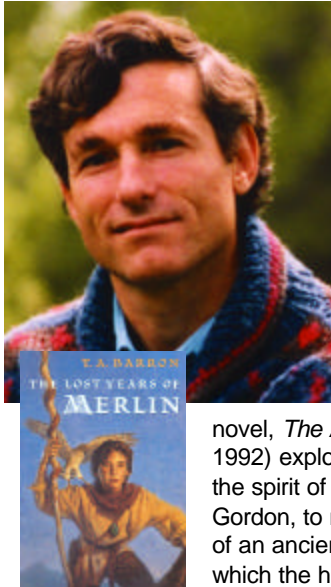


To Think as a Tree, to Act as a Man

A conversation with T.A. Barron

by Antoinette Botsford



"When I was 11 or 12 years old, I was sitting under a Ponderosa pine tree where I used to go to—oh, perhaps daydream," muses T.A. Barron. "I wondered what it might mean simply to be a tree."

Barron has wondered well. His second published

novel, *The Ancient One* (Philomel, 1992) explored what it can mean for the spirit of a brave teenager, Kate Gordon, to merge with the time span of an ancient tree. The grove in which the huge redwood stands has become a prime target for a logging

company. When she slips inside the tree's hollow, she begins an adventure in which the tree serves as a conduit to the people who lived in this land long ago. Emerging from the tree with a newfound understanding of the interdependence between humans and all other species helps Kate to connect more actively and deeply with the modern cause of saving ancient forests. *The Merlin Effect* (Philomel, 1994) described the intrepid Kate's modern-day encounter with the truly ancient Merlin and was a bridge to *The Lost Years of Merlin*, a lively and stunningly original five-volume epic about the life of the young Merlin and his fellow beings (including trees) on the island of Fincayra before King Arthur's reign; the final volume, *The Wings of Merlin*, was released by Philomel in 2000.

ENGAGING WITH THE EARTH

A strong environmental thread runs through all of Barron's books and articles—and indeed, his whole life. His commitment to making a difference in slowing the defilement of our planet's resources means that he must at times tear himself away from the long treks in the quiet places that feed his soul, or from his loving and spirited family, to do such things as speed along the highway from his home near Boulder to a meeting in Denver.

On the day we talk, he begins by explaining that just now he's committed to "trying to develop a growth plan for the state of Colorado." The sound breaks up before I can catch the details. The interview momentarily succumbs to

May/June 2001

the still inviolable mountains. Through the static I reflect that Barron, though host of a brilliant and exhaustive website (www.tabarron.com), remains a man who prefers to write his first drafts on tablets of ruled paper. Yet he's calling on what must be for him an anathema: a cell phone.

Barron deeply believes that everything we do matters in some way, and that we are fully accountable for planetary well-being. In a speech presented to The Wilderness Society in 1998, when accepting the Robert Marshall Award (given annually to a person who has been a force in advancing the conservation of endangered wilderness areas), Barron recounted a theory of physics known as The Butterfly Effect. This shows that "everything in the universe is so closely interconnected that any action, no matter how insignificant, may have consequences far beyond what we can detect." In this way, even "the stirring of a butterfly's wings somewhere in a forest on planet Earth could somehow affect the motions of distant stars."

It's safe to say that all Barron's writing—fictional or otherwise—reflects this view of causality, exemplifying the importance of what each of us does with reference to the natural environment. It is this, combined with a passionate love of nature and of children, that drives the playful but profound vision behind his creative output.

THE POWER OF GOOD STORIES

Barron credits his parents and many of his teachers with fostering his innate love of nature and traditional cultures. One of his baby-sitters—Elvira Scorgie, a woman in her eighties—was the town historian and knew more about the Native American people of that region than anyone else around. "We had a great time discovering things together; once we found an actual Indian spearhead, wrapped in the roots of an upturned tree. We spent weeks exploring that process, figuring out how it got into the roots and when."

Barron maintains that stories, whether for young or old, are the best way to convey one's intention. "A good story gets into our consciousness in a very powerful way.... You think of all the great storytellers who have made important points in their day. Rachel Carson, John Muir, Chief Seattle—they all knew the power of a good story."

So what does it mean to think like a tree? Barron's newest tale, *Tree Girl*, a novel for young readers (to be released by Philomel in September), introduces Rowanna, a girl whose spirit is intimately linked to a tree. As with his previous eight novels and beautifully crafted picture-book *Where is Grandpa?* (Philomel, 2000), this tale will encourage children to pay attention to their inner sense of connectedness—the part of themselves that innately recognizes that we are all one. These are the children who will grow up to join what Barron refers to as "the wise and heartfelt people who are dedicated to protecting land and all its creatures"—children who think as trees might think.

NAPRA Review