

T.A. Barron At Home

Interview by Lori Polydoros

Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators

You might say the spirit of Nature connected with children's author T.A. Barron early on. Whether it was the ancient wisdom from the Colorado Rockies or the quiet heroism of his mother, the power of hope, transformation, and renewal all find their way into his books.

On a geologic timescale, the themes in Barron's books resonate almost eternally, like ancient pieces of petrified wood. With over sixteen fantastical books for kids under his belt, Barron succeeds in giving human frailties -- like greed and arrogance -- important roles in his stories. His characters are bound to Nature; their connection to the air, water, and land inescapable. And along for the ride, readers come to realize their own relationship to the cosmos; the contradiction of being both very small and very large all at once. T.A. Barron helps us find our place the universe as we journey along the mysterious, winding paths woven within the plots of his stories.

Lori Polydoros caught up with T.A. Barron by telephone on his farm in Colorado and through email.

Lori Polydoros: You and your wife Currie have five children. Can you tell us about their unique names?

T.A. Barron: Our five kids range in age from 9-18, and are all named after mountains. We told them they would have the opportunity to develop relationships with their own sacred places, and we would have some great family trips to all these places.

My oldest is Denali (which is the Athabascan Indian name for Mount McKinley in Alaska). She was my at-home editor dedicated to *The Great Tree of Avalon* trilogy (Philomel 2004-2006). She's a great human being who's always had light in her eyes for stories, metaphors and ideas.

Polydoros: As a writer, do you have higher expectations for your children to write?

Barron: We want them to be able to write, even if they don't always enjoy it. The one thing we require is writing in a journal on camping trips. We give them lots of supplies and they create wondrous journals that make their memories real. [Writing] should be an arrow in a child's quiver.

Polydoros: You live on a farm in Colorado. What's it like?

Barron: It's the last house on a dead end that backs up to 1,000 acres of county open space. It's farmland with nothing out there but goats and horses grazing. The most

important structure is our tree house. It sleeps five children and two parents. The best part is the old cottonwood tree. There was a fox den right under the tree, so my wife decided that we should make [the tree house] like a big table with a hole in the middle for the tree so we didn't disturb the den.

Polydoros: You've said that your farm is the best place in the world. Why?

Barron: We have a great view of Long's Peak in Rocky Mountain National Park from the tree house and from the attic, my office. There are lots and lots of blues and greens. With the cottonwoods, evergreens and spruces -- and the owls, coyotes and foxes -- I know nature is close at hand. And our kids bring freshness, wonder and surprise. It is just right for me.

Polydoros: As a child, you were more of a tree climber than a reader, but you learned the value of a good story 'round the campfire. After you got older, you read a lot of nonfiction and philosophy, and finally encountered Merlin in T.H. White's *Once and Future King* (Putnam 1958). You said it was "love at first sight."

Later, J.R.R. Tolkien reinforced your love of fantasy. What was it about Tolkien's work that affected you so strongly?

Barron: I really believed Tolkien's world existed. I could walk into it as if it were real. He could talk about the qualities of humanity, but [since it was fantasy,] he could change the rules -- raising some, while diminishing others.

Polydoros: Let's talk about your education. You finally chose to major in history (which beat out geology and philosophy) at Princeton, followed by your stint as a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford. You said this opportunity gave you "gift of time" to travel the world. You began writing about your amazing experiences in travel journals.

In Amsterdam, you had a powerful experience -- visiting the house where Anne Frank hid in the attic from the Nazis for four years. Can you tell us how this affected you?

Barron: I came out of there destroyed. Here I was, a kid 30 years after [the Holocaust,] who studied history and knew much too little about how this happened or how to prevent [such an event] from happening again. I wrote 50 pages trying to process how the Holocaust happened. Writing became my best way of wrestling with big questions...human nature, fragility, bigotry. A light went on in my head about the power of writing as a vehicle to understanding life better.

Polydoros: And that's exactly what you help your readers do in all your books. Your novels go through six to seven drafts and take about two years to complete. Can you talk about your method?

Barron: It never gets easier. Being disciplined. Staying focused. Keeping with characters and ideas as they develop. I've got lots of children -- and owls in the tree house, goats to feed. I'm a wandering bard with book events. My life is busy -- crazy. I've become more disciplined. It's bringing me back to the love of writing. And I set goals and try to stay with them. I will go back to my writing desk [at all hours] to finish and stay on track.

I've been lucky enough to have some wonderful experiences and known some wonderful people. Having read so much biology and nature has influenced my writing and my imagination. [But there are three vital things] in my writing process. First, I need a character that I care about. Second, a wondrous magical place. And third, a troubling question.

Polydoros: You have two picture books out -- *Where is Grandpa* (Philomel 1999) and *High as a Hawk: A Brave Girl's Historic Climb* (Philomel 2004). Your next, *The Day the Stones Walked*, comes out in April 2007. How is the picture book process different for you?

Barron: It's easier in some ways, and harder in others. I love the picture book form, which feels like a Haiku poem after writing a long, epic poem [like a novel]. It's a fine art -- to be as evocative as possible in the fewest words possible.

Polydoros: Can you tell us about *The Day the Stones Walked*?

Barron: Have you ever wondered about why the great carvers stopped work at Easter Island? I have! This story is a magical attempt to explain it all. And it's also a parable of how we must learn to live in environmentally sustainable ways. Or else our own island, planet Earth, will be unable to support us.

Polydoros: Despite your amazing success, you've had your share of rejection. While you were at Oxford, you wallpapered your bathroom with rejection letters from your first novel -- all 42 of them! What helped you to continue writing after this?

Barron: At that point, my confidence as a writer was shattered. Time had to pass -- seven years. I wrote a few opinion pieces for the New York Times and continued writing in my journal. But nothing that was creative. At the same time, I still had a vivid memory of how writing helped me process life -- how the act of transferring thoughts and experiences to words gave me greater understanding.

Polydoros: It was an emotional time in your life. A dear friend of yours passed away. You met your wife and soon after had your first child, your daughter Denali. How did this evolution play out in terms of your writing?

Barron: I suddenly found myself, for the first time in seven years, imagining a story. Soon I realized that this story, about a young girl and her grandfather who try to save the world from an exploding star, was really my way to try to make sense of the birth, death, and rebirth I had experienced. On top of that, it was a hopeful tale, one in which one

heroic girl actually saves our whole planet. That was a story I wanted my daughter to read someday.

Polydoros: Your friend and colleague, the amazing children's author Madeleine L'Engle helped you get this first book, *Heartlight* (Philomel 2000), published. Can you tell us about how you first met her?

Barron: It was the second best case of serendipity in my life! (The first best was meeting my wife, Currie.) I met [Madeleine] through a fake letter that somebody sent me, believe it or not. The letter was supposed to be from Madeleine, but had been forged as a joke. But I fell for it. The good news was that I wrote back to Madeleine -- and she replied (this time for real). We met for lunch, which lasted eight hours, and became dear friends. A few years later, Madeleine gave me the wonderful honor of adopting me as her godson.

Polydoros: Why do you love fantasy?

Barron: Fantasy allows you to bend the rules of our existence -- highlighting troubling issues of our time. Fantasy is like a bent mirror. You can write about life with more intricacy and power -- bending life -- emphasizing certain elements and de-emphasizing others.

Polydoros: You've called yourself a nature writer first and a fantasy writer second. Which is more challenging, writing realistic fiction or fantasy?

Barron: [For both genres,] the story has to feel true to the reader on every level -- senses, emotion and spirit. A lot of the trueness in fantasy comes from reality -- the reader can walk into a place with [realistic] people and experiences.

Polydoros: English poet, critic and philosopher, Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834) said that readers must "suspend their disbelief for the moment" when entering a world of fiction.

In his essay "On Fairy Stories," J.R.R. Tolkien stated that, "...the story-maker proves a successful 'sub-creator.' He makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is 'true.' "

Author and professor Sarah E. Worth says that readers "...let the fictional world enter into our imaginations, we do not 'willingly suspend our disbelief.' Coleridge aside, we cannot willingly decide to believe or disbelieve anything... When engaging with fiction we do not *suspend a critical faculty*, but rather *exercise a creative faculty*. We do not actively suspend disbelief -- we *actively create belief*."

What is your take on how and why readers can dive into these fantastical worlds?

Barron: The key point here is that Coleridge's statement is woefully inadequate. We don't want merely to make readers "suspend disbelief." No, much more than that, we

want to make readers BELIEVE. My goal as a writer is to create characters so real that they seem to come alive, places so real that we can go there time and time again, and situations so real that they feel as if they are truly happening.

Polydoros: Let's talk about one of your first reoccurring characters, Kate Gordon. She visits many mythical worlds in your books. Kate journeys to a distant star in her first appearance in *Heartlight*. Next, she travels back in time to the world of an ancient tribe of Native Americans in *The Ancient One* (Philomel 1992). And she dives into an underwater world where water and life are born in *The Merlin Effect* (Philomel 1994).

When you started *Heartlight*, you weren't sure if your main character was going to be a boy or girl. The birth of your daughter Denali lead you to create Kate, the girl who could do anything. You've said that a character comes alive if you know their innermost secret, hear their voice and understand what wakes them up in the middle of the night.

When did you first know these things about Kate? Had you planned on how she would change throughout the series, or did she surprise you, like your own children do as they grow?

Barron: Heroes have always intrigued me... and inspired me. How they found the courage or wisdom inside themselves to overcome great obstacles. I chose to write about Kate, in three books, because I wanted my own daughter to know that heroes aren't just boys. And that she, like Kate, could do anything. Even change the course of the stars!

Kate was a big challenge for me. How does a 40-something man write convincingly about a 12-year-old girl? It took a lot of time (as well as rewrites) to get it right. Probably the most helpful thing I did was to stop working on the book and write a brief biography of Kate. Just a dozen pages or so -- but enough to tell me her deepest fears, her inner longings, her favorite snack (in her case, orange juice), and finally ... her greatest secret.

Polydoros: One central theme of "connectedness" stands out in all your books. In *The Ancient One*, Kate helps to save her town by seeking out the patience and wisdom of an ancient Redwood tree.

In *The Lost Years of Merlin* series (Philomel 1996-2000,) Merlin learns his greatest lessons from nature -- humility, compassion and his close connection to the greater universe. He climbs a tree and gets caught in a fierce storm. Afterward, he witnesses the rebirth of a tranquil forest, and realizes that he can transform his own life too.

In *The Great Tree of Avalon*, human weakness, like greed and arrogance unravel threads of the massive tapestry that holds all life together. The links between the land, air, water and sky are obvious. The main character, Tamwyn, has a close relationship to nature that makes it clear that he is a force of hope in his threatened

world.

How has nature empowered you in your own life? Do you consciously bind your characters to the natural world, or is it something that is born within them unintentionally?

Barron: Well, for starters, I grew up in places where Nature was always nearby, so I could explore a creek, climb a tree, pick an apple, or just cover myself with mud. The nearness of Nature shaped me profoundly. Not just in the challenging, adventurous ways you might expect -- in deeper, spiritual ways, as well.

For example, I remember a snowy day when I was very young. My mother dressed me in one of those big puffy snowsuits that made me look like a huge, waddling balloon, and took me outside. There was so much snow, the drifts were even taller than me. Then my mother patted the top of an enormous snowdrift, and said, "Guess what? Believe it or not, there are *flowers* under there. You won't see them until springtime, but it's true." I was astounded. Amazed. *Flowers?* Under there? She was telling me about the patterns of the seasons, of course -- but also about something more. Something like hope. Transformation. Renewal.

Or ... another day, when my brother and I found a slab of petrified wood, over fifty *million* years old, on the hill behind our Colorado ranch house. Geologic time -- now *there's* a great way to gain some perspective on human ideas of time and mortality. And then there was another day, as I was walking through a meadow on the ranch, following some fox tracks, when I saw some geese flying overhead. They were so close, I could hear their wings *whooshing* as they flew. I realized that some of those geese had started their journey way up in the Arctic, in Alaska, and had flown over western Canada and the Rocky Mountains, all the way to our little meadow. And it struck me that their flight tied together some of the most beautiful places on this continent -- that, by the very beating of their wings, they showed how connected those places really are. And how connected *I* was, too, to those very same places.

So why is wilderness important? Because unspoiled Nature is the last, best place on Earth for people to stand upright and tall, dwarfed by the sweep of the stars or the sweep of time, and yet *still* part of it all -- connected to the changing seasons, the fox tracks, or the flight of geese. In Nature, we can feel both very small, and very large, at once -- part of the universe, the pattern, the mystery.

And one more thing. In wilderness, we can still experience *silence* -- a quality that's increasingly rare in this world. We can hear voices apart from our own, sounds not made by automobiles or chainsaws. We can even hear, sometimes, the whispers of *creation* -- that remarkable process whose essence is life, and whose engine is silent.

Polydoros: With nature as a full-blown character in your life, you've mentioned that you "fear for the planet" and for the kids that lack exposure to the natural world. Do you think it's possible for kids today to understand their connectedness to all life

when they isolated from nature?

Barron: I wonder how you can be fully human and protect the earth that sustains us when all your food comes from packages. When you always wear shoes or you've never seen the phases of the moon. When you've never stood under tall trees and sensed their majesty or experienced the natural light of the stars. I believe that environmental education through writing is a powerful tool.

Polydoros: Children's author John H. Ritter calls you a "visionary." You incorporate environmental and conservation issues so beautifully in your books without being didactic and preachy. How do you do it, especially when you're so passionate about protecting our planet?

Barron: When you feel strongly about an issue it's far too easy to sermonize. When I was growing up, the most important things that happened to me were not lectures. They were experiences. It is crucial to never tell the reader what to think. [As authors] we want the reader to make up their own mind. If the story is powered by deep values -- your scenes, setting and characters will win the reader over [and lead them] to make up their own mind.

Polydoros: Trees are an elemental part of many of your books -- *The Great Tree of Avalon*, *Tree Girl* (Philomel 2001), *The Lost Years of Merlin* series. Growing up, you had a special Ponderosa pine tree that you spent lots of time daydreaming under. In college, you did homework under a special oak tree. Why are trees so important to you? Do you have a favorite now?

Barron: [Trees are] a personal, primal memory from childhood. Writing under the old ponderosa pine tree on my parents' ranch, wondering what tales it could tell -- about Utes, forest fires, deep snowy winters, Spanish explorers, and the trill of a meadowlark. The spiritual element: To be a sentient tree would mean to be a truly centered being. This would require sinking roots deeply, being fully alive, and staying utterly aware. Such great wisdom. This requires absolute sense of place -- not just physical, but spiritual. Connecting earth and sky. This experience is starkly different from our human condition: Our unending yearnings, our ability to run and move and change. All this is good up to a point -- but when centeredness is lost, so is a great deal of wisdom.

The cottonwood tree around our tree house is my favorite here at home. I also have one favorite tree up in the Muir Woods near the Bay Area. It's an old Redwood with a trunk that opens up. You can stand inside. It feels like a big hug. It inspired *The Ancient One*.

Polydoros: You've described our present society and planet as being in a "dark time." Our threads seem to be coming apart, just like in *Avalon*. All of your books are so hopeful. How do you stay so optimistic when the negative forces are so great?

Barron: Children. Those young people really give me hope in a way that I haven't found anywhere else, other than those moments of brightness that come from my own children.

They are searching their true hearts, determined to try and make a difference. You can't help but get a sense of courage from them. And Mother Nature keeps me hopeful. No matter how high the snow drifts, there are always still flowers underneath.

Polydoros: Your nonfiction book *The Hero's Trail: A Guide for a Heroic Life* (Philomel 2002) truly gives us a sense of the children that inspire you. You follow the trail of the hero's journey, tracing the lives of mythical heroes like Greece's Prometheus and Polynesia's Mafatu. The book describes the lives of heroes of the not-so-distant past like Abraham Lincoln, Satchel Paige and Mother Teresa. You include present day heroes like The Dalai Lama, Stephen Hawking and Jane Goodall, while highlighting the many children today that are making a difference on a daily basis across the globe. You tell us about Ryan Hreljac who raised enough money to build a well for a village in Uganda. Iqbal Masih, a Pakistani boy, escaped his life as a "bonded laborer" at a carpet factory. He later spoke out against child slavery -- changing laws and freeing many children. Ultimately, Iqbal lost his life to this cause.

Can you tell us about this inspirational book?

Barron: I wrote *The Hero's Trail* more as a dad than as a writer. In talking with kids of all descriptions, I was struck by how many of them felt utterly powerless, both in their own lives and in the wider world. Partly this problem stems from America's confusion about the difference between a hero and a celebrity: While a hero is about inner qualities of character, a celebrity is merely about fame. And partly this problem stems from our society's rampant materialism. The mass media gives our kids all sorts of negative, demeaning messages -- telling them their self-worth comes from what they wear or drink or drive, not who they really are down inside.

I realized that these kids needed to hear stories about heroic young people. Not just fictional heroes, such as the girls and boys in my novels, but real young people who have faced terrible obstacles and triumphed through their own courage, perseverance, compassion, and wisdom. These young heroes come in all descriptions -- every gender, race, age, color, culture, or economic background. Some are well known, such as Anne Frank or Wilma Rudolph or Stephen Hawking, but many more are largely unknown. So I packed that slim volume with dozens of examples of amazing young people, both historical and contemporary. The result, I hope, is that any young reader will gain a sense of his or her own heroic potential.

Why did I use the idea of walking on a trail? Because life is a journey through uncharted terrain. Often arduous, often wondrous, and full of surprises -- life resembles the long hikes I've taken through the mountains of Colorado, Nepal, or Patagonia. The older I get, with more creases on my hiking boots as well as my brow, the more potent this analogy seems. And in every journey we need our guides -- heroes who have walked this trail before, who show us how high we can climb.

Polydoros: Your mother, Gloria Barron, went back to college in her sixties to get a

degree in geology. She said she wanted to learn to read the "book of the mountains." You established the Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes in her name. This prize, given once a year, recognizes young leaders around the world for their selfless contributions to society. Did she show by example the true meaning of the word hero?

Barron: Gloria Barron, the woman I was lucky enough to know as my mother, never sought fame. She simply lived the life of a teacher who cared deeply about her children and her community. She was always learning: The day before she died, at age ninety-two, she delighted in learning a new word origin! And she never lost her childlike sense of wonder.

My mother never ceased reading and learning, which always impressed me. She always urged us to write in journals, thank-you letters, whatever. Her rule was that a good letter should contain "something funny, something beautiful, and something true." She continually urged her kids to make a positive difference to the world, in whatever ways we chose. She didn't sermonize; she just did that and encouraged us to follow her example.

She spent twenty years creating a unique nature museum at the Colorado School for the Blind -- a museum where everything can be touched. Blind kids can experience the grandeur of an eagle by touching its wings, just as they can feel a hummingbird's delicate nest or a polar bear's rich, soft fur. She never sought any credit for this accomplishment, and the only reward she wanted was the satisfaction of knowing that these kids could now experience some of the beauty of the natural world. That's the sort of quiet heroism that countless teachers, parents, and kids show every day. And those people truly hold our world together.

Polydoros: You mention being inspired by a story told by Dr. Victor Frankl, prisoner and counselor to other prisoners in the Nazi death camps:

This young woman knew that she would die in the next few days. Yet she was cheerful in spite of this knowledge. Pointing through the window, she said, "This tree here is the only friend I have in my loneliness." Through that window she could see just one branch of a chestnut tree, and on the branch were two blossoms. "I often talk to this tree," she said to me. I was startled and didn't quite know how to take her words. Was she delirious? Did she have occasional hallucinations? Anxiously I asked her if the tree replied. "Yes." What did it say to her? She answered, "It said to me, 'I am here -- I am here -- I am life, eternal life.'" --Victor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, pp. 68-69

When did you first realize that the power of nature was life altering? This may sound corny, but when you're out in nature, what do the trees and rocks say?

Barron: Nature, especially wilderness, reminds me that I am both very, very small and very, very large at once. Standing under the stars, or on a high Colorado mountain, or by the endless ocean, or under a towering redwood tree, I feel small -- tiny by comparison, infinitely humbled. That's a good experience for us human beings, who can become too

arrogant and self-centered. At the same time, standing in those wondrous places, I feel large -- huge -- because I'm connected to all that majesty, all that expanse, of creation.

Polydoros: Another woman who has supported you throughout the years is Patricia Lee Gauch, the acclaimed author and Vice President and Editorial Director of Philomel Books. Can you tell us a little about what it is like to work with her?

Barron: Patti is the best! She is a tough-minded editor who always strives for the highest quality. Yet she is also a young girl at heart, who feels joy and sorrow and mystery and wonder. She is very demanding, but that's what I want: She pushes me to be the best I can possibly be. I feel truly blessed to have her as my editor -- and as my friend.

Polydoros: Your picture book, *Where is Grandpa*, is a lovely tribute to your father. Your kids had a huge part in its making. Can you tell us about it?

Barron: The best thing about this book is that whatever wisdom that it might have come from my kids. I was just a scribe. The basic wisdom they showed telling stories about their grandfather around the kitchen table at that grief stricken moment made me realize that my dad, their grandpa, really wasn't as far away as I thought. It's all thanks to them. And now, through this book -- with Chris Soentpiet's wonderful paintings -- that experience is helping other kids through similar situations.

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Polydoros: From his website, T.A. Barron talks a little about the movie of *The Lost Years of Merlin*.

Good things are happening ...

The Lost Years of Merlin is on its way to becoming a feature film. Having just returned from a creative meeting in Hollywood, I can tell you that this project is now moving ahead with Merlinesque energy!

Paramount Pictures has acquired an option to make a movie of Merlin's lost years, based on the first book of the epic. And the project could not be in better hands. This is truly the best team I could have asked for: They understand the power and depth of young Merlin—and they also know how to make spectacular movies.

That's extremely important to me, since I'd much rather have no film at all than have one that's anything less than phenomenal. Merlin deserves only the best. And so do you, my loyal readers.

In addition to the people at Paramount and their affiliate Nickelodeon, I am fortunate to have the help of producer Lorenzo di Bonaventura. Before becoming an independent producer, he was the head of worldwide production at Warner Bros. for several years,

where he led the charge to make *The Matrix*, *Perfect Storm*, and other successful movies. As an experienced producer, he's world class.

Scriptwriter Simon Kinberg is also deeply involved. And believe me, wherever Merlin is right now, he is just as delighted as I am. Simon, who wrote the original film script for this project, is now hard at work on revising the script for Paramount. Over the years, he has earned great respect as a crafter of powerful, compelling stories. His most recent films include *X-Men 3* and *Mr. and Mrs. Smith*.

Now, a word of caution: Hollywood is probably the most unpredictable place on the planet. (I find myself thinking sometimes that it's almost as bizarre and full of surprises as Merlin's isle of Fincayra.) So this movie could take a long time to complete, or may never even happen. But I still have high hopes.

This team is determined to make a movie that's truly fabulous. That's why I'm staying involved in the process as much as possible. Whatever does happen, I'll keep you up to date right here on this website, as well as in my newsletters.

The goal of everyone involved, myself included, is to create a film that's truly worthy of the books you care so much about. And that's truly worthy of Merlin.

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T.A. Barron's belief is that fantasy allows him to alter the rules of existence, like a "bent mirror." But within his fantastical worlds, the story rings true with his readers. The senses, the emotion and the spirit of Barron's characters truly makes us believe we can transform our own lives through hope; bound by our connection to all living things in the universe.

Shh! Listen carefully, and you'll hear adults and kids, rivers and trees all whispering the secrets of T. A. Barron's books. Within their pages, you will find the essence and magic of life.

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Lori Polydoros (Orange County, CA) is a frequent contributor to the Los Angeles Times Kids' Reading Page. She freelances for educational publishers: Rigby/Harcourt Achieve, Trillium Publishing, and an does an ongoing series with www.ReadingA-Z.com. Lori also writes middle grade novels and picture books -- and is currently immersed in working on a new novel -- a star-powered superhero series. For more on Lori, visit her at www.loripolydoros.com.