

INTRODUCTION

to the 2016 edition

Twenty-five years ago, I finished a new novel called *The Ancient One*. Unlike most of my books, whose titles have remained a mystery to me for much of the writing process, the title for this one announced itself loud and clear at the very start.

I knew that this book simply had to be named for the great redwood tree who was a towering presence (in every sense) in the story. For the Ancient One was more than a mighty creature, the oldest and grandest tree of the hidden forest in Lost Crater. It was, as well, a central character in the book, a sentient being, and a magical time tunnel.

What few people know is that *The Ancient One* was inspired by a hike in California when I encountered the most magnificent tree I'd ever seen—a redwood of such grandeur that I nearly fell over backward trying to see its highest boughs. As I came closer, the smell of its resins enveloped me. When I ran my hand across the deep creases

of its bark, it was almost like touching the face of an old friend. My other plans for that day suddenly evaporated; I wanted to stay right there with the tree.

I lingered in that grove for the rest of the day. But at sunset, I still wasn't ready to leave. Though I hadn't expected to camp out, and hadn't brought a sleeping bag or food, I decided to stay for the night.

Snuggled against the ancient tree's gnarled trunk, I opened myself to the sounds, shapes, textures, and aromas around me. All through that night, I listened to the great tree's swaying, creaking, and—I felt sure—breathing. Just as I was breathing. Sharing the same air, the same moments, breath for breath.

Whether or not I slept that night, I don't remember. But I do remember feeling an extraordinary sense of peace. And I also remember wondering, all through the dark hours, what amazing stories this two-thousand-year-old tree could tell, what rich wisdom it could share. If only I could hear its authentic voice.

By the time the rosy rays of dawn touched the tree's uppermost branches, I knew I wanted to open myself to that voice. To hear those stories. And to travel through time with this awesome companion.

That campout began the journey that concluded—after two years, lots of research, nine drafts, and a whole lot of ink (since I write the first drafts of my books by hand)—with the novel you are about to read. My highest hope is that, amidst the adventure of Kate's journey back in time to the Native American tribe who had vanished so mysteriously, you will feel a hint of the majesty of that tree. I hope you'll catch a whiff of its sweet resins, feel its deeply rutted bark, and perhaps even hear its resonant voice.

For that voice is very, very old. Not as old as the mountains or the oceans—as the tree itself reminds Kate in the chapter “Deep Roots”—but far more ancient than any human being. That is why, even centuries ago in the time of the Native Americans, they reverently called that tree the Ancient One.

In the quarter century since its publication, *The Ancient One* has reached a wide audience. I recently received, for example, a long letter from a German woman whose passion for the book has led her to plan a trip to see the California redwoods. And I also just received a photo of the book (appropriately tattered and torn) from a family who took it hiking with them in Patagonia. Never would I have guessed the wide-ranging travels of this story, crafted in my attic with my writing pen.

That's the remarkable magic of stories. They do travel—reaching people in distant places as well as distant times. And they also reach deep into our hearts and minds.

Having now written more than thirty books, I am still surprised by how much more a story contains than its plot and characters. For stories are, in truth, vessels—boats that sail to faraway shores, carrying something far more valuable than physical treasures.

Ideas.

Stories enable us all, writers and readers alike, to consider large, complex ideas about life—but to do so indirectly, through the bent mirror of imagination. Those ideas often come in the form of questions: What difference does one life really make? Where do we find meaning? What, if anything, has lasting value?

To illustrate this point, consider the immense array of ideas carried in one well-known story: Noah's Ark. Ever since that story was first told many centuries ago, it has been shared and celebrated as a tale about faith, perseverance, and powers greater than ourselves. And it is also, I think, a parable about the responsibility of humanity to be wise stewards of nature and our fellow creatures—a parable that is more important than ever today. After all, if God asked Noah to go through so much trouble to protect two of every species—how can we do any less?

You will, of course, discover your own ideas in *The Ancient One*. For what it's worth, I would suggest that this story's questions might include: How are we all connected? Are there invisible bridges that link us to other

people, other cultures, other times, and other species?
What does it take to find those bridges—and cross them?

Now, before you begin this story, be warned: You may, like Kate, find yourself breathing not like a human being—but like a towering tree. If that happens . . . you may also discover what it's like to sink your roots deeply into the soil. To reach your boughs higher than you ever imagined, stretching toward the stars. And to experience the enduring peace of the most ancient tree of all.

— T. A. BARRON