

T.A. Barron Finds Merlin's Lost Years

Interview by Therese Littleton
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For more than 15 centuries, writers have told stories about the powerful wizard Merlin as an old man, but T.A. Barron wanted to explore how Merlin grew to be the white-bearded mentor of King Arthur. In his Lost Years of Merlin series, Barron follows the young boy from Wales as he travels through time and space, fights dragons and demons, and learns about his own strength and spirit. Barron has been praised by Madeleine L'Engle and Lloyd Alexander. His books are great fun to read, but also carry messages of hope and joy. Barron chatted with us about how he came to tell Merlin's boyhood story.

Littleton: Why write about the young Merlin?

Barron: I had a very difficult problem with Merlin, because I knew his voice so well as an elderly man. It was scary to try and hear him as a young man, because everybody out there would have this reference to all the others who had written Merlin stories. In researching, I couldn't believe how little there was, both in modern tales and ancient Celtic tales, about the young Merlin. T.H. White did the masterful, virtuoso job of bringing that elder Merlin to life in *The Once and Future King*, but he heads up a long line of authors that includes everyone from Shakespeare, to John Steinbeck, to Geoffrey of Monmouth, to any number of wonderful written treatments of Merlin across the last 1500 years. Virtually none of them talk about Merlin after infancy. There were a few little Celtic tales of this precocious one-year-old who speaks fluently and persuasively in defense of his mother, who is being tried as a witch. But then he totally drops out of sight until he's already a man who has the ability to prophesy. He's already a young wizard. In between lies this gap, this hole.

Littleton: What is it about Merlin that fascinates us?

Barron: Merlin has incredible depth, and the reason he endures is because he speaks to so many of our basic problems and struggles. Three of Merlin's greatest qualities continue to draw this continuing interest. The first is his ability to learn from nature. Nature really is the womb from which we all spring, and our greatest teacher. That's why I have all of Merlin's initial lessons and struggles in *The Lost Years of Merlin* come through nature. Let me give you one quick example: for Merlin to grow from that nameless, half-drowned boy who washes ashore in the first pages, into a young man who is ready to walk right into the legend of Camelot, he has to learn several things along the way. He has to learn about love, grief, his ability to transform himself, and humility. In all of those things, nature plays a crucial role. In the beginning of *The Lost Years of Merlin*, Merlin is at the lowest point of his life that he can remember. He hates this little village in Wales where he lives, he's picked on, he's bullied, the woman who claims to be his mother is someone he can't trust and doesn't feel close to, and at the same time he's yearning for some sort of connection with a family and an identity. One day he's pursued by a bully who literally wants to kill him. He runs breathlessly into the forest, and just in

time, climbs an old pine tree to escape. Then comes a storm so violent that it shakes the tree around, and he's barely able to hold on—he's pelted by hail and rain, but he survives the storm. When the storm ends, the weather has changed from violent to serene and tranquil and beautiful. Mist is rising from every glade, and the forest around him smells incredibly fresh, almost like it has been newly born. In that miraculous moment he knows that if nature can change with that kind of swiftness and power, then maybe he also has the capacity to change and transform himself in the same way. In that moment, he feels just like the forest—newly born himself. It's the first moment of taking a step toward wizardry, when he realizes he has the power to transform his own life. The second of three things that makes Merlin special is his ability to cross boundaries. He is a bridge builder. In 5th and 6th century Britain, society was falling apart. The Roman Empire had crumbled, mercenaries were wiping out villages overnight, the plague rolled through Britain three times, there were all kinds of disasters, mutual hatred, invasions. It was a horribly dangerous and strife-ridden time. At the core of everything was the antagonism between this emerging faith called Christianity and the ancient faith of the druids, who were being driven out into the forests and hinterlands. In the midst of that, a story emerged about a druid master named Merlin who would step across that line and become the mentor to a Christian king named Arthur, who was trying to unify all peoples of all kinds and build a society where everyone would be safe and respected. Merlin's strength comes from his ability to stand very tall and say we are all much more connected than we think. He's a character who stands for universality. The third point is Merlin's ability to combine both a dark side and a light side in his wisdom. That's very important, because so many prophets and heroes in literature seem to be purely good or purely wise, and they know everything and they're flawless, and Merlin is definitely not that way. He is wise mainly because of his vulnerability and his insecurity and his knowledge of human frailties, as well as human possibility.

Littleton: Your Merlin stories are filled with a natural exuberance and spirit reminiscent of *The Once and Future King*. How much did T.H. White influence you? How about other fantasy writers like Lloyd Alexander or Madeleine L'Engle?

Barron: You just paid me the highest compliment you could. I think they are among our greatest storytellers ever, and they dramatically influenced me. I would add J.R.R. Tolkien to that list. No one has ever done a better job of bringing the Camelot legend to life than T.H. White, mainly because he understood the importance of character...making characters come so alive that they stand up and walk off the page. His version of the elder Merlin is very influential in my sense of how Merlin himself embraces a combination of wisdom and an ability to cross boundaries. I think of a legend as a tapestry. In this case, the tapestry of Merlin's tales, which is as rich and luminous and vibrant as any tapestry that's ever been woven, has a giant hole in it. The crucial, formative time when this young man would have found out he had particular powers, when he would have learned his greatest lessons from nature. So I wanted to weave a few threads that I hope are as luminous as the surrounding tapestry into that hole. And make sure that they fit just perfectly.

Littleton: What's next for Merlin?

Barron: One more book will complete this five-book epic about his lost years. It will come out in the fall of 2000, and it will be called *The Wings of Merlin*. In that book, Merlin is going to take his greatest stride spiritually, as well as do something incredibly difficult to save his homeland of Fincayra. In the process, he's going to somehow have to accept his destiny and walk into the future, even if it means saying goodbye to the people and place he loves the most. What it is that makes him ready to do that, I won't say, because it would spoil the story—but have your handkerchiefs ready for the last scene! When it's done, the five books will take him from that moment he washes ashore in *The Lost Years of Merlin*, that boy who can't remember his own name, let alone have any idea of this glorious future that awaits him, to the moment where he knows just what's in store for him and is ready and wise enough to walk into that central role in legend.