

# A Hero's Trail

## An Interview with T.A. Barron about the Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes

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A few months ago, I received an email advertising the Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes. I was intrigued. Young Heroes? An award? I wanted to find out more and so began my exploration into this award. I found that it was created by author T.A. Barron. In an effort to understand what began this honor, I thought there was no better place to start than to interview the noted author himself. And so, the following is a conversation with award-winning best-selling author, outspoken conservationist, education activist, and philanthropist T.A. Barron.

*Editor: You're a well-received fantasy author. Why fantasy?*

**Barron:** Dreams are sometimes the best ways to talk about reality. Fantasy novels—or, as I prefer to call them, mythic quests—give me the chance to bend the rules of our everyday reality in order to highlight some big ideas: the human condition, how we can grow into wisdom, how we can affect the world around us. Fantasy, you see, is like a bent mirror: we can see ourselves, but with certain qualities enhanced and others diminished. And, in the process, we can explore some of the great questions of life.

*Editor: When you began your writing career, did you ever imagine how your work would impact readers? How do you feel about that today?*

**Barron:** All I knew when I began writing full time was that stories really do matter. Books can change a person's life; they certainly have done that for me. And I also knew that unless I left my comfortable career in business, which seemed quite successful to the people around me but which really left a deep part of me unfulfilled, a part of my soul would wither up and die. So I just had to go for it, to follow my dream. Whether or not anyone ever bothered to read a page of what I might write, the greater risk was not losing my job and a steady paycheck, but rather losing an important part of myself. Now, fifteen years later, I can hardly believe all the wonderful things that have come my way. If someone had told me that there would be all these lovely editions, books in several languages, awards, and movie deals, I would have said he or she was stark raving mad! But what strikes me most of all is this: I am still awed by the simple power of stories. Sure, I've learned a little bit about the craft of writing during these years. Mainly, though, I know how much there is still to learn. And how much there is to explore. Writing is the most humbling, agonizing labor I've ever done ... but it's also the most joyous, inspiring labor of all.

**Editor:** *What gives you inspiration in your life and your writing?*

**Barron:** My two greatest sources of inspiration are my children and nature. Our five kids, who range in age from seventeen down to eight, are full of energy, vitality, and a fresh sense of wonder. Their humor, rambunctiousness, and beautiful inner selves are a constant adventure—and also inspiration. They are welcome to join me in my writing room at home, but the rule is that if Dad is working on a creative project, they too must do something creative. So they're often reading books, writing poems, or drawing pictures while I'm working away.

Nature has always been my grandest cathedral, a way to be close to things eternal. I have often felt the natural world's quiet power to make a person feel both very big and very small at once. When you look up at the stars, the expanse of a mountain ridge, or the boughs of an ancient redwood tree, you feel humbled by the enormous scale and time and beauty, and at the same time, uplifted and enriched by the fact that you are part of it all.

**Editor:** *A number of your protagonists portray heroic characteristics. Is that deliberate and if it is, can you speak about why you do that?*

**Barron:** Each of us, I believe, has surprising gifts down inside ourselves: heroic qualities that we may not even know are there. And each of us can rise to heroic heights in times of severe struggle and hardship. But we all need stories of people who have shown great courage, compassion, and perseverance—to remind us of our own potential. And if those stories are told in a truly believable, highly realistic fashion, they can convey inspirational ideas without interfering at all with a rip-roaring good adventure.

**Editor:** *Your book, *The Hero's Trail*, has an interesting correlation between life and hiking. How did you come upon this comparison?*

**Barron:** That's just the way it is: life is a journey through uncharted terrain. Often arduous, often wondrous, and full of surprises, life is much like the long hikes I've taken in the Rocky Mountains, the Himalayas, Patagonia, and other places around the world. And the older I get, with more creases in my hiking boots as well as my brow, the more potent this analogy seems to me.

**Editor:** *In this particular book, you have many different kinds of heroes. How did you choose them, especially the adolescents and teenagers?*

**Barron:** In writing *The Hero's Trail*, I focused on seven key qualities of heroes. These include courage, perseverance, compassion, and humor. Part of my point was to distinguish heroes from celebrities: heroes are all about character; celebrities are just about fame. By getting myself as the author out of the way and simply telling stories about these amazing young people from every background, these heroic kids really speak for themselves. Better than any adult such as me, they demonstrate the power of heroic qualities that reside in us all.

***Editor:** Can you speak about the Barron Prize for Young Heroes? (Why it was started, how long it has been in existence, how it is funded, how the youth are selected, what they receive.)*

**Barron:** I founded the Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes in 2001 for the same reason that I write about heroes in my books: everyone, even children, can make a difference. And I believe that young people need real, heroic role models who have made a meaningful difference in the world.

Each year, the Barron Prize selects ten winners, ages eight to eighteen, nationwide who have made a significant positive difference to people and our planet. Half of the winners have focused on helping their communities and fellow beings; half have focused on protecting the health and sustainability of the environment. Winners are selected by a panel of judges who look for qualities such as leadership, personal initiative, compassion, courage, generosity, and high moral purpose.

I have received tremendous support from the following organizations: National Geographic Society Education Foundation, Girl Scouts of the USA, Roots and Shoots, Student Conservation Association, Earth Force, Girls for Planet Earth, Kids for Saving Earth, National Youth Leadership Council, and Youth Service America. Links to these groups can be found on the National Partners page of the Barron Prize website ([www.barronprize.org](http://www.barronprize.org)).

***Editor:** How has this award influenced the winners' lives?*

**Barron:** Each winner receives a \$2,000 cash award, which I ask be put toward their service project or furthering their schooling. This enables many of them to continue their project or pay for higher education. In addition, the winners' inspiring service achievements are widely publicized, which helps them garner more interest and support for their projects. Here are a few examples. Ashley, who founded AfricAid to support girls' education in Africa, credits the Barron Prize with infusing critical life into her project at a time when she was struggling to get it off the ground. And her prize money made it possible for five Maasai girls to attend secondary school for one year. Winner Michaella used her prize money to ensure that her project, the Exceptional Rodeo for kids with disabilities, would continue each year as a key part of the Colorado State Fair. Winner Anders applied his prize money to the nonprofit group he started, Teens for Technology, using it to buy additional computers and software for an elementary school in Jamaica.

***Editor:** What do you hope this award will do for young people around the country?*

**Barron:** The goal of the Barron Prize is to celebrate such heroic young people—and to inspire others to do their part. These young people demonstrate the power of one person to make a difference to the world.

The new Barron Prize winners have just been announced. I encourage parents, teachers, librarians, students, and everyone else to go to my website ([www.tabarron.com](http://www.tabarron.com)) and read the incredible stories of the amazing young people we have chosen to honor.

**Editor:** *Can you say a few words about promoting the idea that anyone can be a hero?*

**Barron:** Just like the young boy Merlin who washes ashore on page one of the first book in *The Lost Years of Merlin*, each of us harbors amazing gifts down inside. Even though, just like Merlin, we may feel lost, confused, and so weak we're barely alive, we still have those gifts. We still have the potential to remake our own selves and our own lives. And, ultimately, our own world.

**Editor:** *You once stated, "The world around us is full of wonder, mystery, and surprise. It is ours to protect—and also to explore." What does that statement mean to you in regard to your life, your novels, and your audience of readers?*

**Barron:** I believe that life is a gift. An amazing opportunity to find out what sort of wings we might have, and then to spread them and fly. It's also very brief. We don't have much time as mortal beings to explore who we really are and to be everything we could possibly be. So the journey of life requires courage and determination, along with a humble sense of the mystery and wonder of the world around us. To be sure, our world is also full of horror, suffering, and human arrogance. But at its core, it is still glowingly beautiful, a marvelous place to explore for whatever time we are given. And if, in that exploring, we can help protect this fragile planet that supports us, and also give something back to the people who have loved us, then the journey will be even more worthwhile.

**Editor:** *Any other thoughts you wish to share with professionals who work with adolescents and teenagers in libraries?*

**Barron:** Just this: today's librarians and teachers are, to my mind, genuine heroes. The work they are doing is not always appreciated or even understood ... but it is absolutely critical to the young people who will soon inherit our world.

My own high school librarian from Colorado Springs, a grand woman named Lucile Wilson, made an enormous impact on my own life. Her positive influence has lasted many decades now, and I'm sure it will always be with me. That's a constant reminder to me of the power of a dedicated librarian who works with young adults. Now, I know that her job was never easy, and that she constantly had to battle budgets, bureaucracy, and sometimes people in the wider community. But in her heart, all she cared about was expanding the minds and supporting the growth of us students. And she can measure her success in the lives, including mine, that she profoundly touched.