

Interview with T. A. Barron

*Sandra Bornstein's Blog for Writers
and Readers*
July 21, 2014



T. A. Barron, Award-winning Author

What happens when you mix nature with fantasy?

A simple answer—T. A. Barron's creative books. During the last couple of decades, T. A. has authored 24 books. (*Merlin Saga*, *Merlin's Dragon* trilogy, *Great Tree of Avalon* trilogy, *Heartlight Saga*, *Atlantis Saga*, picture books, and nature books) His noteworthy books have continuously received state, national, and international awards.

Welcome T. A.

Your website bio states that you traveled widely as a Rhodes Scholar. Where did you travel? How did travel affect your viewpoint? Do your current travels affect your writing?

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.

So, 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.



Aspen Trees in Colorado

You have spent decades devoting your time to being a notable environmentalist and conservationist. What fueled these passions? How do these interests enhance your stories?

Many of my favorite childhood memories are times with trees. The gnarled old apple trees on my parents' hilltop in New England, the ancient ponderosa pine by the creek on our ranch in Colorado, and the aspen trees where I strung my first hammock and camped many nights under the Rocky Mountain stars—all these became friends.

Sometimes I would wonder just what stories these old friends could tell, if only I could understand their language. Had they seen the Native Americans who lived in these places centuries ago? What about the first settlers to move West in their covered wagons? Did they witness the great floods or amazing lightning storms of the past? And, even more interesting, what could they tell me about how it feels to have such patience and serenity to put down roots in a single spot and live there through all the seasons and years of life?

Maybe this is why so many of my books feature trees—trees who do, in fact, have an enchanting story to tell ... and wisdom to impart if we will take the time to listen.

My job, as an author, is to raise issues about living sustainably with our fragile and beautiful planet. I try to raise them as passionately and convincingly as I can, yet never lecture and sermonize so the reader can form his or her own conclusions.

A passion for preserving the environment is also an important element of my work and life. I've always been grounded in nature and have always found my greatest inspiration in the natural world. To me, nature is not just a backdrop, but a full-blown character.



Colorado

As a fellow Coloradoan, I share your appreciation of the majesty of the Rocky Mountains and the magical elements of Mother Nature. Does living in Colorado inspire your writing?

As you know, I grew up in Colorado ranch country and have always retained my love of the beautiful mountains that my dad used to call “the paycheck from God.” When I began writing full time after a decade in business back East, I returned to Colorado with my family.

Literary agents and traditional publishers accept a small percentage of submittals. Decades ago, you experienced the devastating effect of dozens of rejection letters and chose to temporarily put your writing passion aside. What caused you to give professional writing a second chance?

As you mention, when I got back to Oxford (looking much more grizzly), I thought the novel I’d written would be the great start of my career as a writer. So I sent it off to every publisher I could think of—32 in all. And, as you know, my novel had a terrific reception: It got rejected by all 32 publishers.

As you can imagine, I wasn’t very happy. But I knew that I needed to figure out a different career, and decided to try business. Life was busy. But I continued to feel the yearning to write—and the longing to follow that passion somehow. I found myself getting up before dawn to write story ideas or poems for a couple of hours before work, writing in the back of taxis and airplanes, and ducking out of dinner meetings to go home and write for a while. (If you want to know where some of the ogres, goblins, and trolls in my novels came from—they were inspired by some of those characters I met in business suits.)

Life is too short not to do what you love, what you dream. So I made a decision. I resigned from the business, shocking my partners—and moved from New York City back to Colorado, my childhood home, to see if I could actually write a book that somebody would want to read.

Well, that was 20 years—and 24 books—ago. And I have not had one millisecond of looking back. It’s been a great life. I feel like the luckiest man in the world—getting to do something I love, in a great place to live, with a wonderful family, creating a few stories that people seem to enjoy. More good things have happened to me in this 20 years than I could have ever predicted. So I feel immensely grateful to have had another chance to try to do what was in my heart.

Sometimes people ask me, “Wasn’t it scary to leave a paying job and move to a new place to try to write books?” The answer is, of course. It’s always scary to try something new. And I certainly had no evidence that I could write anything publishable.

But here is the key point: Changing jobs was not nearly as scary as the idea of growing old and realizing that I had never really tried to follow my dream. That life had run its course, and I had missed my chance to try to do something I really loved. Those realizations were much, much more scary than the risk of changing jobs.

I would much rather have tried again to write and failed than never to have tried at all.

I have to admit that fantasy and science fiction books are rarely on the top of my reading list. I know that there are many other people who share my sentiments. Why should middle level or YA readers consider reading this form of literature?

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 hero's journey—which fantasy fits so well—allows me to incorporate all of these qualities.



In addition, the mythic quest gives us a superb 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.

Finally, fantasy allows you to bend the rules of our existence—highlighting tough issues of our time. In this way, fantasy is like a bent mirror. You can reflect the reality of our experience with more intricacy and power—bending life—emphasizing certain elements and de-emphasizing others.



Since the time of Plato, the mysteries surrounding Atlantis have inspired writers to write about its demise. In Atlantis Rising, you focus on the creation of this mystical and magical place. What prompted you to write a story that showcases the beginning of Atlantis rather than its end? How many books are in this series and when are the anticipated publication dates?

Everyone knows about Atlantis, the mythic island destroyed in a single catastrophic day (as Plato first described long ago). But I've always wondered ... how was this magical place born? How was it created? That inspired my new book, *Atlantis Rising*, the first book in my Atlantis trilogy.

This is not just another tale of the destruction of Atlantis. Instead, it is the secret, untold story of the creation of Atlantis. You will discover exactly how Atlantis was created, what people — young heroes, greedy masterminds, and all sorts of bizarre, surprising creatures — fought to make it happen, and how this magical place gained such power

from the wonders of nature. You will see, even in the miracle of Atlantis' birth, the seeds of its future destruction.

There are three books in the Atlantis Trilogy: *Atlantis Rising*, Book 1 of the trilogy, is available wherever books are sold. *Atlantis in Peril*, Book 2 will be released in May 2015, and the third book, *Atlantis Lost* a year or so after that.

Each chapter in Atlantis Rising begins with an excerpt from a journal (Promi or Her). For example, in chapter 47 her journal entry states- "Whatever we give, we gain. Even if what we gain can be enjoyed only by someone else." 342. Why did you choose this journal format? What are you hoping your readers will gain from these pithy excerpts?

This technique was all about conveying the fun of journal writing. I'm a big fan of keeping a journal (although I've never used an old book of dessert recipes). Also, this allowed me to raise the question of who was the mysterious "her" who was also writing the journals. That secret is revealed at the very end of the book.

Mystical characters and magical events are essential elements of fantasy stories. In Atlantis Rising, the characters' good and evil choices are accentuated by their magical powers. What message do you hope your readers will gain from Promi's character development and his choices?

Fantasy is a wonderful way to illuminate the power of choice. That we all have. Even our small choices make a difference—and even when we resist making a choice, that also matters. I believe our free will is our greatest power. Our choices really matter—and if our choices matter, than so do we.

Throughout the book there are numerous references to foods and eating. Why did you emphasize sweet foods as well as the foods that nature provides?

An important part of telling a good yarn is giving readers an experience that awakens all five of their senses. And the smell and taste and texture of food is a great way to do that! In this case, I leaned heavily on sweet because that's simply part of Promi's character. He loves sweets with incredible passion. As readers will learn later on in the story, that also provides a clue that he just might be more than he seems—because people from the spirit realm have a big sweet tooth.

Both of the main characters, Promi and Atlanta express their gratitude at different points in the book. Why is this trait an essential part of the story?

Gratitude is a good place to begin to make a meaningful life. To be wholly alive is to be grateful—for every breath we take, every song we sing, every person we love, every day we discover.

Just being grateful helps us to notice and appreciate all the blessings and opportunities around us. Some people like to start their day with a bowlful of cereal—but for me, it's a bowlful of gratitude!

All we have—truly all we have—is our time and our souls. Even if you live as long as a wizard, that time is really very brief. It's never long enough to do all you can do and be all you can be.

In 2000, you founded the Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes. This national award honors outstanding young people who help their communities or the environment. What prompted you to establish this award in honor of your mother? Can you describe the common attributes of the recipients?

Heroes are important – today more than ever. Heroes (whether real or fictional) remind us who we really are, what we can become, and just how far we can go. Best of all, they 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 I once wrote about: He washed ashore on a strange, hostile coastline ... and ultimately became Merlin, the greatest wizard of all times.

More than anything, heroes are important because they show that every person—young or old, black or white, rich or poor—can make a positive difference to the world. Each of us can be more than just what Madison Avenue calls consumers: We can be creators! Of our own lives, our own destinies.

That's why I created a national award to honor heroic kids from all backgrounds: the Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes. I named it after my mother, who was a hero in my own life. My highest hope for the Prize, which honors 25 kids each year, is that the examples of these young people will inspire others to do whatever they can to help make the world a better place.

Some of the common attributes include courage, knowledge (or the willingness to learn), gratitude, belief, wonder, generosity, hope, and love/compassion. Each winner may have a different strength in these character qualities but they are all there to some degree or another.

Book Awards:

To see a complete list, visit T.A. Barron's website: www.tabarron.com.

Sandra Bornstein is the author of *MAY THIS BE THE BEST YEAR OF YOUR LIFE*. It is available on Amazon. Sandra's memoir highlights her living and teaching adventure in Bangalore, India. She is a licensed Colorado teacher who has taught K-12 students in the United States and abroad as well as college level courses. Sandra is married and has four adult sons. The memoir was a finalist in the Travel category for the 2013 Next Generation Indie Book Awards, the 2013 International Book Awards, the 2013 National Indie Book Excellence Awards, the 2013 USA Best Book Awards, and received an Honorable Mention award in the Multicultural Non-Fiction category for the 2013 Global ebook Awards.