

**Fay B. Kaigler Children's Book Festival
De Grummond Lecture - April 11, 2018
T. A. Barron**

Wonderful to be back here in Hattiesburg and Southern Miss!

There really is Southern Hospitality – I still feel warmth from my last visit. Including warm talks, meals, and best of all, hugs from friends.

I treasure the Medallion (with Merlin's image on one side). But even more, I treasure you good people! A conference with head and heart.

Many of you know my crazy life story. More bizarre than any of my fantasy novels!

Growing up in Colorado, I always dreamed of becoming a writer. To live in a mountain cabin, writing books. My first novel had a **terrific reception** – rejected everywhere (32 times...but who's counting?). Rejections hurt – but at least one was very personal: “Dear Sir/Madam”.

Plan B: I joined a business in New York City, and eventually became president. As the business grew more successful, I got more busy. Even so, I'd get up before dawn to write stories. Finally, I realized that life is just too short not to give this enduring passion another try. So I had the fun of shocking all my business partners and investors by quitting as president of the company. They thought I was **completely crazy**.

That was **27 years ago – and 31 books ago**. In that time, more good things have happened than I could have ever guessed: best sellers, international editions, and let's hope... a movie of my Merlin books.

Best of all: We have 5 great kids.

People often ask me – was it **scary** to change careers? Sure, all change is scary. But the thought of trying and failing again **wasn't nearly as frightening** as the idea of growing old, coming to the end of my life, and

knowing that I had a big dream – but I never really **tried** to make my dream come true. **That** would be worse than any nightmare.

All we have – all we have – is **our time and our souls**. So why not make **the most** of them?

I often tell young people: **See your life as a story** – a story of which **you are the author**. Tell it with courage and passion. Make it the very best story you can!

As Buddha said: “**Make of your life a light.**” Not just for yourself – but also for the wider world.

Back to my crazy life story – what you may **not** know is how important **Madeleine L’Engle** was to me as a young writer. I have nothing but love and gratitude for that person, so wonderful and wise!

Bizarre story of how I met her: a case of incredible **serendipity**.

Later, when I described myself as a “wannabe writer”, she corrected me: “You **are** a writer, Tom. Just not a **published** writer. Not **yet.**”

When she found out I didn’t have any godparents, Madeleine adopted me as her god-son, with a candle-light ceremony over dinner.

She visited my family in Colorado (as did Charlotte, who will speak next).

She kindly joined me at my very first book event, at Books of Wonder bookstore in New York City. (So some people actually came!)

On top of all this, Madeleine L’Engle gave me the best summation of the craft of writing: There are **3 Essential Rules** to write the perfect novel. (Unfortunately, nobody knows what they are.)

Since then, I’ve also learned a few more things about writing:

We've all heard the famous phrase by the poet Coleridge: To write good fiction, the writer must accomplish a "willful suspension of disbelief". But **I disagree**. First, what happens is **not** willful, but willing. Second, "suspension of disbelief" is **way too low** a standard. We writers must actively **win** a reader's belief. Create a story with characters who feel real, authentic; create a special place you can enter again and again!

Also, I've learned one more thing: Children's books must be **entertaining**. That is important – essential.

But children's books can also be **something more** than entertaining. They can be powerful sources of lasting inspiration. For they hold a kind of magic – powerful magic – which can **change people's lives**. That's why the most enduring books (like those by Madeleine L'Engle) are also vehicles for **big ideas** about life. Ideas that plant a seed in any kid – a seed that can grow into a tall and mighty tree (as big as a great oak).

Such books ask questions like: What **difference** can one life make? How are we all **connected** somehow?

So what are the big ideas in my books? Two themes are in all my books, whatever the genre: **Hero** in every child; **Nature** as inspiration.

You will find those themes in all my books, whatever genre:

Merlin Saga (12 books)

Adventures of Kate (3 books)

Atlantis Saga (4 books)

Picture books (plus *Tree Girl*)

The Hero's Trail

Also: Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes.

Plus one more book: *The Wisdom of Merlin*

As you can tell...all my books share those two big ideas: **hero in every child, and nature as inspiration**.

Now, in conclusion, I'd like to read a passage to you...

Passage from *The Mirror of Fate* (Merlin Saga, Book 4) by T. A. Barron:

In this book, young Merlin has an amazing adventure – and a surprising journey. He discovers a magical mirror, bravely walks through it, and meets the last person he ever expected: his elder self. So young Merlin meets, face to face, an ancient wizard – the person he will become (if he can somehow survive this great adventure).

This is **a meeting of two people** – or two times in life of the same person. But **it's also more**: the meeting of **youthful ideals**, tinged with anger and frustration – and **ancient wisdom**, tinged with sadness and loss.

Young Merlin is deeply upset because everything he's been trying to do to save his world **seems destined to fail**. He wonders what was the point of it all – and **what was the point of his life**.

Old Merlin is deeply sad about **all he has lost** in his many years – the dear friends, the homes, the woman who was his life's one true love. **And yet...**there is still **a spark of something else** in his eye. Something like...**hope**.

He reaches out his big, wrinkled hand and places it on the young man's shoulder. Then he says: “**Know this, young wizard: Camelot, our beloved realm, may fail to last. But even so, it may still survive** – not as a place, but as an idea. It may yet find **a lasting home in the heart.**”

He pauses, peering straight into the young man's eyes, then adds: “**And a life** – whether seamstress or poet, farmer or king – **is measured** not by its length, but by **the worth of its deeds, and the power of its dreams.**”