need for her friendship, and her family's dislike of him all force Vicky to confront and evaluate the psychological and philosophical problems that have been bothering her and make an affirmative response to life. The rest of the Austin family put in another good appearance; their conversations and adventures as they travel across the country are authentic and fascinating.

The Young Unicorns takes place during the autumn after *The Moon by Night*, and differs considerably in mood from the rest of the books in the series, as a result of its narrative strategy and its genre. The Austins have moved to New York City for the year, and their story is told by an omniscient third-person narrator instead of by Vicky. The third-person narrator is necessary because *The Young Unicorns* is a mystery story with a very complex plot and a large cast of minor characters. The novel develops themes familiar from the earlier books, but this time against a background of evil and the oppression of big-city life.



The book stresses the importance of individual moral choice and the overriding necessity of making choices rather than responding to life with apathy or mute acceptance.

A Ring of Endless Light, the last of the series, takes place the summer following the events in *The Young Unicorns* and is much closer in tone and plot to the earlier Austin family novels. Like *Meet the Austins*, this novel opens with death: the Austins are spending the summer at Grandfather Eaton's island house because he is dying of leukemia. Vicky, again the narrator of the story, is confused and upset, particularly because another good friend of the family, her friend Leo's father, has recently died.

Zachary Gray, torn between a wish to live and a wish to die, again shows up, to the distress of the rest of the Austins.

In addition to Zachary's attentions, Vicky tries to cope with those of Leo and of Adam Eddington, John's friend who asks her to help out with his experiments with dolphins. Vicky has to resolve her feelings about the three boys and about the inevitability of death.



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