

# **The Ancient One Short Guide**

## **The Ancient One by T. A. Barron**

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## Overview

The Ancient One combines science fiction, fantasy, and myth with environmental activism and adventure to tell the story of Kate Gordon's summer visit to her great aunt Melanie in Blade, Oregon. Soon after she arrives for a summer visit, Kate and her great aunt become embroiled in a battle with unscrupulous and unemployed loggers to save an old growth redwood forest that is also a sacred place to a Native American tribe, the Halamis. While walking in the forest with her great aunt's owl-handled walking stick, Kate is mysteriously transported back 500 years through a time tunnel where she then becomes involved in a mighty struggle between the forces of good and evil for control of the land—a struggle which mirrors the environmental conflicts of her twentieth-century world. In the world of the past, Kate encounters a lush natural environment that is threatened by the Wicked One and inhabited by a cast of fantastic creatures, talking animals, and terrifying monsters. To save the land for future generations and to return to her own time, she must risk her life and find the connections across time and culture to restore the balance between good and evil.

# About the Author

T(om) A. Barron was born on March 26, 1952, in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

As a boy growing up surrounded by the mountains of Colorado, Barron developed a great respect for the natural world. Always an avid reader, he also loved to write down his own thoughts and feelings, and as a fifth grader even produced a personal magazine for his family and friends entitled "The Idiot's Odyssey." After receiving a bachelor's degree from Princeton University, he spent several years in Europe studying at Oxford University on a Rhodes scholarship and traveling. During this period, he also continued to write, completing his first novel. After over forty publishers rejected this manuscript, he abandoned his plans to be a professional writer and returned to the United States to pursue a law degree at Harvard University. However, instead of completing his law degree, he moved to New York to seek success in the business world working for a small venture capital firm.

Although he temporarily stopped writing fiction, Barron continued to dream of one day becoming a writer. In 1990, a number of traumatic life events—including the death of a close friend, marriage, and the birth of a child—happened in rapid succession and prompted him to begin writing again in earnest. At this point he also was fortunate enough to meet Madeleine L'Engle, who asked to read the novel he was working on. L'Engle was so favorably impressed with Barron's work that she passed the manuscript on to her agent who in turn submitted it to Philomel, the children's division of Putnam Publishing, where *Heartlight* was published in the fall of 1990.

With the publication of *Heartlight*, Barron decided to take a chance on pursuing his long-time dream of becoming a full-time writer. So, in 1990, he moved back to Colorado and started writing from his home office in Boulder. Since 1990, he has written and published eight young adult novels, two nature books—*To Walk in Wilderness: A Rocky Mountain Journal* and *Rocky Mountain National Park: A Hundred Year Perspective*—and a picture book—*Where Is Grandpa?* An additional novel, *Tree Girl*, is scheduled for publication in 2001.

Barron's books have been well received by critics and young adult readers alike. The *Ancient One* and *The Merlin Effect* have both appeared frequently on lists of best books chosen by young adult readers as well as those selected by adults. For example, *The Ancient One* was selected for the International Reading Association's Young Adult Choices list and the Voice of Youth Advocates Best Books of 1992 list, while *The Merlin Effect* won the 1997 Texas Lone Star Award, the 2000 Best of the Texas Lone Star Reading Lists, and the 1998 Utah Book Award among others. Barron's "Lost Years of Merlin" series continues to be honored by such groups as the American Library Association, the New York Public Library, and the Children's Book Council.

Barron says that he writes because it allows him to explore wherever and whenever he chooses, whether into space, back in time, or under the ocean. Writing for him is not only a way of telling stories, but also of thoughtfully exploring the big questions of life.

Before he can write his stories, he does extensive research so that he can successfully convince the reader of the reality of a fantastic place or time. For instance, for *The Ancient One*, he researched different tribes that lived in the Pacific Northwest over the last five hundred years and even camped in a redwood forest so that he could thoroughly understand the smells, sounds, and ecology of the forest.

# Setting

For Barron, place is one of the most important elements of his writing; he believes strongly that readers must experience the story's fantasy world through all their senses. In an interview with Amazon.com, he said that "a strong sense of place inspires and infuses everything he writes." With his background as a writer firmly rooted in his experiences with nature, Barron uses vivid descriptions of the natural world filled with accuracy and detail to create his story's reality. Barron's view of the natural world is indeed one of the most compelling aspects of his writing.

The Ancient One is set in the Pacific Northwest in the fictional town of Blade, Oregon, with the Lost Crater forest area located nearby. Blade is a muddy, wet, and dreary town overwhelmed by a chronically depressed economy and inhabited by angry unemployed loggers. There has not been a good day in Blade in eight years. By contrast, Aunt Melanie's little cottage is welcoming, warm, and filled with the comforting aromas of spice tea and huckleberry pie. The natural world of the Lost Crater, currently known as Cronon's Crater, is tantalizingly beautiful with its blue lake and its old growth redwood forest, the oldest and northernmost stand of redwoods in the world. In addition to the woes that humans have brought to valley, the town and Lost Crater are overshadowed by Brimstone Peak, a "fang-shaped, sinister pinnacle" which foreshadows the danger and evil Kate will encounter later in the story. Barron not only describes these places in the text, but he also lends authenticity to the setting by the inclusion of a map of the Lost Crater in the front of the book.

When Kate and Aunt Melanie set off to prevent the destruction of the forest by confronting the loggers, they enter the world of Lost Crater through a forgotten trail, stumbling into a vibrant and verdant world that becomes increasingly mysterious. As they proceed towards the crater, the sky brightens and the sounds and colors become more vivid. Even more striking to Kate and her great aunt and to the reader are the rich aromas that greet them. As she experiences the diversity and the interdependence of this lush natural world, Kate experiences an unaccustomed sense of inner peace: "everything seemed to fit somehow, to belong just where it was." When she enters the redwood grove, Kate is awed by a sense of unity and connection that the Ancient One, with its deep roots and intertwined branches, embodies.

But, The Ancient One is not only a story of environmental problems and activism in the Pacific Northwest; it is also a fantasy adventure story that Barron makes totally believable through skillful manipulation of setting. As Barron creates his contemporary realistic setting, he subtly injects it with elements of mystery and magic, connecting the world of reality to the world of fantasy and leading his characters and his readers to the moment when Kate travels 500 years back in time. Aunt Melanie's cozy cottage is also filled with Halami artifacts, including an intricately carved walking stick topped with an owl's head. As Kate climbs the trail up Kahona Falls, she notices stairs too tiny for humans carved into the rock tunnel.

Alluring aromas entice her into a pool of dark green liquid that turns out to put her under an evil spell, and she is fortuitously rescued by an owl that is unexpectedly awake in the daytime. Aunt Melanie creates her own sense of mystery by deferring and sometimes refusing to answer Kate's questions about the Halami and their legends as well as becoming increasingly vague about the source of her knowledge of these ancient peoples and their legends. By the time the walking stick transports Kate back 500 years ago, Barron has already created a tale so enchanting that both Kate and the reader are prepared to suspend their disbelief and accept this occurrence as perfectly reasonable.

# Social Sensitivity

This novel provides excellent insight into many environmental issues, including preservation of natural resources and endangered species, the fragile and intricate balance of ecosystems, and the spiritual connections to the land of Native Americans. Barron communicates a strong message about the importance of maintaining the balance of nature and of protecting these spiritual places that symbolize our connections with the past. In addition, Barron unabashedly champions the cause of environmental activism; the environmentalists are unequivocally good and their opponents are evil. Throughout the novel, loggers cruelly shoot spotted owls for sport, ruthlessly destroy millennial redwood trees, and never suffer any remorse for their actions. Although Jody finally does try to stop the destruction of the Ancient One, he shows little, if any, appreciation for the natural world or for the profound experience he has just been through in the world of the Halami. There is little exploration of the complexities of the economic hardships experienced by individuals and families in the Pacific Northwest as a result of the successes of the environmental movement.

The treatment of Native Americans in this novel is a topic that prompts some concerns about social sensitivity. According to the note at the front of the book, the Halamis are a totally fictional group that Barron created for this story based on his research into the Tolwa, Coos, Yurok, Wiyot, Hupa, Karok, Coquille, and Tutuni peoples. Although Laioni is portrayed sensitively as a multi-dimensional character, the other Native Americans are fairly stereotypical characters. Also, the contemporary story does not include any present day Native Americans who would certainly be likely to be present in a town like Blade, Oregon. Some may object to this treatment of Native Americans as a fantasy people.



# Literary Qualities

In *The Ancient One*, Barron weaves many traditional elements of the fantasy genre with Native American mythology, scientific issues, and a contemporary setting to create a fresh, original story. These elements include a quest, time travel to an alternate world, and a battle between good and evil.

Early in the story, Aunt Melanie suggests to Kate that she go on a "vision quest" to discover her purpose in life. Like many fantasy heroes, Kate embarks on a quest to find and restore the Fragment of the Broken Touchstone which will in turn defeat Gashra, the Wicked One, and protect the balance between good and evil so essential to the health of the land. In order to succeed, she must not only separate from her life and perform a number of dangerous physical feats, but she must also confront the dragons within herself and grow into her own person. She learns that no matter what her fears and insecurities are, she must try to succeed for the sake of her connections to others. On his official Web site, "The World of T. A. Barron," Barron says that he likes to write quest novels because he can incorporate personal issues that the hero must grapple with as well as life's biggest questions and place these tasks within the context of an exciting "old-fashioned page-turner."

In the fantasy genre, alternate worlds are often used to provide a mirror that enriches the reader's understanding of the real world.

Kate recalls her grandfather saying, "wait long enough and fantasy becomes reality."

Kate arrives in the Halami's world via time travel, a typical fantasy device, and meets a young girl about her age that looks remarkably like her great aunt Melanie. As they become acquainted, Kate discovers that they have much in common. Not only are they the same age, but they also have both experienced the loss of someone they loved and desire to learn their true purpose in life.

Within this alternate world, magical beings typically assist the hero in performing the quest. In this story the Tinannis play that role by helping Kate to find her way in this fantastic place and, ultimately, by helping her look within herself to find the courage to beat Gashra.

A common theme present in most fantasies is the battle between good and evil. In the novels's ancient world, Gashra is the evil force that tries to destroy everything he cannot control, while in the contemporary world, evil is represented by the loggers bent on destroying the Ancient One and the redwood grove. In both worlds, it is Kate's quest, not unlike that of many fantasy heroes, to battle evil and defeat it in order to save the world for future generations. Kate is successful in defeating Gashra and escaping back to her own time. Although she returns through the Ancient One before it is destroyed she is not able to save it. Instead, however, she defeats the loggers and saves the rest of the grove so that it may be preserved as a park for future generations.

# Themes and Characters

The central theme of *The Ancient One* is connections: among people, across time and cultures, and within the natural world.

Barron develops this theme not only through telling two stories linked across time and culture, but also by the interesting and diverse characters he creates.

One of the most intriguing elements of this story is the character of Kate Gordon.

Although Kate is not enthusiastic at first about visiting her great aunt, she hopes that the visit will help her come to terms with her grandfather's death from which she is still grieving, a story told in the earlier novel *Heartlight*. She, like many adolescents, does not feel at home with herself and yearns for Aunt Melanie's peaceful quality.

She feels alienated and alone and decidedly unconnected because every time she gets close to someone, they leave or are taken away from her. At the same time, she is a strong, spunky heroine who has many good coping skills, including an abundance of physical strength and an accurate throw developed as an all-star shortstop.

When she journeys into the world of the Halami, Kate faces many physical and emotional challenges, and in conquering them, she discovers that far from being alone, she is blessed with many important connections. She shares the experience of losing a loved one with both Laioni, who lost a close friend, and Jody, whose parents were killed in a car accident. She finds the courage to face her fears and takes risks to save her friends in the past and return to the present to save Aunt Melanie and the forest. Although she ultimately cannot save the Ancient One, she finds her purpose in life and the universe by communing with and experiencing its deeply rooted connections with the past, present, and future.

The character of Aunt Melanie also symbolizes the theme of connections. She is rumored to have Halami blood and has made a hobby of collecting Halami artifacts and learning Halami legends. She is also linked to the loggers and other residents of Blade because she taught many of them when she worked as a schoolteacher. She also seems to have had some type of relationship with Frank, Jody's grandfather.

For Kate, Aunt Melanie also provides a connection to Kate's recently deceased grandfather since they were brother and sister.

This connection gives Kate a context for working out her grief. Aunt Melanie's character also introduces an air of mystery to the story, which prepares the reader to accept the plausibility of the fantasy. She seems to have time traveled to the world of the Halami herself or at the very least has visited with Tinnanis and explored the connections between the past and present.



Most of the residents of Blade, Oregon, are very flat, one-dimensional characters whose main purpose in life seems to be to destroy the forest. Billy, the logger, is certainly evil to the core with no chance of redemption. Frank, on the other hand, is the only resident who sees that times have changed and that the ways of the environmentalists have some merit. However, he also understands that the residents of the town have been suffering from the lack of jobs to replace the logging industry, so he is torn between the two sides. He tries to find a middle ground between Aunt Melanie and the loggers, but ultimately sides with her when he rescues Kate and helps to establish the new park. Jody is filled with an anger caused by grief for the loss of his parents and for his town's way of life. While his experiences in the world of the Halami do not entirely convert him to the ways of the environmentalists, the bond he forms with Kate and Laioni help him to begin to come to terms with his own grief.

When he has an opportunity, he does try to stop Billy from destroying the Ancient One.

Like Kate, Laioni is uneasy and unsure of her place in the world. Her name means "She Who Follows the Owl," which has two different meanings in the Halami language, and she is unsure of which will be her fate. It was foretold at her birth that she would make a long and perilous journey that would effect the fate of her people, and she wants to learn her true fate. She goes on the quest with Kate, and it is Kate's act of love in saving Laioni's life by burning Aunt Melanie's walking stick that releases the ancient power of the stick. The volcano and earthquake destroy Laioni's home and her people, but she promises Kate to continue on and teach any Halami children the stories, songs, and customs of her people so that there will be a few small reminders of the Halami left to greet Kate in her world.

To tell the fantasy part of the story, Barron creates a number of intriguing characters loosely based on Native American legends.

The Tinnanis who inhabit the Black Island of Ho Shantero are the guardians of the forest, keeping it and the rest of the natural world in healthy balance. They have the power to connect living beings to one another and insure that one group's desires do not mean another group's destruction.

These characters also provide some comic relief in the story from the Chieftain with his insatiable appetite for oysters to the hapless Kandeldanel whose magic flute puts out any fire within earshot. Kandeldanel is a cheeky, sarcastic character who flies in to save the day from time to time, but is reluctant to be as reliable as a hero needs to be. After getting the entire group out of a number of bad situations, he ultimately saves Kate by using his supposed liability of putting out fires with his flute to stop the lava flow long enough for them to escape.

Unfortunately, the Tinannis are losing their ability to keep the world in balance as the power of Gashra, the Wicked One, grows. Gashra looks like a cross between a tyrannosaurus rex and a man. A truly fearsome creature who gruesomely devours his victims by turning them into red rocks, Gashra is assisted in his evil ways by a number of other equally unattractive creatures including the Slimnis and several Halami men

who have been captivated by his evil. When Kate tries to trick Gashra into giving her the Missing Fragment of the Broken Touchstone, he is almost able to turn her towards his evil until she looks at her neon green shoes given to her by Aunt Melanie and remembers her sense of connection to the good in the world.

## Topics for Discussion

1. Kate, Laioni, and Jody all experience a sense of loss because someone they love has died. Compare and contrast their responses. How alike or how different are they?
2. Jody defines courage as the willingness to take a risk, while Kate finds courage best when she faces certain defeat. Compare Jody's and Kate's view of courage.

Which other characters in the novel demonstrate courage and under what circumstances.

3. Barron says that he was very conscious of needing to create an authentic female voice for Kate. Do you think he succeeded? In what ways are Kate's voice and character distinctively female?

How would this story be different if Kate were a boy?

4. Barron uses figurative language to create the setting and characters in this story. Find examples of figurative language devices, including simile, metaphor, and personification, and explain how they are used in the text.

5. What are the major conflicts which take place in this book? Which conflicts are the most difficult for Kate to overcome?

How does conflict advance the story?

6. The plot of *The Ancient One* has been compared to the story of *The Wizard of Oz*. In what ways are these two stories alike and different?

7. Kate learns to not be afraid of the dark when she starts to depend on her senses other than sight. Trace the use Barron makes of sound, scent, touch, and taste in this story.

8. Barron says that words contain powerful magic to create moods. What is the most important word in the story? Prepare a list of reasons that defends your choice.

â IDEAS FOR REPORTS AND PAPER â1. *The Ancient One* is a sequel to *Heartlight*.

How is Kate able to apply the lessons she learned in *Heartlight* to the challenges she faces in *The Ancient One*?

2. Research customs and legends of Native Americans of the Pacific Northwest (the Tolwa, Coos, Yurok, Wiyot, Hupa, Karok, Coquille, and Tutuni peoples) and compare them to the fictional Halamis.



3. Learn about the logging industry of the Pacific Northwest. What impact has this industry had on the environment? What changes have been made in the industry as the result of the environmental movement?
4. Write a letter or newspaper editorial defending the preservation of the Ancient One. Then, write a response from an unemployed logger.
5. The spotted owl is one of the species endangered by the practices of the logging industry. Find out more about this bird and the laws and programs that have been created to preserve its habitat.
6. Although Cronon's Crater is a fictitious place, there are a number of crater lakes in the Pacific Northwest. Find out more about them. Does Barron portray the terrain, flora, and fauna accurately?
7. Kandeldanel is a trickster, a common character in Native American literature. Find several other trickster tales and compare them to his story.
8. For Native Americans, the redwood grove was a sacred place. Find out about other Native American sacred places in the Pacific Northwest and what is being done to preserve them.

## For Further Reference

"Barron, Tom A." In *Something About the Author*, Volume 83. Detroit: Gale, 1996, pp. 10-12. Brief introduction to Barron's early work.

"Barron, Tom A." In *St. James Guide to Young Adult Writers*, 2nd edition. Detroit: St. James, 1999. Brief biographical and critical introduction to Barron's work.

Beers, Kylene. "Portraits: An Interview with T. A. Barron." *Emergency Librarian* (March-April 1997): 61-63. Interview with Barron about his life as a writer.

"Fantasy and Realism: Two Topics, One Author's Talk with T. A. Barron." *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* (1998): 588-594. Interview with Barron focusing on his view of genre of fantasy and how his works are created.

Lesene, Terry. "Words . . . Words . . . Words."

*Teacher Librarian* (December 2000): 54-56.

Brief interview about the craft of writing with Barron and eight other young adult authors.

"T. A. Barron." In *Authors and Artists for Young Adults*, Volume 30. Detroit: Gale, 1999, pp. 13-18. Brief biographical and critical introduction.

"T. A. Barron: Glowing Like a Crystal."

*School Library Media Activities Monthly* (June 1995): 38-43. Interview with Barron.

## Related Titles

Kate Gordon's adventures continue in two other novels, *Heartlight* and *The Merlin Effect*. In *Heartlight*, the first novel in this trilogy, Kate and her grandfather travel to a distant star to save the earth's sun from extinction. In *The Merlin Effect*, Kate finds herself helping her father with his search for a sunken galleon off the coast of Baja California that just happens to contain the legendary Horn of Merlin. Like *The Ancient One*, these two novels combine science, fantasy, and myth with a strong female heroine who has extraordinary adventures in remarkable and intriguing settings. All three books, which can be read in any order, explore connections: between people and other people, people and other cultures, and people and other forms of life.



## Related Web Sites

"Amazon.com talks to Thomas A. (T. A.)

Barron." Amazon <http://www.amazon.com>. February 27, 2001. Interview with Barron about his approach to writing and his view of his work.

The World of T. A. Barron: The Official Web Site <http://www.tabarron.com>. February 27, 2001. Excellent web site created and maintained by Barron, including copies of articles written about him, curriculum materials, maps, and news about forthcoming work.

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