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Jane Langton, Author of New England Mysteries, Is Dead at 95

By **Katharine Q. Seelye**

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Jane Langton, a prolific New England author who evoked a palpable sense of place in her mysteries and children's books, and who illustrated many of her works herself, died on Saturday in hospice care near her home in Lincoln, Mass. She was 95.

Her son David Langton said the cause was complications of a respiratory condition.

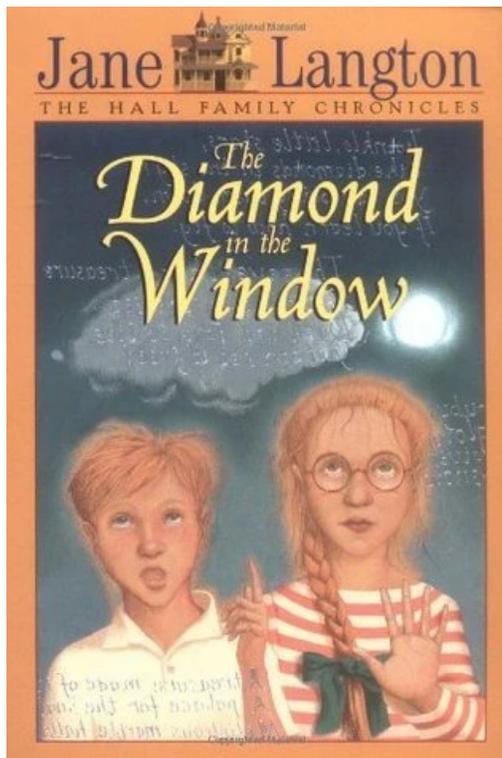
Ms. Langton's home, about half an hour's drive northwest of Boston, was adjacent to the historic town of Concord and a stone's throw from Walden Pond, places she considered hallowed ground. In her more than 30 books, most of them mysteries and children's books, she frequently summoned the revolutionary past and the transcendental spirit of Emerson and Thoreau in Concord, a picture-postcard monument to Americana that Boston magazine has called "the world's quaintest town."

The titles of Ms. Langton's books reflect her devotion to the region: "The Transcendental Murder" (1964), "Dark Nantucket Noon" (1975), "Emily Dickinson Is Dead" (1984), "God in Concord" (1992).

"A novel grows out of a sense of place," Ms. Langton told The Boston Globe in 1995. "A story might have some pompous theme but, really, its meaning must come from an organic relationship with its setting."

In "The Transcendental Murder," she wrote that in Concord's "simple houses noble as Doric temples there had flamed up a kind of rural American Athens."

"The Diamond in the Window" (1962) was the first of eight young-adult books by Ms. Langton called the Hall Family Chronicles. The fourth in the series, "The Fledgling" (1980), was a Newbery Honor book.



In “The Dante Game,” a character contemplating the miracle of the famed Duomo in Florence, Italy, notes, “Nothing in Concord’s rural landscape was miraculous except in the profoundest natural way, in the sense that miracles abound in the unsullied sky, in the purling of water over rocks.”

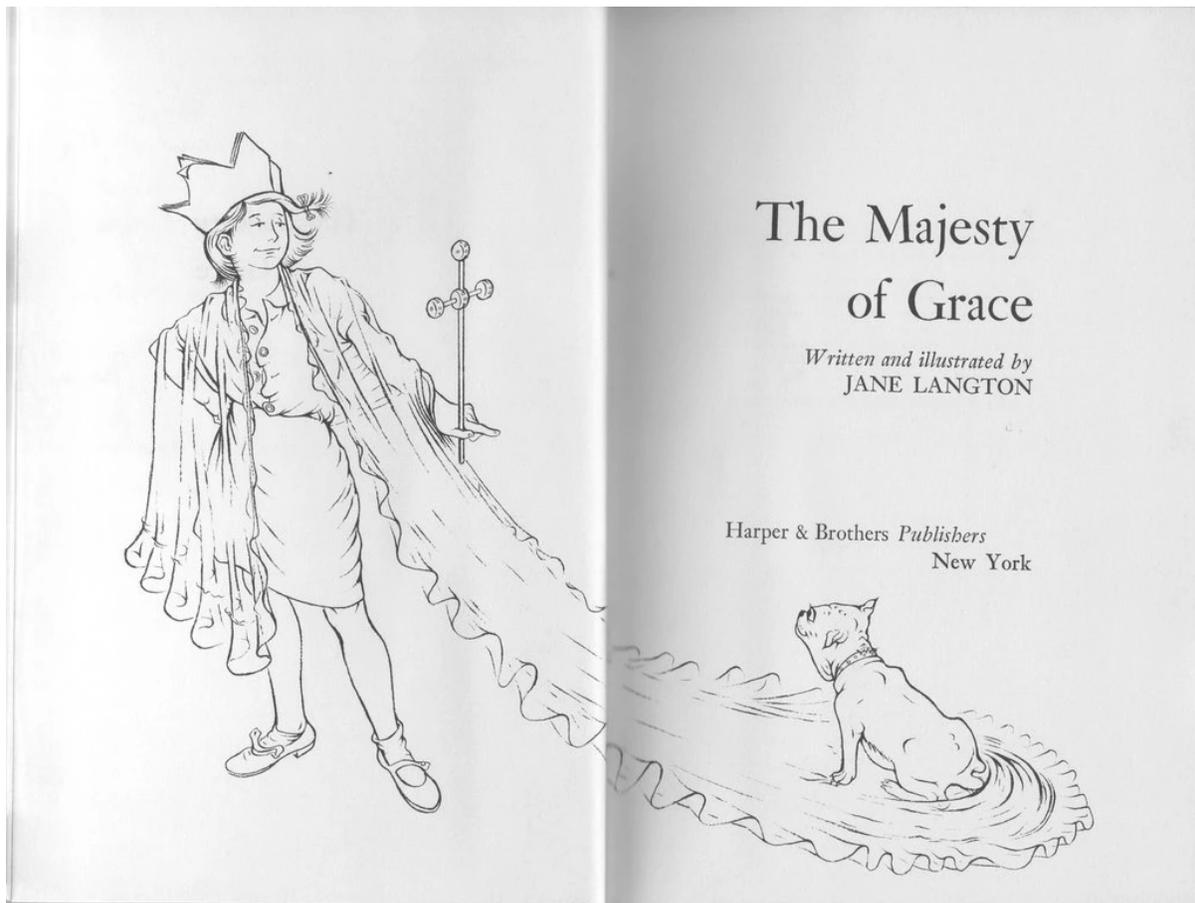
Like the Transcendentalists, Ms. Langton had a deep appreciation of nature. And like them, her son Christopher said in a telephone interview, “she believed there was a fundamental goodness out there that would prevail and you could find it in anybody if you dug deep enough.”

Ms. Langton received the Mystery Writers of America’s Grand Master Award last year for a series of 18 books, published between 1964 and 2005, whose central character, Homer Kelly, is a tweedy Harvard professor and erstwhile police lieutenant. The fifth in the series, “Emily Dickinson Is Dead,” received an award from the Nero Wolfe Society.

Her books usually revolved around two mysteries, Christopher Langton said. One is the plot of the story; the other is “the grandest mystery of all — the meaning of life.”

Jane Gillson was born on Dec. 30, 1922, in Belmont, Mass. She was one of three children of Joseph Lincoln Gillson, a geologist, and Grace (Brown) Gillson. When she was 6, her father took a job as a geologist for the DuPont Company, based in Wilmington, Del., and moved the family to nearby Holly Oak.

While in high school, Jane read a biography of Marie Curie, who won two Nobel Prizes in science, and decided she wanted to be a scientist.



“The Majesty of Grace,” later published as “Her Majesty, Grace Jones” (1961), was Ms. Langton’s first book. It was one of many for which she also did the illustrations.
Jane Langton

After graduating as the valedictorian of her high school class, she started studying astronomy at Wellesley College and later transferred to the University of Michigan, where she met her future husband, William Gale Langton, when they were paired as lab partners in a physics class.

She had hoped to continue with astronomy at Michigan. But since this was during World War II, “all the scientists had left” to join the war effort, Christopher Langton said, and there were none left to teach. She switched to art history, graduating with a bachelor’s degree (and straight A’s) in 1944. She earned a master’s in art history at Michigan in 1945.

When her husband went to Harvard to study physics, she earned a second master’s in art history, at Radcliffe, in 1948. They moved to Lincoln in 1950, and she studied at the Boston Museum School from 1958 to 1959. She illustrated a number of her books with her own pen-and-ink drawings.

Her writing career began with children’s books. Her first was “The Majesty of Grace,” later published as “Her Majesty, Grace Jones” (1961). Set in Cleveland during the Great Depression, it tells the story of a girl who is convinced she is actually heir to the British throne. Kirkus Reviews said it was “charmingly told, richly humorous, realistic to the core.”

She went on to write the Hall Family Chronicles, a series of eight books for young adults set in Concord, starting with “The Diamond in the Window” in 1962. The fourth in the series, “The Fledgling” (1980), about a girl who flies with geese near Walden Pond, was a Newbery Honor book. Kirkus said “The Fledgling” blended “humor, charm, pathos, family feeling, and that hint of something transcendent that lights up all her fantasies.”

Ms. Langton’s husband died in 1997. In addition to her sons David and Christopher, she is survived by another son, Andrew; two grandchildren; and three great-grandchildren.

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