

Interview with T.A. Barron

Interview by Ingrid Seitz
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I was most pleased to meet and visit with Tom Barron during the ALAN Workshop in Pittsburgh this past November. I have heard him speak several times and am continuously impressed with this thoughtful and gentle man whose increasing acclaim as a young adult author does not diminish his sincerity. The following interview was conducted through e-mail in the winter of 2006. As I pondered his large body of work, many of which have been written about in the past, I began this conversation with hopes of glimpsing the eternal young adult behind the pages.

- 1. Tom, you have had a varied and interesting professional career. Your history as a Princeton graduate, Rhodes Scholar, and successful New York businessman has been widely reported. Stopping midstream in a successful career to follow your dream of becoming a writer had to have taken an incredible leap of faith. So what brought you out of the New York business sector into the fantastical world of a writer?**

Look, when I switched careers, I didn't know whether anyone would ever want to read a single page of my writing. (My first novel, written during my travels as a backpacker abroad, was rejected by dozens of publishers.) But I had always loved a good story, ever since the first time I heard a campfire tale as a kid in Colorado. In addition to that, I sensed that trying to write a few stories of my own would stretch and deepen me as a person—would help me grow spiritually, and enable me to ask some of life's biggest questions.

On top of that, I have always felt keenly aware of how very brief life is. How we have just this one chance to be all we can be. Life is our unique opportunity to discover our dreams and then try to realize them—to find our wings and see how far we can fly. So as scary as it was to change careers—and, believe me, it was—that wasn't nearly as scary as the idea of growing old and realizing that I had never tried to follow my deepest passion.

Where did I develop such a strong sense of mortality? I'm not sure. Maybe it was getting seriously ill during my time in the Himalayas. Or maybe it was learning about geology from my mother, who went back to school at age sixty "to learn to read the book of the mountains." I'll never forget the day we found a slab of petrified wood on our Colorado ranch. It was more than fifty million years old. How could I ever think about time in the same way after that? There is nothing like a bit of geologic time to remind us that life is truly a gift—brief, transient, and yet remarkably beautiful.

2. While you have written *High as a Hawk* and *Where is Grandpa* for the younger reader, the main body of your work is directed to the young adult audience. I am curious as to why this particularly challenging age appeals to you?

Young adulthood is the most challenging, uncertain, and paradoxical time of life. It compresses all of life's extremes—beauty and ugliness, understanding and ignorance, fate and free will, sorrow and joy, idealism and despair—into a few brief years. Young adults still have the open-hearted yearning of childhood, together with the awareness of adulthood. They are honest enough to ask life's toughest questions. And they still have the courage to hope. To them, anything is possible.

What a poignant and compelling time of life! I couldn't ask for any more fertile ground to plant the seeds of stories.

3. Why do young adults enjoy fantasy? And why do you?

Young adults understand both the fun and the power of fantasy. What could be more fun than traveling without limits to other times, other value systems, and other universes? And besides, dreams are often the best ways to talk about reality. Fantasy novels, which are heroic adventures in mythic form, allow me to bend the rules of our existence, in order to highlight some troubling issues about the human condition. Fantasy is like a bent mirror. We can see ourselves, but with certain qualities enhanced and others diminished. And, in the process, we can explore what it means to be mortal human beings.

4. I am intrigued by your interest in Merlin, a character from the Arthurian legends. You have devoted many of your own years to this wizard. What has drawn you to this time period and to this character specifically?

Ah, Merlin. How I love that wizard! When I was a student at Oxford, I often sat under an ancient, twisted English oak that I called Merlin's Tree. But I had no idea at all that, twenty years later, I would be adding a few threads of my own to the glorious tapestry of Merlin's legend. Real life is much more bizarre than fiction!

Why is Merlin so fascinating? Why have people been telling stories about this character for over fifteen hundred years? I believe it's because Merlin stands for three basic ideals: the universality of all people; the importance of embracing both the light and dark within ourselves; and the sacredness of nature.

First, take universality. When you look at the original Celtic tales, Merlin's role was truly astounding: He was the bridge between Druids and Christians, nobles and peasants, archbishops and old gray wolves. Then take the light and dark within him. Merlin's understanding of his own weaknesses and strengths made him far more humble, compassionate, and wise. Finally, nature is Merlin's greatest teacher—a source of

wisdom, healing, and inspiration. We don't need to look far to see the importance of these same ideals today.

Plus something more personal: The young man I write about in *The Lost Years of Merlin* books is a lot like you and me. Right from the moment he washes ashore, more dead than alive, Merlin has struggles, sorrows, fears, joys, and secret aspirations. And he also has, hidden deep within himself, a certain inner magic. So just like the rest of us, he is burdened by the human experience while at the same time exalted by it. Just like the rest of us, he can wash ashore ... and also climb to the stars.

- 5. I believe that you have “hit the mark” with *The Lost Years of Merlin* and now, *The Great Tree of Avalon* trilogy. I teach middle level students and they are fascinated by the medieval settings of these stories, the fantasy, the conflicts that confront Merlin, and now Tamwyn, Elli, and Scree, and the thrill of the magical components that envelope these characters. I have been gratified to see that the content of these books appeals to my reluctant readers, as well as my avid readers. They want to know if you were as enthralled with King Arthur and his adventures when you were an adolescent as they are now.**

The truth is, when I was a kid I was more interested in climbing trees than reading books. But among the books I did read, one of my most favorites was *The Once and Future King* by T.H. White. I felt deeply moved by the human flaws that ultimately destroyed Camelot, just as I felt inspired by the high ideals of that realm. And I loved one character more than any other—a quirky old wizard who could live backward in time, change Arthur into a fish, and place a magical sword in a stone.

- 6. Another question from my students lies in the intricate details you have created in the magical kingdom of Avalon. We are curious about your writing process in developing such a large body of work. Did you know that *The Great Tree of Avalon* would always be a trilogy, or did it evolve into that?**

The writing process is still a mystery to me. All I know is that, to craft a story, I need three things: a character I care about; a wondrous, magical place; and a troubling question or idea. Without those three elements, I simply can't muster the energy to spend a day writing or revising a page—let alone several years creating a trilogy. (*The Great Tree of Avalon* books have taken me five years to complete.)

I've also learned that writing requires both sides of the brain. The rational, organized side of our brain enables us to design believable characters with journeys that are logically consistent and emotionally rewarding. The dreaming, poetic side enables us to make metaphors—as well as characters who come alive and surprise us with their secrets. In all this, details are crucial. My job as a writer boils down to one goal: making characters and places and plots feel true.

When I started *The Great Tree of Avalon*, I knew it would be a big, complex tale in three parts. I knew it would be about humanity's relationship with nature. And I also knew how the saga would end. (You'll find out when you see Book Three!) But the beginning, much of the middle, and most of the characters, bubbled up during the creative process. Each volume of the trilogy needed at least seven complete rewrites, start to finish. That was fairly hard work, but well worth it, because the story became tighter and more fully integrated with each new draft. In the end, a book should feel like a polished sphere, with no rough edges—smooth and round enough to be true.

7. *The Great Tree of Avalon* is an extension of *The Lost Years of Merlin*, so I must ask if you see another sapling emerging from Avalon?

Well, the answer is Yes. I am considering writing a prequel to the trilogy, revealing the secret life of Batty Lad. You see, he wasn't always the zany, helpless little fellow who befriends Tamwyn during the quest to save Avalon. Far from it! In his earlier life, Batty Lad knew the explorer Krystallus, the elf queen Serella, and the wizard Merlin. For he was actually the boldest, most powerful—But wait ... if I tell you now, it will spoil the surprise.

8. You have stated that each of us, like Merlin, has the potential to reach for the stars. This theme resonates in many of your characters, indicating a truly positive, optimistic, outlook on life. For the adolescents to whom you write, this is such a message of personal power. That message is pivotal to all that we can wish for our young people. Were you raised in a family that enforced this belief in you? How do you translate that to your own children?

Just inside the door to our farmhouse, the door our kids pass through every day, is a picture of a kitten who is looking in a mirror—and seeing a great lion. Under the picture are the words “Dream big dreams.” That's an idea we try our best to encourage. We want our kids to feel loved and valued for who they are, to know they have enormous potential to shape their own lives and the world around them. Just like that boy who washed ashore, and who ultimately became the greatest wizard of all times, they have their own special magic down inside.

We give our children lots of hugs. We read aloud often, in every room of the house or outside under the trees. And we almost never watch television. This is how I grew up, on a ranch in Colorado. In my youth I remember feeling that life's possibilities were every bit as vast as the blue sky overhead. We hope that our kids might feel that way, too.

9. So many of your books have main characters that come to believe in this heroic power for good that lies within them. Your non-fiction book, *The Hero's Trail*, is a wonderful collection of stories of real-life, yet unexpected heroes. It not only is a great read in and of itself, but it is a powerful accompaniment to a teaching unit on heroes. What led you to this particular book?

I wrote *The Hero's Trail* more as a dad than as a writer. In talking with kids of all descriptions, I was struck by how many of them felt utterly powerless, both in their own lives and in the wider world. Partly this problem stems from America's confusion about the difference between a hero and a celebrity: While a hero is about inner qualities of character, a celebrity is merely about fame. And partly this problem stems from our society's rampant materialism. The mass media gives our kids all sorts of negative, demeaning messages—telling them their self-worth comes from what they wear or drink or drive, not who they really are down inside.

I realized that these kids needed to hear stories about heroic young people. Not just fictional heroes, such as the girls and boys in my novels, but real young people who have faced terrible obstacles and triumphed through their own courage, perseverance, compassion, and wisdom. These young heroes come in all descriptions—every gender, race, age, color, culture, or economic background. Some are well known, such as Anne Frank or Wilma Rudolph or Stephen Hawking, but many more are largely unknown. So I packed that slim volume with dozens of examples of amazing young people, both historical and contemporary. The result, I hope, is that any young reader will gain a sense of his or her own heroic potential.

Why did I use the idea of walking on a trail? Because life is a journey through uncharted terrain. Often arduous, often wondrous, and full of surprises—life resembles the long hikes I've taken through the mountains of Colorado, Nepal, or Patagonia. The older I get, with more creases on my hiking boots as well as my brow, the more potent this analogy seems. And in every journey we need our guides—heroes who have walked this trail before, who show us how high we can climb.

10. Quite obviously, you are passionate about this subject in that you have established the Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes. Inspiring young leaders are recognized for selfless contributions to their communities and/or the environment through this award. Named in honor of your mother, the award would indicate your deep love for her. She undoubtedly has been a powerful influence in your life. Would you care to share what was heroic about her life – at least in the eyes of her son, Tom?

Gloria Barron, the woman I was lucky enough to know as my mother, never sought fame. She simply lived the life of a teacher who cared deeply about her children and her community. She was always learning: The day before she died, at age ninety-two, she delighted in learning a new word origin! And she never lost her childlike sense of wonder.

I remember once when she took me outside on a cold winter day. I was four or five years old; most of the snowdrifts were taller than I was. But she patted one drift and said, "Guess what? There are flowers under there." I was astounded. Flowers? She explained about the seasons, and the miracle of seeds. Only later did I understand that

she was also teaching me about nature's power to renew itself, to transform—a power all of us share.

She spent twenty years creating a unique nature museum at the Colorado School for the Blind—a museum where everything can be touched. Blind kids can experience the grandeur of an eagle by touching its wings, just as they can feel a hummingbird's delicate nest or a polar bear's rich, soft fur. She never sought any credit for this accomplishment, and the only reward she wanted was the satisfaction of knowing that these kids could now experience some of the beauty of the natural world. That's the sort of quiet heroism that countless teachers, parents, and kids show every day. And those people truly hold our world together.

11. So much of your work indicates a strong environmental passion. Your work in this area has been acknowledged in your receipt of the Nautilus award and this strand of your life is woven through so many of your books. Are you trying to subliminally plant a seed of hope in the hearts of your young readers? A seed that they, too, might throw “into the future?”

Right you are. I would love, in some small way, to nourish those seeds of hope. For saving the environment is really about saving ourselves. The Earth, after all, is our one and only home. Viewed from outer space, it is a radiant blue sapphire—fragile, lovely, and alone. We human beings have the ability to protect our planet, to be wise stewards of its air and water and wilderness. Or we can destroy the planet, and all the forms of life it supports. Which will it be? The choice is ours.

And who knows? Maybe one seed in one young person will sprout into a tree as enormous as Avalon.

12. You introduce yourself to those who visit your website by saying, “A life – whether seamstress or poet, farmer or king – is measured not by its length, but by the worth of its deeds, and the power of its dreams.” You instill in your readers the power to dream. For that, we thank you. The final book in *The Great Tree of Avalon* trilogy, “The Eternal Flame,” is to be published in the fall of 2006, and we look forward to it with great anticipation. There is always a “sigh of relief” that comes with finishing a project, and yet that relief is frequently cushioned with a bit of sadness, as if saying farewell to a dear friend. I imagine that your mind is always filled with a backpack full of ideas for future stories, but if you knew that you could only write one more book – what would it be and why?

If I could write just one more book, it would concern religious intolerance. That could be humanity's gravest flaw—as seductive as it is destructive. So don't be surprised if the next book ... Oops! Can't say more. It's still a secret between Merlin and myself.

Tom, your writing is born from a kind and compassionate man and I am grateful for your thoughtful responses and for the opportunity you have provided for us to see the “man behind the words.” Thank you for your contribution to the literate lives of so many young people. We shall look forward to the books that lie within and ahead of you.

Ingrid Seitz

T.A. Barron is as passionate about opening the wonderful world of imagination to students as he is in a personal pursuit of writing. This is so evident in his commitment to reach out to teachers and young writers alike.

Please visit Tom’s website, www.tabarron.com, for a complete listing of his literary work, and environmental passions, as well as wonderful resources for teachers who long for a “bit more” to engage their students.