

Taking Time for Wisdom

The Books of T. A. Barron

The award-winning fantasy author is powerfully motivated by the idea that one person can make a difference.

By Patricia Lee Gauch

Book Links
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As an editor and teacher of literature, I have always been intrigued by what a book reveals about the author and how the author looks at life. When searching for new questions to create a challenging final essay exam in my high-school English classes, I often asked, “What do you know about the author and how the author looks at life from his or her book? Read between the lines!”

The Butterfly Effect

The way T. A. (Tom) Barron looks at life is everywhere in his books, from his earliest Kate books to his Merlin and Avalon epics, and there is probably nothing more present, driving, and defining in his heroes than the “butterfly effect.” A philosophy first suggested in a Ray Bradbury short story in 1952 and picked up again by meteorologist Edward Lorenz, it posited that the single shudder of a

butterfly’s wings could change the course of weather in the world.

Barron powerfully extends that idea. In his earliest published novel, *Heartlight*, he creates a space-travel story where the naive young heroine, Kate, courageously flying on the wings of a beautiful blue morpho butterfly into space, discovers the very nature of matter. But it is the morpho butterfly itself that reflects Barron’s most basic value. Like the mere shudder of the wings of the morpho, Kate, a minor player on the world’s stage, by making the right decisions, by stepping up, can change the world. What an idea! An idea that, as Barron’s editor, I began to discover underlay the stories in all of his books, including the Merlin and Avalon epics.

Perhaps this is not surprising. Barron grew up on a ranch near Colorado Springs with three brothers and three sisters, and with a mother, Gloria, who spread her wings at an unlikely time of her life. The Barron ranch lay at the foothills of Pikes Peak, and Gloria Barron, having raised her seven children, grew intrigued with the hills—not just the living creatures but the very rocks and cliffs and stones. A graduate of Smith College as a young woman, at 57 she went back to school to study geology, hiking out daily to discover for herself connections between creatures of all kinds, even among the elements of the mountains themselves. Tom



Patricia Lee Gauch and T. A. Barron

recalled that she was so impassioned with her discoveries that he might come home from school to discover a geode on their kitchen table or the specimen of some discovered frog in their refrigerator.

Was this obsessed late starter a role model for Tom? His mother’s passions certainly became his: that this earth is good, its creatures large and small, even its very rocks and crystals; that there is a connection among all things, living and nonliving; and that perhaps because of these powerful connections, a single human being could matter—must matter—in preserving the preciousness of the earth. Nowhere are these ideas more present than in Barron’s second book, *The Ancient One*, still one of my all-time favorites of his.

The Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes

In 1999 T. A. Barron founded the Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes, which recognizes 25 diverse young people each year for their large and small heroisms. More information may be found on the author’s website at www.tabarron.com (click on the Young Heroes tab).



the family's Boulder home, and while introducing me to the family goat, she said, "My hobby is nature." All the Barrons have one foot in the world of house and school and town, and the other in the mountains, forests, trails, and lakes. It is not enough that Barron's Merlin understand his magic and his power; he needs to understand his relationship to the earth: to trees and streams and clouds and rocks. He must understand the interconnectedness of the animate and inanimate parts of his worlds. This, in order to make a difference.

From whatever sources, the young reader can see the weblike connections of Barron's stories. In some ways they are the clearest—perhaps the author himself is most certain—in the Great Tree of Avalon epic. Barron always laughs at himself about being a klutz, recalling the summer he spent in Japan laying roof tiles when he dropped one and nearly fell off the roof, creating a domino mess, and realizing once again—Oxford or no Oxford, Princeton or no Princeton—that he was a half-baked and terribly vulnerable human being. In the Great Tree series, Barron fictionalizes this very incident, giving it to his unlikely hero, Tamwyn. A young trail guide, common in every way, a bit clumsy, certainly naive, Tamwyn stumbles across Avalon, originally meant to have been a perfect, harmonious world, when the very stars above begin to vanish, threatening its destruction. With the courageous eagleman Scree and spirited Ellie, a young priestess, this seemingly simple man decides for Avalon, courageously journeying alone to the highest limbs to finally reach the stars for the ultimate battle with the villain Rhita Gawr. Again, the butterfly effect.

Real-life Heroes

Immersed in creating more perfect fantasy worlds, Barron began to take his philosophies out of his fiction and into the world. Had Gloria Barron, who died in 2005, handed a baton to Tom? Had her very life asked, Is there

more that we human beings can do? Sitting one day in his second-floor study that looks for all the world like a treehouse, Barron became Merlinesque, suddenly wanting young people everywhere to know that the real hero is not the giant who stalks the mountains, though he might be; not the eagle man who can fly into portals, or wizards who have magic, though both might be; but the ordinary, common human being who, like the tiny and fragile butterfly, making the slightest shudder of its wings, decides to act.

Barron began to collect real-life stories of young heroes who, in their spontaneous courage or thoughtful decisions, have made a difference. The stories became a book called *The Hero's Trail*. Barron's values are clear: a true hero is you, reader. Powerful if you recognize it, if you believe it. In the book he writes, "Just one act of kindness or generosity or courage can make a huge impact—on thousands of people nearby, or on one person thousands of miles away."

Barron's epics turn out to be an invitation, not merely to rich and surprising adventure in worlds full of fantastical creatures and places, but to readers themselves. How much can readers discover about an author from his or her books? Much. But perhaps more important: From reading a book, how much can readers find out about themselves? Perhaps that would be the best essay question of all, any time of the year.