

# Voyage of Discovery: An Interview with T. A. Barron

Interview by Kylene Beers, Ed.D., Senior Reading Researcher, Comer School Development Program, Yale University

*Books of the kind T. A. Barron writes constitute the literature of discovery. Whatever name you prefer for such tales of mythic heroes, high adventure, and fantastic places—this genre is at once both highly imaginary and deeply real. It is, as Barron says, "true on many levels." For through these books, readers can discover the breadth and depth of the human spirit, witness battles of good and evil, and join heroes who meet and defeat their greatest foes—fear, temptation, loss, and hubris. On top of that, readers just might discover some other things: that loss accompanies life, that fear walks hand-in-hand with bravery, and that 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 Aslan. We understand why our students reach for books that carry them to other worlds or show them surprising sides of our own world. Therefore, we constantly search out wonderful authors to recommend to students—authors such as T. A. Barron. Barron's books often transport readers to new worlds, while at 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.*

**Beers:** Tom, last week in my literature class, we were discussing the merger of reality and fantasy in the sort of books you write. How do you describe that merger?

**Barron:** You need both! At its best, a story of fantasy—myself, I prefer the term “mythic quest”—gives us modern metaphors to see our own world (and our own selves) in bold new ways. But for such a story to succeed, we have to believe in it. So even though the story takes place in an imaginary world with fantastic characters, it must feel true. Real. So real that we can walk right into that world and settle in for a good long while.

Here's another way to put it: Mythic quests allow us to see ourselves through a misted mirror—and, in surprising ways, to see ourselves more clearly than before. But that mirror won't work if it is all mist and no reality. If a writer does a good job in creating a world that looks and feels and smells true, then the reader can fully experience that place. And as we move from our world into the world beyond, we live through those experiences, and we learn about ourselves.

**Beers:** Learn about ourselves. Does that mean you learn about yourself as you write?

**Barron:** You bet. That's one of the great things about writing. Writing allows me to experience, to explore, anything I want. As a writer I can find the voice of a twelve-year-

old girl, be an ancient stone, or become a young wizard. I can experience life in the most wondrous ways. If I'm lucky enough to find a character who has lots of richness and depth, such as Kate or Rhia or Merlin, then as the character grows, so do I. And, I hope, so do readers.

**Beers: Yes, Merlin. He's the focus of your epic *The Lost Years of Merlin*.**

**Barron:** That's right. We meet Merlin as a young boy who washes ashore, nameless and homeless, in *The Lost Years of Merlin*. In the 2nd book of the series, *The Seven Songs of Merlin*, Merlin must master the seven songs of wisdom in order to save his mother's life. I had originally thought that the third book, *The Fires of Merlin*, which is about the power of healing, would be the last book. But sometime between the second and the third books Merlin told me he wasn't through growing, wasn't through experiencing all the many things that must happen to him before he can assume his role as the greatest wizard of all time. He must come to understand the many faces of power, the depth of love, the agony of loss. He must perceive both the dark and the light sides of himself. And he must learn new ways of seeing—not with his eyes, but with his heart. So there will be two more volumes, five in all.

**Beers: That's quite a task for Merlin.**

**Barron:** Yes—and Merlin's personal quest gives rise to what I call “the metaphor of Merlin.” When I wrote the opening scene of the first book, I wanted Merlin to be a blank slate, a person with no history, and no idea of what he was to become. And so he lands on that shore half-drowned, without a clue about himself—not even his own name. What I didn't realize at the time, and didn't realize until I got to the third book, was that the opening scene also created a metaphor for the epic: the notion that all of us, in some way, are washed ashore in life—and that all of us have some special magic down inside ourselves. A gift. And the discovery of that gift is really the primary quest of our lives.

**Beers: So the metaphor of Merlin is a journey?**

**Barron:** That's right. A journey anyone can share. I believe that all of us have the capacity for a journey equally compelling, equally amazing, as Merlin's. Think about it. That boy who starts out with nothing ultimately becomes the greatest wizard of all time, the mentor to King Arthur, a central figure in the quest for Camelot. Anything is possible, if we tap into the magic inside ourselves.

**Beers: So, the magic of Merlin isn't being a wizard.**

**Barron:** Exactly. Being a wizard isn't the point. The important part of Merlin's journey isn't the ground he covered outside, on the land of Fincayra. It's the path he covered inside himself. That's how it is for each of us. Everyone has a special set of gifts, a special potential to reach for the stars. Merlin does it in his own way, and so can we.

**Beers: What created your interest in Merlin?**

**Barron:** In *The Merlin Effect*, which is not a part of *The Lost Years of Merlin* epic, Kate meets Merlin—but it's Merlin as the ancient wizard. As I researched Merlin for that book I found a gap in the lore, a huge gap. There are a few stories of him as a highly precocious infant and then there is nothing until he is a young man with wizard-like powers. Suddenly we have the Merlin we all know—the centuries-old wizard with a long beard, a tall staff by his side, and an owl under his cap. Undisputedly there is a gap. Many years, perhaps. So I started to wonder: What happened to him during those lost years? How did he get to be the greatest wizard of all time? And why were those years lost from story and song, and left untold all these centuries?

**Beers: So, by filling in the gap you hope to make it easier for readers to suspend disbelief as they read about Merlin?**

**Barron:** No! Not just to suspend disbelief, but to really believe. That's a much higher standard. The famous adage from Coleridge that fiction must create the willing suspension of disbelief just is not strong enough. At least not for me. It implies a shadow of doubt. It implies that someone is holding back in some way. My job as a writer is to go beyond that point and create willing, whole-hearted belief.

**Beers: But now we go back to where we started. 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?**

**Barron:** In part, I do it by giving that world its own logic—not necessarily our logic—that is coherent and consistent and true. If a believable logic is there, then we have a framework for belief. Next come the details: the nitty gritty elements that make all five senses come alive. And the historical, geographical, cultural details are very important, too. That's why I do plenty of research before even starting to write. Finally, if it all works, then we believe in this world. And then, like Merlin, we can change from human form into that of a deer and back again. Even better, we can run with the deer!

**Beers: Do you write out all your rules of logic?**

**Barron:** Yes. At least the major rules. I also have much of that in my mind. And sometimes I leave gaps where I need some flexibility later on. But of course, when I fill in those gaps, the new pieces must be consistent with all that has gone before. In the end, we need to have a coherent whole.

**Beers: Can you give an example of your research?**

**Barron:** Well, when I was creating a tribe of Native Americans for the book *The Ancient One*, I had to spend time researching a dozen real American tribes that once lived in the Pacific Northwest. Learning about their life, their culture, their world. And long before I began writing *The Lost Years of Merlin*, I buried myself in all the Merlin lore I could

find: Celtic myths, ancient ballads, the work of Geoffrey of Monmouth, the writings of T. H. White and others, even Shakespeare's references to Merlin.

**Beers: Do you use an outline?**

**Barron:** Yes, I make a very general outline, which helps me get started. It gives me an overview of the arc of the plot, and the main characters. Then I inevitably toss the outline when characters start to take on lives of their own. 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 Colorado. He glares down at me and says, "That's not at all what happened to me, young man. Pay attention and hear my story." And so I do. Or at least I try. To write about characters, to really bring them to life, you must first listen to them.

**Beers: Joseph Campbell says that all heroes must follow a journey that includes separation, adventure, and return. Do you agree with that?**

**Barron:** Absolutely, I agree with the idea of the hero's journey. And with those elements. But the journey is more than it seems. For example, take the aspect of adventure. There is a challenging outer adventure, but also an important inner adventure. And they are connected. Only after the adventure in the outside world is the hero ready to confront the most challenging adventure of all—within himself or herself. Then we have real heroism.

**Beers: And heroism is defined as...**

**Barron:** It's about character. Inner qualities such as courage, perseverance, faith, compassion, humility, and humor. What it's absolutely not about is fame and glory: That's how we get terribly confused in our society, obscuring the great difference between a hero and a celebrity.

**Beers: If the hero's journey is so important as a construct, then doesn't that limit you as a writer?**

**Barron:** Interesting question. Those elements—separation, adventure, return—are universal elements. As a writer I recognize those elements, though I may choose not to follow them. Or to do so in an unusual way. In *The Lost Years of Merlin*, young Merlin is separated from his home, his family, even his own identity. His search for those things leads to many adventures—both inner and outer. Eventually, he will complete his return when he discovers his real home, his heritage, and his true self.

**Beers: Is there a kind of bridge between a reader and a character in the story?**

**Barron:** Absolutely. Without that bridge, the reader stays outside the story. The reader doesn't enter into the feelings of the character, or begin to explore the feelings within himself or herself. And that's essential.

**Beers: Do you think literature is an exploration?**

**Barron:** Definitely! Great stories, the kind that really lasts, offer many points of departure, many paths for exploration.

**Beers: Is that what teachers do when they create classrooms that encourage response and encourage risk-taking?**

**Barron:** You bet. 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 questions as much as answers.

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

**Barron:** Questions. So much of what I do in any book is explore an underlying question. For instance, the big question in *The Ancient One* is how we are all connected to each other. Are we connected across time, culture, gender, age, language, and even species? Another example: In *The Lost Years of Merlin*, we meet a character named Shim who, though very small in size, claims to be a giant. He raises the opportunity to ask what really makes a giant. Is it the size of someone's bones? Or is it the size of something else? My first priority is to craft enjoyable stories. Beyond that, I hope to create characters, plots, and themes that raise the big questions of life. Good fantasy isn't an escape from reality, but rather an alternate, deeper view of reality. Recently, a middle-schooler told me: "Mr. Barron, I have a problem with your books. They leave me thinking for hours." I went home happy.

**Beers: Tell me more about how you make a story, even a highly imaginary story, feel true.**

**Barron:** Well, a story needs several levels of realism to work. First, there is the realism of place: Do I feel like I'm actually there? If I've just washed ashore, do I smell the briny breeze? Do I hear the screeching gulls? Do I feel the roughness 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. And in this arena, I have the advantage of having started out as a nature writer. So place, to me, is much more than just the backdrop of a story. It's really a form of character. And it needs to be every bit as real and complex—and even contradictory—as a human character.

Second, there is the realism of emotion. Have I ever 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 their own 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 now know about the human condition? What am I experiencing that all people in all cultures and all times have experienced? At this level, the writer can touch the basic yearnings, hopes, fears, gains, and losses of humanity.

**Beers: Spiritual realism. Is that what makes some stories connect with people across generations and cultures?**

**Barron:** Right. Those stories become universal. And if writing can reach that level of realism, it can touch people in deep and lasting ways. In the case of mythic quests—fantasy, if you prefer—a good story isn't 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.

**Beers: And how do you discover those truths in your own life?**

**Barron:** Oh, I just bumble along the best I can! But one thing that helps is writing. For instance, several years ago, in the span of about twelve months, a dear friend of mine died, I met Currie, we got married, and we had our first child. That was a lot to have happen in just one year. And I worked through many of the issues of birth, death, and rebirth by writing a story—what became *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 functions, running board meetings—and at the same time trying to write a novel. I wrote anywhere—taxicabs, boardrooms, at home. Finally, I decided that what I most wanted to do was to 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.

**Beers: And so now you spend your days writing.**

**Barron:** Yes, in our farmhouse. Plus I spend a lot of time helping Currie take care of our five children, who are all under the age of ten. It's chaos sometimes. No, most of the time! But it's wonderful. Really wonderful. I just love being a dad. Beyond that, I try to help several educational and environmental organizations. And I enjoy visiting schools and speaking at conventions. And doing book readings, of course.

**Beers: And will we always find you writing fantasy?**

**Barron:** Not always. Mythic quests are my heartland, but I will also write in other genres. For instance, right now I'm working on a picture book called *Where Is Grandpa?* that is really autobiographical. It's about the precious gift of hope I got from my kids on a very sad day—the day that their grandpa, my dad, passed away. It will be illustrated by Chris K. Soentpiet, who is a very compelling artist. I've also written two nature books about wilderness experiences in the Rocky Mountains. And someday I plan to write a nonfiction book about heroic young people.

**Beers: Tom, what's the most important thing readers ought to know about your writing?**

**Barron:** That's a tough question. I suppose that my ultimate goal is to create books that are voyages, journeys. Voyages of discovery! Books that take us to faraway places. To some of life's biggest questions, and to the realm of the spirit. The sort of books that allow readers to find surprising connections—maybe even to find the heroes inside themselves. If my stories can do some of those things, at least some of the time, then I will have done my job.