

THE GREAT TREE OF AVALON: Book One

Book presentation: Anne Schieckel and T. A. Barron at Frankfurt 2005

1. *Introduction of the author and his works by Anne Schieckel*
2. *Brief Speech and brief reading by T. A. Barron*
3. *Reading in German by an actor*
4. *Interview/dialog between TAB and Anne:*

Question 1: Tom, the worlds of your books are worlds of fantasy—first Fincayra and now the world of Avalon—but they have many resemblances to aspects of our planet Earth. What issues do you feel are the most important ones that face your created worlds and our Earth?

Answer: We have only one world, one planet. It is a remarkably beautiful world, full of many wonders and mysteries, with plenty of peoples and places to explore. That is why I have always loved to travel, especially with my backpack, and have hiked in many amazing places in Europe, Asia, Africa, South America, Australia, as well as the Arctic.

But our dear planet Earth is in trouble. Just like the imaginary worlds in my books, all of Earth's beautiful places and marvelous peoples are at risk from human greed and arrogance. We are destroying the environment at a terrible rate, harming the air we need to breathe, the water we need to drink, and the wild places that we need to be fully alive. And we are also harming our fellow creatures, the many animals who share this world with us. Sadly, the people who currently lead my country, the United States, are doing some very bad things to the environment. But there is still hope! We can still save our world, just as the brave young people in my books can still save their worlds.

I believe that we humans must use our gifts of intelligence and free will to protect all of nature and our fellow creatures. The world is not ours to devour and spoil for short-term profit. Rather, it is our home, our spaceship, which we must care for wisely and lovingly.

Question 2: In many of your books, you express deep admiration for trees and mountains in general. Do you have a favorite tree or mountain or place that has inspired you?

Answer: I have many favorite trees and mountains. But let me tell you about one very special tree in England and one mountain in Colorado that I love very much.

When I finished university in the United States, I wanted to study in another country. So I was very glad to get a Rhodes Scholarship to study at Oxford University in England. As soon as I arrived in Oxford, I went for a long run in the hills outside the city. On the highest hill around, at the edge of a farm field, I discovered a magnificent English oak tree. It was over three hundred years old, with twisted roots, a huge trunk, and two branches that reached out like the arms of a great wizard. So I named it Merlin's Tree. Many days I ran up there and sat under its shade, reading or writing or simply dreaming. Many animals came there, too—foxes and squirrels and owls—so it seemed like the kind of place that the wizard Merlin would really enjoy. But, of course, I had no idea back then that years later, I would become a writer and tell a few new stories about Merlin.

The mountain I would like to tell you about is in my home state of Colorado. It is in the Rocky Mountains, near the ski town of Aspen. I first hiked there when just a boy, but fell in love with its wildflower meadows, rushing streams, and beautiful vistas of peaks more than four thousand meters high. For many years I camped there by myself, wishing that someday I could build a mountain cabin there to share with a family, if I was ever so lucky to find the right woman and become a father of children. Well, today my wife Currie and our five children and I spend our summers on that very same mountain. We live in a log cabin that I helped to build myself. The place where I used to camp is now the fire circle, where we roast marshmallows and tell stories and sing songs together. This mountain is now my home, more than any other place on Earth. It reminds me always of the beauty and mystery of nature. And it also reminds me that dreams can really come true if you follow your passions in life.

Question 3: What other things would you describe as the source of your abundant inspiration?

Answer: My two greatest sources of inspiration are nature and children. Nature fills me with wonder—the patterns of the seasons, the designs of a leaf or an elephant or a tropical fish, the mysteries of life, the perspective of geologic time. When I am out in nature, I feel both very small and very large at once. That is true whether I am standing in an ancient forest of trees, or looking up at the stars, or watching the vast sweep of the ocean. I feel small because those trees and stars are so much bigger and older than I am. Yet, at the same time, I feel large because I, too, am part of nature, and so I am connected to all those other creatures and places. In this way, nature inspires me to be humble and respectful, while it also inspires me to grow as great and wise as I possibly can.

Children inspire me because of their energy, their openness to new ideas, and their curiosity to learn about the world, their natural sense of fairness, and their

readiness to laugh. I love to be around my own five children, and we spend a lot of time together. We don't watch television; instead, we read, tell stories, make music, and do arts and crafts. We also hike and bicycle a lot in the mountains near our home. Our children (who are all named after mountains) remind me to keep those youthful qualities alive in myself. And they also give me plenty of ideas for my books!

Question 4: In all of your books, young people have to take their chance to face destiny. How come you are so fascinated by youth?

Answer: Youth is a fabulous time of life. When you are young, anything is possible. You can dream great dreams; you can reach for the stars. You can ask the biggest questions about life—what it means to be mortal and human, and what kind of world we ought to create.

Also, I think that too often we adults underestimate young people. They are much more intelligent, courageous, and idealistic than we believe sometimes. Young people impress me. They give me hope for our world.

Question 5: What kind of literature did you read when you were young? Who were your favorite authors? And what kind of influence did they have on your writing?

Answer: Tolkien was my most favorite writer, long before the movies were made of *The Lord of the Rings*. He set a high standard for all of us who try to create new, imaginary worlds. I think that Tolkien's greatest gift as a writer was that he understood the importance of details: To fully describe a tree, you must know every single leaf on every single branch. And you must also know how the tree bends with the wind, and how it changes with the seasons.

As a youth, I also read many more nature writers. Henry David Thoreau has long been one of my favorites. These writers taught me the importance of making all the reader's senses come alive. If I am going to convince you, as a reader, to enter into my imaginary world, I must first win your trust that this world can feel just as real as the world we live in. To do that, I need to convey to you all the richness of sights, sounds, smells, touches, and tastes. For example, when that young boy washes ashore on the first page of *The Lost Years of Merlin* books, I hope you can really feel the cold salt water of the sea, just as he does. I want you to smell the briny breeze, and hear the screeching sea gull overhead. I want you to taste the sand on your tongue, too. All of these senses, enlivened by nature, help you feel

like this imaginary world is real enough to believe in. Then we can both travel to Fincayra or Avalon and have a marvelous adventure together.

Question 6: Before becoming a writer, you were a businessman in the financial world. When did you decide to change your profession?

Answer: Before I worked in business, I had done many different kinds of jobs: I was a wilderness guide in Colorado, a school teacher, and even a roof thatcher in Japan. But throughout my life, I always loved to write. To be a writer was my deepest longing. Yet I did not have the confidence that I could rally do it. The first novel I ever wrote, while I was a student at Oxford University, was rejected by every single publisher—more than thirty of them. So I really doubted that I could ever succeed in writing.

Even so, I continued to dream about that goal. Finally, about fifteen years ago, when my business was growing into a success, I realized that life is simply too brief not to try to follow my dream. So I surprised my business partners one day by resigning as the president of our company. Why? To try to write books. My business partners thought I was absolutely crazy, to leave behind all that money and success. But this dream was just too important to me.

People often ask me if this decision to change careers was scary. Sure it was. It felt a bit like jumping off a mountain cliff into a little pool of water. But the truth is, the idea of trying to write and failing was not nearly as scary as the idea of never trying at all. I dreaded the thought of growing old and wishing that I had at least tried to follow my deepest passion. Life is brief, our one chance to do whatever we want and become whatever we dream. If I had avoided trying to become a writer, part of my soul would have surely died. And now, having done what I most longed to do, I feel more alive than ever.

Question 7: Into how many languages have your books been translated?

Answer: So far, twelve languages. This amazes me, because when I wrote these stories, I never know how far they would travel from my little desk in the attic of my home in Colorado. I enjoy seeing the different art work on the covers, whether they are German or Japanese or Italian. And I am fascinated by the many different kinds of script that people use: The Thai editions have long, flowing script, while Chinese characters are wonderfully intricate.

I must tell you, however, that no translations and artwork have pleased me more than the handsome German editions published by dtv. And I would tell you this

same thing, even if I were not here in Germany today. Thanks to the extraordinary care of my editors Anne Schieckel and Lisette Buchholz, and the superb translations by Irmela Brender, the German editions set a standard of excellence for the rest of the world. I hope you will enjoy them!