

# Romanian Children's Book Festival Interview 2022

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## What inspires your stories?

- 1) **Writing is the hardest work I've ever done – and also the most meaningful work I've ever done.**
- 2) The best part of this writing craft is that you can always find ways to grow. To expand your abilities to communicate stories and ideas. So my voice as a writer has certainly evolved. But I would add that **everything I write has three essential parts – an unlikely hero I love, a magical place I want to explore, and a big idea that calls to me compellingly.**
- 3) **I write books I would like to read.** Sometimes that's an epic fantasy adventure where the entire universe is at stake, sometimes it's a nonfiction book about heroic young people, sometimes it's a shorter tale for children. And sometimes it's a nature book with a great photographer that gets me out for long hikes to explore some magical places.

## Why do you write fantasy?

- 1) **Fantasy is like a bent mirror. I can reflect the reality of our experience with more intricacy and power – bending life –** emphasizing certain elements and de-emphasizing others. If it succeeds, fantasy transports us to a whole new world, bizarre and terrifying and wonderful, while also illuminating our world.
- 2) **The trick is to make all this feel true: Fantasy, as I've often said, must be true!**
- 3) 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, then so do we.**
- 4) In addition, **fantasy gives us a chance to ask some of life's biggest questions** in the context of a good old-fashioned page-turner. For example, Merlin's origin story – his lost years – let me explore the idea that all of us, whatever our backgrounds, have some special magic down inside ourselves. Just like that unknown boy who washed ashore, **all of us have felt “washed ashore” at some point in life. And just like young Merlin, all of us have the potential to reach for the stars.**

## Why do you write about magic?

- 1) Magic is not merely a fictional construct. **It is a power we can experience, something very real.**
- 2) **Magic exists in the world, if we just have the eyes to see it.** It's in the **wonders of nature, and the love between**

**people and in the power of stories to inspire.** And I do believe magic also exists in the realms beyond our knowing, in **the mysterious pathways of the spirit.**

## How did you create Fincayra?

1) **Fincayra is the part mortal, part immortal island surrounded by mist** where Merlin goes. I'd like to go there myself! Fincayra is the bridge between the mortal world and the spirit realm – the place where young Merlin will discover his true powers and become a wizard.

2) Fincayra is a place I invented. But I wanted it to have an authentic Celtic feeling, and a Celtic name, since Merlin's origins are from Celtic myth. So I chose the name Fincayra, which **I found in a 12th century ballad**, to be the place where Merlin would grow to be the greatest wizard of all times. That ballad referred to "Fincayra, the isle beneath the waves." Now, doesn't that sound like a good place for young Merlin to become a wizard?

## How do you create imaginary worlds?

1) **Whatever worlds I've written about** – whether Merlin's Isle of Fincayra, Avalon, the lost island of Atlantis, a fictional Native American tribe, a faraway galaxy, or any other place – **must feel authentic.** That's the key. **If that world feels real, then anyone can go there – and have a big adventure.** So I use a lot of the skills I developed as a nature writer in Colorado to create believable fantasy worlds. **Those imaginary places need to feel every bit as real as a Colorado wildflower meadow** in the height of summer – with all the right colors, sounds, smells, tastes and touches.

2) Names are important for places, too. Just as with a human character or creature, the name must fit perfectly. For example, I spent a lot of time researching possibilities before I finally chose Fincayra as the name for Merlin's magical island in *The Merlin Saga* books. The same is true for the imaginary places I've created in other books such as my trilogy about Atlantis, or the *Adventures of Kate* books, or *Tree Girl*.

## Why Merlin? What made you write about him?

1) Ah, Merlin. **How I love that wizard!** **When I was a student at Oxford**, I often sat under an ancient, gnarled English oak that I called **Merlin's Tree**. But I had **no idea at all that, twenty years later, I would be adding a few threads of my own to the glorious tapestry of Merlin's legend.** Real life is much more surprising than legend!

2) Why do I write about Merlin? For the same reason that people have been telling stories about this character for over **fifteen hundred years: Merlin stands for three enduring ideals** – the **universality** of all people; the **light and dark** within ourselves; and the **sacredness of nature**. We don't need to look far to see the importance of these same ideals today.

3) First, take **universality**. When you look at the original Celtic tales, Merlin's role was truly astounding. **He could connect with anybody of any description: Druids and Christians, nobles and peasants, archbishops and old gray wolves.**

4) Now take the **light and dark** in every person. Merlin's understanding of his own weaknesses and strengths made him far **more humble, compassionate, and wise.**

5) And finally - **Merlin's wondrous connection with Nature**. Nature is **Merlin's greatest teacher** – a source of wisdom, healing, and inspiration. To him, **the language of the river or the tree** isn't so far from his own; the echoing call of a wolf is full of wisdom. **Humanity has always yearned to connect with the cosmos**, to belong to the universe as wholly as light belongs to the stars. **Merlin reminds us of that yearning, and inspires us to explore it.**

6) **It all started with a dream.** Back in 1993, I dreamed of a boy, half-drowned and barely alive, who washed ashore on a strange rocky coastline. He was weak, nauseous, and terribly confused. Not to mention utterly lost and alone. But he was also something else – the boy who would someday be called Merlin, the original wizard who has inspired stories worldwide for centuries. Merlin has incredible depth, and the reason he endures is because he speaks to so many of our basic human struggles – such as how do we find the courage to reach for our highest aspirations, how do we give our lives meaning, and how do we live peacefully with the natural world that sustains us. For the young Merlin I write about to grow into that exulted wizard of Arthurian lore, he has to learn several things along the way. He must learn about love, grief, compassion, transformation, power, and humility.

7) This young boy who becomes the greatest wizard of all times is, most of all, a story that I hope people of all ages will enjoy. But it's also a metaphor – that all of us, whatever our backgrounds, have a magical person hidden down inside of ourselves. Just like that boy who washed ashore on the first page of the Merlin Saga, **each of us feels “washed ashore” at some point in our lives. Lost, helpless, and alone. And yet... each of us, just like that boy, has some special magic of our own!**

## How did you research for Merlin?

1) Before even starting to write about Merlin's youth, let alone his elder wisdom, **I spent a full year just reading every single thing I could find about Merlin** – ancient sources as well as modern ones. These sources included parts of the **Welsh Mabinogian** (first set down a thousand years ago), Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, and Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*. In addition, I read Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, Robert de Boron's twelfth century poem, and of course Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regnum Britanniae*. That's just the beginning. I also read more modern treatments of Merlin by Shakespeare, Tennyson, Thomas Hardy, Mary Stewart, C. S. Lewis, Nikolai Tolstoy, and (with great delight) T. H. White's *The Once and Future King*.

2) Finally, after reading these sources – and writing about him for over twenty years – **I've come to hear his voice**. It is the voice of my greatest mentor, a true inspiration...and also, I feel, a friend.

3) Merlin – at least, the Merlin I have written about in *The Merlin Saga* – is a real human being. He has struggles, sorrows, joys, and aspirations-and, hidden deep within him, a remarkable talent. Or gift. Or magic. In that way, Merlin is no different from the rest of us – burdened by the human experience while at the very same time exalted by it. Therein lies the remarkable metaphor of Merlin. This metaphor I truly believe lies at the very heart of the whole Merlin Saga. Just like the young Merlin, all of us are washed ashore, half drowned, at some point in our lives. **All of us have hidden struggles – and hidden potential. And all of us, like the greatest wizard of all, have great magic within us: the ability to reach for the stars.**

## Why did you choose for Merlin to lose his memory?

The loss of memory is a powerful storytelling tool – but it has to be used sparingly. I used it when the young lad who just might grow up to be Merlin the wizard washes ashore at the very start of *The Merlin Saga*, and **that leaves the reader wondering, Who is this person really?** So the hero's quest also becomes the reader's journey of discovery. That **dials up the suspense making the reader lean more into the adventure**. As Merlin discovers who he really is – **so do**

we.

## What was your greatest challenge in writing about Merlin?

I realized that, **in the glorious tapestry of myth about Merlin**, a tapestry whose luminous threads had been woven over 15 centuries, **there was a big hole: the years of his youth**. So that was my greatest challenge: To fill in this gap, this mystery, of his youth – with all the richness and majesty and power Merlin deserves!

## Are there things you don't like about Merlin?

Nope. I wouldn't trim a single hair on his flowing beard.

## How do you choose the names of your characters?

**Names are very important! A name must really fit a character.** Sometimes I know that a name must be part of a **certain culture or language where the story originates**. Such as Laoni, the Native American girl in *The Ancient One*, or Tamwyn, the wilderness guide who travels to the stars in *The Great Tree of Avalon* (Book 9 of *The Merlin Saga*). Laoni's name I found in researching tribal names from the Pacific Northwest, while Tamwyn's name I made up using Celtic roots, since the Avalon trilogy (like the other books in *The Merlin Saga*) is grounded in Celtic myth. Another example: Emrys.

Sometimes I make up a new language for a particular creature (such as **Shim or Ballymag** in the Merlin books), and in those cases I use the new language to make the character's name. And sometimes I just wait until a name that feels exactly right comes into my mind! (Once my three-year-old daughter, who was making up rhymes, gave me the idea for a character's name that had eluded me for months. That was Kandeldandel.) Great moment... but I scared her!

## Does the story you're writing sometimes evolve in a different way than you expected?

**Yes!** That happens often – and it's a good thing. Only when characters start to speak, do they come alive. And they frequently have different ideas from my outline! **Surprises** like this assure me that both sides of my brain are engaged – the rational, logical side as well as the dreamlike, poetic, metaphorical side.

## You often say you see your life as a story, why?

1) **This is an empowering idea.** 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 idea was really much more scary than the risk of changing jobs. I would much rather have tried to write a book and failed than never to have tried at all.

2) **See your life as a story!** Yes – and tell that story with all the passion and courage you can! Make your life a story that inspires a little bit of goodness, that makes the world a better place somehow — even in a small way that nobody else notices. It's your story, and nobody else can write it. Only you have that power. I hope that these thoughts will encourage you to seek what you love and follow your dreams!

## How do you create a character?

Making characters come alive is one of the trickiest, but most important elements of writing. **When you see how they look in your mind, and can hear their voice echoing**, then you've **begun to know who they are**. But it's not until they lean close and whisper to you their **innermost secrets – their deepest fears, their highest hopes, and their innermost longings** – that they are truly real. And if they are fully real for you, as the writer, they will also be real for your reader.

### Introducing a character

Throw them in – let their actions introduce them. Any good character is immersed in relationships, a particular place, and a gripping situation. So jump right in! Show the readers – don't just tell them – what the characters are like.

### Developing a character

I watch people around me and look at the small things: how they talk, how they walk, how they gesture. Then I try to go inside them to look at their motivations.

### Making the characters real

Just make absolutely sure that your imaginary world feels real. Make it true! If the places and people you're writing about don't feel real to you then they won't feel believable to the reader. That's one of the reasons I include maps with all my books: They make the worlds more detailed and believable.

### Creating original characters

Inventing original creatures is always fun. To get your thinking started, combine two or three creatures you know into one – and then imagine what kind of extra special eyes would it have. What language would it speak? And while you're at it, what magical powers would it have?

## What character resembles you most?

I would love to resemble, in my own humble way, **a certain wizard named Merlin**. But I'm sure there's some of me in all my characters (especially the bumbling ones).

## Do you have a favorite character?

1) Impossible to say. That's like asking me "Who is your favorite child? I love all my characters...which is necessary to create authenticity. BUT... if I could choose only one character as my all-time favorite – **it would certainly be Merlin**.

2) **What really made me fall in love with young Merlin** was the realization that Merlin, the original wizard and the greatest mage of all times, didn't just spring into life as the ancient, wise, eccentric, powerful fellow we all know – the wizard in *The Sword in the Stone* or the many tales of Camelot. No way. So where did he come from? I started asking, What happened in his childhood? How did he come to be this great exalted wizard who is so beloved around the world? And also ... what strange and terrible and mysterious things happened to him in his youth that made him want

to keep those years a deep secret for centuries – his Lost Years? Around that time, I woke up in the middle of the night from a vivid dream – a dream of a boy, half drowned and only barely alive, who washed ashore on a strange land. He had no memory, no identity, no idea who he was. But he did have something special, maybe even magical, down inside. He felt drawn to the wonders and powers of nature. He had great love for humanity, even with all our flaws. And he had that tiny spark of magic, which was destined to grow into something truly majestic. That was when I knew who he was – Merlin. That was the beginning of this whole journey... and to this day **I'm grateful to Merlin for choosing me to be his companion.**

## Is there anything of your children to be found in some of your characters?

1) Yes indeed! **Our children radiated qualities that inspired me** – and still do. Qualities like wonder, freshness, curiosity, honesty, aliveness, bravery – and of course, humor.

2) **Being a parent has certainly made me a better storyteller.** I learned early that if I could keep the attention of our five kids around the breakfast table first thing in the morning, and not have them fall asleep in their cereal bowls, then I might have a chance to tell a gripping story. In addition, just by spending time with those kids – who are so full of humor, freshness, honesty, creativity, and ideals – how could I not pick up some of those qualities myself?

3) One more thought: I think writers whose stories are shared with young people have a **responsibility to give them a feeling of hope and empowerment.** That certainly doesn't mean talking down to kids or avoiding any of the real struggles, pain, and hardships of life. Just the opposite! But **through depicting honest struggles and serious challenges, we can also inspire authentic hope.**

## Why is nature so important?

1) **Nature is my great friend, teacher, and healer.** As well as **my enduring inspiration.** How did all that happen? The best way to explain is to start with my childhood. I was lucky enough to grow up in two places close to nature – New England and Colorado – and could always explore a mountain stream, climb a tree, pick an apple, or just cover myself with mud.

2) **The nearness of nature shaped me profoundly. Not just in the adventurous ways you might expect – in deeper, spiritual ways, as well.** For example, I remember a snowy day when I was very young. My mother – an independent soul who was a geologist as well as a pantheist – dressed me in one of those big puffy snowsuits that made me look like a waddling balloon and took me outside. The snow drifts towered over me. Then she patted the top of a huge snowdrift and said, **“Believe it or not, there are flowers under there. You won't see them until springtime, but it's true.”** I was astounded. Flowers? Under there? **She was telling me about the patterns of the seasons, of course – but also about something more. Something like ... hope. Transformation. Renewal.**

3) Another example: **When I was about twelve, I was walking through a meadow on the ranch. Suddenly I saw some geese flying overhead.** They were so close **I could hear their wings** whooshing as they flew. Some of them, I realized, had started their journey way up in the Arctic, in Alaska, and had flown over western Canada and the Rocky Mountains, all the way to our little meadow. **It struck me that their flight tied together some of the most beautiful places on this continent – that, by the very beating of their wings, they connected all those amazing places.** And that **they actually also connected me to those very same places.**

4) Then there was another day, when my brother and I found a slab of **petrified wood, over fifty million years old,** on the hill behind our Colorado ranch house. Fifty million years, I thought – why, that was even older than my dad! That was my first glimpse of geologic time – and a whole new perspective on human life and mortality.

5) How did these experiences shape me? Well, early on I realized that unspoiled nature is the best place to feel **both very small and very large at once. Humbled as well as inspired.** In nature, we can be dwarfed by the grand sweep of the stars or oceans or mountains, and yet still be part of it all – connected to the changing seasons, the tracks of a fox, or the flight of geese. **In nature, we can know that we are a very small part of the universe – but that we are, nonetheless, still part of the grandeur, the pattern, the mystery.**

6) I also discovered something startling – something truly radical in today's hyper-connected, materialistic, noisy world: **In wild places, we can still experience silence.** We can hear voices apart from our own, sounds not made by automobiles or chainsaws or electronic media. We can even hear, sometimes, the ongoing whispers of creation – that remarkable process whose essence is life, and whose engine is silent (from *To Walk In Wilderness*). And so, in time, I learned that nature can be a wonderful friend. A brilliant teacher. A powerful healer. And a great inspiration.

## **Nature is always present in your books - do you see it as a mere background or as something more, a character of its own?**

1) Nature is hugely important in all my books. In fact, I'd go so far as to say that I treat the natural world not merely as a setting, a backdrop for my stories – but as a **full-blown character.** Think about it. **Places are alive, just like you or me. They have moods, histories, and qualities that can be bizarre, humorous, tragic, mysterious, or inspiring.** Part of my job as a writer is to make those places so real, so sensuous, so fully alive, that readers want to voyage there again and again. In this way, **environmental awareness** is woven through all my books.

2) **My start as a nature writer** has given me a huge **advantage** as a fantasy writer. That's because a nature writer must learn how to bring places to life – so fully that you really feel like you are there. And that's even more important for a fantasy writer, who must make imaginary places feel totally real, truly authentic, and fully alive.

3) My books about the young wizard Merlin – thirteen books in all, now translated into more than two dozen languages – are really an extended environmental parable. **Merlin** (much like the guy who wrote the books) **learns all his greatest lessons from nature.** His elemental magic comes from **listening to the language of rivers and trees, flying as a hawk, and running with the deer.** Here's an excerpt (from *Merlin Book 3: The Raging Fires*) when he becomes a stag: **"Somehow, in a mysterious way, I was listening not just to sounds, but to the land itself. I could hear, not with my ears but with my bones, the tensing and flexing of the earth under my hooves, the changing flow of the wind, the secret connections among all the creatures who shared these meadows – whether they crawled, slithered, flew, or ran. Not only did I hear them; I celebrated them, for we were bound together as securely as a blade of grass is bound to the soil."**

4) Another example: ***The Ancient One*.** This is the tale of a young woman named Kate who tries to save a great redwood tree from loggers – and who discovers that this ancient tree holds the answer to a riddle about what really happened to a lost tribe of Native Americans who vanished centuries before. Helped by the tree, Kate travels back in time and learns a lot from those people. And she also learns from the tree itself, whose very breath is a revelation: **"As she listened ... she heard a rushing, coursing sound, like the surging of several rivers. She realized that it must be the sound of resins moving through the trunk and limbs of the tree. And, strangely, through her own self as well ... Back and forth, in and out, always changing, always the same. This was the sound, Kate realized at last, of the tree itself breathing. The sound of life being exchanged for life, breath for breath."**

## **Why do you love trees?**

Trees are a personal, primal memory from childhood. The cottonwood tree around our tree house is my favorite here at home.

One of my most favorite trees in the world (and I have many) is a **great redwood** in the Muir Woods near San Francisco. It's trunk opens up like a cavern. You can stand inside and if you sing, the echoing vibrations surround you as if you were standing under a bell. Being inside this tree, really, feels like a big hug. It made me wonder... What stories could this ancient tree tell, if only I could hear? And then I realized that this ancient tree must be a truly centered being, to sink its roots deeply in one place, connecting earth and sky. That experience **inspired my novel *The Ancient One***.

## Do you know from the beginning how a book will end?

Usually, yes. But I am often surprised. Sometimes I think the story is supposed to end in one way – but one of my characters tells me that's wrong, the ending should be different. In those cases, I always listen to the characters.

## When you write, do you have a special setting, special habits?

1) My writing room is my favorite place to create. It feels like a mix of **Merlin's Crystal Cave**; an **art gallery** (fan art from around the world); an outdoor **equipment center**; and, of course, a **Library**.

2) **Handwritten manuscripts**: Well, I still write all the first drafts of my books by hand. Yes, **even the big fat novels** like *The Great Tree of Avalon* trilogy **started out as handwritten scrawl on note pads**. I always write the first draft with a blue felt tip pen on pads of lined paper. Why in this modern age of high tech would anyone do that? Because **the chemistry works for me**. Maybe it brings me back to the creative mindset of my childhood when I was writing my very first stories and poems, leaning against an old apple tree. Sure, this system isn't the most efficient... but it's worked now for over 30 books, so I will probably stick with it. At least for my next 30 books.

3) This **might surprise you**, coming from someone who often writes about wildly imaginary characters and places – but **my best ideas come from real life**. From observing the world closely. If someone really pays attention, really notices, then their senses are more alive and their minds are full of ideas. That amounts to a whole lot of source material! **Just add a pinch of imagination... and anything, literally anything, is possible**.

4) 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 home in Colorado – though that is still my favorite place to work. I love to sit up there with a steaming hot mug of cinnamon tea.

## How do stories connect all people?

Stories can reach across all boundaries of geography, culture, language, religion, and even time. A true sort of magic! (For that reason, I always feel that writing is a humbling experience.)

## What do you wish for your readers around the world?

My deepest wish is that everyone who reads my books will feel **as much joy in the reading as I felt in the writing!**