

DRAGON VOICES:

An Interview with T. A. Barron



Like a character in a fantasy novel, T.A. Barron is a charming man who is larger than life. It is no surprise that Barron's speaking engagements are packed with young fans who want to hear him discuss his *Lost Years of Merlin* epic, and the resulting motion picture that is currently in development. Barron's recent national book tour for *The Great Tree of Avalon Book III: The Eternal Flame* garnered audiences of teens, parents and adult fans. The message is simple. Barron's books stress that each person is important, and that individuals can make a difference in the world.

T.A. Barron has lived a fascinating life. A former businessman and current writer, Barron, his wife and five children spend a great deal of time hiking and enjoying nature. He serves on a variety of environmental and educational boards, and he is the founder of a national award for heroic children. The *Dragon Lodge* recently visited with the author about his passion for the environment, the things that have influenced him the most, and his writing.

DL: Tom, you have been a world traveler, a Rhodes Scholar and a successful businessman, among the other roles in your life. How and why did you decide to write professionally?

Barron: Writing allows me to explore, wherever and whatever I choose. It's taken me back in time, to a distant galaxy, to the place where the sea begins. Best of all, though, writing is a way to explore the biggest questions of life. Not to find the answers, perhaps, but to do some thoughtful exploring of the questions. I have done many things—built a mountain cabin, studied at Oxford, run a growing business, started a family—but I have always written.

When I was in fifth grade, I liked to tell stories so much that I started my own little magazine, called *The Idiot's Odyssey*. As an Eagle Scout, I won a scouting speech and essay competition that sent me to Washington to meet the president. Even when I was president of a business, I often found myself getting up at 4 a.m. to write, composing during meetings, or

scribbling in the back of a taxi.

Finally I had to make a choice, to do what I love best, because life is too short not to follow your passions. So here I am, still telling stories. Writing is the hardest, and most joyous, labor I know.

DL: You have developed quite a following across the United States. Your best-selling trilogy about *The Great Tree of Avalon* has been translated into many languages, and your work on *The Lost Years of Merlin* continues to draw new fans. What is it about fantasy that is so appealing to people of all ages?

Barron: Fantasy allows you to bend the rules of our existence—high-lighting troubling issues of our time. You can write about life with more intricacy and power-bending life-emphasizing certain elements and de-emphasizing others.

DL: What is it about Merlin that is so captivating?

Barron: Ever since my days as a student at Oxford, I have loved the character Merlin—his richness, his depth, his appreciation for both the weaknesses and virtues of humanity. And his love for Nature, his greatest teacher.

When I was researching Arthurian lore to write Kate's undersea adventure, *The Merlin Effect*, I was struck by the fact that of all the thousands of stories about Merlin written over the past 1500 years, almost none are about his youth. He is the ancient wizard, the mentor of King Arthur, the co-creator of Camelot. But where did he come from? And what made it possible for him to become the greatest wizard of all times? That mystery got me going—although when I started out trying to fill in the gap of Merlin's lost years, I had no idea what a big project it would be. Here you had this wondrous tapestry of myth about him, woven over fifteen centuries, and it had a big, gaping hole: Merlin's lost youth. But the weaving needed to be delicate as well as bold; honoring tradition as well as original.

To make things even more challenging, I started out with a boy who washes ashore, with no home and no memory—the absolute opposite of a great, exalted

wizard. For Merlin to grow in a believable way, from that humble beginning to his glorious destiny, required more than just three books. That's why my original plan of a trilogy swelled to five books. And that's also why it took me almost a full decade to write the five books of *The Lost Years of Merlin*.

DL: *Your writing includes picture books, young adult fantasy, and a guide for youth on living a heroic life. How do you determine what you are going to write about?*

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 highest goal is to create characters, plots, and themes that raise the big questions of life. 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.

DL: *A major focus in your work is on young people facing some very tough situations, and having to make some difficult moral decisions. Does that theme have a personal meaning for you?*

Barron: I write books I would like to read. That means each story must have a character, a relationship, a place, a dilemma, and an idea that I care about. A lot. I like a story where an individual must deal with personal issues as well as overarching issues. The mythic quest—call it fantasy if you prefer—allows me to incorporate all of these qualities.

In addition, the mythic quest gives me a great opportunity to wrestle with some of life's biggest questions in the context of a good old-fashioned page-turner. For example, telling the story of Merlin's lost years allows me to explore the idea that all of us, whatever our backgrounds, have a magical person hidden down inside of ourselves. Just like that unknown boy who washed ashore, each of us has the potential to reach for the stars.

DL: *Would you tell our readers a bit about your mother, Gloria Barron, and the prize you have established for young heroes?*

Barron: 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.

My mother never ceased reading and learning, which always impressed me. She always urged us to write in journals, thank-you letters, whatever. Her rule was that a good letter should contain "something funny, something beautiful, and something true." She continually urged her kids to make a positive difference to the world, in whatever ways we chose. She didn't sermonize; she just did that and encouraged us to follow her example.

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.

The purpose of the Barron prize is twofold: to encourage wonderful, public spirited kids to keep working to improve the world; and to inspire other young people to do the same. I love the fact that the winners of the Prize come from every conceivable background. There is a winner who looks like any girl or boy in America. Right there is a message for young people: If these kids are doing so much to make the world a better place, then maybe I can, too. For all of us—regardless of age, gender, color, or background—can make a difference.

DL: *Why are heroes important?*

Barron: Heroes show us how important it is to develop our inner qualities such as courage, perseverance, faith, compassion, humility, and humor. It's about character. Being a hero is absolutely not



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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. We need our heroes—our trail guides on the long walk of life—to show us how far we can go; how high we can climb.

DL: *We noticed that some of the written praise for your work has come from famous people who are also known for being conservationists, like Robert Redford and Dr. Jane Goodall. How do your books reflect the principles of conservation?*

Barron: 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. My books have given me the joy of writing about nature as our greatest teacher, since Merlin, like myself, learns his most important ideas from the natural world.

DL: *Has a love for nature always played an important part of who you are as a person?*

Barron: Growing up near nature was, and continues to be, a tremendous influence on me. No question. And my parents encouraged that, too. We took lots of walks, hikes, and camping trips that I'll never forget.

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.

DL: *How hard is it to stick to a writing schedule when one is as busy as you are?*

Barron: Hard. Discipline is more important than anything—even more important than talent or inspiration. Of course, you need some inspiration to write—but to finish, let alone do the multiple rewrites (I do at least seven complete rewrites, start to finish, of any novel). You need a healthy dose of discipline.

DL: *What's next for T.A. Barron?*

Barron: I think everyone will be glad to know that I have decided to expand the story of *The Great Tree of Avalon*. This new book will be a prequel to *Avalon*, a book that bridges the thousand year gap between the very end of *The Lost Years of Merlin* saga and the very beginning of the Avalon trilogy.

Selected Titles of Books by T.A. Barron

- _____ (2005). *Shadow on the stars*. New York: Philomel.
- _____ (2004). *High as a hawk: A brave girl's historic climb*. New York: Philomel
- _____ (2004). *Child of the dark prophecy*. New York: Philomel
- _____ (2002). *The lost years of Merlin*. New York: Philomel
- _____ (2002). *The hero's trail: A guide for a heroic life*. New York: Philomel
- _____ (2001). *Tree girl*. New York: Philomel
- _____ (2000). *Where is Grandpa?* New York: Philomel
- _____ (1999). *The mirror of Merlin*. New York: Philomel
- _____ (1998). *The fires of Merlin*. New York: Berkley/Ace
- _____ (1997). *The seven songs of Merlin*. New York: Philomel
- _____ (1992). *The Ancient One*. New York: Philomel