

Magical novelist visits Homer

by Michael Armstrong

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While Homer will swarm with national and state writers this weekend for the Kachemak Bay Writers' Conference, one popular author isn't even part of the conference.

T.A. "Tom" Barron just happens to be passing through on his way to a vacation across the bay.

Barron, the author of the young-adult novels "Heartlight," "The Ancient One" and "The Merlin Effect," and the five books in "The Lost Years of Merlin" series, has been visiting Alaska on a working vacation with his family. Saturday he signs books from 5 to 6 p.m. at the Homer Bookstore on Pioneer Avenue for his only public appearance in Alaska this trip.

"I was very touched when the invitation came. I have a special feeling for the most beautiful town in the universe," Barron said. He first came to Homer in 1979, "bumming around and following whatever trail I could find." Since then he has visited nine times.

Barron, 50, gained national prominence with his first two young-adult novels, "Heartlight" (Philomel Books, 1990) and "The Ancient One" (Philomel Books, 1992).

Barron hasn't always been a writer. In the 1980s he became president of a venture-capital business in New

York City.

He has, however, been writing most of his life, persevering even after he said one novel got 42 rejections.

He calls writing "the hardest job I ever had," but also the most fulfilling. Barron's big break came when Madeline L'Engle, the Newberry-winning author of "A Wrinkle in Time," saw a draft of "Heartlight," praised it to her agent,

"His stories have everything from adventure to suspense, I can't put them down. They're worth reading again and again."

- Courtney Stage

and within months Barron took a gamble, quit his prosperous business career and moved to his home state of Colorado to write full time.

Kathy George, the youth services librarian at the Homer Public Library, said "The Ancient One" was his first book to make an impact on readers, hooking them with the environmental aspect. The book concerns Kate, a young girl who goes to Oregon to spend a vacation with her aunt. Kate gets caught up in a controversy familiar to Alaskans, the conflict between a declining timber industry

T.A. Barron, the author of the young-adult novels "Heartlight," "The Ancient One" and "The Merlin Effect," and the five books in "The Lost Years of Merlin" series, visits Homer on Saturday for a book-signing at the Homer Bookstore from 5-6 p.m.



T.A. Barron

and those wishing to save the last of an ancient old-growth forest. Through the power of a mysterious walking staff, Kate goes back 500 years to a more magical time with similar battles for the wilderness.

In a later book, "The Merlin Effect" (Philomel Books, 1994) when Kate meets the ancient wizard Merlin, she sets up a link to Barron's most popular books, "The Lost Years of Merlin" series.

George said that the Merlin-series books "are simple, easy to read and grab the reluctant reader in grades fifth through sixth," particularly boys, though girls are also fans. Even before Barron's visit was announced, George said his books have been checked out constantly. Comparing Barron's popularity to that of J.K. Rowling, the author of the Harry Potter books, she said, "Every kid I've told of his visit, their eyes just light up ... they have all been ecstatic."

Courtney Stage, a 12-year-old fan of Barron, said she likes the way he writes, from a kid's to a teenager's view.

"His stories have everything from adventure to suspense," she said. "I can't put them down. They're worth reading again and again."

Stage said Barron's books aren't just for girls or boys. Even though "The Lost Years of Merlin" series is about the boy Merlin, she said she can identify with a girl character, Halilia.

George said it's wonderful that a writer like Barron who appeals to kids comes to Homer and readers can find out they're real people. Stage looks forward to meeting T.A. Barron and to see what he's like. She said she expects he could be good with kids, since he has five of his own, and that he will be "really cool and nice." As for the opportunity to meet a popular writer for the first time, since "no really famous author from another state comes to Homer," she appreciates that he "donates his time to signing books."

"I mean, if I want J.K. Rowling's signature, I have to send in a request and wait three months till I get one back."

Fans of T.A. Barron only have to wait a few days.