



THE LOST YEARS OF MERLIN EPIC

by T. A. Barron

A Reader's Companion

by Sally Estes (Former Editor, Books for Youth, Booklist)

Introduction

Do you ever wonder just who you are, or who you could become in the future? What kind of experiences do you think would help you as you are growing up? The young Merlin faces these very questions in his search for his true identity and the secret of his powers. In reading about Merlin, author T. A. Barron noticed that little had been written about Merlin's youth and started wondering what challenges Merlin had faced in his search for his identity. What was Merlin like as a boy? Where did he come from? Like everyone, Merlin has to learn who he is and who he could become. He confronts his deepest dreams, his darkest fears, and his greatest lessons about life. The deeper Barron got into the story, the more Merlin himself seemed to take over the telling.

The journey begins in **The Lost Years of Merlin** when a young boy washes ashore on the coast of ancient Wales. He has no memory—not even his own name. For five years he lives in a small village, with a woman who claims to be his mother. By age 12, Emrys, as he is known, has seen the awakening of his powers and gained his second sight, though he loses much at the same time. In search of his identity, he builds a raft and makes his way to the mythic isle of Fincayra. He finds that he must save his the island from a terrible blight to answer his questions. At last, he learns he is Merlin, destined to be the greatest wizard of all time.

The saga continues in **The Seven Songs of Merlin** in which Merlin finally encounters his mother and discovers the dark side of his powers. Danger still stalks Fincayra, and Merlin's mother is the first victim. The only way to save her is for Merlin to master an ancient riddle called the Seven Songs of Wisdom, which will enable him to enter the Otherworld and find the elixir

his mother needs. Even more difficult, Merlin must discover the secret of seeing not with his eyes, but with his heart.

In **The Fires of Merlin** the boy encounters fire in the various forms, most particularly in the form of the ancient dragon Valdearg, who is awakened and threatens to wreak havoc on all of Fincayra. Only the uncertain, insecure Merlin, whose magic powers are untested, has a chance to stop the dragon, though his efforts could cost him his life. Merlin faces not only outward fires but also the awakening flames of passion within himself. And he finds that the power to heal is far greater than the power to destroy.

In **The Mirror of Merlin**, the young wizard gains a greater understanding of his powers and his essential humanity—as well as the great destiny that awaits him. In the Haunted Marsh, he encounters the witch Nimue, who tries to destroy him. He also discovers a magical mirror that can alter anyone's fate. But when he looks into it, he sees the person he least expected to find.

And, at last, we come to the **Wings of Merlin**. Merlin discovers new aspects of his own spirit and gains even more mastery over his powers. Everything comes to a head as Merlin finds himself in a desperate race to save his homeland, Fincayra, and all the people he loves, from destruction. The spirit lord Dagda summons Merlin to tell him that the world of Fincayra and the Otherworld will soon nearly touch. A doorway will open at the sacred circle of stones, and Rhita Gawr, the warlord of the spirit world, will invade with his deathless army. The only hope of repelling the evil forces is to assemble enough Fincayran creatures—humans, dwarves, marsh ghouls, talking trees, living stones, deer people, canyon eagles, merfolk, giants, and more. Only Merlin, who is known to all the races, can possibly rally them. Can it be done? How can Merlin cover enough territory to reach everyone? And more, how can he convince them all to join together, when all distrust one another? As Merlin and his closest companions race against time, new dangers emerge, including a masked warrior whose shoulders bear swords rather than arms. He is roaming the lands, attacking children to lure Merlin into a battle to the death. How can Merlin gather and hide all the children to protect them? The answer lies in solving the ancient mystery of the Fincayrans' lost wings, and in learning the true value of forgiveness. Can Merlin achieve all this and still make it to the circle of stones in time? In the surprising conclusion, Merlin must make the most difficult choice of his life.

About T. A. Barron

T. A. Barron, who lives with his wife and five children on a small farm in Colorado, spent much of his youth on a ranch outside of Colorado Springs. As a child he loved to hike and camp-and also to write. In elementary school, he wrote, illustrated, and printed his own magazine called **The Idiot's Odyssey**. He continued to write in college, founding two publications at Princeton-and was awarded the Pyne Prize, Princeton's highest honor to an undergraduate for outstanding service to the university. He went attended Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar and traveled widely-backpacking through parts of Asia and Africa.

He spent the following years in business, as president of a fast-growing venture capital firm in New York. Finally, in 1989, he surprised his business associates by resigning from the management in order to return to Colorado with his family to write books. Every one of Barron's novels-featuring heroic young people in a wide variety of settings and times-have been highly acclaimed. His books include **Heartlight**, **The Ancient One**, **The Merlin Effect**, and most recently, **The Lost Years of Merlin** and its sequels, **The Seven Songs of Merlin**, **The Fires of Merlin**, **The Mirror of Merlin** and **The Wings of Merlin**.

Barron is also an accomplished nature writer. He wrote the prose and poetry for two books with photography by John Fielder: **To Walk in Wilderness**, and also the award-winning coffee table book **Rocky Mountain National Park: A One Hundred Year Perspective**. In addition, he writes picture books for children. **Where is Grandpa?** is a loving tribute to his own father-and the wisdom of kids. He has also written **High as a Hawk**, the story of a brave young girl and a mountain guide on Colorado's Long's Peak.

Barron's favorite pastime is hiking with his wife, Currie, and their five kids, on the trails near their Colorado home. In addition, he often speaks to schools and conventions around the country, and also supports an array of environmental and educational causes. He continues to serve on several nonprofit organization boards. A former trustee of Princeton University, he helped to found the university's program in environmental studies. And he recently received The Wilderness Society's highest honor, the Robert Marshall Award, for his efforts to protect America's wilderness heritage.

Barron and his wife have also created the *Gloria Barron Young Heroes Prize*, to honor and inspire heroic young people.

Further Reading

Books by T. A. Barron:

The Lost Years of Merlin EPIC:

The Lost Years of Merlin

HC: 0-399-23018-1 \$19.99

ACE PB: 0-441-00668-X \$5.99

The Seven Songs of Merlin

HC: 0-399-23019-X \$19.99

ACE PB: 0-441-00701-5 \$5.99

The Fires of Merlin

HC: 0-399-23020-3 \$19.99

ACE PB: 0-441-00713-9 \$5.99

The Mirror of Merlin

HC: 0-399-23455-1 \$19.99

The Wings of Merlin

HC: 0-399-23456-X \$19.99

Other Novels:

Heartlight

HC: 0-399-22180-8 \$18.99

The Ancient One

HC: 0-399-21899-8 \$19.99

The Merlin Effect

HC: 0-399-22689-3 \$19.99

Picture Books:

Where is Grandpa?

illustrated by Chris K. Soentpiet

HC: 0-399-23037-8 \$15.99

Related Reading:

The Remarkable Journey of Prince Jen

by Lloyd Alexander

Dutton Children's Books, 1991

ISBN 0-525-44826-8

An intricate and intriguing tale, in which young prince Jen sets out on an arduous journey, full of danger and adventure, and learns to be a ruler and a man.

Fire Bringer

by David Clement-Davis

Dutton Children's Books, 2000

ISBN 0-525-46492-1

In the *Great Land*, which today is known as Scotland, a fawn named Rannoch is born, bearing on his brow the mark of a perfect oak leaf of the Herla Prophecy: "When the Lore is bruised and broken," such a deer will be born a healer and a king to lead his people to freedom. But, like Merlin, Rannoch must endure unspeakable danger and learn his inner self and his powers to complete the prophecy.

Parzival: The Quest of the Grail Knight

by Katherine Patterson

HC: Lodestar, 1998

ISBN 0-525-67579-5

PB: Puffin Books

ISBN 0-14-130573-8

This is the tale of Parzival, who goes to Arthur's court to become a knight but leaves to pursue his path of valor. He encounters the Angler (Fisher King) and dines in the presence of the Holy Grail. Although Parzival sees that the Angler is suffering some "great pain or sorrow," he hesitates to ask the cause. Dishonored because of this, Parzival is doomed to wander until he can undo the wrong.

I Am Mordred: A Tale of Camelot

by Nancy Springer

Philomel Book, 1998

ISBN 0-399-23143-9

The Arthurian arch villain Mordred, bastard son of King Arthur and his sister Morgause, tried to sort out his love/hate feelings for the father who tried to murder him as an infant. When he's 15, Mordred is sent to Camelot, where he meets his father, who refuses to acknowledge his son for the well being of the realm. Desperately wanting to avoid his destiny as Arthur's killer, Mordred embarks on a long and dangerous quest that does not stop his inexorable path to fulfilling his destiny.

I Am Morgan Le Fay: A Tale of Camelot

by Nancy Springer

Philomel Books, 2001

ISBN 0-339-23451-9

Fleeing for her life after her stepfather, the king, is killed, Morgan learns to treasure the power of sorcery, even at the expense of love. Nancy Springer continues to shed light on the dark side of Camelot in this follow-up to **I Am Mordred**.

Internet Sites of Interest:

The Worlds of T. A. Barron

www.tabarron.com

The official website for the author of the **Lost Years of Merlin** series.

King Arthur on Britannia

www.britannia.com/history/h12.html

Britannia, an online travel and tour guide to Great Britain and Ireland, offers comprehensive information on King Arthur and Merlin.

Locus Online

www.locusmag.com

The online version of the news and review magazine dedicated to science fiction, fantasy, and horror publishing.

An Interview With T. A. Barron

What first brought Merlin to your attention?

When I first read T. H. White's **Once and Future King**, I absolutely loved his characterization of Merlin, elder wizard and mentor of Arthur. I read it under an English oak tree on a farm outside Oxford, so the setting seemed very real. I even named the old oak "Merlin's tree." But I had no idea at all that I would, one day, have the chance to add a little bit to his legend.

Twenty years later, when writing a novel **The Merlin Effect** that required some research into Arthurian lore, I realized how little had been written about Merlin as a youth, except for occasional references in the Welsh Mabinogian and a few modern treatments by authors such as Mary Stewart. I started to wonder about his struggles and triumphs as a child and as a young man. What were his deepest dreams? His darkest fears? His greatest lessons about life? It seemed to me that, in this wondrous, truly luminous, tapestry of myth about Merlin, there was a gaping hole—his youth. So despite feeling humbled by the task, I couldn't resist trying to add a few new threads. The result is the five books of **The Lost Years of Merlin**.

You often refer to Merlin as a metaphor in your Author's Notes. Would you explain just what you mean?

This character has incredible depth. One reason he has stayed so richly alive for 1,500 years, and across so many cultures, is because he represents some of humanity's most basic struggles and aspirations. Three examples are his ability to learn from nature; his ability to cross boundaries and stand for universality; and his ability to combine both a dark side and a light side in his wisdom—a sense of his own frailties and vulnerabilities as well as his own powers and ideals. Looked at in the historical context of the disintegration of society in sixth-century Britain and the antagonism between the emerging faith of Christianity and the ancient faith of the Druids, who were being driven into the forests, Merlin's role as a bridge builder is truly extraordinary.

The first stories emerged about a Druid master who would step across that line and become the friend and teacher of a young Christian king, so that

together they could unify the people and create a society where justice and individual respect would prevail. This was a radical—and terribly hopeful—idea.

After spending these years writing about Merlin's youth, however, I am struck even more by another metaphor: that of Merlin's own passage, from the nameless, half drowned boy who washed ashore at the start of Book One and who grows in many ways, until he is finally ready to step into his legendary role as the greatest wizard of all times. That transformation, with all its struggles and surprises, is really about Merlin discovering his own inner gifts, his own inner magic. As he grows in wisdom and mastery, he finds that he holds far more greatness inside himself than he ever believed possible. And therein lies the metaphor. Perhaps, like that boy who washed ashore, each and every one of us holds some special magic within ourselves—magic that just might hold the makings of a wizard.

It's obvious that you did considerable research to write about Merlin because your young Merlin fits so well in the Merlin canon. However, did you turn up your other characters in your research or in your imagination?

Some of both. From the start, I knew my young Merlin had to fit seamlessly into the greater body of myth. Even so, that left me considerable room for originality—as long as my new additions felt completely integral to the whole. The grounding of Celtic lore, therefore, was essential. The name Fincayra, for example, came from a line in a Celtic ballad that referred to an island called Fincayra, halfway between our world and the Otherworld of the spirits. This reference fit my story perfectly, not only because of its blend of mortal and immortal, but also because of the ancient Druids' reverence for "in between things." Ancient Celtic lore inspired the names of many of my characters. For example, once I knew the personality of Merlin's friend and teacher, Cairpré, I named him for a fabled bard. I also found an old tale about a wood nymph called Rhiannon—just the right name for the girl of the forest who would become so important to Merlin. The name of Merlin's archenemy came from a deadly ogre known as Rhita Gawr. And I gave Dinatius a name of Roman origin to connect him to post-Roman Britain.

In other cases, I grounded original characters in established categories.

Hallia, for example, is a deer maiden. Valdearg is a mighty dragon (though I gave him a soft heart). And Elen is a healer and herbalist—although I also made her a Christian who retained her respect for the wisdom of other faiths. Other characters bear little or no resemblance to anyone I found in the traditional tales: Shim, the dwarf who discovers that he is truly a giant; Trouble, the fiery hawk who becomes Merlin's first friend, and lasting inspiration; Merlin's shadow, who possesses a mind of its own; the kreelexes, creatures who devour magic; and Urnalda, the irascible enchantress of the dwarves.

The conventions of most fantasies include a struggle between Good and Evil, magic, a prophecy, a hero and his/her companions, a quest, an amulet, etc. What makes good fantasy? What takes it beyond the formulaic?

The elements you've cited are some of the tools commonly employed in fantasy. But like any tools, they can be wielded well or poorly. And these tools aren't the core of the best fantasy, which contains a moral vision, with ample room for complexity and contradiction. That is why such stories can give us a whole new perspective on ourselves, through casting an altered mirror that reveals our world afresh. But such a mirror must be more than just distorted: It must also be true. Every detail, every element, of an imaginary world must be believable, and all those details must be fully integrated.

Imagination, really, is our personal form of the power of creation. If a reader finds a story about an imagined world to be true, in all its characters and places and voices, then that reader can completely envision that world. And also inhabit it. That is why I prefer the term "visionary tales" to describe this kind of story—tales about new worlds we can envision, and create, because they are at once wholly imaginary and wholly true.

Discussion Questions

1. Like all fantasies, **The Lost of Years of Merlin** books carry you into other worlds, allowing the reader to go "outside" his or her life. However, the Merlin books also explore many inner worlds, such as the meaning of life and who you are as a person. Are there lessons you take from the series that may help you learn more about yourself and your dreams?
2. Throughout the series, what aspects of himself did Merlin have to discover-and why-in order for him to grow as a wizard and as a man? Think about the journey Merlin took to discover his essential humanity. Do you think you know yourself or do you have things you need to discover about yourself? In **The Mirror of Merlin**, young Merlin looks into a magical mirror and faces the person he least expects to see. What kind of person do you think you will become? How can you find out? Where and how do you picture yourself in five years? What about ten years?
3. As he began writing **The Fires of Merlin**, T. A. Barron discovered that Merlin's path to self-discovery would take longer than the three books he'd originally planned. As you look at the different parts of your life, think about the goals you have set for yourself so far. Did you realize you were setting them at the time? Do you feel that you have met many of your goals, or has it taken you longer than you had thought to fully realize your potential?
4. When Rhia and Emyrs talk about home in **The Lost Years of Merlin**, she asks him, "Where then is your home?" He doesn't know; he has no memory of his past. "Isn't your home wherever you are?" she asks. "You aren't serious. Home is the place you come from. The place where your parents live, where your past is hidden," Merlin answers. Why is he so intent on finding what he calls "home" and how does this influence him throughout his adventures? How does your home affect your life and personality? Does it influence your relationship with other people?

5. What does the blight that threatens to destroy Fincayra in **The Lost Years of Merlin** represent? How might you relate it to our own world?
6. What does Dagda mean in **The Wings of Merlin** when, after telling Merlin of Fincayra's greatest peril, he says, "Heed well these words young wizard: Fincayra's fate has never been more in doubt. You may find unity in separation, strength in weakness and rebirth in death, but even that may not be enough to save your world. For in certain turns of time, when all is truly gained, all is truly lost." Have you ever experienced what you think is a victory, only to realize that it may not be one after all?
7. Sometimes authors pull back from their main characters in order to let them take the center stage, to take on lives of their own, which can make them seem very real—like people you could talk to and interact with. In his Author's Notes in each of the five books, T. A. Barron tells us that Merlin himself is the guide, that Merlin invited him to be his scribe. Can characters develop their own personalities and take over the story? Is this what makes a character easy to relate to when you're reading a story? Imagine holding your own conversation with Merlin. What would you talk about?

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