

Merlin Epic Foresees a Better World for All

The Great Tree of Avalon

By T.A. Barron

Published by Philomel Books
A Division of Penguin Young Readers Group

Rarely does a young reader's book with its own magic and idealism have such a message for the world today: to respect and revere all life, to protect our fragile environment, and to end the divisiveness that is escalating between individuals, families, communities, and nations.

Perhaps, told bluntly, the message is too overwhelming and can't sink in, but told through fantasy, in epic form, with fictional characters (evil and good) in make-believe settings, one can see what's really going on and be inspired to do something about it!

Once again, T.A. Barron, award-winning conservationist and author of 12 novels, has produced this new volume in his well-known and continuing 'Merlin' series in which readers, young and old, will see the battle lines drawn between the forces of greed, arrogance, and evil, and those of sharing, of compassion and of "the will to good."

Having completed five volumes of the *Lost Years of Merlin* epic, Barron has begun a new trilogy. The first book, *The Great Tree of Avalon*, was just released this October by Philomel Books.

An uncertain future

In this first installment of the new series, Barron recreates the legendary world of Avalon as a gigantic tree growing between earth and heaven. Its seven root systems sprout separate realms or countries. Stars hang from its unseen branches atop its massive trunk. The tree grew from a "seed won by the great wizard Merlin on his journey through a magical mirror."

The tree was to have housed peaceful kingdoms where humans, animals, and fantasy-like creatures could live and prosper in harmony. Now, in the year 1002 Avalon is suffering from mysterious droughts, and the very stars are beginning to lose their light. Evil forces that put humans ahead of all other creatures and their habitats, are gaining strength and threatening the whole "Tree."

The fate of Avalon now rests with three young people: Tamwyn, a homeless wilderness guide; Elli, an escaped slave turned priestess; and Scree, an eagleman. One of the trio is

Book Review by Charles Sutton

the true heir of Merlin, the only person who can save Avalon. One of the others is the dreaded child of Dark Prophecy, the person fated to destroy it. Read on—this is a suspense thriller, too. But like all of Barron's books, the players on the stage grapple with inner conflicts and outer obstacles as they proceed on their appointed journeys.



— From *The Great Tree of Avalon* by T.A. Barron —

positions in a venture capital firm in New York City for several years.

Like many of the conflicted characters in his novels, Barron opts to leave a successful career and to return to his native Colorado and start writing books in an attic room overlooking the nearby 14,255-foot Longs Peak, rising above the ridge line of the Rockies. He is now married (he met his future wife Currie while they were both cross-country skiing in the Catskills) and starts raising a family. His five children, ages 8 to 17 today, get to hear or read all his books first, and he admits they are his best critics and editors.

In between his Merlin books, he stumbles (by accident or fate) on a letter saved by the famed mountain guide Enos Mills about an 8-year-old girl from Arkansas named Harriet Peters, who sealed Longs Peak with him in September, 1905. This inspired Barron to write his first children's picture book, *High as a Hawk: A Brave Girl's Historic Climb*, illustrated by Ted Lewin and just published by Philomel.

As much as he is writing inspirational books and the often disquieting Merlin epics, he envisions a better and happier world today for all children. His book *The Hero's Trail, a Guide for a Hero's Life*

Sacredness of the earth and its ecosystems is often a theme of his books, even if the worlds are halfway between heaven and earth!

Barron hopes all of us can find a Merlin, a wizard within ourselves, to make our lives more magical and hopeful. He calls on all of us to connect to our better selves to help make a better world, or is it worlds?

The following are T.A. Barron's books in the Merlin series: *Lost Years of Merlin (Book I)*—Young Merlin is washed ashore on a beach in ancient Wales, and so begins his journey into boyhood and coming of age in magical, but often scary realms.

The Seven Songs of Merlin (Book II)—Young Merlin has freed the enchanted isle of Fincayra from a terrible blight, but he and the forest girl Rhia's ordeal of overcoming evil have just begun. Merlin must master the Seven Songs of Wisdom passed down from his wizard grandfather if he is to save his mother's life.

The Fires of Merlin (Book III)—Here Merlin must discover his own power and the power of the world.

One of the others is the dreaded child of Dark Prophecy, the person fated to destroy it. Read on—this is a suspense thriller, too. But like all of Barron's books, the players on the stage grapple with inner conflicts and outer obstacles as they proceed on their appointed journeys.

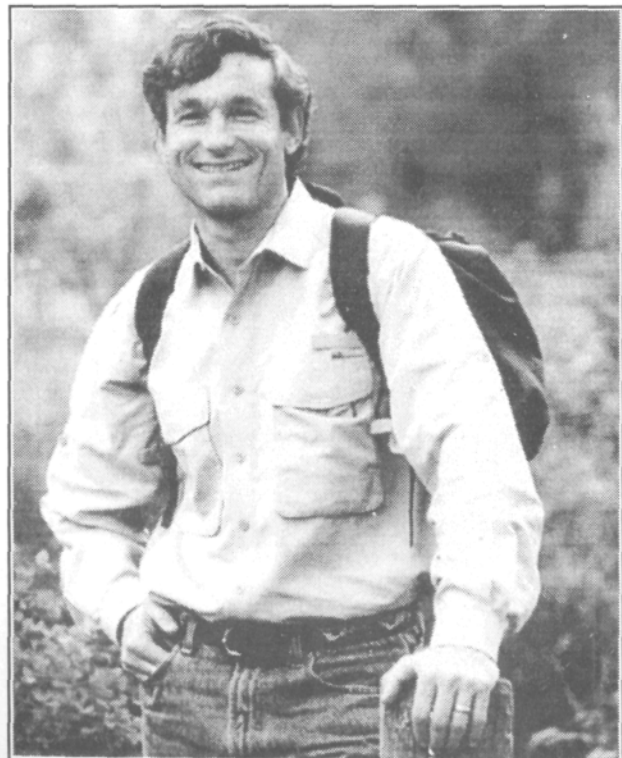
A journey with Merlin

In an interview we asked T.A. Barron (T stands for Tom), how the Merlin theme got started, and sustained itself through all of his books.

He told about when he was a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford University and did some backpacking in the highlands of Scotland. He read T.H. White's *The Once and Future King* for the first time, and at once became fascinated with the wizard Merlin who was the mentor to King Arthur.

Later, in researching the myths and legends surrounding this amazing man, Barron found little about the future wizard's youthful years. He wondered what were the young Merlin's most cherished dreams, his fears and passions, first joys and sorrows? This led Barron to start his tales of Merlin's lost years. And in the first episode, the boy, almost drowned, washes ashore off the coast of Wales. He has no memory, no home, and no name. From these losses, he, however, gains internal strengths and wisdom, which will ready him for his celebrated role in the Arthurian legend.

Barron himself is on his own journey. After studying in England, he returns to America, and earns advanced degrees in law and business from Harvard. He then has management



T.A. Barron photo by Greg Harring

by Ted Lewin and just published by Philomel.

As much as he is writing inspirational books and the often disquieting Merlin epics, he envisions a better and happier world today for all children. His book *The Hero's Trail, a Guide for a Heroic Life*, profiles heroic young people.

Heroes may be in no short supply in his books, but he feels real life heroes are needed badly today, and they should be encouraged and recognized.

In 2001, he established The Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes to honor outstanding young leaders, ages 8 to 18, who have made a positive difference to people and the environment of the planet earth.

The prize is named after his mother, an unsung hero who worked for 20 years to create the "Touch Museum" of natural history at the Colorado School for the Deaf and Blind. She instilled in each of her seven children the idea that one individual can make a lasting difference in the lives of others.

Merlin's own mother Elen was an unsung hero, too, of her times, "who dared to combine old faiths with new ones, faraway cultures with those near at hand. She was shunned, even attacked, for her beliefs, yet she persists in building bridges whenever she can."

Building humanity

The "building bridges" theme runs through the Merlin stories. It connects humanity (people, animals, plants, even strange creatures) for the greater good.

When writing his books, Barron said he starts by writing down the name of each character and then gradually adds information from simple things like how the person looks, dresses and speaks to their deepest fears, hopes, and longings. Once the characters get on the book pages, we can see they assume a life of their own. But, of course, the writer has to see and record what happens. They can run away from him if he doesn't watch it!

Obviously Barron has fun writing; his style is fast-paced, and sometimes humorous even when dealing with scary subjects. No matter what the odds, old-fashioned habits of perseverance, faith, and courage pay off. This is true even in the sub-worlds of dragons, evil spirits, and humanoids.

Merlin is Barron's ideal hero because he embraces three fundamental themes: the universality and inter-connectedness of all things; dark and light within the individual, both embraced and dealt with; and a bonding with the natural world.

For love of heaven, earth, and in-between

As a conservationist, Barron today is deeply troubled by the Bush team "quietly and effectively devouring our heritage of natural treasures." Asked what he considers the most endangered area or species on the planet today, he replied, "ourselves."

As much as he does book signings and talks about his books, he frequently appears before environmental and conservation groups to warn about the dangers to our air and water and other natural resources. He recently received the Wilderness Society's highest honor, the Robert Marshall Award, for his conservation work on behalf of America's natural treasures

wisdom passed down from his wizard grandfather. He is to save his mother's life.

The Fires of Merlin (Book III)—Here Merlin must discover his own power and the source of his magic to fight and overcome a long series of threatening fires from dragons and others, including those within himself.

The Mirror of Merlin (Book IV)—Merlin must voyage to frightening places to save himself and the magical isle of Fincayra. In these adventures he is joined by Hallia, the deer-woman he has grown to love.

The Wings of Merlin (Book V)—Merlin faces the most difficult challenge of his life—to unite all the people, but also including dwarves, animals, and "walking trees" against an invasion of an evil warlord. Merlin must unite the battling forces within himself, if he is to save his isle and its peoples.

T.A. Barron's books on Merlin and his latest, *The Great Tree of Avalon*, are available at bookstores or can be ordered from the publisher, Philomel Books, a division of Penguin Young Readers Group, New York, NY, (212) 414-3300.

For more information about T.A. Barron, you can visit his website at www.tabarron.com.

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