

Interview with T.A. Barron

By Sally Estes

Booklist

April, 2001

Estes: When did you start writing and what got you interested in fantasy?

Barron: As a kid, I often dreamed up stories and poems—especially about nature. My first real story, written when I was seven or eight, was called “Autobiography of a Big Tree.” My family moved to a ranch in Colorado, and I continued writing outside under the ponderosas. In middle school, I produced my own little magazine with the bizarre title “Idiot’s Odyssey.” And I kept writing, in bursts, through college and my years at Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar. While on the Rhodes, I took a year off to travel with my backpack and journal through Asia and Africa. That was when I began my first novel. Nobody ever published it (my file of rejection letters was an inch thick), but I felt drawn to the novel as a form of story with lots of elbow room for intriguing characters, places, and ideas. So later, when I was working in a business in New York, I would often steal away to write. In those days, I had the reputation of a copious note taker in meetings—but no one knew I was really working on character sketches. Finally, with the encouragement of my wife Currie, I resigned as president of the company and moved back to Colorado to write full time. That was more than ten years ago, and I haven’t had a moment of regret. I feel very, very lucky to get to follow my deepest passion in life.



Fantasy appeals to me because of its possibilities in both depth and breadth. Virtually anything is possible in well-written fantasy—including a whole new perspective on ourselves. The best fantasy (by people such as Madeleine L’Engle, Lloyd Alexander, Natalie Babbitt, Susan Cooper, Ursula Le Guin, T.H. White, and J.R.R. Tolkien) can awaken our senses, our emotions, and also our spirits. But to pull this off, the writer must somehow create an imaginary world that feels every bit as real as the world we live in. And that’s not easy. It requires, first, making every detail true; and, second, weaving all the threads into a believable tapestry. I’m especially aware of these challenges from my background as a nature writer: A walk on the mythic isle of Fincayra should feel just as sensuous and true as a walk in Rocky Mountain National Park. When it comes together, this kind of story can transport us to wondrous places, both inside and outside ourselves. And those journeys of fantasy can truly change our lives.

Estes: What first brought Merlin to your attention?

Barron: When I first read T. H. White's *Once and Future King*, I absolutely loved his characterization of Merlin, elder wizard and mentor of Arthur. I read the book under an English oak tree on a farm outside Oxford, so the setting seemed very real. I even named the old oak "Merlin's tree." But I had no idea at all that I would, one day, have the chance to add a little bit to his legend.

It wasn't until twenty years later, when I was writing a novel (*The Merlin Effect*) that required some research into Arthurian lore, that I realized how little had been written about Merlin as a youth. But for the occasional references in the Welsh *Mabinogian*, the famous tale of Vortigern's dragons, and a few modern treatments by authors such as Mary Stewart, the youth of this fabled character remained unexplored. I started to wonder about his struggles and triumphs as a child and as a young man. What were his deepest dreams? His darkest fears? His greatest lessons about life? It seemed to me that, in this wondrous, truly luminous, tapestry of myth about Merlin, there was a gaping hole—his youth. So despite feeling humbled by the task, I couldn't resist trying to add a few new threads. The result is the five books of *The Lost Years of Merlin*.

Estes: You often refer to Merlin as a metaphor in your Author's Notes in the series. Would you explain just what you mean?

Barron: This character has incredible depth. One reason he has stayed so richly alive for fifteen hundred years, and across so many cultures, is because he represents some of humanity's most basic struggles and aspirations. Three examples are his ability to learn from nature; his ability to cross boundaries and stand for universality; and his ability to combine both a dark side and a light side in his wisdom—a sense of his own frailties and vulnerabilities as well as his own powers and ideals.

Let's spend a moment on that notion of universality. When you think about the historical context, which gave birth to the stories about him and the rest of Camelot, Merlin's role as a bridge builder is truly extraordinary. In sixth century Britain, society was disintegrating: The Roman Empire had crumbled, mercenaries wiped out villages overnight, the plague struck several times, people feared invasions, and different languages and religions divided the population. It was a terribly dangerous time. At the core lay an antagonism between the emerging faith of Christianity and the ancient faith of the Druids, who were being driven into the forests. Then, in the midst of all that strife, the first stories emerged about a Druid master who would step across that line and become the friend and teacher of a young Christian king, so that they could unify the people and create a society where justice and individual respect would prevail. This was a radical—and terribly hopeful—idea. Merlin, sometimes in the very same ballad or story, would talk just as easily with a nobleman or a peasant, with the Archbishop of Canterbury or an old gray wolf on the hillside. Right from the beginning, Merlin stood for the connections that bind, rather than divide, us all. And his universality is still part of his appeal today.

After spending these years writing about Merlin's youth, however, I am struck even more by another metaphor. This is the metaphor of Merlin's own passage. From the nameless,

half drowned boy who washed ashore at the start of Book One, he grows in many ways, learning about humility and compassion and power, until he is finally ready to step into his legendary role as the greatest wizard of all times. That transformation, with all its struggles and surprises, is really about Merlin discovering his own inner gifts, his own inner magic. As he grows in wisdom and mastery, he finds that he holds far more greatness inside himself than he ever believed possible. And therein lies the metaphor: Perhaps, like that boy who washed ashore, each and every one of us holds some special magic within ourselves—magic that just might hold the makings of a wizard.

Estes: The natural world plays a large role in your Merlin tales, and I see many aspects of your exploration of it in your Merlin tales that can be related to today’s environmental problems. Is this intentional?

Barron: Very much so. Nature plays a crucial part in these books, for two reasons: First, as a Druid, the Merlin of lore was closely connected to the patterns and mysteries of nature. So as I imagined the lost years of his youth, it was important—and fitting—that the Earth be his greatest mentor. Second, as a lover of nature myself, I was delighted that Merlin gave me the chance to explore humanity’s relationship with the wider universe. As a result, young Merlin learns about many things—humility, love, grief, rebirth, compassion, and transformation—from nature.

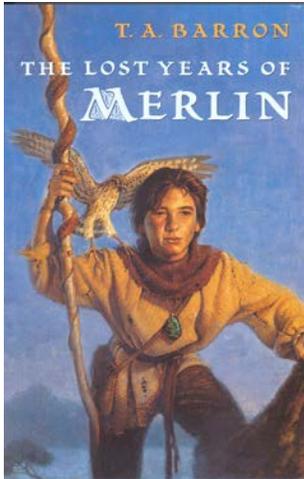
Here is one example: At the beginning of Book One, Merlin is deeply depressed. He hates the squalid village where he lives, yearns to find his own identity, cannot trust the woman who claims to be his mother, and is constantly picked on by the village bullies. When one of those bullies tries to kill him, Merlin escapes into the forest and climbs an old pine tree. He evades his foe—but finds himself in worse trouble yet, when a violent storm strikes. He’s barely able to hang on, pelted by hail and rain. Suddenly the storm vanishes, and the forest is tranquil and serene once more. Mist rises from every glade; the trees smell incredibly fresh, as if they have been newly born. And in that moment, Merlin realizes that if nature can change from something so violent to something so serene, perhaps he too can change. He too can be newly born. This is the very first step in Merlin’s long road to wizardry—when he first discovers his own power to transform his life.

Estes: It’s obvious that you did considerable research to write about Merlin because your young Merlin fits so well into the Merlin canon. (Thanks, Sally.) However, did you turn up your other characters in your research or in your imagination?

Barron: Some of both. From the start, I knew that my young Merlin had to fit seamlessly into the greater body of myth. I was trying to fill in a hole in the tapestry, yes. But the threads absolutely had to match what came before and after. Even so, that left me considerable room for originality—as long as my new additions felt completely integral to the whole.

The grounding of Celtic lore, therefore, was essential. And researching this wondrously rich set of traditions was no chore: I loved learning as much as I could about the people, the land, the customs, the names. The name for Fincayra, for example, came from a line

in a Celtic ballad that referred to an island called Fincayra, halfway between our world and the Otherworld of the spirits. This reference fit my story perfectly, not only because of its blend of mortal and immortal, but because of the ancient Druids' reverence for "in between things."



In the same vein, the ancient Celtic lore inspired the names of many of my characters. For example, once I knew the personality of Merlin's friend and teacher, Cairpré, I named him for a fabled bard. As another example, I found an old tale about a wood nymph called Rhiannon—just the right name for the girl of the forest who would become so important to Merlin. The name of Merlin's archenemy came from a deadly ogre known as Rhita Gawr. And I gave Dinatius a name of Roman origin, to connect him to post Roman Britain.

In other cases, I grounded original characters in established categories. Hallia, for example, is a deer maiden. Valdearg is a mighty dragon (though with a soft heart). And Elen is a healer and herbalist—although I also made her a Christian who retained her respect for the wisdom of other faiths.

Then there are some characters who bear little or no resemblance to anyone I found in the traditional tales. Shim, the dwarf who discovers that he is truly a giant, is one of these. Another is Trouble, the fiery hawk who becomes Merlin's first friend, and lasting inspiration. Others include Merlin's shadow, who possesses a mind of its own; the krelixes, creatures who devour magic; and Urnalda, enchantress of the dwarves.

Estes: What do you think Thomas Malory would have thought about the mass of literature spawned by his *Le Morte D'Arthur*?

Barron: My guess is that Malory wouldn't have been surprised. He must have known that he had tapped into an incredibly rich vein of characters, dramas, and ideas. There is one primary reason we keep telling the old tales, and creating new ones, about Merlin, Arthur, Guinevere, Lancelot, and all the other figures in Camelot: They are true in the deepest sense. These characters, with all their dilemmas, tragedies, and triumphs, speak to our highest ideals as well as our gravest flaws. They hold so much complexity and allure that they have intrigued us for centuries—and will continue to do so for centuries to come.

It is no accident that writers as diverse as Tennyson, Ariosto, Spenser, Shakespeare, Mary Stewart, C. S. Lewis, John Steinbeck, Thomas Hardy, and T. H. White (my own personal favorite) have followed in Malory's wake. So I knew that, in attempting to add a little to the lore of Merlin, I was plunging into a pool much greater than any single story, a pool whose wellsprings flow from humanity's deepest sources.

Estes: The conventions of most fantasies include a struggle between Good and Evil, magic, a prophesy, a hero and his/her companions, a quest, an amulet, etc. What makes good fantasy? What takes it beyond the formulaic?

Barron: The elements you've cited are some of the tools commonly employed in fantasy. But like any tools, they can be wielded well or poorly. And these tools aren't the core of the best fantasy—literature of the imagination that can touch us deeply, even profoundly. Something deeper is going on.

The best fantasy contains a moral vision, with ample room for complexity and contradiction. That is why such stories can give us a whole new perspective on ourselves, through creating an altered mirror that reveals our world afresh. But such a mirror must be more than just distorted: It must also be true. Every detail, every element, of an imaginary world must be believable, and those details must be fully integrated.

Imagination, really, is our personal form of the power of creation. If a reader finds a story about an imagined world to be true, in all its characters and places and voices, then that reader can completely envision that world. And also inhabit it. That is why I prefer the term “visionary tales” to describe this kind of story—tales about new worlds we can envision, and create, because they are at once wholly imaginary and wholly true.

Estes: What did you read as a young adult?

Barron: I didn't read fantasy. But I did devour two kinds of books: biographies and nature writing. So I grew up with tales of heroic character such as Abraham Lincoln, Helen Keller, Albert Einstein, Leonardo de Vinci, and Glenn Cunningham (the boy who, doctors said, would never walk, but who later became the world's fastest mile runner); and with the vivid nature writing of John Muir, Henry David Thoreau, and Rachel Carson. My interest in fantasy didn't happen until my twenties: I discovered Tolkien and L'Engle and was forever hooked. But I think you can see, in the kinds of fantasy I write, the influence of my early readings. My interest in heroes (as opposed to mere celebrities), and my pull toward the natural world, are as strong as ever. Those are key themes in my life.

What do I read now? Not enough! I'd like to have another few hours a day just for reading. Right now I am reading a scientific study of snowflakes; Otto's *The Idea of the Holy*; Isabel Allende's book about the death of her daughter Paula; and *The Soul's Code* by James Hillman. I just finished *Cold Mountain* and *Tuesdays with Morrie*. And I am eager to start *Kneeknock Rise* by Natalie Babbitt.

Estes: What do you think draws young adults to fantasy?

Barron: The freedom to travel anywhere, without any limits, in one's own imagination—that's the primary attraction. And, as we know, if fantasy is well crafted, with attention to detail, we really believe in those imaginary worlds. We can explore them deeply, and return any time.

In addition, I think the opportunity to gain perspective on our own world is an important attraction of fantasy. Through the distorted mirror, and the moral vision of the author, we can see ourselves in new ways. What we find may be disturbing or inspiring—or simply absurd. But it is always valuable.

Estes: What kind of reader reaction have you gotten to *The Lost Years of Merlin* epic?

Barron: Every so often, I get a letter that begins: “Dear T. A. Barron: My teacher made me write to a living author. So if you are still alive when you get this letter, please write me back.” But that’s the exception. Most of the letters are truly heartwarming. I’ve received many that made me cry, or laugh out loud. Nothing I have written, I feel sure, has touched others as deeply as those letters from readers young and old have touched me.

My favorite response is when boys and girls catch hold of the idea that, just like young Merlin, they have their own special magic. Kids today get far too many messages that they don’t really matter, that their choices don’t count. So it makes me smile when kids write to me, musing about their own futures, and what ways they could make a difference with their lives.

Estes: Do you plan to expand on Merlin by looking at other aspects of Arthurian legendry?

Barron: Not for some time. The process of writing the five novels has left me both exhilarated and exhausted. It’s a bittersweet feeling, after all this time, to say goodbye to Merlin and all those other characters on Fincayra. But the story of his lost years is finally complete, and I feel good about that. Someday, no doubt, I’ll return to the world of Arthurian lore, and perhaps to Merlin himself. It’s just too wondrous a world to stay away forever! Right now, though, I need to do something different.

Estes: What is your next writing project?

Barron: I’ve started a short novel, mythic in tone, about a homeless girl who feels strangely drawn to the forest. The working title is *Tree Girl*. I’ve also just finished a picture book about a brave girl and a mountain guide, set in Colorado a century ago. It’s based on an intriguing historical event, and will be titled