

Merlin In Our Midst

By **Antoinette Botsford**
NAPRA Review

The first three volumes of *The Lost Years of Merlin* young adult series lay on my desk—real page-turners, gracefully written yet powerful in impact and purport. In them, the long arm of time reaches through the Celtic mists into a high-tech world where modern-day monsters threaten the balance of nature. “This author is a genius,” I say to myself. “There must be some way I can meet him.”

Not long after, T.A. Barron and I become acquainted near a noble and grandly proportioned camphor tree on the grounds of the Rosicrucian Museum in San Jose, California. Within minutes, our conversation centers on what is closest to our hearts: our children. Barron readily shares pictures and stories of his radiant family—a fitting transition into the magical reality that informs his books.

The Eyes of the Soul

It occurs to me that even when he was the successful chair of the Swiss Knife Corporation, a kind of cosmic charge must have tingled through every knife blade, linking each one to Arthur's sword Excalibur. Like Arthur seizing the blade so firmly embedded in the stone, Barron's writings (seven books in all) eagerly take on the themes of our epoch: ecumenical flowering, the balancing of masculine and feminine powers, the honoring of the Earth and all sentient beings, the integration of spiritual with material reality, and, most importantly, the interconnectedness of everything. Through the adventures of young Merlin and his fellow travelers, Barron—more than any other author on my sagging shelf of Merlin books—helps readers of all ages confront these vital topics with renewed vigor and deepened insight.

“I had often wondered about Merlin's experience as a young boy,” he ruminates. “How did he become the sage who could inspire Arthur to become the greatest leader of his epoch?”

From slender remnants of surviving ballads and other medieval literature, Barron evolved a complex portrait of the boy Merlin and his times. Though powerful, Merlin is perilously fallible. Like all of us, he acts unwisely at times, and because of this loses his physical sight.

Not surprisingly, much of what the author has to say relates to vision. “The greatest truths and most important patterns are the ones beyond what we can see or touch physically. They require seeing, not with the eyes but with the soul.”

Blindness is only one of the losses the young Merlin must endure. All through the series, he learns from sacrifice and about the transcendence of death—whether of his totemic

hawk, Trouble, or his sister, Rhia. Even when he grieves most intensely, Merlin must repeatedly experience that what he loves and has lost survives within him.

Everyone a Hero

“Good fantasy,” he explains, when I ask about his choice of genres, “is a way into ourselves rather than an escape from ourselves. The opportunity and challenge of creating imaginary worlds depends upon characters who are believably human.” This means that his principal characters must have “the vulnerabilities and frailties of humanity represented in their natures, so that when [they] find within themselves the inner wisdom and magic they need to triumph, we celebrate them—at the same time recognizing our own heroic capability.”

Merlin does not carry the stories single-handedly. His life is graced with men and women of all ages whose courage and persistence are key to the unfolding of the deeper values of each book. “More than ever, we now need a strongly developed sense of masculine and feminine wisdom,” says Barron. He achieves this partly through well-considered interactions with strong feminine characters. This is perhaps most poignant when Merlin takes his dying sister Rhia's spirit into himself in *The Seven Songs of Merlin* (Philomel, 1997), the second book in the series which includes *The Lost Years of Merlin* (Book I) and *The Fires of Merlin* (Book III).

“The heroes of the new millennium must also have a deep connection with nature—its cycles, wonders, and fragility,” he adds. Barron's characteristic sensitivity to the natural world helps the reader to connect more strongly to the fictional events he describes. This commitment follows him into his non-writing life, where he leads workshops in environmental preservation and restoration for the Wilderness Society and other groups.

“I begin each workshop with the seed of a tree. This is the real magic,” he tells me. “Think about what is embodied in a seed. Life, light, the ability to stretch up to the sun, to set roots. The patience to withstand seasons, years, even centuries. What is necessary to activate this magic is for someone to sow the seed safely in the right spot and nurture it for a while. With this very concrete activity, it is possible to plant seeds within ourselves.”

The idea behind these workshops, as in Barron's books, is that no one need feel helpless in the face of difficulties. “That's what I hope for,” this modern Merlin contends. “I hope that these tales will give people a sense of their own wondrous gifts.”

More than this, I believe his work inspires us to hang onto our dreams—no matter what.

Effects on Distant Shores

The fourth book in the quintet, *The Mirror of Merlin* (Fall '99), invites us to join Merlin in meeting the great wizard he will become. Here he foresees the Round Table and

envisions a society based upon justice—and with this comes an almost certain premonition of the dream going wrong.

Does this imply that Merlin's struggle is in vain? The old wizard, looking through a magical mirror, speaks to his younger self: “Hear me out. There is still this: a kingdom that is banished from the land may yet find a home in the heart. And a life—whether wizard or king, poet or gardener, seamstress or smith—is measured not by its length but by the worth of its deeds, and the power of its dreams... And while you may not prevail in your own time and place, your efforts will flow outward as ripples on a pond. Powered by that greater good, they may touch faraway shores, altering their destinies long after you have gone.”