

Interview with T.A. Barron

By Sissy Carroll
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Editor's note: Along with the 300 or so participants in attendance, I sat mesmerized as Tom Barron discussed his art and his outlook on life at last year's ALAN Workshop. When I asked the author if he would agree to an interview he was gracious enough to give me an enthusiastic, "Yes!" We corresponded over email in the summer, 2001, and the following is the electronic interview that resulted. I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed being involved in it. Please see a review of *Tree Girl* in our Spring/Summer 2001 issue. I encourage you to check out Tom's website, www.tabarron.com, for more information, as well. - psc



About your career as a writer:

Carroll: In the late 1980's, after graduating from Princeton, fulfilling a Rhodes Scholarship, and spending a year hiking in Asia and Africa, you left New York City and your position as president of a venture capital firm and moved home, to Colorado, to pursue writing as a career. Did you know, then, that you'd be happy as a writer? Have you experienced any major surprises about writing—or about yourself as a writer, in the years since you decided to write full time?

Barron: When I made my decision to leave my business and try to write full time, I knew nothing about the future except that my passion for writing was strong enough that I simply had to give it a try. My business partners all thought I was crazy—after all, who in his right mind would leave a successful business to try to write books in some attic in Colorado? Well, I guess I just wasn't in my right mind. All I knew was that life is too short not to follow your passions, whatever the risks. And from that perspective, the risk of trying to write and failing completely—a real possibility—was far less frightening than the risk of growing old and never following my dream of being a writer. Since that big decision, I haven't had one single millisecond of regret. Now, that's not to say it's been easy! For example, I have discovered that writing books is the hardest work I've ever done. It's harder than running a business, harder than building a log cabin, harder than leading a wilderness trail up some mountain. But at the same time, it's also the most joyous labor I've ever done. It's truly a thrill to bring characters to life, and to illuminate some of life's big questions through metaphor and story. It is also a constantly humbling job, since no matter how much you learn about the craft of writing, you can always get better.

In the end, though, I feel triply blessed: I get to follow my passion and do something I love; my job gives me a chance to go deeper into myself and to work with language and all its magical powers to enrich our lives; and I am surrounded by wonderful young people, my readers, who continually inspire me. I am very lucky.

Carroll: I remember that you lovingly mentioned that your wife was home with all five children while you were speaking at the 2000 ALAN workshop in Milwaukee. Does your role as husband and father influence your work habits, and the kinds of writing you do?

Barron: Definitely. For starters, my wife Currie is my best friend, and we both believe strongly that raising our kids is the most important thing we'll ever do. And we're blessed with five big-spirited, energetic, creative kids. Our house is full of pandemonium, laughter, and tears—all the makings of a great family life. As a writer, I get to be a much more present father than I would have been if I had stayed in my business job. My work hours are much more flexible. So I can adjust my schedule, when I'm not on a book tour or speaking to some conference, to fit the needs of our family. I'm also never completely out of touch: One time last year I was in the middle of a book signing in Ohio when I was told there was an emergency call from home. It was my six-year-old son, who was calling to tell me that his pet ant had died! In sum, I just love being a dad. It's really a privilege to be so close to those five wonderful spirits for these years. One more point: Being around kids keeps you honest. They say what they think. It also keeps me in touch with my own sense of humor and childlike sense of wonder. In other words, being around my kids makes me a better writer. And a better person.

Carroll: It's clear that your family has a positive influence on your art. I'm curious: What kinds of information and insights have you gleaned from your readers' comments?

Barron: During the school year, I sometimes get more than 100 emails a day from kids and adults who are reading the books. And I learn a lot from them. Most recently, I have been struck by how many kids have been inspired by the heroic young people in my books—Kate in *Heartlight* and *The Ancient One*, and Merlin in his *Lost Years* books. They have also been asking me what heroic things they might get to do in their own lives, or whether that is just something for imaginary characters. Well, all those letters have caused me to write a new book, called *The Hero's Trail*—which will come out in 2002—about what it really means to be a hero. And how any one of us, no matter how insignificant we may feel, has the capacity to do heroic things. To make a real difference in the world. In the book, which is nonfiction, I will describe dozens of remarkable young people who have done and are doing amazing things. So in a way, I view this book as the best answer I can give to all those people who wrote to me.

Carroll: Sounds like a great book for kids and adults! I wonder: The three *Heartlight* books and the five books of *The Lost Years of Merlin* series are complete now, and *Tree Girl* is being released this fall. Will you continue to use fantasy as the genre with which you spin your stories?

Barron: After *The Hero's Trail*, I have no idea what comes next. We shall see!

About your connection to the natural world:

Carroll: Teachers who know you as a writer of fantasy novels for adolescent readers might be surprised to know that the early influences on your reading and writing were not novelists, but non-fiction writers such as Rachel Carson, Henry David Thoreau, John Muir (and I wonder if you read John McPhee—a Princeton connection?). Can you discuss how your deep interest and extensive experience exploring the natural world informs your creation of imaginative fantasy worlds and characters? What aspects of your environmental philosophy will readers find incorporated into your fantasy novels?

Barron: Absolutely. My youth was spent in two beautiful and compelling natural landscapes: an apple orchard in New England, and a ranch in Colorado. How could I not feel the power of nature's marvels, the patterns of the seasons, the wonder of a songbird at dawn? I still remember, when I was seven or eight, finding a monarch butterfly emerging from its cocoon: What a miracle! On top of those experiences, I was lucky enough to have a mother who was (and still is) deeply curious about the natural world and its mysteries. She even went back to college in her sixties—forty years after studying French at Smith College—to learn about geology. Her passion to understand “how to read the book of those mountains out our window” led her to study at Colorado College and later to start a touchable nature museum at the Colorado School for the Deaf and Blind. So she was not only a great inspiration to me and my six brothers and sisters, she was also a great teacher. Because of her all of us have spent much of our lives in nature and in education.

Carroll: Sounds as though you inherited a love of nature. Are there particular nature writers you'd recommend to adolescent readers who are interested in the environment?

Barron: I would especially recommend the writings of John Muir (*Travels in Alaska* is my favorite of his journals); Rachel Carson (*A Sense of Wonder* is great reading for both kids and adults); Henry David Thoreau (*Walden*, of course...but my favorite is his short essay called “Walking”); John McPhee (*Coming Into the Country*); Aldo Leopold (*A Sand County Almanac* is one of the first ecological essays); T.H. Watkins (author of numerous books about our vanishing wilderness); Terry Tempest Williams (her book *Refuge* is really remarkable); and Ann Zwinger (whatever she writes is beautiful).

About your work as a writer of fantasy:

Carroll: You've stated, on your Website, that you believe that the key to writing fiction is “making it true.” Can you elaborate on how you address that seeming contradiction as a writer of fiction?

Barron: Good fiction is, indeed, true. I know that sounds contradictory, but here is what I mean: The best fiction is true on many levels: First, on the level of our senses, we must really believe we are there, right beside the main character. Part of this process is making the place feel true—more like a character itself, richly described in all its details. My own background as a nature writer helps in this regard, since that helps me to make even imaginary places feel real. Second, on the level of our emotions, good fiction feels true, down in our hearts. That requires making characters and situations really come alive, so that the reader feels everything that he or she would feel in real life. It means paying close attention to the characters' motivations, dreams, and

fears—as well as their highest aspirations. Third, on the level of the spirit, the best fiction allows us to feel connected to the great realm of human experience. No matter who we are, what culture we come from, good fiction feels true at this most fundamental level. And the very best books—the ones that stand the test of time—are true on all three of these levels at once.

Carroll: Ah. Speaking of truth in fiction: You've noted, in an Amazon.com interview, that the Merlin of your *The Lost Years of Merlin* series has special qualities that allow him to see the capacity for change even within himself, to cross boundaries, and to combine both darkness and light in his wisdom. Are these qualities that you hope adolescent readers see in Merlin, and perhaps readers see in Merlin, and perhaps aspire to in their own lives? Have readers' responses to your fantasy books provided any information regarding whether or not they are reading the character this way? (I know that the pair of questions above assume that you aim to provide lessons through your fiction; please forgive me if I am wrong in making that assumption, but there is such a strong moral thread throughout your books that I just can't get away from the connection.)

Barron: Sissi, you are right in finding a moral thread in my books. It is important, I believe, to write books that are both entertaining and thoughtful—that are great fun to read—but also convey an underlying idea. Books that really stand the test of time are built around a compelling idea or question, something that is important about being alive and human. That having been said, I never, ever “preach” to my readers. Rather, I pose questions and moral dilemmas, and show how my own characters deal with them. Then it's up to the reader to come to his or her own conclusions about the moral implications. Merlin's growth—from a half-drowned boy who washes ashore on a strange coast to become the greatest wizard of all times—is a metaphor for us all. Every one of us, I believe, has a remarkable, gifted person inside of ourselves. We may feel lost at times, even washed ashore, but we still carry that potential to do positive things with our lives.

Carroll: I agree, and know that kids need to see evidence of their potential, too. A friend of mine enjoys reading your books with her 11-year-old son because, as she says, “the values are clear and strong and positive” and the books “kick his imagination into high gear.” How might you respond to that comment?

Barron: More power to your friend! First of all, I love it when a parent and a child read my books together as a shared experience. And second, if my books provide a bit of positive inspiration and encourage readers to use their own imagination, that makes me very, very glad.

Carroll: Has the popularity of that other young wizard of literature (Harry Potter) had a discernible impact on young readers' and/or parents,' teachers,' and media specialists' interest in your books?

Barron: All of us who write books for young people are grateful to Harry Potter. He has reminded a lot of people, of all ages, just how much fun reading books can be! So I am very happy for J.K. Rowling's success. At the same time...I still like another young wizard even better. Merlin has an incredible depth and richness as a character, which is why people have been weaving yarns about him for over 1,500 years.

Carroll: Which writers of fantasy would you put on your list of all-time favorites? Which would you recommend to today's adolescent readers? And are your own children fans of T.A. Barron's books?

Barron: The best writers of fantasy—the ones who make their worlds and their characters so true that we can really believe them—give us a good time as well as a chance to ask some of life's big questions. Their books stay with us over time, inviting us to return and discover something new, mysterious, and insightful. Who would I name in that group? Madeleine L'Engle (*A Wrinkle In Time; A Swiftly Tilting Planet*), J.R.R. Tolkien (*Lord of the Rings*), E.B. White (*Charlotte's Web*), and Lloyd Alexander (*The High King*) top the list. My personal number one favorite is T.H. White's classic, *The Once And Future King*. And let's not forget Gail Carson Levine (*Ella Enchanted*), Robert Siegel (*Whalesong*), and Norton Juster (*The Phantom Tollbooth*). Are my own kids fans of my books? You'd have to ask them. But I can tell you that some of my most special moments, both as a dad and a writer, have been when I have been able to read my books aloud to them! That's a memorable time for us all.