

Sparkling Reviews

Interview Q & A with T. A. Barron

Mary Genthner, Interviewer

2010

Q. I am in love with your series, I went and picked up the first two so that I could properly review *Merlin's Dragon: Ultimate Magic*. Can you tell us a little bit about the series and where you got the idea from to write it?

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 a few threads of my own into the marvelous tapestry of myth about Merlin. Life is really more surprising than legend!

Now, Merlin and I have had quite a ride together. (To write all 12 books about him has spanned 17 years!) And in that journey, I've met literally hundreds of amazing, bizarre, and diverse characters. But none of them have captured my heart more than Basil. How did we meet? In writing *The Great Tree of Avalon* trilogy, this wacky little fellow flew into my imagination, and just wouldn't leave. Then I realized he was really the greatest dragon of all times—the legendary Basilgarrad—but hidden, in disguise, until he revealed his true size and power in the final, climactic battle to save Avalon.

That was the moment I had the idea of telling the middle of Merlin's saga—the story of the thousand years after *The Lost Years of Merlin* books ended and before *The Great Tree of Avalon* began—from the dragon's point of view. Of course, he'd need to start out very, very small ... so we could discover the secret story of how he came to be the greatest dragon ever. That gave me the chance to develop him as the world's most unlikely hero—which was lots of fun. And something else happened: Basil's humble origins as a little fellow who started out running for his life gave me the chance to explain why, when he finally gained "a body as great as his heart" (as Merlin said), Basil always defended the other small and weak creatures from bullies (including most other dragons). Having been bullied himself, he never forgot how wrong it felt. And so, in time, the creatures of Avalon gave him a nickname: Wings of Peace.

Q. There are some amazing characters in your book, can you tell us which character that you relate with the most and why?

I think there is some of me in each character. Everything you write is somewhat autobiographical. But if you press me, I would choose Merlin—that fellow who learned his greatest lessons from nature, and who hoped to help his world. He is the one I most admire. I really would have loved to be a wizard!

Q. Where are you most comfortable when you write?

In the attic of our Colorado home.

Q. I read that you have always liked to travel, where are some of places you have been?

As a young man I spent every penny of the money I earned in summer jobs in college, plus the remainder of my scholarship, on travel. For a whole year, I traveled in Asia, Africa, and Europe—carrying my backpack through Russia, Uzbekistan, Japan (where I worked as a roof thatcher in a remote village), Philippines, Thailand, India (oh, what a wondrous country!), Nepal (trekking through the Himalayas), Turkey, Kenya, Tanzania, France, Norway, and the Seychelle Islands.

Since then, my travels have continued. In the last few years, I've been lucky enough to go to Rwanda, Bhutan, and New Zealand. But my favorite place to go remains the hiking trails near our home in Colorado.

Q. Have any of them influenced your writing?

Yes, all of my travels have influenced my writing in one way or another – they have influenced me. The two most influential places have been Colorado's Rocky Mountains, so full of nature's wonder and beauty, and England (when I was a student at Oxford), where I first explored the land that gave birth to Merlin.

Q. Who are some of your favorite authors?

Impossible to name them all, but here are just a few: Novels by E. B. White, J. R. R. Tolkien, Madeleine L'Engle, T. H. White, Boris Pasternak, and Isabel Allende. Nature books by Aldo Leopold, John Muir, Henry David Thoreau, Loren Eiseley and Rachel Carson. Biographies of Abraham Lincoln (my favorite is by Carl Sandburg), Anne Frank, Albert Einstein, Helen Keller, Eleanor Roosevelt, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, Wilma Rudolph, Mohandas Gandhi, Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce tribe, Thomas Edison, Winston Churchill, and Martin Luther King, Jr. Poetry by Keats, Shelley, Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Robert Frost, Emily Dickinson, Ogden Nash, and Mary Oliver. And finally—Children's picture books by Barbara Cooney, Barbara Berger, and Ted Lewin.

Q. Do you have a specific routine when you write (ex: a certain place, a certain snack etc.)?

Essentially, I write all the time, even when I'm traveling, going for a hike with my kids, sleeping, whatever. The creative process isn't limited to the hours I spend in my writing chair in the attic of our house—though that is still my favorite place to work. I love to sit up there with a steaming hot mug of cinnamon tea.

I always write the first draft with a blue felt pen and a pad of paper, because that is a good creative chemistry for me. And I do lots of rewrites. How many? As many as it takes to get it right! Like a good stew, novels get better when you boil them down and integrate all the ingredients. Most of my novels take six or seven full rewrites and at least a year or two to finish.

Q. I do have to admit that I have become quite addicted to your writing through this series, What can we expect to see coming out from you next and what is it about?

What's next? I have lots of exciting ideas that I'm exploring. Stay tuned! But don't be surprised if the next book takes place in a magical village somewhere in the Himalayas ... and is a new kind of heroic adventure—as well as a love story.

Q. Do you have any advice to anyone that is trying to get their book published?

Get yourself a literary agent. It's just too difficult to get published without one. How do you find one who is right for you? There are professional writers' organizations, such as the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators and the Mystery Writers' Guild that could be helpful.

And don't give up! Remember that rejection is, unfortunately, part of the process. But if you persist, the chances are good that you will eventually succeed. Never forget that you have something valuable to say, and it's worth sharing!