A Wrinkle in Time isn’t for cynics — or adults

Madeleine L’Engle’s 1962 children’s novel *A Wrinkle in Time* is a weird book — and that’s gloriously deliberate. It’s about a family where weirdness is the norm, the natural offshoot of scientific brilliance and wild creativity. But it’s also about how one member of that family struggles with her own awkwardness, unlikability, and temper, and how those faults become assets in a supernatural fight to save her family from a vast interplanetary evil.

The new Disney film adaptation *A Wrinkle in Time*, directed by Ava DuVernay (an Oscar nominee for the 2015 historical feature *Selma* and the 2017 documentary *13th*), pays a lot of lip service to that awkwardness but never convincingly captures it. L’Engle’s brand of weirdness can be ugly and unsettling, as her characters suffer physical abuse, fight their own uncontrollable rages, or just spout oddball jargon, oblivious to the ways they’re alienating or offending other people. The film is unmistakably the Disney version of the story, with anything potentially problematic or offensive sanded off and replaced with soft, pastel CGI. It’s a pretty take on the story, but it’s also a frustratingly safe and squishy one. It’s infinitely well-intentioned, full of warm self-affirmation and positivity, and absolutely nothing about it feels emotionally authentic enough to drive those messages home.





Photo by Atsushi Nishijima / Walt Disney Pictures

Storm Reid stars as Meg Murry, the teenage daughter of two scientists (Gugu Mbatha-Raw and Chris Pine) who are investigating a way to travel the universe by tessering, a vaguely hand-waved method of channeling quantum entanglement and atomic frequencies. Meg is deeply devoted to her father Mr. Murry, who brings her into his lab at a young age and stokes her interest in science. When he suddenly disappears, shortly after he and Mrs. Murry adopt a young son, Charles Wallace (Deric McCabe), Meg is devastated. Four years later, Mr. Murry is still missing, Charles Wallace is almost unbearably precocious, and Meg is acting out at school, where a preening bully keeps poking her about her missing dad.

Then Charles Wallace introduces Meg to three mysterious women. Mrs. Whatsit (Reese Witherspoon) chatters incessantly and flits about whatever space she’s in like a loud, exotic bird. Mrs. Who (Mindy Kaling) can only speak in quotes from poets and rappers because she’s “evolved beyond language,” until the

screenwriters apparently get tired of that. And Mrs. Which (Oprah Winfrey) spends half the film as a towering, semi-visible giant, a benevolently stiff goddess-figure looming over the proceedings. All three are intensely glammed-up, vividly colorful versions of L'Engle's alien strangers, which underlines one of the odder things about this *Wrinkle* adaptation: it feels like a feature-length version of the costume ball from Disney's live-action *Beauty and the Beast*. As the three "Mrses" take Meg, Charles Wallace, and a local boy named Calvin (*Pan* star Levi Miller) on a cross-universe trek to save Mr. Murry, Meg fights her anger, distrust, and resentment, or at least the softened version of it that is permissible in a Disney movie.

Screenwriters Jennifer Lee (*Frozen*, *Wreck-It Ralph*) and Jeff Stockwell (*Bridge to Terabithia*) take plenty of their material directly from L'Engle's book, but that isn't always a plus. Lines like Mrs. Whatsit saying, "Wild nights are my glory!" or Mrs. Who's Rumi quotes play as quirky on the page but sound stiff and pretentious coming out of actors' mouths. Much as Hollywood spent decades trying to figure out how to put costumed superheroes on-screen without making them look vaguely ridiculous, L'Engle's idiosyncratic rhythms don't translate well to the way people really speak — especially when they're hitting for the bleachers the way they are here.





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Which is one of *Wrinkle*’s biggest issues: the performances are virtually all loud and strident, pitched with the energy of people in a Broadway musical trying to make sure their smiles still play for the ticketholders in the nosebleed section. Everything about the film operates at the same intense fever pitch: the glistening score urgently batters the audience in every direction, the colors are eye-bleedingly bright, and the emotions are big enough to play on the tiniest phone screen. This is a big, big movie, full of shouted lines and exclamation points. And that perpetually works against the intended personal qualities of the story, which is theoretically as much about one girl navigating her own self-loathing as it is about a huge, symbolic battle between good and evil.

But Lee and Stockwell, in particular, are more invested in the battle, which they spell out in the broadest, most naked terms with perktastic lines like, “Love is always there, even if you

can’t feel it! It’s always there for you!” or “We serve the light and good in the universe!” The dialogue in the movie is often strangely clunky and artificial, as when Calvin abruptly says at one point, “I smell food. Like, good, *roasted* food.” But it’s especially awkward around the good / evil, light / dark dichotomy, which is never really put into more relatable terms. Like C.S. Lewis before her, L’Engle was a frank Christian who put her beliefs into her work, and her *Wrinkle in Time* is both open about its religious imagery, and about her belief that love is a powerful force against the self-serving power of evil. But even so, L’Engle never had her Mr. Murry standing in his lab shouting “*Love* is the frequency!” as his wife’s love for their child suddenly makes all his mysterious scientific machines work.



Photo by Atsushi Nishijima / Walt Disney Pictures

And this overstatedness isn’t the only major script problem. Curiously, Lee and Stockwell keep the major movements of the

script but consistently remove their purpose. Calvin is included, but never given any purpose besides complimenting Meg to make her feel more comfortable in her own skin. The specific travels from planet to planet are preserved, but the reasoning behind them has been removed, making the storyline feel haphazard, accidental, and overstretched. Too much of the story feels arbitrary, driven by images instead of narrative purpose.

For all its clumsiness and overstatedness, *A Wrinkle in Time* is a bold film. It's certainly not meant for cynics. It wears its heart openly on its sleeve and shouts about the importance of said heart every few minutes. And that heart is unquestionably in the right place, given how script crowds ideas about self-acceptance and individuality into every segment. Meg, for instance, can't tesser easily because instantaneous travel involves letting go of herself and translating into energy, and once she does, she doesn't want to return to the physical identity that bullies have told her to hate. So where Calvin and Charles Wallace bounce effortlessly around the universe, Meg strains and struggles until she learns to like herself.

DuVernay fills the film with these kinds of confident, distinctive choices, from the flamboyant, retro-futuristic look of the three Mrses to the surreal imagery surrounding on-screen antagonist Red (Michael Peña). Her take on *Wrinkle* is a poster-worthy movie, with striking images around every corner. And it's full of pro-science, pro-uniqueness, pro-connection messaging. It's just strident and overstated about all these things to a degree that adult viewers are going to find hard to swallow.



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And the boldest move of all — casting Reid as Meg, and making the character biracial — is curiously underplayed. As in the book, Meg hates how she looks; her wild mane of hair and her thick glasses embarrass and infuriate her. But Reid's casting brings a new dimension to the story, by suggesting a connection between Meg's coming-of-age awkwardness and the notorious identity struggles biracial people face. The focus on her hair seems particularly telling, given the complicated politics around black women's hair.

But even in a movie where everything is spelled out and shouted, this daring choice is never overtly examined. In an environment where more and more movies are thoughtfully examining race, and the real experiences of people of color, this seems like a missed opportunity. And it's a particular disappointment in a film that spends so much screen time on loudly, insistently spelling out its intentions. Young kids may well be along for the entirety of *A Wrinkle in Time*'s

joyride, from the fight against bullies to the wild CGI adventures. But like many of the best children’s stories, L’Engle’s quirky, comparatively quiet original book was grounded and authentic enough to play for adults, too. In the attempt to make this story bigger, louder, and safer, a lot of its best qualities have been left behind.

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