

Teaching the Difference Between Celebrities and Heroes

Chicago Parent
March, 1999

T.A. Barron grew up on a ranch in Colorado, attended Princeton University, was a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford and became president of a venture capital firm. But his first love was writing, and in 1989 he left his business interests, returned to Colorado and began writing novels about young heroes coming of age. His latest book, *The Fires of Merlin*, is the third in a five-book epic about the famous wizard's childhood. When we interviewed him, he had just wrapped up his fourth *Merlin* novel.

Barron, who lives with his wife and five children on a farm outside Boulder, Colorado, has also published several nature books. He can be reached at his website: www.tabarron.com.

Why is Merlin a good model for a modern hero?

A hero is very different from a celebrity. A hero is someone who has to overcome tremendous odds and difficulties and has to reach down inside himself or herself and find the inner strength to do that—which is exactly what Merlin does in *The Lost Years of Merlin* epic I'm writing.

In my books, he's far from that all-powerful wizard. He's a boy who has enormous struggles to learn the basic lessons of wisdom, truth, humility, power and love. Merlin's journey is a metaphor for the hero that's in every one of us.

In other words, the heroic struggle is internal as much as external?

Often even more so. Overcoming fears and doubts and weaknesses is often the hardest part of what a hero has to do.

Modern society seems to be doing a very good job of confusing heroes and celebrities. What is the difference?

A celebrity is someone who is merely famous and whose name or face is well known. Frankly, I don't think that's any big deal. There are a lot of ways to get famous and many of them say absolutely nothing about a person's inner character or wisdom or ability to make a difference to the world.

The people I admire are people like Abraham Lincoln, Helen Keller, Eleanor Roosevelt, Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Thomas Edison, Harriet Tubman, who rescued so many slaves. Those people really made a lasting difference in other people's lives. But they only did it because they first overcame the deep obstacles they had in themselves. Just the fact that somebody's name is in lights or they get paid a lot of money doesn't

mean anything to me. A hero does something to give back to society. That's really important.

I'm often stunned by how kids can be numbed by our media and by the messages that come from Madison Avenue. But every time [I visit a school], I meet some kids who inspire me completely. They have passion, energy, the drive to make the world a better place. You can tell they have the stuff that makes heroes. If kids are given a chance, they have an incredible ability to rise to very high levels.

It's interesting that your first heroic character was a girl.

It was a stretch for a 40-something man to make a 12-year old girl really feel alive and true and believable. But I ended up writing three books about her because she came so alive for me that I didn't want to let her go. I wanted to find out what happened to her next. It's extremely important that girls have strong role models, and Kate is a very heroic girl.

The media typically doesn't cover heroes; they cover celebrities. So how do kids find out about the heroes of their era?

There are lots of unsung heroes in our society right now. There are lots of hardworking parents. There are lots of teachers I would consider heroes. There are charitable groups—environmental or educational—and I see lots of heroes in those groups. They're getting paid very little. They're out there either trying to save the planet from getting devoured or destroyed, or they're worried about the hearts and minds of our young kids, and really throwing themselves into the task. The fortunate kids meet those people in real life.

Sometimes we have people who really do become celebrities and are heroes, too. I actually think Michael Jordan is a combination of both. I have a lot of admiration for him as a person.

Do we need a new kind of hero for the new millennium?

I think we do. We need heroes who have a sense of both masculine and feminine wisdom. That's part of what I've learned in the process of writing about so many strong female characters and sensitive male characters. We also need heroes who really appreciate nature and the beauty and fragility of planet earth. Merlin signifies this because he learns his greatest lessons from nature—the lesson of his own powers of renewal. Whether it's lessons about love or grief or power or connectedness or humility, Merlin learns it from nature.

Your novels have been described as "coming of age" books. What does "coming of age" mean to you?

Discovering the wisdom and magic that we have down inside of ourselves, that's what it's about. I think I will always write about young protagonists because they're still full of wonder and freshness and questions and yet haven't quite discovered the wisdom and magic inside of themselves. As they discover that, it's very exciting.

How is the sword in the stone a metaphor for coming of age?

It is an incredibly powerful metaphor. King Arthur had, all the time, the wisdom and power within himself to pull that sword out of the stone. He had to discover it for himself. That's what Merlin helped him realize. It was Arthur's own gifts that allowed him to triumph against all odds. But Arthur had to grow to a certain level of believing in himself before he could do that. I just wrote an article for Parents magazine on what modern-day parents can learn from the way Merlin raised King Arthur. I believe in the power of that metaphor.

So parents shouldn't be afraid to talk to their kids about heroes?

It's not just "should we;" it's essential because kids need role models. Kids need to know the importance of what one person can do to make a difference. I'll put it even stronger than that: When you expose your kids to heroes, you're not just teaching them about another life that made a difference. You're teaching them that your kids themselves can make a difference. That's incredibly important.