



The Spiderwick Chronicles

Author Program In-depth Interview Insights Beyond the Movie

***The Spiderwick Chronicles* creators Holly Black and Tony DiTerlizzi, interviewed in their studios in Amherst, MA on October 29, 2004.**

TEACHINGBOOKS: *The Spiderwick Chronicles* are extremely popular, and they have created quite a following among readers — how do you account for this, given the relatively dark nature of the material?

TONY DITERLIZZI: I think any good faerie tale, probably the most well-loved and well-known faerie tales, are extremely dark. I think that's what makes them so good. Holly and I really strived hard to imbue that sense of darkness into *The Spiderwick Chronicles*. The faeries and the faerie folk in *Spiderwick* are true to real folklore. They're not Tinkerbell-type characters. They act as the faeries in folklore do. The ogre is not a cartoon. He's a real ogre.

As storytellers, our responsibility was not to terrify, but to communicate the sense of impending danger that these kids felt, and to make readers question if the characters were going to get out of danger. After all, we're talking about two nine-year-olds and a 13-year-old, and they're facing very real challenges. But so did Hansel and Gretel. So did the kids in Peter Pan. For example, in the original text Wendy is shot with an arrow when they fly into Neverland. But that's what we love...that's the stuff. You want to be thinking, "Oh my God, they are not going to make it out of this." In great stories — from comic books to kid's books to movies — there's always that sense of "there is no way they're going to get out of this mess." And that's what we tried to do with *Spiderwick*.

HOLLY BLACK: Faerie tales are very dark in many ways. There's a lot of destruction and death and darkness in some of the classic faerie tales. And I don't think that there's necessarily more than that in *The Spiderwick Chronicles*.

I got this letter from a grandmother who was upset because the goblins in Book Two of *The Spiderwick Chronicles* were roasting a cat, and she thought this was the worst. She said, "This is horrible! How could you have written this? I can't give this to my child. You're a terrible person for writing this." And I wrote back to tell her that the point is that creatures in and of themselves aren't bad — they have to do something bad. Goblins aren't bad because they look bad. Villainous things aren't villainous because they wear dark capes and carry big swords and have horns and hooves and glowing red eyes. They're bad because they do bad things. And that means that in a book where people are confronting some kind of dark thing, that thing actually has to do something frightening, or bad — otherwise it isn't bad. And I think that is really important, because thinking things that only look bad ARE bad is a terrible and frightening message.

TEACHINGBOOKS: The children in *The Spiderwick Chronicles* face real-life issues as well as the faerie tale sort. Was this an important element for you?

HOLLY BLACK: I don't think that you can believe in the supernatural unless it's contrasted with something that feels really real. If you have these fantasy things happening and there's nothing that you can hold onto, I think the entire thing doesn't seem real. It's the juxtaposition of the fantasy on the reality that makes the whole story feel like it could actually happen and might actually happen to you. So, yes, it was important to include real-life issues in the books.

For instance, I made sure that the kids squabbled through the entire book, because that's how siblings relate. They're not going to be really friendly with one another. And, Jared's anger issues are a big thematic point.

TONY DITERLIZZI: We wanted readers to be able to associate with the kids in *The Spiderwick Chronicles*. We wanted readers to be able to project themselves into the story and to actually go on this adventure. So the issues and the problems that they face are contemporary and very real — their mother is beside herself in the beginning because she's trying to start her life back over again. She's got to take care of three kids, they're relocating a new town, the house is in shambles and the kids aren't getting along. Their mother needs them to work with her, but they don't understand that. So, their mom is a little more out of the focus at the beginning of the series and becomes a little more in focus at the end.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What was your collaboration like?

TONY DITERLIZZI: It was an unconventional collaboration — you know, usually a writer writes a manuscript, they give it to the editor, the editor gets an artist, the artist does the art, and that's the end of the story. A lot of times, you don't even meet the writer until the book's long been out.

Here, Holly and I were both at the same point together — kind of bantering back and forth the entire time, me helping her plot it and then actually giving her feedback on the text. Her giving me feedback on the art directly and reminding me of what she wrote in the text. In the end, our collaboration made for a better book, and that's really what our goal was.

HOLLY BLACK: When Tony and I were collaborating I would write whatever it was I was writing, sometimes the whole book, sometimes a chapter. Whatever I was working on, I would send to him, and he would go through it and see what he thought, then he would call me up and we would have long rambling conversations about it. And he would send me the art he'd done and we'd do the same thing.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What was the difference in the way in which you worked together on book one of the series, versus book five — the last book in the series?

HOLLY BLACK: In the beginning, our work on *Spiderwick* was more isolated, because we didn't really fully understand how the collaboration process would work. But toward book four, we were sending things back and forth more. He would send me a sketch, and I would write a scene for the sketch and then I would send it back to him and he would change the sketch based on the scene. And it really got to be much more collaborative and much less inhibited in terms of the kind of comments we would send each other and how much we would see each other's work.

We talked about book one a lot more before it got written and a lot less during the writing process. Book one is a different kind of book because it is the setup, too. And the setup is always different because the setup has everything to do with every single book that comes after it. So there's a lot of things you have to hit in book one, and a lot of our concern with it was making sure that we hit all those things.

TONY DITERLIZZI: We knew where the books were going from the start, and we wrote them one book at a time. The difference between book one and book five is that we hit our stride. Our collaboration was, I think, a lot smoother. There was more of a comfort level and we got our groove. We became more comfortable communicating our ideas with one another, and we were able to just interact a little better.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You included bits and pieces of additional information, such as photocopies of letters and neighborhood maps, in *The Spiderwick Chronicles*. They helped to establish and strengthen the real-life nature of the story you were telling.

TONY DITERLIZZI: Yeah. We tucked in these extra bits of artwork that I called “sideways information.” It really didn’t advance the plot of the Grace children forward, but it gave you colorful stuff on the side that helped readers maybe visualize the world a little better.

In the second book, there was the newspaper article regarding Theodore Spiderwick, Arthur’s brother, and how they believed he was killed by a bear, but Arthur was adamant that it was a troll. This causes the reader to say, “Wait a sec, this has been happening for a while. This could be why Arthur made his field guide.”

There’s also the expulsion letter Jared gets in book four. We know as readers what’s going on, and we know Jared’s not necessarily at fault. But the adults in that world had to act responsibly and accordingly, and that’s what would happen to him if he were to pull a knife at a school function.

The watercolor of Arthur and Lucinda shown at the end of book five was actually discovered by Jared in the very beginning of book one. There were a bunch of them on the desk and Jared says that there was one of a father playing with a daughter. At the end of book five, Aunt Lucy’s in Arthur’s study looking at them all.

HOLLY BLACK: The little pieces of evidence that we put into each book were some of the most fun things, because they were an extra bonus. There are these clues where readers can get to know either more information or get to know things that will come later in the books.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How did *The Spiderwick Chronicles* come to be a series, rather than one book?

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 wanted to make it exciting and fun to read.

One of the things that we really wanted to be aware of at the beginning was how long the books were going to be, and exactly what was going to happen in each one. Of course, we had the story from the Grace kids to go on, but life doesn’t happen in a novel format. And it certainly doesn’t happen in a format that can then be split into five individual books, each with their own separate arc. So, we did a lot of tweaking, and there were some things that were up in the air.

TONY DITERLIZZI: We thought if we tell this story from start to finish about what happens to the Grace kids when they find the field guide it’s going to be about maybe 400, 500 pages long. And that’s a big book. Yet the kids in the story are like eight; Mallory’s 13. So we asked ourselves, “Is there a way we can maybe make this story more available for younger readers and not dumb it down, not simplify it. Not do anything except just make it less daunting?” And that’s when we

realized that we could cut it up into little slim volumes. We did it more as a serial and less as a series, the difference being there's no recap at the beginning of *Spiderwick*. Book two picks right up where book one left off. Book five picks up right up where book four left off.

And so when the reader is done with the series, this 7-year-old reader had read a 500 or 600 page book. And the separate books allowed me more space to do more art and make it copiously illustrated throughout the whole series.

TEACHINGBOOKS: At the time of this interview (October, 2004), you are restoring *Arthur Spiderwick's Field Guide to the Fantastical World Around You*. How is this restoration different from creating the five books?

TONY DITERLIZZI: *Arthur Spiderwick's Field Guide to the Fantastical World Around You* is over a hundred pages long. It has lots and lots and lots and lots of art. It has not just one representation of a lot of creatures, like brownie, for instance. There are actually two different brownies illustrated and lots of species of goblins.

We've taken Arthur Spiderwick's loose notes, his finished paintings and some of his sketches and compiled them all into a clean, cohesive book that kids will be able to learn all they want to about these fantastical creatures. Then, hopefully, they'll go out in the backyard and see if they can find some.

HOLLY BLACK: The *Field Guide* was in pretty bad repair, so Tony is laboriously, painstakingly restoring it. One of the cool things about the field guide is that it used to be, you know, the Grace kids' Great, Great Uncle Arthur's field guide. But it's now also Jared's field guide. He added more information about the creatures because he learned a lot more about some of them than Arthur knew. For instance, now Jared knows more than Arthur about dragons, because Arthur never saw a dragon. So Jared got to add some of his information to the guide. He's not quite the artist that his great, great uncle was, but he's getting there. In the back of *Arthur Spiderwick's Field Guide to the Fantastical World Around You* is an addendum by Jared Grace — his drawings and notes that either coincide or, in some cases, conflict with Arthur's observations — based on the experiences that Jared, Simon, and Mallory had.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You both live with your spouses in Amherst, Massachusetts, and are involved with a local literacy program that premiered with *The Spiderwick Chronicles*.

TONY DITERLIZZI: Amherst Reads is an annual program focusing on one book at a time. The idea behind it is to create excitement about reading, and books and exploring the possibilities of the books not just in schools, but kids with their families, too. It was formed by a coalition of librarians, local school teachers, parents, and a couple local authors. The inaugural "book" is the five-book series, *The Spiderwick Chronicles*.

There are many events during the month-long program that are tied in with the books. Mallory's a fencer in the *Spiderwick* books so there's going to be a fencing demonstration at the event. There's a lot of crafting going on. Kids are going to be able to make their own little pocket faeries and stuff like that. There's going to be a costume contest. Kids will be able to dress us as their favorite characters and there'll be lots and lots of reading. There's going to be storytellers there from nearby and abroad. And Holly and I are going to do some storytelling. And, of course, we'll be signing any and everything that everybody brings.

There's also a suggestion box to nominate the book for next year. I'm really looking forward to seeing the program grow year after year.

HOLLY BLACK: Yes. And, Tony and I have been lucky enough to be allowed to bring some artifacts from Arthur's Spiderwick's library and show them at Amherst Reads, including physical evidence that fairies leave behind. Normally, in order to see fairies, you need "the sight." But not everyone has the sight. So we're lucky to have just a few artifacts that anyone can see. There's a unicorn horn, leprechaun shoes, the sink stone, Arthur's monocle and other neat things.

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