

Madeleine L'Engle

THE SMALL RAIN

*A Novel*



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Madeleine L'Engle's classic young adult books include *A Wrinkle in Time*, *A Swiftly Planet*, and *Certain Women*. *The Small Rain*, an adult novel, focuses on Katherine Forrester, the daughter of distinguished musical artists, whose career as a concert pianist evolves through loves and losses. Katherine is a child growing up in a refined, yet bohemian, artistic ambience--theatrical as well as musical . . . [Her] adolescence is lonely and difficult, but as Katherine advances to young womanhood, her heart as well as her talent is promisingly engaged (*Publishers Weekly*).

## The Small Rain Details

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Author : Madeleine L'Engle

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# From Reader Review The Small Rain for online ebook

## Austen to Zafón says

This was the first book I'd read of L'Engle's adult fiction. I read her fantasy books as a kid and really liked them and I knew a bit about her own life, but somehow I never managed to get around to reading her adult books until a couple years ago. This is her first published book and it shows in that it's a bit overwritten, but that said, I still really liked it. It's a coming-of-age story, but it's L'Engle, so you know it's not going to be schmaltzy. Tortured is more like it. The main character is a concert pianist and a sensitive person. Although she is frequently betrayed by people she trusts, her music keeps her going and is ultimately the only thing she can rely on. It's a good portrait of youth and naivete.

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## Lia Marcoux says

This is a book full of gross impositions. A mother expecting her ten-year-old to manage her alcoholism; a stepmom encouraging her tween stepdaughter's shipboard romance with an aging married Lothario who has a stone-cold Nazi villain scar; a predatory teacher kissing his student; getting engaged to a guy because when you were a child and he was already a grown-up you had a pash on him, and, sure, that's not yucky; and everybody but everybody kissing the main character without permission. But it's not a horror story! With one exception, I suppose (sort of hilarious because I do think L'Engle softened on this issue down the road)...terrifying l-l-lesbians!!

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## Rowan says

I read this because I really love the book, A Severed Wasp. This book is the prequel (or rather, A Severed Wasp is the conclusion) to the story of Katherine.

Madeleine L'Engle writes in the forward to The Small Rain, after the book was put back into publication in 1984 (first published in 1945), that it is very much a first novel. That I can see. A Severed Wasp was written decades later and the writer has matured and grown along with the characters. I probably won't re-read this because the writing isn't as good as A Severed Wasp. However, I really enjoyed getting to read about Katherine as an adolescent and how it relates to the person she becomes in A Severed Wasp, when she is in her 70s and coming to terms with her memories. It is a look into the past of one of my favorite literary characters.

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## Amander says

I was surprised at how much this book resonated with me. It was first published in 1945 (is L'Engle's first novel, I believe), and has been out of print since 1985. I think L'Engle's voice is so earnest, the reader cannot help but be sympathetic. For me, L'Engle is a kindred spirit, and this work seems at times autobiographical (she was a student in a boarding school in Switzerland, her mother was a pianist, she was clumsy and misunderstood by teachers as a child).

I was also surprised how the book addressed issues of the changing social norms post-World War II (sexuality, abortion, lesbianism, divorce). While the discussion was subtle, the author did not shy away from showing a realistic picture of the changing zeitgeist.

At times it was difficult to tell what the character Katherine wanted (other than to live up to her mother's legendary status as a pianist), but I think that's what makes it a true coming-of-age story - the character herself does not know what she wants, and lives on the cusp of adulthood where she is not yet able to fully make decisions for herself, and would not know how to even if she could.

"Active happiness is not a common state. Active unhappiness is better than dull days. Katherine was seldom in an intermediate stage" (153).

"I don't know anything any more except that I've got to believe in something, and I do, I don't know exactly what it is. Because I don't think many of us are enough in ourselves to say anything great in our work; I know I'm not, but I do think if I work hard enough and make myself ready, things can be said through me that are much bigger than I am, and I do believe there's something great somewhere to say them, if I should be ready enough to be chosen" (191).

I am looking forward to reading the sequel, *A Severed Wasp*.

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### **Vanessa says**

I love L'Engle's work as a rule, but Katherine in this book was carried from place to place, largely babied and bullied by others until she actually notes that she feels comfortable with bullying by her lover. The number of times men press themselves on her and the times they physically threaten her--and it makes no real impression on her. So many events don't seem to develop her character, for she's horribly unintrospective and phlegmatic. The things she wants she can scarcely explain to herself. The dialogue is markedly frustrating in how every single potential love interest calls her "kitten" and "little one" and "darling." Indeed, she barely takes up any space at all.

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### **Meredith McCaskey says**

Even Madeleine L'Engle could write a not-very-good kind of self-indulgent first novel. And what's with every man she ever meets from the time she's 14 wanting to hit on Katherine? Ew...

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### **Jenny says**

[she married Justin Vigneras although she is engaged to a man named Pete throughout the whole last third of the book. (hide spoiler)]

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## **Devon says**

I knew reading this book was going to be a weird experience but I was unprepared for how beautiful it was going to be. L'Engle's writing is often lovely but sometimes lovely just for the sake of being lovely which I always claim to dislike and then feel drawn to anyway. I wasn't particularly fond of the characters but I liked the tone of this book and the cyclical plot a lot. It left me feeling melancholy and I love when books affect my mood like that.

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## **Farahjoan says**

I used to read this author a lot as a kid, so when I saw this at the library I was intrigued. Musicians, New York City, coming of age...sure!

Oh, no. Weepy women, domineering men, terrible dialogue. It's like Attack of the Clones without any Jedi and a much less pressing conflict.

Side note: why does the main character seem to relish being babied? And why do the men like it? Gurl! Stand up for yourself.

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## **Judy says**

This is Madeleine L'Engle's first novel and what a beautiful book it is. (I missed it when I was reading books from 1945.) The story opens when Katherine is ten years old. Her mother, a famous concert pianist, is somewhere unknown to Katherine, recovering from a nearly fatal accident. Manya, an actress in the New York City theater, is caring for Katherine, who has a bit part in Manya's play.

Katherine does not want to be an actress. Her dream is to be a pianist, like her mother. She also wants her mother. She gets both of those wishes but their fulfillment comes with heartbreak, struggle and much loneliness.

Katherine's coming of age tale takes place between the World Wars. She has a most unusual childhood and adolescence for an American girl, part of which is a deeply unhappy period at boarding school in Switzerland, where her only consolations are long hours of piano practice and a beloved piano teacher.

Later, back in Greenwich Village, as her piano studies continue, she experiences love, betrayal and more heartbreak. She learns to discern whether or not friends are trustworthy and comes to terms with her priorities as a serious musician.

L'Engle vividly captures the wild emotions of adolescence, the sacrifices of becoming a true artist, the perfidy of others and the cost of finding oneself. I wish I had known of this novel in my early adult years. It was clear to me, after reading *The Small Rain*, why she became such a successful writer. She has got that view of the independence women must always struggle to achieve and maintain; she knows the prices we pay. Her awareness that at the bottom of it all is love for ourselves and for others, as well as for art, shines through the story. I must say it again: beautiful.

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## Sally Ewan says

The story of a young woman raised by artistic types who undergoes various trials in her early life (death of loved ones, horrible boarding school, lack of peers, etc) and must stay strong and persevere in her music. I could see why I loved L'Engle so much when I myself was young--the amazing idea that one would just start having deep, passionate, meaningful conversations about life with people one had just met--and yet as an adult now, it seems slightly overwrought. As one of the characters comments, "The old will never understand the young." :)

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## Margaret says

(I read and reviewed this and *A Severed Wasp* together originally, so I'm posting comments on both here rather than trying to separate them out.)

L'Engle's books quite often have to do with art, but the two Katherine Vigneras books are particularly focused: Katherine is a pianist, from a family and background of musicians, composers, and actors. The two books are very good on the artistic life, from its beginnings in *The Small Rain*, which covers Katherine's childhood and adolescence, to its later stages in *A Severed Wasp*, in which an older Katherine looks back over her life and tries to come to terms with her memories.

*The Small Rain*, which was L'Engle's first novel, is full of adolescent angst and emotion; *A Severed Wasp* is also emotional but is more contemplative. I always read them together; they make a beautiful pair.

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## Sophie Gronn says

I adore this novel. I first read it as a young adult and fell in love with the beautiful writing and the way it talks about an artist's life. Upon re-reading it, I realized just how downright strange parts of it are (ship's doctor hitting on 14-year-old Katherine, the adults in her life encouraging it, allowing Katherine to smoke and drink as a young teen, the distressing (to a present-day reader) gay bar scene.

This was "very much a first novel," as L'Engle says in the forward. I'm wondering how much of the strangeness is because of the time period it was written in and how much was L'Engle herself. I also found myself wondering what this type of novel would look like now? What's out there right now that discusses artists and how to become one from the point of view of a young girl/teen? Looking forward to re-reading *A Severed Wasp*, the sequel that came many years later.

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## Sue says

Katherine is a serious, deep-thinking child who is determined to be a pianist like her mother. As the book opens, she's ten years old, appearing in a play with her famous aunt, with whom she lives; she has not seen her mother in three years. The novel spans the next eight or nine years of Katherine's life, including bereavement, boarding school, and her first romantic affairs.

Madeline L'Engle states in the introduction that it's not autobiographical, but some of Katherine's situations are hers; she sees her as a close sister. It was her first novel, started when she was in college; unlike her best-known 'Wrinkle in Time' series, this is intended for adults, and very much set in the real world. Written in 1945, the book feels quite up-to-date in its emotional impact, despite being obviously dated in some respects.

I felt that it was a bit long-winded in places, with conversation that didn't entirely flow. Some of the characters seemed a little flat, too. But overall I found it very readable, and finished it in just a couple of days. I look forward to reading the sequel, 'A Severed Wasp' at some point.

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## **reb says**

this ranks as one of my favorite books of all time and definitely something i'd recommend to any females out there. basically it's a coming of age book, sans your typical judy bloom-like horror stories. katherine, the main character, is being raised by her composer-father who is neglectful if not anything else, and her step-mother-actress. the book chronicles the different phases she goes through as she reaches her adulthood. i thought it was very well written (as tends to be my opinion about most l'engle books) and i immediately liked the character. the only drawback that i found to this book is that l'engle later wrote a sequel to it (a severed wasp) which excited me greatly when i finished this book as i didn't want the story to end. but instead of finding the same katherine that i had enjoyed in the first book, i found a much older version that liked to solve mysteries and was a little full of herself. at any rate, the small rain is definitely a must-read.....especially for females in their teenage years.

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## **Zoe says**

Rather than hide the whole review, I'll just say now that there are massive spoilers in here. You have been warned.

I've been slowly filling in my collection of "books I loved as a young adult". Reading *The Small Rain* was partly a familiar experience and partly an entirely new one - this is because as a young adult, I only had access to an expurgated and edited version of the book called *Prelude*. L'Engle was the one who edited it, and mostly her editing consists of taking out the last half of the book. However, she also edits some scenes within what remains, making them far more idealistic and romantic rather than conflicted and in some ways quite disturbing.

In *Prelude*, one of the bits that resonated most strongly was Katherine's loneliness and feelings that no one understood her properly. I certainly felt like that as an adolescent (as indeed many adolescents do) and although my chosen creative art was words rather than music, Katherine still seemed like a sister. This feeling became more pronounced when, at a boarding school which she loathes, she finally does make friends with another girl, Sarah, and they spend so much time together and become so close that Katherine can tell her things she has never spoken about before. It's after Katherine confesses her feelings after her mother's death and Sarah is comforting her that the two girls are "sprung" by a teacher, who instantly suspects them of having an unnaturally close friendship - in other words, that they are lesbians.

I still remember how I felt about it when I was young. I burned with the injustice of the teachers' suspicions; of COURSE Katherine and Sarah weren't lesbians! They were pure soul mates, and grown-ups just sullied

everything with their horrid suspicions. Never mind that I, at that stage, was writing a (very bad) novel in which the male protagonist wound up falling in love with his male best friend. Never mind that this very bad novel made my own (female) best friend a bit nervous that I was trying to tell her something - that made me burn with misery and injustice as well.

Now that I am an adult, I read it and still burn with injustice, though less fiercely since I am no longer full of adolescent hormones. It's also for slightly different reasons - although I agree that Katherine and Sarah weren't lesbians, what would be so wrong if they were? Yes, yes, 1945, things were like that. I can't really expect much better of characters or their authors at that point in history.

Interestingly, these scenes remain unchanged (from what I can tell; I didn't do a side-by-side comparison of *Prelude* and *The Small Rain*). The rest of the book, and the edited scenes, are also quite disturbing. Katherine has a huge crush on her male piano teacher, Justin. At one point, he takes her to Paris to meet a renowned pianist. They drink too much and Justin winds up kissing her and if she didn't insist that she felt strange because of all the drink, it seems he would have been okay with sleeping with her, or at the very least taking it further. She's about 16 at this point. As it is, there's rather disturbing dialogue stressing her childishness and she goes to bed, wanting him to come in to her room. Which he does not, thankfully. Although the trip to Paris is in *Prelude*, the kiss and sexual elements are not, and *Prelude* ends shortly after that.

*The Small Rain* goes on. Katherine does sleep with a man a few years older than her whom she has known for many years and who has a physical resemblance to the idolised Justin. It's a one-off and isn't repeated, but they do discuss what would happen if she were to get pregnant and the nature of the sex quite frankly. Katherine finishes school and has a brief interlude in Paris with an almost-friend from school, who sleepwalks out the hotel window and dies. She accidentally runs into Justin's sister and eventually sees Justin again - they stay up all night talking and playing music, but nothing else happens.

Then she goes back to New York, where she finds someone to continue teaching her the piano and meets an actor she knew in her childhood (her aunt is an actress and as a child, Katherine was in a production with her). They become friends and, gradually, more than that. There's a disturbing scene with another actor that I kept thinking was going to turn into rape but didn't. She and the actor, Pete, become engaged while she is delirious with fever and severe influenza, to the point that she is hallucinating. She meets Sarah again, who is now an aspiring actress, and Sarah's friend Felix. Katherine and Sarah wind up sharing a one bedroom flat, with them taking turns between sleeping in the bed and on the couch. They briefly revisit the past accusations of lesbianism but don't say much about it. Then there's a memorable scene in which Sarah and Felix take Pete and Katherine to one of their favourite bars, which you eventually realise is a gay bar. This part is worth quoting.

At the bar sat what Katherine thought at first was a man. After a while Sarah nudged her and said, "That's Sighing Susan. She comes here almost every night."

Startled, Katherine stared at the creature again and realized that it was indeed a woman, or what had perhaps once been a woman. Now it wore a man's suit, shirt, and tie; its hair was cut short; out of a dead-white face glared a pair of despairing eyes. Feeling Katherine's gaze, the creature turned and looked at her, and that look was branded into Katherine's body; it was as though it left a physical mark.

The other people (note, people, not creatures) in the bar are briefly described. At best, they seem pathetic. At worst, they seem debauched.

So apparently, it's okay to kiss your 16-year-old student when you are a grown-up man. It's okay for a girl to



get completely, roaringly drunk and sleep with a man. It's okay for her to have a conversation with that man making it clear that it was just a one-time thing, completely beautiful and wonderful but not going to happen again and that it wasn't about being in love. It's okay for an older male actor to not-so-subtly coerce the young, pretty girlfriend of his rival into coming back to his apartment, to sexually menace her. None of these things confer inhumanity in 1945 according to L'Engle. She's willing to delve into what would have been fairly controversial and daring territory in that era. However, being a woman and cutting your hair short and wearing men's clothes makes you no longer human, it makes you a creature.

I know, I know. There's a scene in *The Well of Loneliness* which is similar, and Radclyffe Hall was a lesbian. But somehow it's different *because* she was a lesbian. L'Engle, to my knowledge, is not. She married and had children, which I know is no guarantee of heterosexuality. And yet the lesbian thing comes up over and over in her books, as does the near-pedophilia. Sometimes (as in *A House Like a Lotus*) they are the same. Sometimes, like here, they aren't. It makes me mad that L'Engle treats it so simplistically when she's prepared to see the complexity in other relationships, in other people who frankly behave much worse than just having a short haircut and wearing trousers.

It also makes me wonder whether L'Engle was trying to deny something in herself. She treats gay men more sympathetically than lesbians, which reminds me of how I felt myself as an adolescent. I also went through a quite homophobic phase at uni, just before I realised that I wasn't completely without same-sex feelings myself. And yes, I know L'Engle is not me, just as Katherine is not me, just as Katherine is not L'Engle. But because I identified so strongly with Katherine, and L'Engle writes in her preface that she did too, I can't help but be disappointed in L'Engle's cruelty and lack of understanding.

(I should make it clear that although I think it's unwise to get completely, roaringly drunk and sleep with someone you're not in love with, I don't think it's on the same level as pedophilia.)

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## Sherry says

A delightful coming-of-age tale, splendidly written. *THE SMALL RAIN* kept me up too late several nights as I eagerly read on to find out what would happen to Katherine, the introverted pianist living among glamorous famous people. Heartbreak and happiness, determination and ambition, all are expertly rendered. There is, admittedly, a fair bit of white privilege, homophobia, and mooning over one man or another—one wishes for Katherine to fully realize herself and focus on her music, but that would be a novel written today, wouldn't it?—but L'Engle has given what feels like an honest portrait of a smart, talented, brave, sometimes foolish, very young woman. I long for a sequel!

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## Melody says

I never realized as a kid that L'Engle just can't write believable dialogue. She really had a tin ear. And it really doesn't matter.

It's interesting to me how, as I work my way through the L'Engle on my shelves, I keep complaining about it and following the complaints with "but it really doesn't matter". It's true, though. The bones of the writing are so good that the flesh ... wait, it's L'Engle, so: the soul of the writing is so good that the flesh is inconsequential. Her examination of matters spiritual and philosophical is so absorbing and important that

the wooden dialogue and clumsy plotting becomes invisible.

This character study of Katherine Forrester gets under my skin a little because of L'Engle's treatment of homosexuality, in a very disturbing scene in a bar in the Village as well as some decidedly odd scenes from boarding school. It foreshadows the weirdness in *A House Like A Lotus*, I think.

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### **Rachael says**

I have read so many books in my life. I suppose, objectively speaking, this was far from the best. It is certainly, as she notes in her forward, "very much a first book". The plot is, as other reviewers have noted, clumsy, and the dialogue, regardless of who is speaking, invariably channels L'Engle philosophizing and little else.

That said, it is, on a personal level, one of the most important things I have ever touched, and my feelings for it are so deep that I am not sure how to write a candidly useful review. Katherine Forrester is my exact literary doppelganger. How queer and wonderful to have discovered so suddenly and so late that such a thing even exists. I do not know if anyone else I know on here would like this book and, frankly, I do not care. But, for what it is worth, it is now on my list of top five all-time favorites, and we will, most assuredly, be meeting up again.

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### **Emily says**

It's been a long time since I read this (18 years-I read it during the first year of my marriage), but I still remember that this book wrecked me. That might not sound like a recommendation, but it is: I love it when writing is that powerful.

That year (1995) was my Madeline L'Engle year. I read books of hers I hadn't read and re-read what I had read before, and it was all grand. Madeline L'Engle feeding frenzies are good for the soul.

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