

# Why Nature? Why Merlin? Interview

Published by Random House/Listening Library  
August, 2006

**1. All your novels—from *The Lost Years of Merlin* to *The Ancient One* to *The Great Tree of Avalon*—deal with the theme of heroism. What really is a hero? Does our world need them? And why?**

Well, let's start with what a hero does *not* mean: a celebrity. In our society, we often confuse the two, but they couldn't be more different. A hero is someone who, faced with a tough challenge, reaches down inside—and finds the courage, perseverance, or wisdom to triumph. That someone could be utterly unknown to most of the world. It could be a girl or a boy; a Tibetan refugee you've never met or the person next door; a member of any race, culture, or economic group. But in every case, it's someone with impressive qualities of *character*.

By contrast, a celebrity is just someone who has won our *attention*—whether for fifteen seconds or fifteen years. That fame could have come from entertaining us, serving us, or even harming us. Now, sometimes heroes can become so well known that they also become celebrities: I'm thinking of people such as Abraham Lincoln, Mother Theresa, Thomas Edison, Winston Churchill, Eleanor Roosevelt, Mohandas Gandhi, Wilma Rudolph, the Dalai Lama, Jane Goodall, or Martin Luther King, Jr. But you can see the difference, can't you? For a celebrity, what counts is fame—period. For a hero, though, what counts is *character*.

That's why, I think, heroes are so important—today more than ever. Heroes, whether real or fictional, are our companions on the journey through life—trail guides, you might say, on our long hike from birth until death. They remind us who we really are, what we can become, and just how far we can go. And best of all, heroes remind us of our *own* heroic potential. For anyone, no matter how young or small or unlikely, can find heroic qualities down inside. Just like that half-drowned boy who washed ashore on a strange, hostile coastline...and who ultimately became Merlin, the greatest wizard of all times.

I guess, more than anything, heroes are important because they show that our *choices* really do matter. And because of that, we *ourselves* matter. Every single one of us, every day. So we can *choose* to admire someone's courage or tenacity or humor—more than someone's fancy car or hook shot or momentary fame. And we can, if we choose, be more than just what Madison Avenue calls *consumers*: We can be *creators*! Of our own lives, our own destinies.

**2. The great adventures of your novels are often set in Nature. Why are Nature and wilderness so important—in your stories as well as in real life?**

Well, for starters, I grew up in places where Nature was always nearby, so I could explore a creek, climb a tree, pick an apple, or just cover myself with mud. The nearness

of Nature shaped me profoundly. Not just in the challenging, adventurous ways you might expect—in deeper, spiritual ways, as well.

For example, I remember a snowy day when I was very young. My mother dressed me in one of those big puffy snowsuits that made me look like a huge, waddling balloon, and took me outside. There was so much snow, the drifts were even taller than me. Then my mother patted the top of an enormous snowdrift, and said, “Guess what? Believe it or not, there are *flowers* under there. You won't see them until springtime, but it's true.” I was astounded. Amazed. *Flowers?* Under there? She was telling me about the patterns of the seasons, of course—but also about something more. Something like hope. Transformation. Renewal.

Or...another day, when my brother and I found a slab of petrified wood, over fifty *million* years old, on the hill behind our Colorado ranch house. Geologic time—now *there's* a great way to gain some perspective on human ideas of time and mortality. And then there was another day, as I was walking through a meadow on the ranch, following some fox tracks, when I saw some geese flying overhead. They were so close, I could hear their wings *whooshing* as they flew. I realized that some of those geese had started their journey way up in the Arctic, in Alaska, and had flown over western Canada and the Rocky Mountains, all the way to our little meadow. And it struck me that their flight tied together some of the most beautiful places on this continent—that, by the very beating of their wings, they showed how connected those places really are. And how connected *I* was, too, to those very same places.

So why is wilderness important? Because unspoiled Nature is the last, best place on Earth for people to stand upright and tall, dwarfed by the sweep of the stars or the sweep of time, and yet *still* part of it all—connected to the changing seasons, the fox tracks, or the flight of geese. In Nature, we can feel both very small, and very large, at once—part of the universe, the pattern, the mystery.

And one more thing. In wilderness, we can still experience *silence*—a quality that's increasingly rare in this world. We can hear voices apart from our own, sounds not made by automobiles or chainsaws. We can even hear, sometimes, the whispers of *creation*—that remarkable process whose essence is life, and whose engine is silent.

**3. Your books work especially well on audio—with their varied characters, humor, and poignancy, they are perfect to read aloud and listen to. Why do you think this is true?**

Well, if that's true, I'm glad! That's the goal of every bard—to tell a few tales that make people lean forward a bit, and maybe see themselves or the world in a different way. And if it *is* true, it's largely thanks to the fact that I was lucky enough to grow up in a home where people often read aloud, made up plays, and told campfire tales. My wife and kids and I do all those things now at our own home—and we also severely limit the use of our one old television. The result is a rich and vibrant conversation around the dinner table most evenings, as well as a houseful of creative, active kids who are also good readers.

And all this has really helped me as a writer, because I *hear* voices and descriptions in my head as I'm crafting a story. Not to mention the challenge of telling tales that can hold the attention of our five rambunctious kids...for five or ten seconds, at least.

Good fiction, you see, is *true*. That may seem bizarre to some people, who think only nonfiction can be true. But good fiction, the kind of stories that touch our lives and stand the test of time, are *also* true. How? The *places* they describe must enliven our senses, and seem absolutely real—the sort of places we can walk into and stay for a while, with all the richness, complexity, and irony of a well-drawn character. Characters, too, must feel true—people who walk right off the page and into our hearts. Their habits, their motives, and most of all, their *voices*, must ring true. And the story's underlying *idea* must also feel true—to the human condition, to our deepest selves.

When stories are read aloud, performed, or sung, they can also tap into another sort of truth. In a primal way, they connect us to the earliest people on the planet—and to all the diverse peoples who have shared their feelings, experiences, and dreams through the human voice. The ability to tell stories—whether around an ancient campfire or in a modern movie theater—is what sets human beings apart from other animals. And it may also be what brings us closer to the profoundest truths of all.

#### **4. Your books take a strong ethical stance. Do you think books can contribute to our learning to lead moral lives?**

Definitely. Most peoples, from whatever culture or time, have used stories to embody their deepest moral principles. That's true of Native American tales, Greek myths, African legends, Celtic ballads, Chinese folktales, Biblical psalms—you name it. The best possible way to convey a moral dilemma, or to impart a pearl of wisdom, is to weave it into a good, compelling story. To make it into a metaphor.

For me, as a writer, moral questions and ideas are an essential part of storytelling. Without the chance to wrestle with some of life's great questions, it just wouldn't be worth all the agony of crafting a novel! The kind of story that touches people, that truly lasts, has an underlying idea, something significant, that gives it weight. Now, I am *not* saying stories should be teachy or preachy—just the opposite. Lots of great stories have been ruined by the author's sermonizing. The trick is to weave moral questions and ideas into the very fabric of the story—to embed them seamlessly—and then to step back and let the reader respond. However he or she may choose. So the author's job is to raise the issue, passionately and intelligently, and then—get out of the way.

On the very first page of *The Lost Years of Merlin*, a boy washes ashore. Bedraggled and nearly drowned, he has no home, no memory, and no name. He is a completely blank slate. And yet...he surprises himself, and also the reader, by what he discovers down inside: hidden courage, wisdom, and eventually, magic. And so we witness his struggles to find himself, to choose his destiny, to write something new on that slate—and, in time, to become the wise and beloved wizard we call Merlin.

Now this is, of course, a story. But it's also an idea. A metaphor. About the hidden gifts, hidden possibilities, that all of us possess. For all of us, at some point in life, may feel washed ashore, lost and alone. But all of us, like Merlin, can make choices, shape our lives—and maybe even rise to unexpected heights.

**5. Why has Merlin fascinated people for so many centuries? What is so remarkable about him? What keeps him—and that special place, Avalon—so alive in our hearts?**

Let me start by saying that *I've* been fascinated with Merlin ever since my first year as a student at Oxford, when I sat in the shade of an ancient English oak tree and read T.H. White's *Once and Future King*. But even though I eventually named that oak “Merlin's Tree”, I had no idea that twenty years later I'd have the chance to weave another thread or two into the marvelous tapestry of myth about Merlin. Life is really more surprising than legend.

So why has Merlin persisted in our minds and hearts? Why have people been telling stories about him, adding to his legend, for over fifteen hundred years? Well, here's my theory. It's because Merlin stands for three basic ideals—ideals we need today, more than ever: universality, humility, and the sacredness of Nature.

First take universality. When you look at the original Celtic tales, Merlin's role was truly astounding. And unique. Despite all the chaos, warfare, plagues, and hardships of life in sixth century Britain, here came this wizard who actually succeeded in building bridges among people—Druids and Christians, nobles and peasants, archbishops and old gray wolves. And now, in our own time, when so many people are bent on tearing humanity apart, Merlin gives us hope that we can still perhaps come together.

Then there is humility. There is always a tension in Merlin's legends between the light and dark sides in humanity. And in Merlin himself. That is why, in the Celtic tales, he was given a saintly mother and a demonic father. And that is why, in my own tales of Merlin, he often grapples with his own dark side, his own flaws. All this makes him a wiser, more compassionate person—and a truly remarkable mentor.

And finally—Merlin's wondrous connection with Nature. To him, the language of the river or the tree isn't so far from his own; the echoing call of a wolf is full of wisdom. Humanity has always yearned to connect with the cosmos, to belong to the universe as wholly as light belongs to the stars. Merlin reminds us of that yearning, and inspires us to explore it.

Much like Merlin, the mythic world of Avalon kindles some of our deepest longings. For it is a place that combines mortal and immortal, transitory and eternal. A place where all creatures, whether they walk or fly or swim or crawl, live together in harmony. And also, a place of hope amidst human suffering. The sort of place where Merlin himself might live—and where, through the magic of story, we *all* can live, for a time.