

Reality Carved from Fantasy: The life of T.A. Barron

By Douglas Brown
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The author climbs a spiral staircase, up from the tea-happy kitchen, up past curved walls lacquered with his five kids' artwork, up to his well-windowed aerie with its staggering views of Longs Peak and its chaos of books - on shelves, on desks and tables, piled on the floor.

There he sits in an office chair the color of sun-dried moss and writes his best-selling novels, tales of wizards and strange creatures and an entire world in the roots of a magnificent tree.

And befitting the premodern universe Tom "T.A." Barron conjures in his head most days, he doesn't channel the stories into a computer. He rests a portable desk on his lap, leans back in his chair, takes a sip of any number of teas he's jammed into a kitchen cupboard, uncaps a blue Flair pen and writes, on pads of lined, white, legal-size paper.

With 19 books, many of them parts of vast epics in the vein of "Lord of the Rings" or "Harry Potter" - including the recently released "Great Tree of Avalon Book 2: Shadows on the Stars" - that's a lot of scrawled ink.

Barron, 53, plans on draining plenty more pens.

While Barron might not have the name recognition of a J.K. Rowling, he's not toiling in obscurity either. His books have a following around the country, enough to launch the first installment of his "The Great Tree of Avalon" trilogy to the New York Times best-seller list. They have been translated into at least 12 languages, including Thai.

He is finishing the last book of the trilogy, and he's already toying with several ideas for the next book or series.

"They all involve young heroes in a difficult situation, and they all involve big moral questions," he says. "I don't know which one will rise to the head of the list."

As Barron winnows his inventory of ideas, Hollywood players push forward with the film adaptation of one of his books, "The Lost Years of Merlin."

The books represent "a very hopeful tale about human potential and also about how we can all learn from nature," he says.

"Those are the twin ideas that inspire my writing and most of what I do - all of my charitable work too," he says. "The idea that every person has a hero down inside, and that it's our responsibility to take care of nature so that this beautiful planet that nurtures us all will survive."

The author attributes his devotions to heroism and the environment to his mother, Gloria Barron, who recently died on the Colorado Springs family ranch at 92. She never shrouded her spiritual connection to the natural world, marinating all of her children in everything from the joys of blueberry thickets to the glories of an eagle's wing or a sprig of springtime sage.

"In a quiet, unassuming way, she made an enormous difference to her seven children, as well as to the community of Colorado Springs," says Barron. His mother taught as a volunteer at the Colorado School for the Deaf and the Blind and became consumed with the Touch Museum of nature at the school, a project to which she dedicated 20 years of her life.

Her example - the hidden hero, the anti-celebrity - inspired her author-son to start the Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes, an annual award that celebrates kids around the nation who, through their singular efforts, made the world a better place.

He also helped found the Princeton Environmental Institute, and he's on the board of the Wilderness Society, which in 1997 presented Barron with its highest honor, the Robert Marshall Award.

"Dad was a mountain climber, but Mom showed that it's more than a physical conquest," says Jim Barron, 65, one of Tom Barron's brothers. Jim Barron, who recently retired as a school superintendent and lives in Gunnison, says all of the Barron brood remains beguiled by the environment, but "Tommy stands head and shoulders above us all."

"It runs deep," he says. "He has an incredible passion and reverence."

T.A. Barron is tall and lanky, with salt-and-pepper hair parted on the side in the manner of a Kennedy, thick eyebrows and a freckled face. During a recent morning on his rural Boulder County idyll, he wore calf-topping Sorel boots, faded Levi's and a plaid cotton shirt, feeding his Nubian goats pelleted food and throwing a ball to Zeus, his golden retriever.

Stolid cottonwoods, some with wooden birdhouses nailed to the side, decorate the property. A series of raised garden beds capture a chunk of yard, from which the family of seven - including five children, all named after mountains - harvests salad greens for months each year.

Birds sing and soar. Squirrels rummage through dry leaves. Front Range peaks decorate the horizon. Would an elf in a vest of woven wheat appear from behind a juniper tree, surprise might not be the first response.

The author slips into the setting like a fox in a hedgerow. But Barron's tactile world wasn't always gnarled walking sticks and an aromatic barn.

After Princeton University, after his Rhodes Scholarship at Oxford University in England, and after 42 publishers turned down his first stab at a book, Barron suddenly was rudderless.

The blizzard of rejection letters, he says, "knocked me for a loop, and I lost all of my confidence."

He moved to New York, took a job with a venture capital firm, and rose within seven years to president.

He'd sit in meetings and write as the suits talked of convertible debt instruments and exit events, only he was drawing character sketches of people in the room, not jotting down notes about strategies for portfolio diversification.

Barron was running the place, but in some ways was an absentee landlord. He dreamed of making a living writing books about heroes and nature. He and his wife, Currie, started having children, and ached for Colorado.

So one night after delivering an annual speech to the firm's partners laying out the previous year's financial performance - the most triumphant of these speeches he'd ever delivered - he punctuated the presentation by saying, "Oh by the way, I'm resigning and moving back to Colorado, where I grew up—to see if I can write books."

Fifteen years later, he's still at it, with a string of epics, a handful of environmental books, a pair of illustrated children's picture books, and a children's guide to heroism, called "The Hero's Trail." He has received numerous awards.

John Clark, a library administrator in Maine, was so taken with Barron's Merlin series that he pushed to make Barron the keynote speaker at a statewide conference in 2003.

"He's created a fully fleshed world and characters; you come to think of them as real enough that you have strong feelings about them," says Clark, a fantasy enthusiast who has written reviews of Barron's books. "Even the bad guys can generate some sympathy."

The success of J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series inspired many writers to pursue the fantasy genre, but when Barron started in the field, "It wasn't the big thing," says Arsen Kashkashian, a manager and children's books buyer at Boulder Book Store. Now, Barron is well-known, particularly along the Front Range, where he routinely gives readings and stays in contact with readers and teachers.

"It's been dynamite for us," says Kashkashian. "He's a great guy, he's one of those people who is overjoyed to sell his books. We get great feedback from the parents and the kids."

Barron's own kids rank high in his catalog of inspirations. Artwork from his three boys and two girls covers much of the walls in his office; passing through the kitchen, he grabs an old-fashioned photo album and leafs through pages of pictures of his kids frolicking around the family's mountain cabin near Crested Butte. Attached to most of the pages are pieces of paper scrawled with descriptions, written by Barron.

He wants his kids, he says, to have the same exposure to the wild world that he enjoyed growing up, thanks to the drive of his mother.

When Barron was weighing whether to chuck his New York job, he thought about how he felt when the family moved from rural Massachusetts to Colorado when Barron was about 12.

"I remembered feeling the sky above me, and the mountains to the west were so big, that it made me feel big inside. It made me feel like this was the land of possibilities, that I could be anything I wanted to be," he says. "I was sure when I made that career change, trying something brand new and risky, I wanted to be in that part of the world that made me feel enlarged under that big sky."

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