

Colorado Author Is Living His Dream: Madeleine L'Engle helped 'Merlin' writer leap

By Claire Martin
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Look at the crowds clutching numbers for their places in line at T.A. Barron's book signings, and it's hard to believe that just 10 years ago Barron spent his workdays collecting small and mid-sized business for his New York venture capital firm and his spare time collecting rejections from publishing houses.

Then Madeleine L'Engle, the Newbery Award-winning writer, saw a draft of Barron's *Heartlight*. She saw strength and promise in the manuscript, which combined a quest, astronomy, butterfly lore, and the complex relationship between grandparent and grandchild. L'Engle passed it on to her agent, jump-starting Barron's career as a writer.

Within months, Barron walked into his venture firm and told his partners, who were still congratulating themselves for acquiring profitable businesses like the one that imports Swiss Army knives, and announced that he was resigning as president. They gaped when Barron added that he was moving with his wife Currie and their small children to Boulder. He intended, he said, to be a writer "in the attic of some house" he had yet to find.

Attic retreat

It sounded like an almost hopelessly romantic goal.

But Barron did exactly what he'd predicted. He found a great house in Boulder with an attic, and he has become a popular and successful author. *Heartlight* was followed by two books (*The Ancient One* and *The Merlin Effect*) in a trilogy about a resourceful girl. Barron's research about Merlin, the magician who tutored King Arthur, led to *The Lost Years of Merlin*, the first in a sequence about Merlin's boyhood.

Barron teamed up with photographer John Fielder for *To Walk in Wilderness: A Rocky Mountain Journal* and elaborated upon the late Enos Mills' recollections for another Fielder collaboration, *Rocky Mountain National Park*. Of all his books, Barron holds a special place in his heart for *The Ancient One*, about threatened old-growth redwood forest, but he is best known for the Merlin story that, after three books—the latest is *The Fires of Merlin*—is still unfinished.

Barron voices few regrets about trading New York's skyscrapers for the Boulder canyons he and Currie hike with their five children.

“The company in New York was a whole lot of fun in some ways, but a complete mess in other ways,” Barron says.

Barron is earnest and boyish, a rangy man who comes across less as a former firm president than a onetime Outward Bound course leader.

When he was a college student at Princeton, Barron “tried hard not to major in anything, and came close to majoring in geology, history, religion and other things.” When he won a Rhodes scholarship to Britain's Oxford University, he used that time to cast a wide net. He spent most of his time, and his earnings from summer jobs, traveling. He rode the Trans-Siberian railway, lived in southern and eastern Africa, and stopped in Japan to help roof thatched homes.

After returning to Oxford, Barron wrote his first novel—the one that collected more than 40 rejection letters. He toyed with the idea of retreating to a remote cabin in Alaska to write, but the mountain of rejection letters persuaded him otherwise. Instead, he enrolled in Harvard's law school, thinking of becoming an environmental lawyer. He changed his mind again and left law for the venture firm and its success.

One thread wove through his chameleon career lives: He kept writing. Currie, whom he'd met cross-country skiing in New York's Catskill mountains, encouraged him. When L'Engle passed on Barron's manuscript to her agent, Currie knew, as Barron put it, “that while I was very close to achieving what lots of people think of as success in the business world, that part of my soul would wither and die if I didn't take the chance to see what kind of writer I was.”

Barron grew up in the Black Forest, near Colorado Springs, and the return to Colorado fed his soul as much as the writing. “There is something about the immensity of the Colorado sky that, when I was a boy, gave me the sense that I was bigger than the world thought I was.”

His Merlin series, along with the *Heartlight* trilogy and the collaborations with John Fielder, present a world as implacable as it is breathtaking.

Barron had envisioned *To Walk in Wilderness* idealistically when he and Fielder set out to spend a month in the Maroon Bells-Snowmass wilderness. It snowed and rained for the first three weeks, presenting Fielder with fine photo possibilities and leaving Barron with a wet journal and stiff fingers.

Barron's fiction epics thrust their characters into conflicts that offer painful choices—which is one reason, he theorizes, that the legend of Arthur continues to enthrall so many.

“Why has the tale of Camelot persisted in our hearts for 1,000 years?” Barron asked rhetorically. “It's a tragedy that's fundamentally human, about high ideals and aspirations, and also about basic human frailties that can undo even the greatest intentions. For Merlin to be the mentor to King Arthur, to be ready for all that, he had to know human

foibles and possibilities in himself... And I really hope that it conveys a sense of humility, too. That's another thing we lack at the end of this century. We're part of a great universe, but we're also very small.”

Truth in images

He remembers a conference in Greeley, where a woman upbraided him for using, in *Heartlight*, a luminous-winged butterfly as a metaphor for the soul. “She said it was outrageous, and how can you speak about questions of God and truth in a context of butterflies and prisms and trips to the stars?” Barron says. “My response was: Hold on. Are you telling me the stories of Elijah and the chariot of fire, drawn by horses of fire, is anything but a metaphor for higher forms of power, higher forms of light? What's so different about a modern metaphor?”

“The fact is, spiritual questions are in everything, anyway. The only issue is in (how)...we see those questions, in what ways they manifest themselves, and in what ways we're inspired by them.”