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Why it took 54 years to turn *A Wrinkle in Time* into a movie

By [Eliza Berman](#) | Photograph by [Michal Pudelka](#) for
TIME

“Dear Mr. Disney”—

That’s how a 10-year-old girl named Catherine began her letter to the most powerful man in movies during the bitter, final months of 1963. She had experienced that year’s traumas like most children do, through the anxious whispers of adults, despair moving a few feet above her head. She wanted to tell Mr. Disney about a book that had given her hope, one she thought could do the same for a nation of kids who felt the world around them darkening. If only he would put its story on film. But she never sent the letter, setting it aside in a moment of resignation. Three years later, when Walt Disney died of lung cancer, she was inconsolable. Not only was the maestro of the Mouse House gone, but she couldn’t think of anyone else who could make that movie. So she resolved to do it herself one day.

Fifty-four years later, producer Catherine Hand nearly has. *A Wrinkle in Time*, a Disney movie based on Madeleine L’Engle’s 1962 novel of the same name, will come out on March 9, 2018. The film brings to life the story of Meg Murry, a gangly adolescent who travels across dimensions to rescue her scientist father. Meg is guided by a trio of guardian angels collectively called “the Mrs.” The book, and the movie, is about what it means to be a source of light in a world in which darkness seems only to proliferate. It also makes the case for thinking independently when conformity is the norm.



“I wasn’t just casting for actresses. I was casting for leaders—icons,” DuVernay says of choosing Mindy Kaling, Oprah Winfrey and Reese Witherspoon to play Mrs. Who, Mrs. Which and Mrs. Whatsit, respectively. DISNEY

As a child, Hand assumed that the power to adapt *Wrinkle* rested with a single man. But it took a collective of women to finally do it: Hand, who later in life befriended the author; screenwriter Jennifer Lee, best known for writing and co-directing the Disney megahit *Frozen*; and Oscar-nominated director Ava DuVernay. Plus DuVernay’s cast. For the all-powerful trio of Mrs., she chose Hollywood’s own all-powerful: Oprah Winfrey, Reese Witherspoon and Mindy Kaling. And for the young hero at the center of it all, she will introduce moviegoers to Storm Reid.

As a novel, *A Wrinkle in Time* has been a mainstay of middle school English curricula for decades. It introduced the spiritual antecedent to Katniss Everdeen, Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Hermione Granger. And it posed a series of philosophical questions that are no less relevant in the era of Trump and Putin than they were in the time of Kennedy and Khrushchev. High stakes, in other words. As Winfrey sees it, *Wrinkle* the movie heightens the stakes even more. “I felt like we were making the new *Wizard of Oz* for another generation.”

**“I felt like we were making the new
Wizard of Oz for another generation.”**

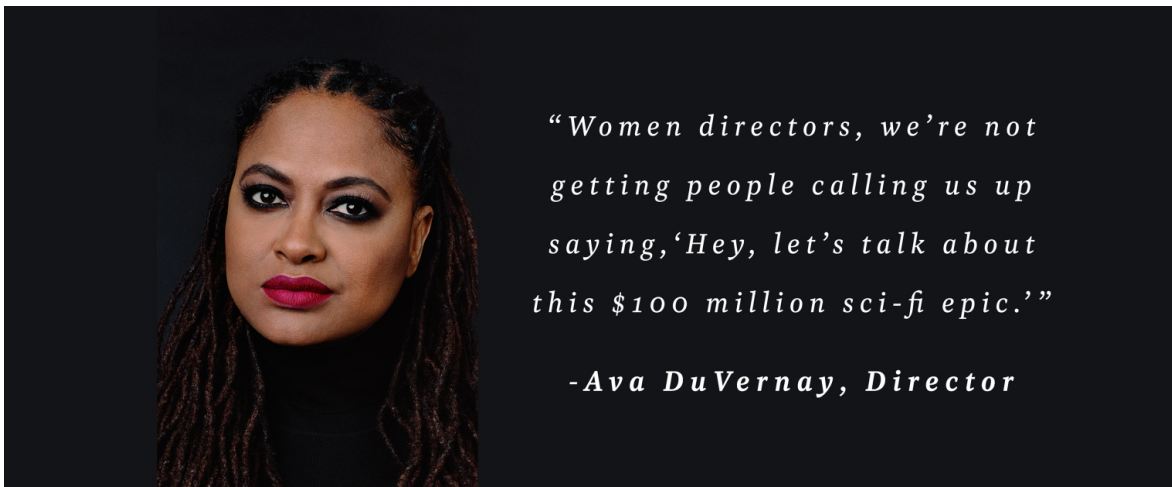
-Oprah Winfrey

***A Wrinkle in Time* begins** with the mother of all literary clichés: “It was a dark and stormy night.” But what follows is wholly original. When *Wrinkle* was first published, L’Engle was 17 years into a writing career that would span fiction,

nonfiction, poetry and theater. The idea for the book came to her during a family camping trip when the names of three old-as-time ethereal beings—Mrs. Whatsit, Mrs. Which and Mrs. Who—“popped” into her mind.

She had been on something of a cosmology bender, soaking up the works of Arthur Eddington, Max Planck and Albert Einstein. The theory of relativity interested her, and she’d come across the concept of a “tesseract”—familiar to anyone versed in advanced geometry or Marvel’s Avengers movies. From there, she conjured a story about a girl who “tessers,” or travels in the fifth dimension—or, as the writer put it, traverses a wrinkle in time.

The book is partly autobiographical. As a girl, L’Engle had felt gawky and unwanted. She would come home in the afternoon and write stories with heroes she aspired to be like. But when she created Meg Murry, she crafted one who shared what L’Engle felt as her own failings: Meg is an outcast who struggles in school, her scientist parents’ genes for brilliance taking some time to express themselves. She’s also angsty and angry and troubled by the injustices around her.



MICHAL PUDELKA FOR TIME

The story is driven by Meg’s search for her father, whose disappearance may have been inspired by the emotional distance of L’Engle’s own. With the help of the Mrs., her younger brother and a hunky classmate named Calvin, Meg seeks him by beaming to planets with names like Ixchel and Uriel. She learns of an evil Dark Thing descending over a world called Camazotz, where humans’ minds are plugged into a disembodied brain that controls them. On Camazotz, evidently modeled after postwar suburbs like Levittown, N.Y., the children are carbon copies who bounce their bouncy balls in eerie unison. In the end, Meg learns that she has had the tools—critical thinking and boundless love—required to save her father all along.

The tale almost never saw the light of day. Unlike L’Engle’s previous novels, this one puzzled publishers. Some rejected it because they believed its themes too challenging for young readers. Some objected to its portrayal of evil, and still others wouldn’t bet on a female sci-fi protagonist. All told, it met with some 26 rejections

before Farrar, Straus and Giroux took a chance. The book, the first in what would come to be known as the *Time Quintet* series, hasn't gone out of print since. As of its 50th anniversary in 2012, *Wrinkle* had sold more than 10 million copies worldwide.

After its publication, *Wrinkle* was controversial. It's still one of the most frequently banned American books, in the company of censored classics *The Catcher in the Rye* (profanity) and *Charlotte's Web* (talking animals). Most objections were made on the grounds that it was un-Christian. The book is reverential of Jesus, but it also equates him with historical geniuses like da Vinci and Gandhi. (L'Engle was a Christian.) The book promotes, according to critics, witchcraft, divination and a "new age" approach to spirituality.

L'Engle, who died in 2007 at 88, eventually came to accept the great publicity attempts to censor *Wrinkle* proffered. Not that the book, which won the Newbery Prize in 1963, needed it. Its influence helped launch a new generation of fantasy writers and new types of books that didn't quite fit in any one section of the library. Not least among the reasons *Wrinkle* was so novel and widely read: its hero was a girl.

Watch the Wrinkle In Time Trailer

DuVernay wasn't exactly expecting the call from Disney. "Women directors, we're not getting people just saying, 'Hey, let's talk about this \$100 million sci-fi epic,'" she says, sitting beside her cast a short while after TIME's cover shoot for this story. She says she didn't accept the job immediately when the studio offered it in 2016. She had never read *A Wrinkle in Time*. Both she and longtime collaborator Winfrey, who grew up in Compton, Calif., and Milwaukee, respectively, say it "missed" their neighborhoods.

DuVernay says a challenge issued by Tendo Nagenda, the Disney executive who put the script in her hands, kept nagging at her. "Ava, imagine the worlds you can create," she recalls him saying. "And I said, 'Worlds?' He said, 'There are planets, and you get to decide what they look like.' I was just like, 'I do?'" DuVernay gets a little emotional, recalling the feeling: "How many women hear that? How many people of color hear that?"

At the mention of Nagenda's name, Winfrey sits straight up, assuming a meditative position with thumbs to fore-fingers, and repeats in her unmistakable alto: "TEN-Do Na-Gen-Da." The room erupts into a chorus of reverential murmurs: "Ten-Do Na-Gen-DA."

DuVernay, who started out as a film publicist, launched her filmmaking career with low-budget indies, including *Middle of Nowhere*, which earned a directing award at Sundance in 2012. In 2015, her drama about Martin Luther King Jr., *Selma*, was nominated for an Oscar for Best Picture. *Wrinkle* will make DuVernay the fourth woman to solo-direct a movie with a budget over \$100 million and the first - African-American woman ever to do so. People can't seem to stop asking her about that, including TIME. She sums up all these conversations: Question: "Girl, how did you do it?" Answer: "Same way he did it!" "I've made films for \$50,000," she says. "So when people say, 'How are you managing \$100 million?' It's like, 'Quite well.'"

When it came to envisioning *Wrinkle*'s worlds, the first thing DuVernay saw was not topography but faces. She wanted Meg to have brown skin, and the three Mrs. to be "black, white and someone who wasn't either," as well as different sizes, faiths and ages. "I wasn't just casting for actresses. I was casting for leaders—icons," she says. "Reese is the hottest producer in town. Oprah's the most prolific, venerable legend of television and an artist and entrepreneur. And Mindy's one of the few women running a show with her name, about her." She looks at the faces to her left and right. "When I think about the three of them together as a unit of celestial beings, it feels right."



Witherspoon, pictured with Reid, appreciated that DuVernay wanted to bring “a youthful spirit and vitality” to Mrs. Whatsit, who is said in the book to be more than 2 billion years old. DISNEY

Those celestial beings include Mrs. Who, who speaks almost exclusively in the words of Buddha, Euripedes and others. (In the film, she references such contemporary philosophers as Justin Bieber and Jay-Z.) DuVernay chose the “Chaplin-esque” Kaling to play her. Mrs. Whatsit, played by Witherspoon, is the youngest at 2,379,152,497 years old, and the kookiest. And for Mrs. Which, the oldest and most enlightened, DuVernay didn’t have to think twice. “There’s not even a question if you’re trying to have the all-knowing, wisest lady in the universe, who happens to be one in real life, and you have her phone number.” You just call up Oprah Winfrey, who starred in *Selma* and executive-produces DuVernay’s TV series *Queen Sugar* on OWN. “Who else would you get?” Winfrey asks, half-joking.

For the role of Meg, DuVernay auditioned about 70 girls. Reid, who had had a few small roles in films including *12 Years a Slave*, was among the first the director saw. “She became the benchmark for what I was looking for,” says DuVernay. The director adds that hiring a mature young actor whom adults could relate to was crucial. “I don’t have kids for a reason,” says DuVernay, patting Reid’s knee affectionately as if to say, “No offense.” “My films are my children.”

During the photo shoot, the women had patiently heeded directions from the photographer as a gaggle of makeup artists, stylists, publicists, assistants and a burly bodyguard type looked on. Reid, resplendent in a Gucci gown, showed uncanny poise. You might have mistaken her for older than 14 if not for her eyes. After every click of the shutter, they searched the crowd for her mother’s face, looking back at her with reassurance.

Reid, who grew up in Atlanta, seems to understand fundamentally the character she’s playing. For her, the movie is “about knowing that you’re going to go through dark spaces in your life. You’re not going to be perfect, but the most important thing is not trying to please anybody. It’s loving yourself inside out.”

“It’s just a different perspective, and you don’t get that until we start to have powerful filmmakers of different colors, different genders.” -Reese Witherspoon

So why did it take nearly six decades to get here? Everything that could go wrong, did. When Hand first began trying in 1979, she was working as an assistant to the legendary TV producer Norman Lear. She asked if he’d read the book and, although he liked it, he didn’t see it as a fit for himself. She persuaded the head of his production company to acquire the rights. From that point on, it was one step forward, two tesses back.

Hand had one big advantage in her efforts to make the movie. Three days after reaching out to L’Engle to inquire about the rights, she was sitting across from her childhood idol at the World Trade Center’s Windows on the World restaurant, the first meeting in what would become a long friendship. Hand was in her 20s and L’Engle in her 60s.

In 2003, Hand worked with Disney to produce a made-for-TV movie. Thanks to budget constraints, among other issues, the adaptation turned out bland and uninspiring. It disappointed audiences, L’Engle and Hand. “This is not the dream,” Hand recalls telling herself. “I’m sure there were people at Disney that wished I would go away.”

Nagenda wasn’t one of them. In 2013, Disney’s executive vice president of production decided he wanted to try again. Nagenda, one of Hollywood’s highest-ranking African-American executives, was born in the U.S. but spent a formative part of his adolescence in his father’s native Uganda. At Disney, he has shown a particular talent for helping transform old stories for new times. And after *Frozen*, executives discovered that *A Wrinkle in Time* had been writer-director Lee’s favorite book as a child. Hand says the rest “was kismet.”

Lee was everything Hand had been searching for decades earlier. Aside from her success with *Frozen*, which won two Oscars, Lee also had a fascination with the intersection between science and faith. That *Wrinkle* is equally reverent of the two, rather than treating them in opposition, is no less significant in 2018 than it was in 1962. The studio brought a draft to DuVernay more than 20 years after Disney first acquired the rights to *Wrinkle*.



On a warm spring morning in Santa Clarita, Calif., Reid is flying. Her spring-loaded curls are taking on a life of their own, thanks to giant fans just out of frame. Eventually, the blue screen behind her will be replaced with billowy clouds against an impossible sky. The movie's visuals are more than a little weird, something like the results of a highly productive LSD trip. "Men who are doing sci-fi I don't think are having as much fun in the makeup, hair and clothes as we did," says DuVernay. Winfrey's hair, perched above her rhinestone-bedazzled brow, alternates between voluminous Earth Mother curls and Frank Gehry splines, for example.

Kaling's kaleidoscopic costumes borrow from cultures across the globe and, well, Witherspoon sports shamrock lip gloss and a tangerine bouffant.

It wouldn't be farfetched to describe the set, both on location in New Zealand and on the Disney lot in California, as a matriarchy. DuVernay recalls the rapid formation of a sisterhood. "The men, you know, who knows?" she jokes, before clarifying that the guys, including Chris Pine and Zach Galifianakis, who play Meg's father Dr. Murry and a soothsaying mystic called the Happy Medium, respectively, were lovely people. "But it was something special with the ladies."

I mention that the women's social-media posts against the backdrop of New Zealand's vivid greens and blues were enough to inspire FOMO, short for the "fear of missing out." There's confusion:

"What's FOMO?" asks DuVernay. She turns to Winfrey: "Did you know?"

Winfrey nods.

Kaling chimes in: she has it regularly, in fact, "pretty acutely."

Winfrey says that Gayle King, her best friend, has it too. "She'll fly across the country for your birthday party."

Kaling says making this movie was more than just a refreshing dose of woman power. "The essential quality of Ava is not, to my mind, tied to her woman-ness. It's tied to her Ava-ness." It began with an exacting attention. Lee recalls DuVernay asking, "Can you think on this scene and sort of lean into how to disprove Einstein's theory of relativity?" She laughs, "I was like, 'Sure, no problem.'"

DuVernay's demands weren't only -production-related. "I've never seen somebody demand inclusiveness like that," says Witherspoon, who has worked in Hollywood for 25 years. "It's just a different perspective, and you don't get that unless we start to have powerful filmmakers of different colors, different genders. You're just gonna have the same 20 dudes making the same 20 movies over and over and over again." Winfrey agrees. "I looked at her in her jeans and sneakers and those dreads out there calling it," she says. "It's just the coolest damn thing to watch her with those big-ass machines. It just feels like, O.K., next generation: there you are."

Despite its mega-budget, its global fan base, its award-winning writer and director, its all-star cast and, yes, even despite the presence of Oprah, there's no guarantee *A Wrinkle in Time* will be a hit. Or the adaptation L'Engle and Hand always envisioned. Online shops from Walmart to Etsy sell T-shirts that read, The book was better. Twitter is already flooded with messages from fans begging Disney not to ruin their childhoods. "I used to laugh with Madeleine, and she knew it too," Hand says wistfully. "I mean, jeez—you always have the book."

A Wrinkle in Time, the movie, will come out at a time much like the one during which Hand was planning to lobby Mr. Disney. Audiences clearly want a balance between escapism and reality, stories that leave them feeling good, but not without some prodding to examine the world around them. “There’s a particular person that I feel like is the root of all darkness and evilness that’s going on in the world right now,” says Reid. Her director and co-stars widen their eyes. A few bob their heads in approval. “Smart girl,” murmurs DuVernay.

But that’s not why this group believes *Wrinkle* will matter. Reid says, “Before I got this role, I wanted there to be more little girls that look like me on TV and in lead roles.” Says Winfrey, “When you don’t see yourself, there is a subconscious psychological manifestation. It’s diminishing.” But to see yourself as the savior of a world threatened by unquantifiable evil? “That will have impact far beyond anything any marketer, any researcher, any of us even know.”

—*With reporting by Sam Lansky/Los Angeles*

***This story appears in the Dec. 25 issue of
TIME. Go behind the scenes of the cover shoot
with photographer Michal Pudelka at Milk
Studios in Los Angeles.***

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