

The Merlin Effect Short Guide

The Merlin Effect by T. A. Barron

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Contents

The Merlin Effect Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Overview.....	3
About the Author.....	4
Setting.....	6
Social Sensitivity.....	8
Literary Qualities.....	9
Themes and Characters.....	10
Topics for Discussion.....	12
Ideas for Reports and Papers.....	13
For Further Reference.....	14
Related Titles.....	16
Related Web Sites.....	17
Copyright Information.....	18

Overview

The Merlin Effect combines scientific research procedures with the mythical stories of Merlin the magician and the conventions of modern fantasy. It tells the story of Kate Gordon and her father and their expedition to the coast of Baja California to search for a sunken Spanish galleon said to contain the lost horn of Merlin. Their research site also reveals unusual undersea volcanic activity, ancient fish that should be long extinct, local villagers with unusual longevity, and a group of ever-singing gray whales guarding a mysterious and dangerous whirlpool.

Always willing to test her limits, Kate gets sucked into the whirlpool where she meets Merlin himself, finds the horn, and battles with Merlin against the world's mortal enemy. Along the way, she resolves her relationship with her father, learns to make choices, and comes to understand her own powers of creation.



About the Author

T. 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 traveling and studying at Oxford University on a Rhodes scholarship. During this period, he also continued to write and completed his first novel. He abandoned his plans to be a professional writer after over forty publishers rejected this manuscript, and returned to the United States to pursue a law degree at Harvard University. However, instead of completing his law degree, he eventually 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 life changing 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 was also fortunate enough to meet Madeleine L'Engle, who asked to read the novel he was working on, a book that would eventually be *Heartlight*. 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 longtime 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 nine young adult novels, two nature books (*To Walk in Wilderness: A Rocky Mountain Journal*, 1993 and *Rocky Mountain National Park: A 100 Year Perspective*, 1995), and a picture book (*Where Is Grandpa?*, 2000).

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. *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 cited 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 any place and any time period he chooses; he can travel into space, back in time, or under the ocean.



Writing for him is not only a way of telling stories, but also 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 example, prior to writing *The Merlin Effect*, he learned about the legends of Merlin, the history of Spanish galleons (sailing ships), and the lives of gray whales, as well as the sights, sounds, motion, and smells of the ocean.

Setting

Setting is one of the most important elements in Barron's writing; he believes strongly that readers must experience the world depicted in the story through all their senses.

To establish a tone of realism, he uses vivid and highly accurate descriptions of the natural world that look, feel, and smell true.

Then, once readers thoroughly believe in the reality of the story, Barron moves them gradually into the fantasy world of his book.

The Merlin Effect is set on the coast of Baja California and off shore in the Pacific Ocean.

The story opens with Kate Gordon—alone, paddling out to sea in a kayak, and pondering the state of her relationship with her father. Her isolation in the ocean intensifies her anger at her father. She feels he is ignoring and excluding her, and she dares herself to sprint beyond the second buoy in hopes of attracting his attention. When she reaches the second buoy, she has her first encounter with one of the inhabitants of the ocean, a gray whale caught in the wiring of the sonar transmitter. As Kate struggles to set the trapped whale free, she must also battle the cold, wet, and painful reality of the ocean until she is rescued by her father.

As the story unfolds and the setting is developed, it becomes clear that the amazing beauty of the Pacific Ocean is not the only awe-inspiring quality of this place.

Not only do the whales sing continuously, but there are local legends that claim these creatures have actually rescued sailors from drowning for centuries. The other sea life in the area is also strange; some of the fish resemble creatures that have been extinct for centuries. When Isabella (marine biologist and oceanographer) conducts genetic testing on specimens she buys from village fishermen, she discovers that not only the species but also the individual fish are actually hundreds of years old. The whirlpool, called "Remolino de la Muerte" by the villagers, is surrounded by mysterious mists reminiscent of Arthurian Avalon, and protected by the whales. Legends say that there is a Spanish galleon on the ocean floor, but no one has been able to penetrate the whirlpool to find it. Efforts by the research team to record a picture of it have been to no avail. Barron lends additional authenticity to the setting by providing a map of the lagoon and the ocean printed on the end papers of *The Merlin Effect*. By the end of "Part One: Beyond the Lagoon," the author has effectively established the real world and the challenges it poses for the research team.

By the time Kate is swept away in the whirlpool to the underwater world of the Spanish galleon, the reader is well prepared to experience this fantasy. In the murky and misty rooms inside the whirlpool, real and mystical time blend and become confused. At first, Kate and Sir Geoffrey have trouble communicating because she speaks in contemporary idiomatic English that he takes literally; his difficulty is her first clue that



time is confused. The air is very humid and full of mist, recalling the mists of Avalon that hid the magical island in Arthurian times. By the time Merlin's nemesis Nimue shows up, Barron has convinced his readers of the believability of the story and the reader has become fully engaged in the narrative.

Social Sensitivity

While *The Merlin Effect* poses few if any controversial issues requiring social sensitivity, it does raise some philosophical and scientific questions which students may find interesting to discuss. Terry, Isabella, and Jim disagree on the best way to discover what is "true" and they each bring the methods of different disciplines to their work. Barron also raises the question of whether truth can be discovered not only through facts but also through faith. The research project team seeks to find and retrieve the wreck of a sunken galleon.

There is controversy in this field concerning whether remains of this type should be salvaged or left as graves. Finally, Kate's choice to rescue the whale, even though it causes the destruction of the research equipment, poses questions about the impact of scientific research on the environment.



Literary Qualities

In *The Merlin Effect*, Barron weaves many traditional elements of the fantasy genre with mythology, scientific issues, and a contemporary setting to create a fresh, original story. *The Merlin Effect* includes a hero who must make difficult personal choices that have profound meaning, a quest, the discovery of the credible in the incredible, and the use of legendary materials to tell a new story. Kate's quests, both personal and universal, are most important to the story because she is the central character, but the other characters are also pursuing their own quests. Kate's mission is to find and save the Horn of Merlin to protect the world from evil, but she also seeks to find meaning and direction in her own life as well. For Kate, a trip to the incredible undersea world of Merlin and Nimue is the key to finding the answers to her own personal dilemmas.

Most quest fantasies for children and young adults tell the story of a male hero. Barron's use of a female hero who experiences adventure, danger, and a successful quest distinguishes his work from other fantasies and provides a strong role model for adolescent girls struggling with their own questions of identity and purpose. Finally, although there are a number of fantasies for young adults based on Arthurian legends, few, if any, combine those legends with a contemporary setting. This use of myth and legends connects the present with the past and provides a unique venue for exploring questions of adolescent identity.

Barron makes important use of symbols to tell his story and enrich its meaning. The central symbol of the novel is the spiral. It appears first as a code associated with the Resurreccion that is found in the Spanish archives. The whirlpool is a spiral that both hides the Treasures of Merlin and sweeps the characters to their adventures. Later, the image is found in the strands of DNA, which hold the basic elements to create life, and finally in the Horn of Merlin itself, which can grant immortal life. This spiral not only ties the story together, but it also symbolizes the vast, continuing nature of creation and life itself. The whirlpool is named the place of death, but the sunken or rebirth. Barron also makes use of cold and warmth to symbolize evil and good or danger and safety, while he use images of light and dark to signify good and evil.

Barron uses the "Ballad of the Resurreccion" to provide a sense of connection among all the elements of the story. The words of the ballad begin and end the novel. For Jim Gordon, the ballad is evidence that the sunken galleon, the Horn of Merlin, and Merlin himself did exist, although others may dismiss it as just a song. The ballad also creates a historical context for the strange occurrences in the lagoon and around the whirlpool. Kate has heard the ballad so often that she frequently recites lines from it to explain what is happening to her and comes to understand the truth of Merlin's story through the poetry of the ballad.



Themes and Characters

Barron develops the major themes of the novel through the character of Kate Gordon and the story of her inner struggles and her relationships with the other characters. In the course of her adventures, Kate explores the value of choosing, the importance of power, the ability to create, and the best way to determine truth.

The novel's main character, Kate Gordon, is an adventurous thirteen-year-old girl who is spending her summer vacation assisting her historian father on a scientific expedition to Baja California. Kate (who has had other fantastic adventures in Barron's previous novels, *Heartlight* and *The Ancient One*) feels somewhat distant and alienated from her father and longs to be closer to him. Like many adolescents, Kate feels powerless to create her own life, is seeking some goals and direction through her relationship with her father, and would like to be creative, but does not know where to start.

She hopes that spending time with her father will make them closer, but as the story begins she feels that he is so wrapped up in his work that he barely notices her existence. After he rescues her from the ocean, Kate and her father do experience a moment of closeness, but it is quickly shattered when she tells him that, in rescuing the whale, she damaged the sonar equipment so critical to the research project. After this incident, Kate is so despondent that she remarks to Isabella that "sometimes being alive does not feel so great" and believes the break in the relationship with her father is her fault.

Jim Gordon, Isabella, and Terry each introduce Kate to a different way of examining the world and determining the truth.

Jim is a historian who has spent his career trying to prove the historical truth of the legends of King Arthur and, more specifically, the existence of Merlin. Since myths cannot be definitively proved, his work requires that a certain amount of faith be mixed with fact. At the other extreme, Terry is a geologist who believes in the fundamentals of science and has figured out how to use sonar imaging with thermal sensing to measure volcanic activity. If he cannot see something, he does not believe it. When Kate is transported to the undersea world, she understands the limitations of this approach. Isabella is a marine biologist and oceanographer who uses genetic analysis to study the theory of evolutionary biology, but she understands that her data does not explain everything she is discovering. Her work enables her to understand creation as an ongoing process with all the possibilities for the future lying within the present. Her explanations of the continuing renewal of cells help Kate to understand that she has the power to create her own life by making choices.

When Kate falls overboard and is swept into the whirlpool, she encounters another group of characters who lead her through life-changing adventures at the bottom of the ocean. First, she meets a curious old Englishman named Sir Geoffrey of Birdseye who has been imprisoned in the whirlpool since the *Resurrection* sank in 1547. As it turns out, he is actually Merlin and has been hiding in the whirlpool for almost five hundred



years to protect the Horn of Merlin from the evil Nimue. Nimue craves the Horn of Merlin so strongly that she has been waiting outside the whirlpool for centuries so that she may steal it, drink from it, and become immortal. In order to lure Merlin out of the whirlpool, she captures Jim and Isabella and holds them prisoner.

Merlin transforms Kate into a fish and even allows her to experience the beginning of life as a water spirit, preparing her for the choices she must make to triumph. Using her evil ring to control Kate, Nimue commands Kate to kill her father. Ultimately, however, Kate is able to resist and joins in the battle with Merlin and her father to defeat Nimue and save the Horn.

Through her adventures with these characters, Kate learns that the power of free will and the ability to create your own life is the most important power of all. When she finally gets control of the Horn, she decides not to drink from it because she realizes that she has these powers within herself.

She also comes to understand that although she might like to live forever, she actually prefers the chance to continue to grow and change. Her new found wisdom has given her multiple ways of arriving at truth, a skill she can use to keep on growing.



Topics for Discussion

1. What is the Merlin Effect? How does it affect each of the characters in the story?
2. Choice is an important theme in the story. What choices do Kate, Merlin, Jim, and Terry make throughout the story? Why is Merlin's Horn so tied to choice?

3. Does Kate think power is important?

How is power represented in the story?

4. When Isabella asks Kate what her goals are, Kate tells her she would like to create something. When Kate chooses to return the Horn to the ocean, what do you think she has decided about her goals?

5. 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.

6. 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?

7. 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.

8. What are the major conflicts in this book? Which conflicts are the most difficult for Kate to overcome? How does conflict advance the story?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. The stories of King Arthur and his court have a long history. Research the following elements of Arthurian legend that are mentioned in this book: Merlin, Arthur, Isle of Bardsey, Emrys, Thirteen Treasures of Britain, Nimue, and Avalon.
2. Jim Gordon, Terry, and Isabella are all engaged in research projects in Baja California. Jim is a historian, Terry is a geologist, and Isabella is a marine biologist. Find out more about these careers and what other types of research they might do.
3. Write a ballad or poem about Kate and the Horn of Merlin.
4. What kind of marine life really lives off the coast of Baja California? Does Barron describe his setting and its inhabitants accurately?
5. This story ends with many questions.

Will the team get a permit to continue its research? Is Terry dead? What will happen to the wreck of the Resurreccion now that it has been discovered? Will Merlin return again? Write another chapter that continues the story.

6. Research the biology and ecology of gray whales.
7. The news of this research expedition could be reported for a number of audiences: a national newspaper, a newsletter for historians, Kate's essay on what she did on her summer vacation, and scientific research article. Choose one of these audiences and write a report on what happened in the story.
8. The Merlin Effect is a sequel to both Heartlight and The Ancient One. Read one or more of these books and decide how Kate applied what she learned in the first two books to her challenges in this story.

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

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Related Titles

Kate Gordon's adventures continue in two other novels, *Heartlight* and *The Ancient One*. 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 Ancient One*, Kate finds herself helping her great-aunt battle loggers to save an old growth redwood forest by traveling back in time to fight the forces of evil. Like *The Merlin Effect*, 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 explore connections: between people and other people, people and other cultures, and people and other forms of life.

Barron's research into the legends of Merlin for *The Merlin Effect* inspired him to explore the character of Merlin more deeply.

Many of the conflicts and themes introduced in Kate Gordon's adventures appear again in Barron's series "*The Lost Years of Merlin Epic*." These five volumes explore the childhood and young adult years of the great enchanter as he learns who he is and comes into his magical powers.

Related Web Sites

"T. A. Barron." Amazon.com talks to Thomas A. (T.A.) Barron.
http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/showinterview/b-t-arronhomasata/ref=pm_dp_in_b_8/102-38962118570513. (February 27, 2001).
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<http://www.tabarron.com>. Accessed 22 March 2001. Excellent website created and maintained by Barron, includes copies of articles written about him, curriculum materials, maps, and news about forthcoming work.



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