

# 'The Thieving Dragon'

## A tale from Central Europe

Adapted by AMY FRIEDMAN

One lovely spring morning, a shepherd stood on a hillside and looked out at his grazing sheep. He counted them. He frowned and scratched his head. Two of his sheep were missing. "I will guard them well tonight," he said to himself.



But just before dawn the next day, he fell into a light sleep. When he awoke he saw that once again two sheep were gone. "Tonight I will be especially watchful," he said to himself. But again, as the dawn light crept over the mountainside, he closed his eyes. When he opened them, to his dismay he saw that two more sheep had vanished.

The next day a gypsy climbed up to the hilltop to visit with his friend the shepherd. "You look so sad, my friend," said the gypsy. "What's wrong?"

The shepherd told the gypsy of his woes. "I'm afraid the thieving dragon comes each day at dawn to steal my sheep. If this goes on, I will lose my whole flock."

The gypsy had heard tales of the thieving dragon. "Ahh," he said thoughtfully. "I will help you. Tonight I will come to your house. Please prepare a supper and make certain to have a good round cheese. After supper, I will tend your sheep. I will catch the thieving dragon for you."

With this advice, the gypsy walked off to prepare for his adventure. First he cut a branch from a weeping willow. This he whittled down to a slender rod. When he returned to his camp, he searched until he found a heavy iron rod. That evening he set off for the shepherd's house.

The two friends enjoyed a pleasant meal. Well after the sun had set, the gypsy stood. Taking his wooden rod and his iron bar and a big round of cheese, he strode into the night, off to the lonely hillside.

Beneath the starry skies, he sat and listened to the soft bleating of sheep. He built a roaring fire and listened to the sound of the crackling wood. He watched the stars blinking and twinkling. Late into the night the gypsy listened to the quiet grazing of

the animals. He concentrated on the many sights and sounds around him. And in this way, the gypsy stayed awake.

Just as dawn came, an enormous shape appeared on the hillside. The gypsy smiled to himself. "Ah yes, it is the thieving dragon," for he could see the fierce nostrils and the creature's scaly body in the glow of firelight and dawn.

"What do you want?" the gypsy called to the dragon.

"Two sheep for my breakfast," roared the ferocious dragon. The fire from his breath singed the whiskers on the gypsy's chin.

"These are not my sheep," the gypsy called. "They belong to my friend the shepherd, and you are not permitted to steal any more of them."

The dragon roared. "I shall take as many sheep as I like. No one is strong enough to stop me!"

"Well, we shall see about that!" said the gypsy as he stood. "I am stronger than you. Of that I'm certain."

"Hal!" bellowed the dragon. "Prove your strength."

The gypsy stepped forward and showed the dragon his two sticks. "See here," he said, "I have two sticks. Let us see which of us can grow his stick highest into the air." With this he handed the dragon the iron bar. "You go first, if you please."

The dragon seized the iron bar and lunged it into the air. Up and up it went, higher and higher, until at last it began its descent and fell to the ground with a thud.

The gypsy smiled mischievously. "My turn," he said. And he held the willow rod as if it weighed a great deal. He whirled it. He twirled it. He whirled it again. "Now look up," he called to the dragon, and as the dragon stared upward, the gypsy dropped the stick behind his back.

The dragon stared and stared. "I see nothing," he said.

"You see," the gypsy said, "I have thrown my stick so high it will never come down. Now, do you believe I am stronger than you?"

"Of course not!" roared the dragon. "One test does not prove your strength."

"Very well. We shall have another contest. But dragon, if I win this one, will you believe me?"

"I will," the dragon said haughtily.

And so the gypsy picked up the round cheese. "Do you see



JILLIAN GILLILAND

this stone?" he asked. The dragon nodded. The gypsy took the cheese in both hands and began to squeeze. He twisted the cheese and turned it, and grunted and groaned and squeezed. The dragon's mouth fell open as the cheese began to sweat watery milk from its skin. At last it crumbled into hundreds of pieces.

The dragon hissed flame.

Then the gypsy picked up a stone the size of the cheese and handed it to the dragon. "This one's for you," he said.

The dragon took the stone between his two front paws. He twisted and turned the stone, and grunted and groaned and squeezed with all his strength. Nothing happened.

At last he threw the stone to the ground. "You win!" he hissed, in anger and in fear. "You are stronger than any creature I have ever known. Do not harm me. I have an old mother who lives in the cave on the far side of this hill. It is she who forces me to steal sheep."

"That is not true," said the gypsy.

"Come, I will show you," the dragon begged.

"Carry me on your back," the gypsy said. "But don't forget how strong I am. I could kill you with one blow if I wished."

The gypsy climbed upon the dragon's scaly back. Off they went to the cave on the far side of the hill.

"Who's there?" called the dragon's mother when she heard footsteps approaching the cave.

"Someone stronger than any creature in the world," the

dragon said sadly. "Ahh," sighed the mother of the gypsy.

"I once knew a father who was just as strong as these gypsies. It is possible we shall have wishes."

For a moment the mother of the poor old dragon when he looked into his eyes he saw dozens of silver coins.

"You have pleased Mother Dragon," said the old mother.

"Yes, that is true," said the gypsy. "Will you tell me your strength?"

"From my father I learned what it is," the old mother winked. He turned the cave and walked back to the shepherd. "Your flock is as strong as mine."

The shepherd was full that he gave a basket of cakes and the gypsy took it and shared it with changing their use: fare into a feast, breathing dragon still for those who gypsy, know how dragons.

The first book, "Heartlight," is available for \$2 for postage and handling. Send your orders to: McMeel, P.O. Box 4 City, Mo. 64141; or 6480. Allow three to delivery.



T.A. Barron's first book was "Heartlight."

## Author blends fantasy and science fiction for children and adults

By DONNA FREEDMAN  
Daily News reporter

As president of a Manhattan venture capital firm, T.A. Barron had a reputation as a ferocious note-taker. As lawyers yammered on and on through endless corporate meetings, Barron scribbled at a tremendous pace.

"Until somebody finally figured out I was editing chapters," he says now.

The writing bug had bitten, and drawn blood. In those days, Barron snatched odd moments here and there to pursue his dream. He wrote at 4 a.m. "before (my) kids started crying." He wrote in taxis. He even claims to have written in elevators.

"It took me until I was almost 40 to figure out ... that I had to do it full-time to find out how good I could be," says Barron, who makes two public appearances in Anchorage next week.

That was in 1989, when he quit to write full-time. He and his wife, Currie, had already decided that New York City was no place to raise their children, so they moved out west to Barron's home in Colorado.

His first book, "Heartlight" — the one he was working on in those meetings — was published in 1990. Two more books with the same protagonist, a strong-willed 12-year-old named Kate Gordon, have followed since then: "The Ancient One" and "The Merlin Effect."

The books have been cited as must-reads by Parents and Family Life magazines. His writing has been praised as "interesting and august" by The New York Times, and as "splendid fantasy, firmly in the tradition of Madeleine L'Engle and C.S. Lewis," by The Philadelphia Inquirer.

L'Engle apparently agrees. For a book-jacket blurb on the cover of "The Ancient One," she had this to say: "Once in a great while a book comes along that is so powerful and so wise that I want to shout about it. ... Readers young and old will enjoy the adventure, relish the characters and ponder the meaning."

"Young and old" is the operative phrase. Although Barron's work often winds up in the children's section of the library, fully half his mail comes from adult readers. Possibly that's because his paperback publisher, Tor, is a science-fiction house that doesn't separate books by age groups.

His books aren't truly science fiction, but neither are they strictly fantasy. Even Barron isn't sure what to call them.

"I would say science fiction/fantasy, perhaps. ... I've been struggling for the right term," he admits.

The books weave together science fiction, quest, fantasy and adventure, with dashes of time travel and magic thrown in for good measure. He shows a tremendous respect for nature, with plot points such as clear-cutting and marine biology.

Barron likes to place his characters in situations of sweeping consequences. At the same time, he's asking provocative questions about the state of one's soul, or the value of a single person's life. Through Kate Gordon's adventures, readers learn that individuals can make a difference.

"That message seems to be lost on many kids today, for whatever reason," Barron says. "Every person matters. Every action counts, every choice can make a difference."

**T.A. BARRON**, author of "Heartlight," "The Ancient One" and "The Merlin Effect," will speak from 7:30 to 9 p.m. Wednesday at the Z.J. Loussac Library. He also will appear at a book-signing from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m., Saturday, May 6, at Borders Books and Music.

## Don't blame age for loss of creativity

The Associated Press  
**NEW YORK** — The conventional wisdom about older people is that they lose their creative flair with age. A new study of scientists says it isn't so, and that attitudes of bosses toward older workers are more of a critical factor in the supposed loss of creativity.

The study looked at more than 3,000 scientists in 24 companies, comparing those who were most and least innovative. The most important factor in creativity turned out to be the overall climate in a given

organization, not age.

Scientists of any age who were exposed to more colleagues and who were encouraged to be part of cohesive groups and engage in diverse activities were more productive.

It's possible that companies actually reduce the creativity of scientists over 50 by treating them as if not much was expected from them in the way of innovation, the researchers concluded. By implication, the finding could also apply to non-scientific workers.



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