

What Is In A Tale?

Interview with T. A. Barron

By Steve Curwood, National Public Radio (NPR)

2000

CURWOOD: Albert Camus once suggested that philosophers write novels. And that is a message T.A. Barron takes to heart for his environmental philosophies. He works with the ancient lore of the wizard called Merlin. It's a pleasant literary task. Children and adults alike are captivated by tales of the sword and the stone in King Arthur's court. Yet, little has been written about the early years of Merlin's life, the time when he was a boy just discovering his powers. T.A. Barron calls these the lost years of Merlin, and has written a series of books devoted to the young wizard. In the latest, *The Mirror of Merlin*, T.A. Barron weaves an environmental message through a tale of spells and adventures.

BARRON: Stories somehow get into our consciousness in a very powerful way. I don't think there is any more effective means of getting a point across. You think of all the great storytellers who have made important points in their day, whether it's Rachel Carson or John Muir or Chief Seattle, for that matter. They knew the power of a good story.

CURWOOD: Now, you choose to write stories. I'm wondering why you choose to focus on an ancient mythological, magical figure, Merlin.

BARRON: He's got a great amount of interest to me for several reasons. One of them is that he learns all of his greatest lessons from nature. One of the things about Merlin that's very striking is that as a Druid, he learns about the basic concepts of, like, humility or compassion or his connectedness to the wide universe, really from the natural world. That's why in my stories, to rediscover his lost youth, I have him have experiences, like getting trapped up in a tree during a wild storm and having a sense that, as the storm evaporates and suddenly the forest around him feels newly-born, that's the moment where he discovers that he has the chance to remake his own life, too.

CURWOOD: Why do you have such a strong environmental thread running through each of your books? They're -- they're strong, although they're subtle. You don't hit people over the head. But do you think that young adults respond more favorably to this type of approach? Why not be more forward about this?

BARRON: Since half of my readers are young adults and half are adults, I really am very aware that I really want these images to last and come through to people. And when I was growing up, the most important things that happened to me were not lectures. They were experiences. They were stories, perhaps, and experiences therefore that I lived through my imagination. Or they were real-life experiences. Let me give you one example that led to a book. And I hope that conveys a really important point about the world we live in.

CURWOOD: All right. Go ahead.

BARRON: When I was a kid on a ranch in Colorado, there was a single Ponderosa pine tree, very old, whose roots were being undercut by the creek that ran through the ranch. And I used to sit under it a lot, sometimes to just simply get away from my brothers and sisters, and sometimes just to daydream. And I remember when I was, oh, 11 or 12 years old, sitting there once, and wondering what it might be like not to be a boy, not to be a human being at all, but maybe even just simply to be a tree. And what would it be like, what would it mean in terms of patience and wisdom and foregoing all that wanderlust and all the angst that it meant to be human.

And I know that it's a very difficult thing to trace the root, but I'm positive that 25 years later, when I was writing a novel called *The Ancient One*, which features a girl, a brave teenage girl named Kate Gordon, who finds out that her town in Oregon, which is a logging town and at the edge of collapse, it turns out that the only possible way she can save her town and the people she loves is by enlisting the help of the one living creature that's old enough that its life stretches between all of those centuries and connects those two times. And that turns out to be a single tree, a redwood tree. A tree that was so old that even back in the days of the Indians they called that tree *The Ancient One*.

So, the climax of this book is when Kate somehow does the most difficult thing she has ever done, which is to become a tree. And in that moment when she comes through the centuries and actually arrives in the ancient time, and then moves backward and comes up into the twentieth century and hears the whining sound of chainsaws, if I did my job right as a writer, that moment, when the saws are biting into the tree's side, that is her side, it's also biting into the reader's side. And I'm hopeful that that scene of *The Ancient One* under the saw is more powerful than any lecture that I might have written about why we ought to preserve our redwood trees.

CURWOOD: So, this is a logging lesson, *The Ancient One*.

BARRON: Well, it's really bigger than that. It's a lesson about our connectedness to everything. The Ancient One is really a novel, like all the novels that feature this Kate Gordon character, and probably I guess you could say it about the Lost Years of Merlin novels, too, it really is about the question of how and what ways our life is connected to the lives of others. That means others of different times and others of different cultures, but also others of different species, too.

CURWOOD: Well, Tom, thanks so much for talking to us today.

BARRON: Oh, it's a real pleasure, Steve. And thank you for the thoughtful questions. It's been a great chance to be here.

CURWOOD: T.A. Barron's new book is entitled The Mirror of Merlin, and he joined us from his home town of Boulder, Colorado.

(Music up and under)