

NPR Living on Earth Interview

Interview by Steve Curwood

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Curwood: It's Living on Earth. I'm Steve Curwood. Books on the environment may not be on the top of kids' reading lists these days, but to read one of T.A. Barron's books, you might wonder why not. His fantasy novels, set in the mythical time of Merlin, are packed with dragon fights and wizard riddles and epic battles against evil. And readers might get so caught up in the action that they might not notice they're also taking in some deep lessons on nature and ecology.

T.A. Barron, or Tom, as he's known to his family and friends, joins me to talk about the latest of his ten novels: *The Great Tree of Avalon: Child of the Dark Prophecy*. It's the first book of a new trilogy. Tom, welcome to Living on Earth.

Barron: Thank you, Steve.

Curwood: Now, your books are geared towards young people, I think it's fair to say. And much of your work outside of writing also involves young people.

Barron: Young people of all ages.

Curwood: Of all ages, okay, and we'll get to all that in a minute. But first, I want to get an idea of what you were like as a kid yourself. Think you were any different from kids today?

Barron: (Laughs) Well I can't say whether I was different from kids today, but I can say that I was different from a lot of the kids around me. And lucky enough, for starters, to grow up in two wonderful places: one was a little apple orchard home in New England where we could still find Indian arrowheads. And then, when I was about ten, we moved out to Colorado and my parents bought a ranch, a quarter-horse ranch under the shadow of Pike's Peak and great big blue skies so wide that made me feel like anything was possible. And with the sense of all that I grew up really feeling like nature was a friend. It wasn't just a setting, it was a friend. So, when we would find old pieces of petrified wood on the ranch and my mother, who was a part-time geologist, would explain "this is more than 50 million years old, little ones." You know, a sense of geologic time began to permeate my consciousness and gave me an awareness that human life is wonderful, but it's only a small part of the grander wonder of all this creation. And it's not just vast in terms of space but, also, time.

Curwood: Now, you say that you don't know about kids of today being different from, but you felt somewhat different from your peers. Why?

Barron: Well, for starters, I always enjoyed being close to the woods and outside. You know, I still enjoyed a lot of things that kids would enjoy, sports and the rest. But there was a special friendship out there that I had in that quiet place which gave me kind of a grounding that is especially important today. What I'm saying was that a lot of the kids I was around, a lot of the kids in my public high school just didn't have any kind of a sense of wild places, open spaces, around them at all. That you know, if you were to ask them where the water came from in their house, they would say from the faucet. Or what does it feel like to walk barefoot among pine needles? They wouldn't know. And I suppose that is worse today. And I fear for those people, I fear for our planet, because there are so many people who don't have the opportunity or the exposure to those kind of experiences.

Curwood: So, let's see, here you are growing up in New England, and then in Colorado, one of six children—

Barron: One of seven. Although my parents did lose count every so often, thought it was six or eight. But usually it was seven.

Curwood: (Laughs) Now, with six brothers and sisters, I'm sure that you had your individual personalities. And I want to ask you if any of these personalities, or pieces of them, show up in your writing now? Because you got some pretty strong—in fact, I'd say downright stubborn—folks in your books.

Barron: (Laughs) No doubt. You know, I think I have to tell you, I have one character who's absolutely, no question about it, tied to my brother, Jim, who was the first guy to lead me up a mountain. Jim is a wonderful man and yet words don't always come out they should, and he gave me a very clear idea of how one character could talk. And he's actually, as it turns out, a lot of kids' favorite character in *The Lost Years of Merlin* books.

Curwood: Just how does he speak?

Barron: (Laughs) Well, he says everything in triplet, for one thing. He says “certainly, definitely, absolutely.” Or he will add –ly to the strangest words. So he'll say “maybely I'll do that.” But that's something that Jim sometimes falls into. And it gave me a great idea for how Shim should speak.

Curwood: Let's talk now about your latest book, *The Great Tree of Avalon: Child of the Dark Prophecy*. It's a great fantasy mythological tale. It's set in the time of Merlin, and there are elves and dwarves and a dragon or two. And it all centers around one 17-year-old named Tamwyn. Could you introduce us please to Tamwyn?

Barron: I'd be delighted. Tamwyn is a wandering wilderness guide. He's 17 years old. He has no real sense of himself other than that he's searching for his lost brother; he has no family that he remembers. He has a great kind of mysterious cloud about his future. And he would be the last person ever to describe himself as a hero. He's bumbling and clumsy. He falls off of roofs when he's thatching them. Yet he has somehow managed to

pick up a lot of wisdom from nature in all those years as a wilderness guide—wisdom that serves him well when he has to really be put to the test in *The Great Tree of Avalon*.

Curwood: Now, Tom, throughout this book there's this constant presence of nature—either in its full glory or in decimation. There's this world of Merlin which is flowering, and healthy, and is a natural place. Then there's this darker encroaching world where they're clear-cut trees and things sort of smoldering and smoking, and drought, and where animals are made slaves, and such. Can you talk to me a bit about this dichotomy in the world that you've created here in Avalon?

Barron: The Avalon of *The Great Tree of Avalon* is really very much a parable for our modern day world. I want you to imagine a world that for more than a thousand years has been the last place and time where all creatures of all kinds, all descriptions—some that live only as long as a heartbeat, and some that have been alive for more than that thousand years—all of them living together in the weave of this wonderful luminous tapestry of Avalon. And then, suddenly, a few of the threads begin to come apart. And that's because of a few ideas that have to do with humanity's superiority, that have to do with greed, that have to do with arrogance. And I don't think we have to look very far to see those things in our world, and what it can do to pull apart the weave of our own wondrous fragile planet.

There's no accident, Steve, that *The Great Tree of Avalon* is dedicated to Mother Earth—beleaguered and yet still bountiful, as I said in the dedication page. Because I want this book, with all of its adventure, and all of its emotion and romance and fun and humor and great old page-turning experience for the reader—I want it also to have some ideas underneath. Because nature has always been the greatest teacher for me, nature is often a great teacher for my characters.

After all, in *The Lost Years of Merlin* books, it's a storm that teaches Merlin that he has hope to change his own life. When he sees the power of transformation of a storm, where he's nearly killed by this terrible storm, and then suddenly it turns into a tranquil and serene forest all around him, where mist is rising everywhere and the smells are fresh and water runs down each tree. Then he realizes, well, maybe I have a chance to transform my own life. And that's his beginning, that's his way to becoming a wizard, ultimately. The same is true of Tamwyn: it's when he runs like a deer that he realizes he may have the power inside to do much more than he did before. And I think in the end, if Avalon survives—and I'm not gonna say how it's gonna end—but in the third book of *The Great Tree of Avalon* you'll see, ultimately, whether three young people with a shred of hope and a lot of wisdom from nature, can ultimately save this world from all those forces of greed and avarice that want to pull it apart.

Curwood: So, along with writing your novels you've also set up a “Young Heroes” prize, which is in honor of your mother.

Barron: Right, right. It's the Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes. This is a prize, first off, that's all about one thing—and that is to turn the spotlight on remarkable young

people, period. It's kids who have stepped out and done something truly heroic. Who understand right from the cellular level what the difference is between a hero and a celebrity—something we're massively confused about in our culture—and who go out and just try to make the world better somehow. More than half these kids every year have done something for the environment. Others have done things directly for their community. But, in every case, they've shown the kind of courage and perseverance, compassion, humor, that is really inspiring.

Curwood: You must come across some pretty interesting youth in the process of awarding this prize. Can you tell me a couple stories about some?

Barron: Amazing kids. Amazing kids. Let me tell you a couple of stories. There's Barbara Brown, a girl who grew up in West Texas. She's black. She has a rural home in a place where recycling crude oil is not exactly the first thing on everybody's priority list. She decided that it was really wasteful the way her parents and the neighboring ranchers would take oil that they hadn't used and were ready to change out, and dump it on the ground. And she was worried what was going to happen to the water table, as well as about the waste. So she organized a recycling program in her county and called it "Don't Be Crude." And she has spread that idea now over, I think it's, nine or ten different counties in West Texas.

There's another story about a boy from Ontario who was so upset—his name is Ryan. He was so upset when his first grade teacher told him that kids were dying in Africa from bad drinking water that he spent his whole summer trying to earn the \$200 that he was told it would take to buy a drinking well. And then when he brought it in to the local relief agency in Ontario they said "sorry kid, your numbers are wrong; it's actually \$2,000." So this guy is seven years old, but instead of giving up he just went right back to work. He started cleaning windows, and doing all kinds of things, and he raised the money. And then, as it's turned out, he's now raised the money for, I think, 11 or 12 free wells that are for communities in Uganda and other places. And it's a great thing to see.

Now, another example is a lovely young woman named Ellie Wen who just won the Barron Prize this year. She's in San Francisco, and she was struck by how many kids who had English as a second language were really struggling. And to make it fun for them, but to also give them a sense that they could learn anything, she organized a troop of volunteers—who are now in the hundreds—who read poems and stories. And everything from Doonesbury comics to acts from Shakespeare's plays and tape them as audio books, and give young people a way—through their computer, or through a tape or a CD—they can hear the language that they're learning. And also experience the fun of it.

So those are three examples, and there are so many more.

Curwood: What if the winners of the Barron Prize have shown up as characters, or maybe a piece of a character, in your writings?

Barron: (Laughs) Oh, I can't think of any specific examples, but I can say that the mood of hope and inspiration that they give me definitely comes through in my books. As dark as the days get—and I think we're in a dark time now in our society and in our planet—those young people really give me hope in a way that I haven't found anywhere else, other than those moments of brightness that come from my own children. It's a really striking thing to find young people out there determined to try to make a difference in a way, even if it's not marked and not widely known, but who truly have that staying power to do it. And that's why even, I think, with all the struggles that I have in all my books, that the young heroes—whatever their name, whether it's Merlin or Kate or Anna—whatever their name, those kids have to go through misery, often, and great loss, before ultimately they come to that point of triumph. But they, in the end, always have a sense of hope. And I think it's important for readers today to have that, whatever our age.

Curwood: T. A. Barron is the author of ten novels, including the epic *The Lost Years of Merlin*, and the new trilogy, which begins with *The Great Tree of Avalon: Child of the Dark Prophecy*. Tom, thanks so much for taking this time with me today.

Barron: Thank you so much, Steve.