

Books for adolescents

Fantasy and realism: Two topics, one author; a talk with T.A. Barron

Kyrene Beers

Note: I have been a huge fan of Tom Barron's writing for a number of years. I grew up reading stories of Merlin and Arthur and the court at Camelot. I still enjoy escaping to that mystical and magical time and place. That journey is made easy by the wonderful and enchanting books by Barron. Recently, I asked my colleague and coauthor, Kyrene Beers, to interview Tom so that all of us would gain some insight into the realm of fantasy writing.

Teri Lesesne



Tom Barron

Fantasy literature is the literature of discovery. It is the genre of the magical, of the pretend, of the strange and unreal, of other worlds, wondrous worlds, frightening worlds, and paradoxically, it is the genre of the real. Real hopes, dreams, fears, conflicts, conquests, real lessons learned that last long after the pages of the book

are read, the covers closed, and perhaps the title forgotten.

Real lessons learned about courage and consequences as we read of porridge-eating bears, web-writing spiders, wardrobe-traveling children, and pasta-flowing pots. Real lessons experienced vicariously in the midst of high adventure as characters suffer through losses and learn about the nature of power and the realities of greed. Real lessons learned as readers travel there and back again with hobbits and dwarves, watch Stuart bravely search for Margalo, battle to preserve Salamandastron, join Cara's fight to save the unicorns of Luster, watch Prince Jen search for the wisest of emperors, or cry with Winnie as she leaves the everlasting Tucks.

In the midst of adventure, in the safety of faraway lands, with the assurance that "this could never happen" readers of fantasy encounter the breadth and depth of the human spirit, witness the battles of good and evil, and watch others meet and defeat their greatest foes—fear, temptation, loss, hubris—and through those characters learn that loss accompanies life, fear walks hand in hand with bravery, and good and evil are two sides of the coin called power.

Many of us spent our youths with Charlotte and Wilbur, with Meg and Charles Wallace, with Bilbo and Gandalf, and with Digory and Asian. We understand why our students reach for books that carry them to other worlds or show them the most curious of events within our own world. Therefore, we constantly search out wonderful authors of fantasy to recommend to students. One author many recommend is T.A. Barron. Tom Barron's fantasies often transport readers to new worlds, other times they show readers the magic in this world, but they always treat readers to an adventure that not only entertains but also enlightens.

I've traveled with Barron's heroine Kate across the universe and to the depths of the ocean, I've gone back in time to meet the Ancient One, and I've



Jacket illustration from *The Lost Years of Merlin* by T.A. Barron. Jacket art copyright ©1996 by Mike Wimmer. Used by permission of Philomel Books.

TAB: No! I hope to make it possible for people to believe in Merlin, not merely suspend disbelief of him. That famous adage that fiction must create the willing suspension of disbelief just is not strong enough. At least not for me. I don't think it goes far enough because that implies a shadow of doubt. It implies that someone is holding back in some way. My job as a writer is not to create a willful suspension of disbelief, but to break that down completely and create the full, willing, whole-hearted belief.

KB: But if I'm going to believe the fantasy, I've got to find the reality. How do you make me believe in a world that has never existed?

TAB: In part, I do it by giving that world its own logic—it might not be our logic—that is coherent and consistent and true. If the logic is there, then the history of the giants fits into the history of the dwarves which also fits into the history of the people who can change from human form into deer and back.

KB: Do you write out this history, these rules of logic?

TAB: Yes. I have to. I have crib sheets. I also have much of it in my mind. And sometimes I leave gaps so that later I can create new things. But when I create those new things, they must be consistent with what was previously created. In the end, the total picture must be a coherent whole. If I do that, then I've created a great place to visit that feels true. Otherwise it just feels random.

Not only do I work out the logic of the world, but I do spend a lot of time researching the things in this world that will help that other world become real. For instance, when I was creating a tribe of Native Americans for the book *The Ancient One*, I first had to spend time researching the Native American tribes that once lived in the Pacific Northwest. Long before I began writing *The Lost Years of Merlin*, I read Celtic myths, the work of Geoffrey of Monmouth, the writings of T.H. White, C.S. Lewis, even Shakespeare's references to Merlin.

Also, I create an outline of where the book is going, which generally gets abandoned as characters take on their own lives. With *The Lost Years of Merlin* books, I often find this old wizard sitting on the edge of my desk in the attic of my home in Boulder, Colorado, looking at me saying "That's not at all what happened to me, young man. Pay attention and hear my story." And so I do. At that point, I often must abandon that initial outline I had created. I think of that initial outline as being like a satellite photo: It gives the large outline of the land below but the details, the texture, the real understanding of the people and the land only emerge upon close inspection.

KB: Thinking of that land that emerges, Tom, one thing that would have to become visible are the paths that the characters follow. Let's talk a bit about a different type of path that Joseph Campbell says all heroes in all fantasies must follow, the path of sep-

aration, adventure, and return. Do you agree with his thought?

TAB: Absolutely, I agree with the overall path. But what I'd like to do is add to the notion of adventure, specifically the role of the adventure. It is the adventure in the outside world that so shapes heroes that they are finally prepared to face the greatest adventure of all, which lies within the hero. It's after the adventure that the character is now ready to confront the most challenging adventures of all—those within himself or herself.

KB: So on this path that Campbell is describing, the role of the adventure is to create the hero?

TAB: The role of the adventure, and let's stay with the notion of path, the role of the adventure is to provide the signposts that lead the character, soon to be hero, toward heroism.

KB: And heroism is defined as...

TAB: Our society often defines heroes as those who confront dragons outside themselves. Whether firemen rushing into burning buildings or mythic characters facing fire-breathing dragons, people often label one a hero by the deeds performed. But the greater challenge, and for my money the greater heroism, comes from confronting the dragons within ourselves. Not necessarily slaying them, maybe discovering them as a part of ourselves and owning them, embracing them, maybe even making them our friend.

KB: But if fantasy follows this path, then doesn't that limit you as a writer?

TAB: Interesting question. And the answer is complex. Those elements—separation, adventure, return—are universal elements. As a writer I am bound, I wouldn't say limited, but bound to that eternal pattern. Readers from a young age recognize the pattern. Hansel and Gretel will be separated from their parents. During that separation they will have a grand adventure with the witch in the candy house. After their wits save them from death, they will return home. Pinocchio is separated from Gepetto, has his adventures, faces his dragons, and returns home. In

The Lost Years of Merlin, Merlin is separated from his home, from his family, even from his identity. His search for those things leads to many adventures. Eventually, he will complete his return when he discovers his home, his heritage, himself.

That pattern is something the writer knows and the reader comes to know. The one person who doesn't know the pattern is the character in the book. That unawareness by the character is what creates the suspense for the reader. We know the character is supposed to emerge heroic but the character doesn't. That allows readers to wonder if the character will make the right choices. Will the character clutch the hope that threatens to disappear long enough to survive the adventure? And because the character does not know the future, does not know the pattern, readers can identify with the hero because all of us are full of vulnerabilities, all of us doubt our capacity to hold tightly to fragile hope, wonder about our own ability to change our world, ourselves. Experiencing the hero's growth gives us all the sense that we too can rise to that kind of height. This fact that the character does not know what power, what magic he or she has down inside is the bridge between the character and the reader.

KB: And the importance of that bridge?

TAB: Well, without that bridge, the reader stays outside the text, the reader doesn't enter into the feelings of the character or, more importantly, begin to explore the feelings within himself. That bridge is as much a bridge between the character and the reader as between the reader and himself. Literature of any genre must provide readers with a path to seeing themselves. Without that, literature is but words on a page.

KB: Rosenblatt says literature is an exploration.

TAB: Yes. And the best literature offers many points of departure, many roads for exploration

KB: That's what teachers do also as they create classrooms that encourage response, encourage risk taking.

TAB: I can always tell when I'm in a classroom where the teacher has truly lit the fire for learning by the quality of questions the kids ask. When kids aren't afraid to take risks in their questions, when they are willing to put themselves into their questions, when they ask those questions that can't be answered with yes or no, a, b, or c, then I know I've got kids who have been encouraged to value asking questions as much as finding answers.

KB: Are your books more about finding answers or asking questions?

TAB: So much of what I do in any book is write through an underlying question. For instance the question underlying *The Ancient One* is the question of how we are all connected. Are we connected over time, over cultures, over ages, over languages, perhaps even over species? In *The Lost Years of Merlin* you meet a character named Shim who, though very small in size, claims to be a giant. Shim became the great opportunity to raise the question of what makes a giant. Is a giant determined by the size of someone's bones? Or is it the size of something else?

While my characters might be trying to find answers to the conflicts presented through the plots, I hope their journeys create questions for the readers. My highest goal is to create characters, plots, and themes that raise the big questions of life. Recently, a middle schooler told me: "Mr. Barron, I have a problem with your books. They leave me thinking for hours." I smiled and went home happy.

KB: You obviously did something that encouraged exploration for that reader. I agree that the bridge between character and reader is crucial, but with fantasy literature what other hurdles must you cross before bigger questions, bigger truths can emerge?

TAB: Well, the biggest hurdle is that in the midst of the fantasy the book must be real, that issue we talked about earlier. There are several levels

of realism that must be present for the fantasy to work. There is realism of place. Do I feel like I'm there? Do I smell the briny breeze? Do I hear the screeching of gulls? Do I feel the glass edge of the sand? As a writer, my job is to make sure I describe the fantasy world with such accuracy and detail that readers can really experience it. There is also realism of emotion. Have I felt the way the character feels? Am I moved by the character's struggle? Do I believe the character's pain or joy, fear or hope? Again, I must choose the words that will allow readers to experience emotions. Finally, there is a deeper level of realism, a level that goes beyond the senses, beyond the emotions all the way to the spirit. Why does this ring so true? What do I know now about the human condition? What am I experiencing that all people in all cultures in all times have experienced? At this level, the writer must touch the basic yearnings and searching, tragedies and triumphs that accompany life.



Jacket illustration from *The Seven Songs of Merlin* by T.A. Barron. Jacket art copyright ©1997 by Mike Wimmer. Used by permission of Philomel Books.

KB: So this is the level that connects us one to another across generations and cultures?

TAB: Right. And if writing can reach that level of realism, then it has the opportunity to touch people in deep and lasting ways. I believe that good fantasy is not an escape from reality but rather a plunge into reality in the deepest, truest sense. Good fantasy allows us to discover ourselves and some of the great truths of life.

KB: And how do you discover those truths in your life?

TAB: The best way for me to work through issues is through writing. For instance, about 11 years ago a close friend died. I met Currie, we married, and we had our first child. That was a lot to have happen in about one year. I worked through many of the issues of loss and love and life in a book I was writing called *Heartlight*. At that time we lived in New York where I was in business and doing all the things that go with a fast-paced professional life—attending business lunches, board meetings—and at the same time trying to write a novel. I wrote anywhere—taxi cabs, boardrooms, at home. Finally, I decided that what I most wanted to do was be a full-time writer. Life is too short not to follow your true passion. So we left New York and moved to Colorado, where I'd spent much of my childhood. There I finished *Heartlight*, which was published in 1990.

KB: And so now you spend your days writing.

TAB: Yes. Plus I spend a lot of time helping Currie take care of our five children, who are all under the age of 10. And I spend many days visiting schools and speaking at conferences.

KB: And will we always find you writing fantasy?

TAB: Fantasy is my heartland, but I write in other genres. For instance, right now I'm 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.

KB: So, Tom, even though we may see your writing in a variety of forms

and genres, does any one thing unify all your writing?

TAB: I hope so. I hope that readers see that my writing is about connections. Whether writing a history of the Rocky Mountain National Park or a picture book about the relationship between a grandfather and his grandchildren or a fantasy about mythical characters from misted lands, my goal remains constant: to find the right words so that readers may connect to the world in the text, to the world within themselves, and perhaps to the wider world called humanity. If that happens, then my time as a writer will have been well spent.

Books by T.A. Barron

Fantasy

The Ancient One. Philomel. 1992. ISBN 0-399-21899-8.

The Ancient One. Tor. 1994. ISBN 0-812-53654-1.

Heartlight. Philomel. 1990. ISBN 0-399-22180-8.

Heartlight. Tor. 1995. ISBN 0-812-55170-2.

The Lost Years of Merlin. Philomel. 1996. ISBN 0-399-23018-1.

The Merlin Effect. Philomel. 1994. ISBN 0-399-22689-3.

The Merlin Effect. Tor. 1996. ISBN 0-812-551-699.

The Seven Songs of Merlin. Philomel. 1997. ISBN 0-399-23019-X.

Nature

Rocky Mountain National Park: A 100 Year Perspective. Westcliffe. 1995. ISBN 1-56579-123-1.

To Walk in Wilderness. Westcliffe. 1993. ISBN 1-56579-038-3.