



## PROFILE

### Of Myth and Merlin: T.A. (Tom) Barron's Literary Odyssey



COURTESY T.A. BARRON

Barron

**C**areers in writing and business were foreshadowed early for T. A. (Tom) Barron (MBA '80). When he was nine years old, growing up in Harvard,

Massachusetts, he produced a humor magazine, *The Idiot's Odyssey*, which he peddled to the public for a nickel a copy. "Sales were important," he recalls, "because I printed it at my school, where they charged me every time I used their equipment."

After graduating from Princeton, Barron won a Rhodes Scholarship to Oxford, where he studied philosophy, politics, and economics. But outside the university's hallowed halls, the natural world often called; Barron recalls one professor chiding him for "studying the hiking trails of Scotland more than anything else."

Despite his numerous academic and extracurricular interests, including writing, business came first for Barron, thanks to his father's example. "My dad owned a small shoe store, and after a lot of hard work, it gradually turned into a department store," Barron explains. "He treated people fairly and was well-respected. I think I gained a more positive view of business than others in my generation because I saw how a small business could benefit a community."

After returning from Oxford and travels around the world, although writing was

still on his mind, Barron enrolled at HBS intending to build a business of his own. After graduation, he took a job with Prospect Group, Inc., a New York City venture-capital firm, eventually becoming its president and COO. But the writing bug never left him. Barron scribbled in taxis, elevators, and board meetings. After a decade in the business world, he decided to pursue his literary muse.

His initial effort, a book based on his round-the-world travels after Oxford, garnered 32 rejection slips. That helped Barron decide to change his focus. Before long his



first novel, *Heartlight*, the story of an astrophysicist and his granddaughter who try to save the solar system, was published to glowing notices, including this encomium from author Madeleine L'Engle: "This is one of the best science fantasies I've read in a long time. The author manages to combine sophisticated concepts of physics with high fantasy in a marvelous way."

*Heartlight* was followed by the equally acclaimed *The Ancient One* and *The Merlin Effect*, contemporary mythic tales featuring an adventurous young heroine. Barron's first child (of five) was a girl, and he comments, "In a sense, I was writing things for

her to read later. Each of these books is about the power of one person to make a difference." His most recent book, *The Lost Years of Merlin*, begins in ancient Wales and portrays the struggles and triumphs of the young man who would one day become the greatest wizard of all time.

Although Barron's novels are generally found in the science fiction or young adult sections of bookstores, his intentions transcend such categories. "I'm writing for thoughtful people of all ages, people who like to wrestle with ideas in the context of a moving story," he explains. "The reason I often choose young protagonists is because that's the age when we make our first major choices and begin to discover the connections that reach far beyond our own lives."

Barron and his family live in Boulder, Colorado, where he is a private investor. He spends most of his professional day writing, with the rest devoted to business and charitable pursuits. In addition to his other books, Barron's abiding interest in the outdoors has resulted in two nature books, one about the history of the Rocky Mountain National Park and the other an illustrated essay inspired by a monthlong hike in the Colorado wilderness.

Musing on the connections between his business and writing careers, Barron observes: "The people I know who have done best in business pay attention to the subtleties of human relations and motivations. They have a good sense of people and observe the little things. Knowing how to listen is as important in business as it is in writing."

by Thomas Frick