

## A favorite son returns to Harvard

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By Nancy Shohet West, Globe Correspondent | April 18, 2010

In the 1950s, a boy grew up in an old house atop Harvard's Prospect Hill. He learned a love of reading from his parents, and he absorbed the history of his hometown — from the earliest Native Americans to the Utopians and the Shakers — from his babysitter, a local historian named Elvira Scorgie.

The boy was then called Tom; he would grow up to be known as T.A. Barron, author of more than 20 books, including his Merlin series for middle-grade readers now in development for the big screen with Paramount Pictures.

The young Barron left Harvard in 1964 at age 12 with his parents and six siblings to resettle in Colorado, but the town's rich history and evocative topography never left his imagination. Years later, his first published novel, "Heartlight," would be set in a small New England community much like Harvard.

On Thursday, Barron will be back in town to read from his upcoming Merlin book, "Ultimate Magic," at the Harvard Public Library at 7 p.m.

It will be a homecoming in more ways than one. As many longtime residents know, the building at 4 Pond Road that houses the library was an elementary school when Barron was a boy, and he remembers attending art classes in the same room where he'll be reading Thursday night.

"These circles are one of the wonderful things about life," he reflected in a recent telephone interview. "To think that I'll be coming back to talk about my books in the same space that was once my art room at Bromfield Elementary School, the room where I spilled all kinds of paint and burned holes in the floorboards doing pottery projects."

Barron wrote his first book while traveling through Europe and Asia on a Rhodes scholarship. It was, he believed then, the first step toward realizing his dream of being a professional author. But publishers disagreed.

"After I'd received 32 rejection letters, I knew I had to go home and find a different job," he said. Barron returned to the United States to embark on a career as a venture capitalist in New York.

But even the thrill of high-stakes finance in the 1980s didn't compel him the way that writing children's books did. "Even after I was named president of a venture capital company, I was getting up at 4 a.m. to write children's books," he recalled. "I'd be sitting in the back of boardrooms during meetings, drafting story ideas and character sketches."

His colleagues likely thought he was taking notes on the meeting, and in a way he was, Barron said: "If some of the ogres, trolls, and goblins in my fantasy books resemble certain people in the New York financial world, it might not be a coincidence."

The more he wrote, the more certain he became that it was the right life for him. With his wife Currie's support, on the day he delivered one of the most successful annual reports in company history, Barron also submitted his resignation, announcing he would be returning to Colorado to write books.

Barron and his family settled in Boulder, and he began to work in earnest on "Heartlight."

A theme unites his books for children, he said. "They all have a young person, a heroic kid, at the center, whether that's a contemporary girl from New England or the young wizard Merlin. The other thing my books have in common is the theme of nature in all of its power and richness and ability to inspire."

He and Currie, a concert pianist, have five children, ranging in age from 13 to 22, and because he loves talking about writing with youngsters he was a frequent visiting author at schools across the country. One such visit a decade ago made a dramatic impact on him.

"I gave a talk at a school in Ohio. Afterward, a girl came up to me and said, 'In books like yours, a kid saves the people he loves, or his whole world, or does something fabulous. But the truth is, that kind of thing only happens in fairy tales. In real life, kids can't do anything. Kids just don't matter.'

"That girl's comments and the cynical look in her eye hit me like a two-by-four. It made me see that kids like that girl need stronger medicine than all these fictional young heroes."

Barron resolved to demonstrate that children could indeed make a difference in real life. The result: "The Hero's Trail: A Guide for a Heroic Life," published in 2002. It tells the stories of 100 youths who set out to fix a problem in their communities.

Although Barron does not know whether the girl in Ohio ever saw his book, the research fueled his belief in the power of children. In 2001, he founded the Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes, named after his late mother, to "recognize outstanding young leaders who have made a significant positive difference to people and our planet."

Past winners, who must be 8 to 18 years old to qualify, have done such things as growing vegetables to supply a food pantry; organizing local environmental clean-up projects; and organizing inner-city mentoring programs. He typically receives 500 nominations per year for the 10 \$2,500 scholarships and 15 honorable mentions.

The children's librarian in Harvard, Abby Kingsbury, put the wheels in motion for Barron's visit after meeting him at conference last year. She said she can't imagine a better role model for her young patrons. "Ever since we scheduled his visit, kids have been coming up to me . . . to say 'He's my favorite author! I can't wait to meet him!'"

Earlier this month, Kingsbury discussed the Prize for Young Heroes with a group of fifth-graders. "I said to them, 'Wouldn't it be great if someone from Harvard won that prize?' And you could just see them start to think about it," she said. "Now they're going to go off and try to do something amazing they never would have dreamed of previously."

For his part, Barron is looking forward to his return.

"Harvard gave me a huge amount of creative material," he said. "It was a stew pot filled with ingredients like apple trees, views of Nashoba Valley, ancient Native American lore, and the influence of the Alcotts. And I've been dipping back into that stew pot for my entire life." ■

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