

A GREAT WIZARD CONTINUES TO INSPIRE

In an epic series, author T.A. Barron reconstructs the boyhood - the lost years - of Merlin.

Stories about the legendary Merlin, mentor of Camelot's King Arthur, have appeared for 15 centuries. Today, Merlin and the tales surrounding him are enjoying a revival with children and adults.

Particularly popular with young people (10 -15) and with a number of adults are T. A. (Tom) Barron's books *The Lost Years of Merlin* (1996) and the recently published *The Seven Songs of Merlin* (both published by Philomel). These are the first books in a five-book epic exploring the youth of the ancient and intriguing wizard.

Barron writes fantasy fiction eloquently. His books are thought-provoking and resonate with powerful spiritual undertones and a deep respect for the natural world. But Barron also knows how to spin a good yarn and keep readers on the edge of their chairs. Merlin's youthful adventures are fast-paced, action-packed stories - full of battles, magic and narrow escapes. The author's imaginative writing has captured the hearts of kids, who are already asking - "what happens next?" The third book will be published in 1998.

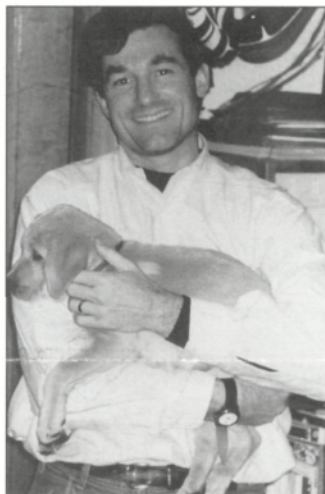
Tom Barron was raised in Harvard, Mass. He currently lives in Colorado with his wife and five children. Globe correspondent Stephanie Loer interviewed him on his recent visit to Boston area schools and bookstores.

S.L. What prompted you to write about Merlin's years as a teenage boy?

T.A.B. If you think of a story as a tapestry of threads, certainly the stories about Camelot are some of the richest in literature, and Merlin is an integral

part of these tales. But when I began to research Merlin's personal history, I realized there was an enormous gap in the tapestry of his story. There is almost nothing about his youth; yet those years were important in shaping him to be the mentor of King Arthur. As a writer, that gap became my invitation.

Whether Merlin is real in the realm of history, he is certainly real in the realm of myth. We know so much about Merlin as a centuries-old wizard, that the coming of age of a person like that must have been an exciting time. My challenge was to give young Merlin a human face, but have my stories remain true to the myth.



S.L. Are the stories based on truth?

T.A.B. Scholars are still debating whether Merlin is legend or whether he actually lived. So these stories I've created are fiction. When I'm asked this question, I respond by saying there are many different levels of truth. Stories are true on one level if they bring the five senses to life. A story has to feel true to you - whether you are writing it or reading it. This happens if it touches your mind, your emotions and the deepest places within your soul.

S.L. Your books about Merlin are very popular. Why is he such an appealing character to young people?

T.A.B. He has an almost charismatic depth to him that seems to appeal to each new generation. Here's a

character who has strode across 15 centuries. On one side he's mysterious. He's a wizard and performs magic. Yet, he is also extremely human; he's aware of human frailties and has a sense of the tremendous capacity for human achievement. Kids pick up on this combination of talents. I think they like Merlin because he is a "can-do" sort of person. Merlin is about the power of the individual; he is, in a sense, a metaphor for all of us.

S.L. Could you elaborate on why Merlin represents a metaphor?

T.A.B. Because as a young boy Merlin was washed ashore with no memory, no name, and no clue about his wondrous future. All of us, at some time in our lives feel like we have been washed ashore - with no idea of who we are or where we're going.

Like young Merlin, each of us harbors hidden strengths, capacities and possibilities. Although they may be undiscovered, these qualities are there, and we can find them within ourselves. In a fundamental way this process of self-discovery involves both gaining a lot - but often - one must first lose a great deal too.

S.L. You visit many classrooms. How do children respond to your books?

T.A.B. Most questions from young people are very thoughtful and usually very thought-provoking. One comment I really loved was made by a 12-year-old boy in Nashville who announced to the whole student audience: "Mr. Barron, there's only one problem with your books; they leave me thinking about them for hours afterwards."

At that point, I thought to myself - "Terrific! The story has made the connection with the reader. What more could an author want?"

