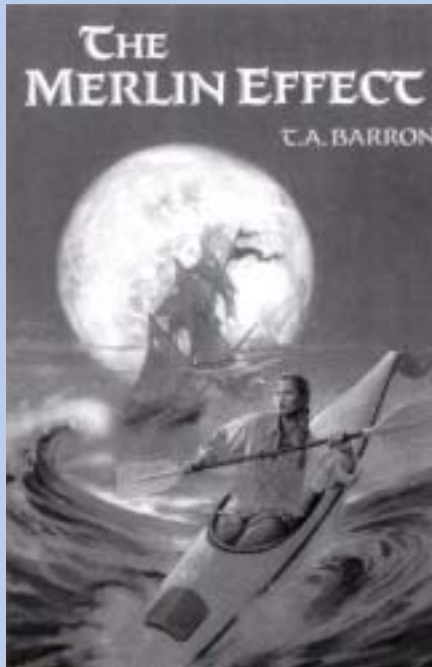


# Connections

with  
**T.A. Barron**

A TEACHER'S GUIDE  
*to*  
**THE MERLIN EFFECT**  
*by T. A. Barron*

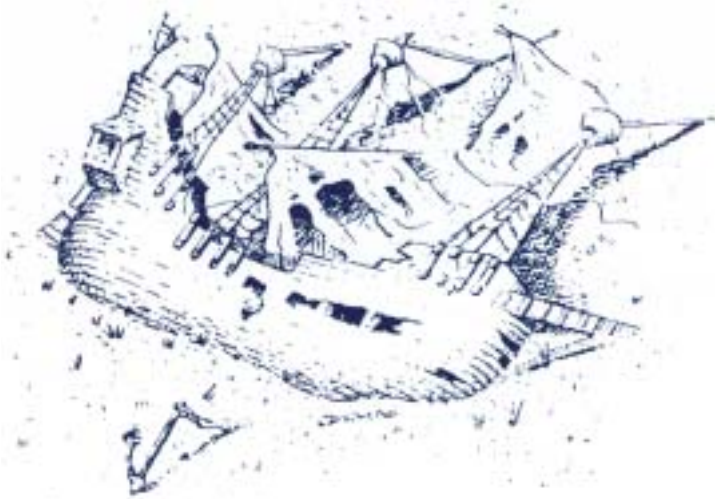


"While writing this book, I was excited—and humbled—by the challenge of adding a new chapter to the legend of Merlin. He is already such a well-known and well-loved



My task was to discover a completely new facet while remaining true to the original legend.  
Not easy ...but deeply rewarding."  
- **T. A. Barron**

# THE MERLIN EFFECT



**T**HE MERLIN EFFECT opens with Kate Gordon paddling her kayak just a little bit too far into the Pacific Ocean off Baja California. She is deeply worried about her relationship with her father—but soon has much more to worry about. Caught in a mysterious whirlpool, she finds herself plunged into a centuries-old mystery involving a sunken Spanish galleon bearing heaps of treasure (as well as the prophesy that the ship itself may one day rise out of the waves and sail again), a group of ever-singing whales, a touch of genetic theory, a magical drinking horn lost in the days of King Arthur, and the wizard Merlin himself.

## Connecting with the meaning

**NOTE:** In discussing these issues with students, responses could take many forms other than a large group discussion. Activities such as small group discussions, panel debates, persuasive speeches, and role playing should be encouraged.

1. Prior to reading *The Merlin Effect*, ask students to discuss which of the following is the most important to them:

- The opportunity to make choices
- The need to "see" in order to "believe"
- The need to achieve perfection
- The importance of power

After finishing the book, revisit these statements with students to see if their opinions have changed.

2. In writing *The Merlin Effect*, Barron adds a new chapter to the rich lore that surrounds Merlin.

In the book, he uses names and locations that can point readers to further information about Merlin and King Arthur. Put students into groups and have each group research one of the following names. Then let them report what they found and explain how this name appears in the book.

- Geoffrey of Monmouth
  - Isle of Bardsey
  - Emrys
  - Thirteen treasures of the Island of Britain
  - Garlon
  - Glastonbury
  - Nimue
  - Merlin
3. Remind students that one aspect of good fantasy is that the story is grounded in reality, moves to fantasy, and then returns to reality. Ask students to discuss how this progression is shown in this book. Why does this progression create a more believable fantasy?
4. In Chapter VIII, Kate suggests calling Isabella's theory about the aging process the Merlin Effect. While this explains one meaning of the book's title, ask students if there are other meanings. What is Merlin's effect on Kate at the beginning and end of the book? What is Merlin's effect on Jim, Terry, and Isabella? Is Merlin's effect positive or negative? How does Merlin affect unseen characters such as Kate's mother?
5. Merlin's Horn is the thirteenth treasure. Thirteen has long been believed to be an unlucky number. Have students debate whether or not this magical horn is lucky or unlucky. Does it create or destroy?
6. Ask students to reread the description of the twelve treasures Emrys created (see chapter IV). Then ask students if they could create twelve "perfect" treasures what would they be? What do Emrys' treasures tell readers about Emrys? What do the students' treasures tell students about themselves?

## Connecting with literary elements

1. Which pair of characters show the most, similarity? The least?

- Kate and Merlin
- Merlin and Emrys
- Emrys and Jim
- Jim and Terry
- Terry and Kate

2. Present students with the following scenarios:

- a. Terry saves Kate from falling overboard.
- b. Jim and Isabella do not go underwater in the submersible.
- c. Kate chooses to drink from the magical horn.
- d. Terry does not follow Kate through the whirlpool to the Glass House.
- e. Terry and Isabella are not in this book.

Next, have students rate the scenarios from the one that least affects the plot and theme of the book to the one that most affects the book.

3. Remind students that setting can help reveal a story's theme. The majority of the action in *The Merlin Effect* takes place underwater, blending ancient and modern time. Question students as to why the ocean is such a good setting for this story. Would a setting in a mountain cave have been as effective?

4. Conflict is essential to any story. Furthermore, in fantasy, an obvious conflict is often a disguise for deeper, more important conflicts. Ask students to identify the obvious conflict and the other conflicts to which that one points. How do these conflicts provide for motivation and growth of the characters?

5. Put students into groups and have them skim the novel looking for Barron's use of foreshadowing. If students need some examples, point them to Chapter VII where Kate says "I suppose sometimes I've thought about creating something" or to Chapter XIX where Kate feels as if Geoffrey reminds her of someone "she had known in a story." After students have found other examples of foreshadowing, ask how foreshadowing lends to the credibility of the characters and events. Why is this critical for fantasy?

6. In her book *Thursday's Child*, Sheila Egoff defines fantasy as "a literature of paradox. It is the discovery of the real within the unreal, the credible within the incredible, the believable within the unbelievable." What are the real, the credible, the believable elements in *The Merlin Effect*? Terry has a difficult time finding the real within the unreal. Why is Term's skepticism important in this fantasy?

7. Barron uses symbols throughout this book to create various levels of meaning. Ask students to explain how the following are used in the book and

to discuss what each symbolizes:

- a. The ship's name Resurrección.
- b. The ring in Kate's nose when she is a fish
- c. The spiral
- d. Cold and warmth
- e. Light and dark

8. Throughout this novel, all the characters must make choices. Let students discuss the choices that Kate, Merlin, and Terry make throughout this book. When do characters make poor choices and bad choices? When is choice denied? Do any of the characters make bad choices for the right reasons? Is it possible to make right choices for the wrong reasons? Ask students to consider why Merlin's Horn is so connected with choice. What is Barron saying about the importance of choice?

9. Point out to students that, Barron uses a recurring image of sight. For instance, in chapter II, titled "Darkness," Kate encounters the whale and is drawn to his eyes: "For a long moment, they held each other's gaze." Then in Chapter XIV, Nimue appears but, in the place of eyes are "two holes, vacant as the void." Later in Chapter XXVII, the ruby ring flashes "blinding" Kate. But Kate rights to "see with her own eyes." Merlin points the "sword of light" at Nimue to destroy her. Share these examples with students and let them find other passages that use the image of sight. Ask why Barron uses this image. Why is it important, that the sword be called the sword of light? Ask students to explain how "seeing" is connected to "choosing."

10. Ask students to defend or refute the following statement: Kate thinks power is important. Make sure students consider the various ways power is presented in this book: the power of research over Jim, the power of the ruby ring, Nimue's power over Kate and Garlon, the horn's power over Merlin, the power of the whirlpool, the power of the ocean, the power of free will. If students do not agree with the above statement, what statement, do they think Kate would make about power?

11. In Chapter VII, Kate tells Isabella that she would enjoy "creating something." By the end of the book, she holds the Horn and, with it, the power to create. Yet she returns the Horn to the ocean. Have students talk about this choice. What has Kate decided about creation? At the end of the book, has she accomplished her goal of "creating something?"

12. Have students discuss how choice, power, and creation affect Merlin, Kate, Nimue, and Terry. Do these three words mean the same to each character? Is this book more about the power of choice or the power of creation? Are the two powers somehow related?

### Connecting with composition

1. To help create the mood of an Arthurian legend, Barron surrounds the whirlpool with a mist, much like the mist that surrounds Avalon. To make more emphatic the Resurrección's rise, he begins the book in San Lazaro Lagoon, a play on the name Lazarus, a character from the Bible who rises from the dead. Discuss with students how these analogies add a layer of meaning for discerning readers. Have students create settings using analogies to create deeper meaning.

2. Show students that Barron uses language to highlight the gap in time that Geoffrey faces when he meets Kate. Kate's expressions or "pulling my leg," "it's a lot to swallow," "my dad's in the same boat," and her references to DNA, keep Geoffrey confused. Next, let some students survey senior citizens to compile a list of sayings that meant something else years ago. Have other students create a list of sayings that could mean something else in the future. Using these lists, ask students to create dialogue for people from different times using the sayings as the means for illustrating the time gap.

3. In meeting Merlin, Kate has become a part of the legends surrounding him, the Morn, and the search for the Horn. Put students into groups and have them write a ballad that might be sung in centuries to come about Kate and Merlin's Horn.

4. While this story answers many questions about Merlin's Horn, it also leaves readers asking new questions: Is Terry dead? What will Jim and Isabella tell Terry's family? Will something happen to cause Kate to regret what she did with Merlin's Horn? Have students choose one of these questions or one of their own and write another chapter that provides the answer.

### Connecting with T. A. Barron

"Writing is the hardest, and most joyous, labor I know. While writing *The Merlin Effect*, it was no small challenge for me to make each of the elements of this book come alive—and feel truly

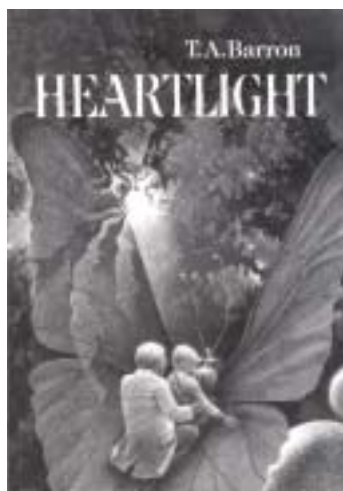
connected to each other. This meant learning about the legend of Merlin, Spanish galleons of the 16th century, the physics of whirlpools, and—best of all—the gray whales. Not to mention the motions and sounds of waves, the rhythms of tide pools, the screeching of gulls.

"As I write, my characters come alive for me. And often, as the story unfolds, my characters tell me to turn right when I had expected they would turn left. In such cases, I always listen to my characters. Then I rewrite, rewrite, and rewrite, researching whatever is required. In the end, the journey has included several surprises and experiences I would not have predicted. But each surprise adds depth and credibility to the underlying issues I am addressing. The chance to wrestle with such issues is a large part of the joy and struggle of writing."

### Other Books in this series

**Heartlight**, Tor Books (paperback) 1995; Putnam (hardcover) 1990

**The Ancient One**, Tor Books (paperback) 1994; Putnam (hardcover) 1992



Study guides for these books are also available.

### Other Fantasy Novels by T.A. Barron

**The Lost Years of Merlin**, Putnam (hardcover) 1996

*In this book, T.A. Barron explores an entirely new facet of the legend of Merlin.*

Study guides for T. A. Barron's books were written by Dr. Kyleen Beers. She teaches children's and young Adult literature at, Sam Houston State University in Texas.