

"Where Fantasy Flies"

An Interview with

T.A. Barron

Kylene Beers, Guest Columnist

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to be "T.A. Barron". The signature is stylized and fluid, written over a yellow background.

YOUNGSTERS GROW UP BELIEVING IN fantasy. They wish on candles, wait for tooth fairies, talk to their stuffed animals and play with imaginary friends. In that talk and play they work out their problems, explore ideas and defuse frustration. They giggle, plot and plan. In fact, fantasy play is natural and spontaneous for children. Not surprisingly, fantasy literature ranks high with children. Beginning with *Winnie the Pooh* and *The velveteen rabbit*, continuing to *Charlotte's web* and *The mouse and the motorcycle* and moving on to *The lion, the witch, and the wardrobe* and *The Indian in the cupboard*, children enjoy entering the world of make-believe. That enjoyment comes not only from the entertainment that those books

hold, but also from the universal themes they address. At the child's level, each of those books tackles important issues such as friendship, caring for the less fortunate, finding courage to do the seemingly impossible and the need to act responsibly.

As children enter upper elementary school and middle school many continue to be interested in fantasy. Books by T.A. Barron, one fairly new contributor to the fantasy genre, are what many teachers and librarians suggest when students ask for another good fantasy. I first met Barron through his books *Heartlight*, *The ancient one* and *The Merlin effect*. Then I had the opportunity to meet him in person at the National Council of Teachers of English Annual

Convention in 1995. Since then, we've had many conversations about his books and fantasy literature in general. The following is a record of one of our recent telephone conversations.

KB: Tom, we've discussed this before so this question shouldn't surprise you: Why do you write fantasy?

TB: Fantasy opens the door to experiencing the magic that is in the world around us and more importantly the magic in ourselves. As a genre, fantasy is about moving from our world into the world of experiences beyond. By tapping into those experiences we come to know more about ourselves.

Lloyd Alexander once said "realism

walks where fantasy flies". Fantasy has all the virtues of realistic fiction plus something more. If a writer does a good job in creating a secondary world that looks and feels and smells true, then that writer has the opportunity, distance and the perspective to make any changes in that reality that let readers step back and view themselves through the fantasy mirror.

KB: That's a strong requirement to put on fantasy writers — providing a mirror for readers.

TB: Yes, but that is what good fantasy must do. It must take readers on a journey that helps them see or find truth.

KB: Some readers who don't enjoy fantasy would scoff at the claim that fantasy provides personal truths; they believe that fantasy is pure fluff, pure escapist fiction.

TB: Some fantasy is fluff. But that fantasy lacks a journey; not a journey for the protagonist, but one for the readers. Whereas in pure fantasy, readers on the journey discover truths about themselves and about their connection to humanity. The first level of truth is achieved at the level of the senses: Can readers see the world of the protagonist? Can readers visualize, touch and smell the world in the book? This has got to happen first or the reader will not accept any of the deeper truths. Some people say that for this to happen readers must suspend disbelief. I think that sounds negative. I prefer to say that the reader must be willing to accept belief. He or she must be willing, for a moment, to believe the world of the book. But for that to happen, I, as the author, must treat this fantasy world as if it were absolutely true, absolutely real.

KB: So you've got to believe in the world first before you can convince others to believe.

TB: Yes. And for that to happen, I've got to do a lot of research on the topic. For instance, when I was creating a tribe of Native Americans

Kylene Beers is an adjunct professor in the Department of Library Science at Sam Houston State University in Huntsville, Texas.



for the book *The ancient one*, I first had to spend time researching the Native American tribes that once lived in the Pacific Northwest. Only after I knew about the real tribes could I convincingly write about a fictional tribe. Likewise, when writing about Kate's encounter with a whale in *The Merlin effect*, I had to experience being close to a whale to make that true for the reader. Once I knew a whale's sounds and smells, once I had looked into the eye of a whale only then could I write truthfully about a whale.

KB: Achieving this first level of truth sounds like enough right there.

TB: Sure, and a lot of fantasy stops there. But there can be much more. The second level is truth on the emotional level. Emotions have a whole different sensitivity to truth than do the senses. The reader's emotions need to feel that the fantasy world is true. The pain is true. The struggle is true. Here, the empathetic connection is vital. The reader has to feel Frodo's destitution and Ged's fear. In my most recent book, *The lost years of Merlin*, I want readers to feel

Merlin's confusion, loss and despair as he looks for a family he cannot remember and struggles with power he cannot understand.

The third level, the deepest level, is the level of the spirit. This level brings readers to a truth that goes beyond senses and emotions. At this level, the writer must find a way to touch the deepest chords of human experience, to touch the fundamental yearnings, searchings, agonies and joys of being alive. Truth on the emotional level is a profoundly personal moment when sorrows or joys are felt. If the writing is done well, it is totally consuming. But at this third level, the level of the spirit, readers move beyond their own experiences and come in contact with something bigger than themselves. This is the realm of great literature.

KB: So the emotional level connects us with our own feelings while the spiritual level connects us to humanity?

TB: That's exactly right.

KB: What about wisdom? Can there be a journey that offers excitement but no wisdom?

TB: Absolutely. But without wisdom, the journey is pointless. Good fantasy is not an escape from this world, but rather a plunge into this world in the deepest, truest sense. Good fantasy allows us to discover ourselves and some of the great truths of life.

KB: How did you decide to seek those truths through literature?

TB: In roughly one year, I experienced the death of someone who was like a grandfather figure to me; I met Currie, my wife, which was like a rebirth of sorts; and we experienced the birth of our daughter. The best way for me to work through these issues was through a book called *Heartlight*. At that time we were living in New York. I was living the business life complete with board meetings and business lunches. I was also trying to be a writer; I was writing in taxi cabs, during business meetings, early mornings, during weekends — in others words, whenever I could find a moment. It took me four years to get anything done on *Heartlight*. As I got close to finishing it, I quit my life in New York. My family and I moved back to Colorado in the last part of 1989 and *Heartlight* was published in 1990.

KB: And now you write full time?

TB: Yes. Plus I spend a lot of time helping Currie take care of our five children whose ages range from nine years down to 10 months. And I spend many days visiting schools and speaking at conferences.

KB: A real respect and love for the environment comes through in your books, especially *The ancient one*. Where does that interest come from?

TB: All my life I have loved listening to the rain, watching the stars and smelling the fallen leaves. But the first time I really sensed nature's grip on me was the day when, as a child in Colorado, I was walking home from school and realized that what I loved best was not the mountains, not the alpine meadows but the sky. I loved the limitless nature of the sky. When I decided to give up New York and that life, I knew that in order to write I had to return to Colorado and be under that wide expanse. I need the silence that nature offers. On one occasion, I wrote this about silence:

The ultimate gift of the wilderness, for me, is not the glowing vistas, the marvelous creatures, nor even the crystalline air. It is that precious quality so often drowned by the cacophony of modern life — that quality called Silence.

To sit upon a ledge on a mountain ridge drinking in the silence is to become a part of the stone, the water, the wide open sky. To listen to silence, truly listen, is to hear echoes across vast distances both within oneself and without. Sometimes, at such moments, I lose myself completely in the simple miracle of all that surrounds me. Other times I feel with painful clarity how empty life would be without those I love. Still other times I am moved by the continuous power of creation, whose essence is life, and whose engine is silent.

KB: Tom, that's beautiful.

TB: Thank you. It's from a book I wrote called *Rocky Mountain National Park: A 100 year perspective*.

KB: So you do write more than fantasy.

TB: Fantasy is my heartland, but I write in other genres. For instance, I've recently been working on a realistic fiction picture book called *Where is Grandpa?* It will be illustrated by Chris K. Soentpiet and will be out in 1998 or 1999. I enjoyed writing in the picture book format. Actually, I resist being classified as any one type of writer. Once, a woman in Seattle told me she could find elements of fantasy, realistic fiction, non-fiction and historical fiction in each of my books. I took that as a compliment.

KB: If you resist classification, would you classify yourself as an author who writes for one particular age group?

TB: No. But I am an author who prizes the importance of childhood and young adulthood. It is no accident that my protagonists are young adults. That moment at the edge of adulthood is an incredible time of life. I choose that age for my protagonists with much care. The greatest children's books understand the importance of this time; they go beyond the experiences of the child and imbue these books with a wisdom that makes these books also touch adults.

KB: Tom, what's the most important thing readers ought to know about your writing?

TB: I want readers to know that my goal is to create books that are a journey into the world of the senses, the emotions and the spirit. If readers open the door and find surprising connections — connections to the world and to their deepest selves, then I will have done my job.

Books by T.A. Barron

Fantasy:

The ancient one. Philomel, 1992.

The ancient one. Tor, 1994.

Heartlight. Philomel, 1990.

Heartlight. Tor, 1995.

The lost years of Merlin. Philomel, 1996.


The Merlin effect. Philomel, 1994.

The Merlin effect. Tor, 1996.

Nature:

Rocky Mountain National Park: A 100 year perspective. Westcliffe, 1995.

To walk in wilderness. Westcliffe, 1993. **EL**



I'm a Little Teapot!
Presenting Preschool Storytime
Compiled by Jane Cobb
Illustrated by Magda Leticia

- 63 themes
- 1,000 picture books
- 500 fingerplays and songs
- bibliography • index • 8.5x11 pb • 256 pp

All you need for a successful and creative storytime collected in one book!

TO ORDER:

- US: \$23.95 + \$3.50 S&H to: Black Sheep Press, PO Box 2217, Point Roberts, WA 98281-2217
- Canada: \$29.95 + \$4.50 S&H + 7% GST to: Black Sheep Press, 6-2626 Granville Street, Vancouver, BC V6H 3H8

Tel/Fax: (604) 731-2653
On the Web: www.blacksheeppress.com