

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

A Wind in the Door

by

Madeleine L'Engle

Book Information

Madeleine L'Engle, A Wind in the Door

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With the help of strange beings, Meg, Calvin, and school principal, Mr. Jenkins, enter Charles Wallace's body to help save his life and restore the balance in the universe.

Award: Newbery Honor

Topics: Family Life, Illness; Fantasy/Imagination, Misc./Other; Science Fiction, Aliens

Main Characters

Blajeny a mysterious, gigantic being who is a cosmic teacher; he alerts Meg and others of the need to battle the Echthroi

Calvin O'Keefe Meg's sensitive, courageous friend who comes from a very poor family

Charles Wallace Murry Meg's ailing brother, a six-year-old genius who is being tormented by his classmates because he is different

Dr. Louise Colubra the devoted doctor and friend of the Murrays who tries to cure Charles Wallace

Louise the Larger an enormous snake who has a special relationship with the twins, Sandy and Dennys; she helps protect Meg from the Echthroi

Margaret (Meg) Murry the intelligent and insecure girl who is determined to protect her beloved brother Charles Wallace

Mr. Jenkins an uncaring principal who changes his ways after accompanying Meg in her journey to save Charles Wallace

Mr. Murry the Murry children's physicist father, who is investigating the cosmic damage done by the Echthroi

Mrs. Murry the scientist mother of Meg, Charles Wallace, Sandy, and Dennys, who is struggling to unlock the mysteries of the farandolae and save Charles Wallace

Proginoskes the cherubim with many wings and eyes who acts as Meg's wise cosmic guide through her ordeals

Sandy and Dennys Murry Meg's practical twin brothers who have adapted well socially at school

Senex a fara, or mature farandola, who offers his wisdom when Meg and her friends are trying to stop the Echthroi from killing Charles Wallace

Sporos an immature microscopic being called a farandola who believes the Echthroi's assertion that growing up means limiting oneself; he endangers everyone with his foolishness

the Echthroi evil beings who are trying to destroy the universe; they impersonate Mr. Jenkins in an effort to sabotage Meg's rescue mission

Vocabulary

acute severe or intense

cardigan a sweater that is fastened up the front

immaterial of little importance or meaning

intuition the ability to know without conscious reasoning

irrational not based on reason

ordeal a situation or event that causes difficulty

pallor an unnatural or extreme lack of color in the skin

philodendron a climbing plant with broad, heart-shaped leaves

underestimate assign too low a value to

volition free will or choice

Synopsis

Meg Murry has been worried about her six-year-old brother Charles Wallace because his classmates routinely attack him. Charles has alienated himself from his peers by showing his extraordinary intelligence in class. Meg has tried to help Charles by angrily confronting Mr. Jenkins, Charles's principal, about the attacks. Now Charles Wallace's statement that he saw dragons in their twin brothers' vegetable garden makes Meg fear Charles is imagining things. Meg and Charles embark on a search for the dragons. Charles further worries Meg by telling her their scientist mother is studying

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farandolae, a part of the mitochondria within cells, because Charles's health is failing due to a malfunction of his farandolae.

At night, after Charles Wallace claimed he saw dragons in the garden, Meg sneaks out there, unsure why she has returned. There, inexplicably, she meets Mr. Jenkins, who claims he has come to apologize to her. Suddenly, Louise, the Murry family's pet snake, starts hissing. Abruptly, Mr. Jenkins screeches, rises, and flies off, slashing through the night sky. Meg screams and sobs in fear, but her dear friend Calvin O'Keefe soon joins her. She is talking to Calvin about Charles's problems when the intuitive Charles, who psychically felt Meg's fear, startles them. The three are about to leave when Charles spots the dragons again. A strange voice tells them the dragons are actually a cherubim named Proginoskes. The voice belongs to a cosmic Teacher named Blajeny. He informs Meg she must pass three trials which may lead to Charles's recovery. Proginoskes is to aid her.

The next morning, Meg tells Proginoskes about the strange Mr. Jenkins. He explains that she encountered an Echthros, an evil being that annihilates things by un-Naming them. Proginoskes kythes, or mentally communicates, with her so she can witness the Echthroi destroying some stars. Meg and Proginoskes go to Charles's school to try to discover how Mr. Jenkins is connected to what is happening. Meg is speaking to him when two more Mr. Jenkinses suddenly appear. Proginoskes, who is now invisible, informs her she must Name the correct Mr. Jenkins by loving him. Meg has had many conflicts with Mr. Jenkins, and she can think of nothing lovable about him. Charles, who is being sent home because he brought Louise to school, interrupts Meg's test. The three Mr. Jenkinses take Charles home. While they are gone, Proginoskes tells her if she chooses wrongly, he must X, or destroy, himself to control the evil. Meg remembers something good about Mr. Jenkins: he once bought her friend Calvin shoes because Calvin's family was too poor to provide him with a proper pair. When the three Mr. Jenkinses return, Meg successfully Names Mr. Jenkins because she realizes he's the only one

who's human enough to make as many mistakes as he does.

After the Naming, the Echthroi disappear, and Blajeny reappears. Meg urges Mr. Jenkins to join them in their mission, and Blajeny transports them to another galaxy. Calvin joins them, but Meg is disturbed by psychic visions of Charles Wallace, who is gravely ill. Blajeny encourages them to open their minds so they can meet one of the microscopic farandolae who can help them discover Charles's problem. Soon they are introduced to Sporos, an arrogant farandola who resents having to work with inferior humans. Sporos does not understand that Charles is his galaxy and if Charles dies, so does he.

After explaining they must investigate why the farandolae are not thriving, Blajeny transports Meg and the others to the mitochondrion that serves as Sporos's planet. There, communication is done through kything. Mr. Jenkins is having trouble expanding his mind to be able to kythe. When Proginoskes encourages Meg to help him, she accidentally links with an Echthros-Mr. Jenkins, and several farandolae sacrifice themselves to save her. Proginoskes helps the humans know they are in a place where farae, or adult farandolae, are rooted like trees and sing the song of the universe. The humans soon discover the problem is that the Echthroi are encouraging the childish farandolae to refuse to Deepen, or root and mature. Instead, the farandolae are racing around the farae, dancing wildly, and sapping the farae's energy until they die. Meg and her friends must find a way to make the farandolae Deepen. If they do not, the farae will die and so will Charles Wallace.

While Sporos is running with the dancing farandolae, Calvin cannot get him to cooperate, so Calvin jumps into the mass of circling farandolae. Meg follows, and Mr. Jenkins comes to save them. When the Echthroi attack Mr. Jenkins, Meg cries to Sporos that the only way to save Mr. Jenkins is for the farandolae to Deepen. Realizing that Mr. Jenkins endangered himself to help them, Sporos and the other farandolae Deepen. Meg tries to stop the

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Echthroi from killing Mr. Jenkins, but Proginoskes has to X himself to save everyone. Meg is then able to stop the Echthroi by Naming them. Suddenly, Meg, Mr. Jenkins, and Calvin are in Charles's room. Charles is rapidly recovering. The story ends with Mr. Jenkins planning to improve conditions both for his school and for Charles Wallace.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

Why does Meg regret that Mr. Jenkins joins the journey to Yadah?

Mr. Jenkins finds it very difficult to kythe, so Meg must spend precious time helping him overcome that barrier. Calvin and Meg must also spend a great deal of time explaining the farae to Mr. Jenkins since his perception of reality is so rigid that he cannot comprehend the world of the farae. Meg is getting flashes of Charles slowly dying, so she feels desperate to finish the ordeals as quickly as possible.

Literary Analysis

What is the idea behind people's insistence that Charles Wallace continue going to the local school?

Blajeny, Mrs. Murry, the twins, and Mr. Jenkins all believe it is important for Charles Wallace to learn to adapt to his environment. The consensus is that despite his spectacular intelligence, Charles Wallace will never be successful unless he learns how to get along with other people. In order to do this, he must continue to socialize in settings that may perhaps not be natural ones for him. If he is put in a special school or taught at home, he will not be exposed to people who think differently than he, and he will not have to learn how to live with and communicate with those people.

Inferential Comprehension

Why do Meg and Mr. Jenkins have such a difficult time getting along with each other?

Both Meg and Mr. Jenkins are insecure and attempt to mask their insecurities by behaving aggressively with people who disagree with them. After Meg Names Mr. Jenkins, she mentions to him that her mother said he underestimates himself. Mr. Jenkins replies that he and Meg both underestimate themselves. Another factor in the difficulty of their relationship is that the majority of their encounters before Meg Names Mr. Jenkins revolve around some conflict Meg is having at school. Since they never see each other during good times, they have only difficult experiences with each other. This causes them to perceive each other only in negative ways.

Constructing Meaning

Do you feel that Blajeny is correct to withhold so much information from Meg and the others when they are trying to save Charles Wallace?

Answers will vary. Some students may note that the members of Blajeny's class might have felt overwhelmed if the entire mission had been explained to them at once. The members of the class might have had difficulty understanding the concepts and needed to see things for themselves before they could understand. Some might not have been willing to participate if they had known in advance what they were expected to do. However, other students may feel that certain difficulties might have been easier to overcome if Blajeny had given his class more information. Blajeny also scolds Proginoskes for having limiting thoughts about Mr. Jenkins, but Blajeny's stinginess with information implies that he also has a limiting perception of his students. Also, Blajeny potentially puts Meg in jeopardy when he does not tell her and the others about the Echthroi in their first meeting. At that point, Meg has already had one encounter with an Echthros.

Teachable Skills

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Understanding Literary Features This book has characteristics of both fantasy and science fiction. Talk to students about the distinguishing features of these two genres. Fantasy stories contain elements such as beings, places, or events that do not exist in real life. These stories often include talking animals, magical powers, or mythical beings. Science fiction stories often tell about life in the future, including science and technology of the future. Science fiction stories are sometimes set in space, on another world, or in a different dimension. Stories about marvelous inventions and space invasions are common in science fiction. After the class has discussed the characteristics of these two genres, have the students determine which genre they believe this book belongs in. Have students list the book details that they feel justify their decision. If the students decide the book has elements of both genres, they should list which details and aspects of the novel fit into which category.

Extending Meaning Many of the characters in this book experience great personal growth. Have the students choose three characters they feel grew greatly, and then have them make a chart showing what these characters needed to learn and how they changed by the end of the story. Have them rank the three characters they chose from most dramatic growth to least dramatic growth.

Responding to Literature Proginoskes has Meg visualize a place where she feels safe after she witnesses the destruction wrought by the Echthroi in the stars. Have the students consider what they might have visualized if they had been in Meg's place. Give the students collage materials to create a representation of their safe place. Ask students to write a title on their collage. When collages are complete, have each student write a brief essay about their safe place. How has this safe place helped them? Do they think the image might have helped them recover from the presence of a threat such as the Echthroi, as Meg's safe place helped her?

Recognizing Feelings In this book, feelings become forces that make things happen. Have

the students work in small groups to discuss the plot of the book and how it is shaped by the feelings of the characters. Where possible, give each group a section of the board to work on. If it is not possible, have them write their decisions on paper. Have students write their thoughts in column form: the names of the characters, the feeling each character has, the action that comes about as the result of the feeling, and whether the result was welcomed or regretted. Have each group present their charts to the class. Which character seems to have the most effect on the movement of the plot?