



Holly Black

Author Program In-depth Interview Insights Beyond the Movie

Holly Black, interviewed in her studio in Amherst, MA on October 29, 2004.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You collaborated with Tony DiTerlizzi on the popular *The Spiderwick Chronicles*. How did you come to write them?

HOLLY BLACK: Tony and I were both doing book signings in New York; I was signing for *Tithe* and he was signing for *Ted*, I think. And we got this letter — the store clerk gave it to us and said that these kids had left it for us. It's the letter that we put into *The Spiderwick Chronicles*. It came with this photocopy that looked like it was from an old book. Tony is a collector of old books, and he thought it looked pretty good; pretty real.

This was so cool that we had to go ahead and contact the Grace kids (Mallory, Jared and Simon Grace). They told us that they really saw faeries, that faeries were real, and that their great uncle had made this book. So we heard their story, and we thought this would be the best thing ever to put into a book. And we decided to do it together.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You and Tony created the art and text for *The Spiderwick Chronicles* simultaneously. What was it like to work so closely with an illustrator as you wrote?

HOLLY BLACK: Collaborating with Tony was so much fun. We'd sit down and we would talk about what we wanted to do and then I would go off and write and he would go off and draw and we would send things back and forth. Having that kind of support and having somebody to tell you if you were on track or if you were off track, and being able to look at just beautiful artwork made the whole process so much more fun than just sitting by myself and writing.

TEACHINGBOOKS: With *The Spiderwick Chronicles*, you were involved with the art and production of the book as well. How did that feel?

HOLLY BLACK: It was very exciting to be involved in the art side and the production of the books, because usually, as a writer I'm very isolated from that. You don't meet the artist. And a writer doesn't normally have the kind of input on the book production that I had with *Spiderwick*.

TEACHINGBOOKS: *The Spiderwick Chronicles* is a five-book serial.

HOLLY BLACK: *The Spiderwick Chronicles* really are one big book that has been split into five parts. And although they have to have individual arcs to make them satisfying individually, there's no recap in them. We don't go over the same stuff at the beginning and they don't have the same structure. Each one has a different structure, the way you would go through a novel. And so when you put them together, you've really read one novel.

TEACHINGBOOKS: *The Spiderwick Chronicles* are written for a younger audience than is typical for you. What was that like for you?

HOLLY BLACK: I wasn't sure that I knew how to write for kids who were younger than teenagers. I had never pictured myself doing that. And it was a little intimidating, so I went on a reading binge trying to really make sure I understood what I was doing.

I think the key to writing for any age is trying to remember what you felt like at that age and what you liked and what you were doing. And I think that's really one of the really fun things about writing kids' books is remembering what it was like to be that age.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How would you describe your distinguished young adult novel, *Tithe*? (*Tithe* was a finalist for the Mythopoeic Award, was one of the ALA's Best Books for Young Adults and was listed in the New York Public Library's "Best 2002 Books for the Teenage.")

HOLLY BLACK: *Tithe* is a young adult trailer park faerie fantasy novel set in New Jersey.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You grew up in New Jersey.

HOLLY BLACK: One of the cool things about writing *Tithe* was that it's set where I grew up in New Jersey. New Jersey has a reputation for being in the middle of Philadelphia and New York and for being industrial, because most people fly into Newark airport. I lived at the Jersey shore, which is a really strange place, because it once was a place that people went to that was extremely nice with beautiful large buildings with a lot of architectural detail. Now they've all kind of fallen into disrepair. New Jersey was a really interesting setting to use for this book, because I got to contrast the sort of strange industrial but also architecturally interesting area with faeries, which are chaotic. It was a nice place for them to be.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Describe *Tithe*, both in terms of plot and the subculture you present.

HOLLY BLACK: Kay moves back home with her mother who is a failed musician. They've run out of places to crash, so they go stay with Kay's grandma (her mom's mom). Kay gets reacquainted with some of her childhood imaginary friends, which were actually faeries. And when she does, she meets this knight. His name is Broyben and he's miserable and angst-ridden and, you know, I like that kind of thing and other people may also like that kind of thing. And Kay likes that kind, too. So she becomes enamored of him and it turns out he's not a good guy, maybe, and so she has to sort that out along with everything else to decide whether she thinks he's a villain.

I played with the idea of the silly and the un-silly courts, which are widely thought of as the good and bad courts of faerie. It's unclear how many silly and un-silly courts there might be in the world, but they are generally at odds with one another. And Kay is this young girl who gets embroiled in faerie politics and finds out that she herself is a changeling. She has to choose which side to be on, and she winds up having to make some very difficult choices about how to survive in this world and who to try and save.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Where did you get the idea to include silly and un-silly courts in *Tithe*?

HOLLY BLACK: I'm a big fan of urban fantasy. And there's a lot of urban fantasy that has had silly and un-silly courts in it. There's a lot of faerie fantasy where usually the silly court is the good court and the un-silly court is the bad court. And I always thought that the silly court could only be marginally better than the un-silly court. So, in *Tithe*, I wanted a book in which both courts really have no difference whatsoever except sort of aesthetically and their method of fighting — where one is no better than the other, or not much better than the other. That produces a fairly dark book, because there isn't any clear good. There's good people, maybe, or good creatures, but not a good side.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What's next for you?

HOLLY BLACK: There are two more books that are going to be sort of in that same world. One is actually a sequel to *Tithe*, called *Ironsides*. And the other is called *Valiant*, which is a different group of characters, but in the same universe. They're actually in New York within silly court territory and have totally different problems. So we get to see the faerie politics from a different point of view.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You must have read fantasy and faerie books when you were young.

HOLLY BLACK: I have always loved reading about fantasy. At some point in middle school, I realized that there was all this folklore that it was based on. So, I took up reading all this folklore about faeries and I was surprised that it was so different than what the popular conception of faeries really is.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please explain.

HOLLY BLACK: Well, I think the popular conception of faeries is that faeries are really small, glittery girls, like Tinkerbell from the Peter Pan movie — very harmless, fun and happy. And faeries are actually frightening. There are a lot of folkloric stories about faeries coming and stealing children, bringing disease or curdling milk and ruining people's livelihood, driving them out of places, snatching them off . . . and they're not necessarily small. There are a lot of different kinds of creatures that fall into the faerie category. It was just so interesting to see how different it was from the common belief. For instance, I mean, faeries are called "the good people" or "the little people." But, they're called that because they're actually neither good nor little. They were called that to pacify them, because it was believed that if you said the word, "faeries" you might incur their wrath.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What else in your background contributes to your writing in the fantasy genre?

HOLLY BLACK: I grew up in a crumbling Victorian house. My mom and dad inherited it from my great grandmother, and they sort of let it run down. Living there was very conducive to being worried about ghosts.

My mom was a big believer in supernatural things, which is about the least reassuring thing in the world, because I would say, “Mom, I’m really afraid the goblins will come. And she would say, “Oh, goblins probably won’t come.” But she didn’t say that goblins aren’t real. She didn’t give me any kind of real reassurance. She’d say, “Well, you know, it’s unlikely.” So, I grew up a terrified child, because I believed everything was real.

My best friend lived across the street from me, and our house was on a hill. We had these huge overgrown trees that would seem like they were reaching down and I would run past them as fast as I could. I was afraid of the dark, I would sleep with the light on and I wouldn’t watch horror movies. This was well into my teens.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What changed your fear into interest?

HOLLY BLACK: I eventually grew to really be interested in a lot of things like ghosts and faeries and the supernatural because I had started out with this fear of them and the way to overcome that fear was to learn more about them.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Who are your literary influences?

HOLLY BLACK: I read J. R. R. Tolkien and Lloyd Alexander when I was young. And Susan Cooper’s *The Dark is Rising* books are amazing. I love The Muppets, and I love all those 80s fantasy movies like *Labyrinth* and *The Dark Crystal*. They had a huge influence on me, and on Tony, as well, and those movies are one of the things that we really talked about a lot when we had first met.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What is a typical workday like for you?

HOLLY BLACK: I get up. I drink enough coffee that I have achieved consciousness while I check my e-mail, and then a lot depends on what I have to do. There’s a lot of different things that I didn’t realize I would have to do to be a writer. For instance, speaking. I’m a shy person, and I never realized I would have to speak. I do interviews and things of that nature. But if I don’t have any of those things to do, I really do just try to sit down and write. I usually try to meet daily goals for word counts or page counts. Sometimes I wind up doing just a lot of reading, or a lot of research for whatever it is I’m working on. And those are the very fun days, because writing is a lot harder than reading.

TEACHINGBOOKS: And you’re an avid reader.

HOLLY BLACK: I think part of learning to write is certainly reading, and reading everything — reading widely. I like the feeling of reading, and I think it gives an intuitive language construction in your mind. You can create sentences, because you’re so used to reading sentences. A lot of what I know about grammar and spelling is all from reading.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You give creative writing workshops.

HOLLY BLACK: Yes. I like to talk with the participants about their writing and how they can develop what they're working on. When I was a kid, I took all kinds of creative writing classes, and I loved doing that. I try and give them opportunity to write, to talk to me, to talk to each other and to learn a few tricks.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you do when you get stuck in your writing?

HOLLY BLACK: Well, getting stuck usually means I went the wrong way because the book isn't ringing true anymore. I kind of look at plot as you're going down this road and each time the character has to make a decision, that's another fork in the path. Usually when I'm stuck, it means that the last fork was the wrong fork, but it could be that a fork way back somewhere was the wrong fork. And I usually have to go back and see.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What was it like trying to get your first book published?

HOLLY BLACK: For a long, long, long time I wanted to be a writer and I didn't really think that I ever could ever really be a successful one. Then, *Tithe* got bought. It is difficult to believe that you can do something when you don't know anyone who's ever done it, and you don't know how people do it. But, it is so much more possible than I thought it would be, looking back.

Editor's Note: For more information on *The Spiderwick Chronicles* and its creators, please see our TeachingBooks exclusive Authors Up-close programs featuring *The Spiderwick Chronicles* and Tony DiTerlizzi at www.TeachingBooks.net.

Books in The Spiderwick Chronicles Series by Tony DiTerlizzi and Holly Black

- ARTHUR SPIDERWICK'S FIELD GUIDE TO THE FANTASTICAL WORLD AROUND YOU, Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2005
- SPIDERWICK CHRONICLES NOTEBOOK FOR FANTASTICAL OBSERVATIONS, THE, Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2005
- IRONWOOD TREE, THE: BOOK 4, Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2004
- WRATH OF MULGARATH, THE: BOOK 5, Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2004
- FIELD GUIDE, THE: BOOK 1, Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2003
- LUCINDA'S SECRET: BOOK 3, Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2003
- SEEING STONE, THE: BOOK 2, Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2003

Additional Books by Holly Black

- VALIANT: A MODERN TALE OF FAERIE, Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2005
- TITHE: A MODERN FAERIE TALE, Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2002

Additional Books by Tony DiTerlizzi

- BERNIE MAGRUDER & THE BATS IN THE BELFRY (written by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor), Atheneum Books for Young Readers / Simon & Schuster, 2003
- BOOTS AND THE SEVEN LEAGUERS: A-ROCK-AND-TROLL NOVEL (written by Jane Yolen; cover illustration by Tony DiTerlizzi), Harcourt, 2003
- ALIEN & POSSUM: HANGING OUT (written by Tony Johnston), Simon & Schuster Books for

- Young Readers, 2002
- BELOVED DEARLY, THE (written by Doug Cooney), Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2002
 - DRAGONRIDERS OF PERN, BOOK 1: DRAGONFLIGHT (written by Anne McCaffrey), Del Rey, 2002
 - HARVEY ANGELL (written by Diana Hendry), Pocketbooks, 2002
 - HARVEY ANGELL AND THE GHOST CHILD (written by Diana Hendry), Pocketbooks, 2002
 - HARVEY ANGELL BEATS TIME (written by Diana Hendry), Pocketbooks, 2002
 - SPIDER & THE FLY, THE (based on the poem by Mary Howitt), Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2002
 - ALIEN & POSSUM: FRIENDS NO MATTER WHAT (written by Tony Johnston), Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2001
 - BERNIE MAGRUDER & THE BUS STATION BLOW-UP (written by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor), Aladdin, 2001
 - BERNIE MAGRUDER & THE CASE OF THE BIG STINK (written by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor), Aladdin, 2001
 - BERNIE MAGRUDER & THE DISAPPEARING BODIES (written by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor), Aladdin, 2001
 - BERNIE MAGRUDER & THE DRIVE-THRU FUNERAL PARLOR (written by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor), Aladdin, 2001
 - BERNIE MAGRUDER & THE HAUNTED HOTEL (written by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor), Aladdin, 2001
 - BERNIE MAGRUDER & THE PARACHUTE PERIL (written by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor), Aladdin, 2001
 - BERNIE MAGRUDER & THE PIRATE'S TREASURE (written by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor), Aladdin, 2001
 - ONCE UPON A FAIRY TALE (a contributing illustrator), Viking, 2001
 - TED, Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2001
 - JIMMY ZANGWOW'S OUT-OF-THIS-WORLD MOONPIE ADVENTURE, Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2000
 - RIBBITING TALES (written by Nancy Springer), Penguin Putnam, 2000
 - DINOSAUR SUMMER (written by Greg Bear), Aspect, 1998
 - GIANT BONES (written by Peter S. Beagle), Roc / Penguin Putnam, 1997

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