



A Severed Wasp

Madeleine L'Engle

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Katherine Forrester Vigneras, in a continuation of her story from *The Small Rain*, returns to New York City from Europe to retire. Now in her seventies, she encounters an old friend from her Greenwich Village days who, it turns out, is the former Bishop of New York. He asks Katherine to give a benefit concert at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. This leads to new demands on her resources--human, artistic, psychological, and spiritual--that are entirely unexpected.

A Severed Wasp Details

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From Reader Review A Severed Wasp for online ebook

Kate says

Um, WTF ML'E? This has a bizarre soap opera storyline. So much craziness without a real purpose for it. She clearly has all kinds of things to work out with homosexuality...and race. And these to Katherine Forrester Vigneras books are none too feminist-friendly. Yikes and yikes.

Here's a quote that reflects a major theme (unhappy jealous women) in the book: "Unhappy women often want to make their sons hate their fathers, in order to keep on possessing them, even beyond the grave. You have just seen what an unhappy, jealous woman can be driven to do."

Also, spoiler alert, the only people of color in the book are the villains.

There's lots of creepy older man/younger women stuff, as usual.

I love ML'E on the whole, but I really, really don't like her beauty obsession. Any woman of value must be or become beautiful (Meg, Polly, Flip, Katherine, etc.) and ugliness usually is equated with bad temperment.

So, majorly disappointed in this one and makes me dislike more *The Small Rain* in retrospect.

Katharine Holden says

Rather silly novel overflowing with more tragedies than a year's worth of soap opera scripts. All the characters speak in lengthy paragraphs and can divine a person's level of musical talent by looking into his or her eyes.

Rachel says

If a student turned writing like this in, I'd be proud. If I had never heard of the author, I would probably put it down. From Madeleine L'Engle, it's disappointing (and oh, does it hurt to say that). I'm only pushing through out of loyalty to her. This book would probably make a dynamite short story, but it just takes so long for everything to happen! It's a little soap-opera-y too, like too many sensationalist subplots. I do like the characterization. Whatever. I'm not quite done, but I know the last chapter won't change my mind. That certainty is what makes this book not as good as it could be. I wouldn't recommend it; go for *Meet the Austins* or *A Wrinkle in Time* and their successors.

Virginia says

I kept reading this one hoping I would like it more than I did - it was very slow and measured, and everyone sat around at drank tea a lot. And ate dinner. And went to dinner parties. And took long baths. And in dribs and drabs in between all that there was some plot. But only a little bit. And very understated. A lot of people on Amazon loved this book, but it was just not for me.

Beth says

This was an uglier read than I remembered. Some plot points were horrifying. The writing was classic L'Engle, always a plus, but the darkness dragged this book down. This is a personal perception - others may not mind the darkness - but L'Engle, to me, was a writer who saw hope in everything, who stressed that cliché silver lining. That clear-eyed joy in all things was what drew me to her works.

Other negatives: the plot wrapped up too hastily and the plethora of immensely talented people became frustrating. So did the insinuation that a lack of such talent is a heartbreaking thing. Why not celebrate average people?

This will be one of her books (possibly the only one) I never revisit.

Liz says

This is, by far, my very favorite L'Engle piece. Since she was a family friend, I grew up reading all of her books since they were what I always got for birthdays, Christmas and anniversaries of baptism. As I grew older, I was given books like this one, or *A Live Coal in the Sea*, and I fell in love all over again. This, more than the others, has been a staple in the readings of my life. I read it over and over again, perpetually amazed at the magic that comes from her words. I feel so at home in this book, surrounded by music and God. Once, I used this novel as a devotional to try to mix-up my Bible Study routine, and tried to find the workings of God in every character in every page. It was one of the greatest things I've ever done for myself, because I find that I relate so well to the characters, and can find new ways to relate to God through them.

If you're not sure that you want to read this book, remember that action comes before faith. Read the book, and you won't be able to put it down.

Sally Ewan says

It's interesting to think that L'Engle wrote this novel so many years after "*The Small Rain*". We see Katherine Vigneras retired from piano performance and settling in NYC, reconnecting with a friend from long ago and getting drawn into a psychological drama. Again, I am amazed at the way people approach the main character. It's typically like this: "Katherine/Katya/Madame Vigneras, I've only known you for a few days/two minutes/an hour but I feel like you know my soul and so I'm going to talk to you in a way that most people only do with their therapist of twenty years." ! That feels a little odd, as if the main character is just a foil for confession on the part of others.

This book came out in the early 1980s, and L'Engle touches upon the cultural obsession with sex and sexuality in a very current way. (Nothing new under the sun, I suppose.) I do like the way Katherine talks about marriage as something that requires effort but is ultimately worth that effort, encouraging others to persevere and show grace to one another.

Kristi says

Having loved L'Engle's *Wrinkle in Time* (and related stories), I devoured *A Small Rain* and *A Severed Wasp* over a weekend. I have to say that I enjoyed the grownup Katherine more than I did the helpless youthful Katherine. Her character is graceful, composed, elegant, but still human. The New York atmosphere gave it additional romance, all of that tenseness and heat of the city.

Rachael says

Got about 80-ish% through and have not picked it back up in months, so am probably not going to finish. I don't usually review unfinished books, but, unless something really amazing happens in the last couple of pages, I can assure you you're not missing much. I feel like I have an unusually high tolerance for so-called "slow" books, because I enjoy rich language, setting, introspection, etc. Unfortunately, this is the single slowest book I've ever read, and I finally couldn't take it anymore. There *is* some meat to it (what else would you expect from Madeleine L'Engle?), which is why I gave two stars instead of one. But you have to stay immersed for a desperately long time whenever you sit down to read before this other layer starts sifting through. Maybe I'll come back to it in three or four decades and find it's much better than I remember. But, at least for now, I pass.

Holly says

I enjoyed reading this book, but didn't love it. I couldn't fully relate to a single one of the characters, but I appreciated the themes of reflection, contextual family (in this case, the people you are thrown together with in life rather than your blood relations), and some possible social and political situations I had never before imagined. Although I enjoyed spending time with Madame Vigneras, I hated how all of the other characters, especially Felix, just talked at her for ages while she never had a chance to speak much, and then spoke about how well she loved him as a friend. I would not enjoy that person as a friend, and I truly didn't think she would either! Also, there was a mention of sexual assault on children that was glossed over with rationale, which I felt was totally inappropriate, but I'm guessing not so outrageous for the time in which it was written. All of that said, L'Engle's words and storytelling kept me rapt and also offered some very beautiful turns of phrase, as expected. Themes are love, loss, friendships with people who work in churches, piano and organ playing, classical music, age, reflection, community, and New York. If any of that grabs you, pick up a severed wasp!

Ann Boytim says

This is the second book featuring Katherine who has returned to the US from living in Europe. Katherine now in her seventies is now widowed and was married to her mentor and composer husband Justin for many years. In her past Katherine was put in prison and her husband sent to a prisoner of war camp. Justin was originally Katherine's piano teacher but after his hands were broken in the POW camp he became a composer and no longer was able to play but continued to push Katherine in her career. Katherine meets an old friend from the past and find out that he had become a priest but is now in retirement. Katherine owns an apartment house and becomes good friends with one of her tenants, a woman Dr. Katherine has many secrets in her life and because of circumstances that Justin suffered in the POW camp they were unable to have children but

Katherine had two children by different fathers - this was known to Justin who wanted children in his life. Katherine has started to get nasty phone calls and finds out that her priest friend also has some enemies. Even though Katherine has retired she is persuaded to give a benefit concert for the church and becomes involved in the community.

Austen to Zafón says

I don't know why this says it's an Austin Family book; it isn't. It's a sequel to *A Small Rain*. Although this book, written much later in L'Engle's life, is more mature in style, I liked it less than *A Small Rain*, which was her first published book. The story moves from Europe to New York and centers around a church there, and I think that I'm just not that interested in the new setting. I read it because I really wanted to see Katherine, the main character, grown up. I still would recommend it if you like L'Engle. It didn't interest me as much personally, but the writing was quite good. Oh, and I should say that I was fascinated and also horrified to read the George Orwell quote from which the title comes: "I thought of a rather cruel trick I once played on a wasp. He was sucking jam on my plate, and I cut him in half. He paid no attention, merely went on with his meal, while a tiny stream of jam trickled out of his severed esophagus. Only when he tried to fly away did he grasp the dreadful thing that had happened to him. It is the same with modern man. The thing that has been cut away is his soul, and there was a period -- twenty years, perhaps -- when he did not notice it." —"Notes On The Way", George Orwell: *The Collected Essays, Journalism & Letters. Volume Two*

Marietje says

This book was tacky to say the least. And Katherine Vigneras, the protagonist, became too much of a saint to remain credible. I am disappointed.

Frona says

Wisdom, happiness, freedom and lots of other things are so desirable that we pursue them purely for themselves, though they are only attainable as means or by-products of our other, less tempting goals. They are like unexpected guests who come and go and never stay for long. The more one is trying to take hold of them, the more elusive and annoyed they become. So, when wisdom is the main goal in the story (or life) and everything else is subdued to it, there is a chance of converting a novel into sermon and excitement into dullness, by leaving out the alluring fuel that is made of inner conflicts, trials, transforming dialogue between the characters and their circumstances. To a moderate degree this happened to *A Severed Wasp*.

A retired piano virtuoso returns to her birthplace to find solace, but bumps into an old acquaintance that needs her help. Between warm baths, herbal tea rituals and neck massages she finds the time to heat up her experience-made pot and pour the wisdom among the thirsty gathering that loiters around. She becomes a sage for the church congregation, a mentor to their prodigal children and a prosecutor of the mischief among them. Former pop star, reminiscences of Nazism and homophobic calls mingle in.

What makes the plot bizarre is the fact that it is a sequel to *Little Rain*, a simple novel written around fifty years earlier, that resembles any other coming-of-age book. The author and protagonist surely have matured; the youthful determination and sincerity that made the prequel somewhat bearable have been replaced with

stiffness and versatile plot twists that the protagonist, like god, straightens out with her magical touch. The old age seems to smooth the strains and edges like rivers do with pebbles. Unfortunately, the fun is not so much in the final result as it is in transformation.

PF says

One of the great pleasures for me in reading this book is the chapter by chapter unfolding of the petals of a great blossom, the way perspective and points of view shift on astounding plot turns revealing completely new ways of looking at the cast of characters and the rest of the book. And this **KEEPS** happening throughout the entire book! To write a review full of spoilers would take away the potential for that pleasure from future readers, so please excuse me if I avoid plot details entirely.

This book is one of my favorites of all time. Mme. Vignerass, the main character, is very subtle in her communications, with layers and layers of unstated meaning implied. Often when she makes a statement, it is for the specific purpose of eliciting a response from the other character or the reader, of provoking them into questioning or thinking more deeply about what was said. This is an incredibly richly textured book, requiring deep reading and looking explicitly between the lines. Each time I re-read it, I discover something I had previously missed in earlier readings. Many of the plot turns echo in the brain and challenge the reader to examine their own conscience, the context of the book, the perspectives of the characters, and more. They justly deserve a hard look and much thought, and it is a good sign when one's initial reading is disturbing, and has provoked a variety kinds of questions and emotions. As someone who has read this book more times than I can count, I assure you, the explanations and justifications **ARE** present in the book. However, finding them will require looking as deeply into oneself and those around you as into the book itself.

Melissa Wheatley says

"A Severed Wasp" kept me engaged and I read it quickly. There were certainly some wonderful lines in this book, and continuing Katherine's story is a treat, but I do agree with other reviews that mentioned that at times the soap opera melodrama is heaped on.

I read this immediately after devouring "The Small Rain" and enjoyed seeing where the years had taken both L'Engle as a writer and Madame Vignerass as a character... both matured and deepened in the 40+ years that passed between the two novels, as one rightly expects, but there were several times I could imagine this book being about a different heroine altogether as Katherine and many of the characters from the first book have drastically departed from who they were when last we left them.

While I ultimately enjoyed The Small Rain more, the themes in this book disrupted and challenged me in helpful ways. Both are worth a read. Forgiveness, aging, and fidelity were explored through complex relationships, perhaps the most unexpected of which is that of art and religion. Katherine is a window cleaner, after all.

Margaret says

For my thoughts on this, please see my review of The Small Rain.

Tiffany Reisz says

A very odd and lovely book. For anyone searching for perspective about the world of today, you absolutely must read books written 20, 30, 40, 50, 100 years ago. This book came out in 1982 and at several points in the book people are wishful and wistful for a simpler, safer time. One person complains that kids don't know how to play anymore. All they want are electronics. Sound familiar? No one living in a simpler day and age knows they're living in a simpler day and age. Everyone thinks their time is the scariest, the most chaotic, the most disconnected from the real world. Books like this give me a great deal of perspective on my own feelings and fears about the modern era. Even in a book written in 1920, I read the author complaining that nobody is self-sufficient anymore, that urban life has disconnected everyone from the land and nature. 1920! When only a third of the country even had electricity in their homes!

Any who, about the book itself. It's the story of Katherine, a retired great pianist who gets involved in the weird goings-on at a cathedral. It's a lovely book and very refreshing to read something where the heroine is older (77) and there's no romance with any of the major or minor characters. It's more about people coming to terms with the pains of their past.

And did I mention the good bishop in the book is bisexual? In 1982? And he's not judged for it by the author? It's very lovely to read that. L'Engle might not have been ahead of her time. I think everyone else is behind the times.

Genessa says

This isn't my usual fare, but I'd read other L'Engle books previously and the blurb on the back cover sounded interesting--and goodness am I glad I picked this up. The depth and complexity of the characters are marvellous, and the way their personalities intertwine in the plot is superb. But more than the excellent writing and likeable, human, characters, the... mindset (if you will) or perhaps atmosphere of the book is what really drew me in. I loved the wisdom and compassion shown by the characters, the way they struggle and learn in and through the difficulties of life in order to find peace and resolution. This is the kind of book, I think, that leads one to do some soul examining and emerge therefrom healthier and richer of self, and therefore more compassionate and understanding of others.

Beth says

I love L'Engle so much, and this was written beautifully, but it took me forever because I just couldn't get beneath the surface of the prose. I didn't realize it was a sequel--maybe that has something to do with it.
