

Faeries and Goblins and Changelings –



Oh, My!

by Bruce B. VanDusen

Once upon a time last fall, it came to our attention that one of our 1994 graduates is an expert on faeries. Moreover, while she admits she's never seen one in the flesh, her writings about faeries already have cast a spell over tens of thousands of youngsters who can read them in any of 27 languages worldwide.

For her predominantly 8- to 12-year-old audience, Holly Black is one of the most wonderful writers in the world and her five-volume faerie adventure, *The Spiderwick Chronicles*, may be the most gripping, satisfying tale they have ever read. From the time the first volume was available in 2003, the series has been high on *The New York Times* children's bestseller list, as well as other lists of recommended children's literature.

As a writer, Black, who was Holly Rigenbach until marrying Theo Black in 1999, has risen to prominence in an impressively short time. Her first novel, *Tithe: A Modern Faerie Tale*, was published by Simon and Schuster in 2002 to very favorable professional reviews and ecstatic responses from youth. It was followed immediately by the *Chronicles*, which was available in stores in 2003 and 2004 and has been optioned for filming by Nickelodeon/Paramount. A new novel, this one for the young adult (ages 12–25) market, will be out this summer under the title of *Valiant*. At 33, Holly is well on her way as an author of children's and young adult fantasy.

Happily we caught her between book projects at the beginning of the year. She visited campus in February to meet with some children's literature and creative writing classes and to check out what's happened to her old school. What we discovered is that *Tithe*, the book that first brought her professional recognition, was conceived while she

was completing her undergraduate years on the Ewing campus.

After high school, Holly had followed her boyfriend, Theo Black, to Philadelphia, where he attended art school and she enrolled at Temple University. Two years later she transferred to the College and majored in English while still commuting from Pennsylvania.

About *Tithe*, she told the students during her campus visit, "I worked on it in fits and starts over five or six years, and in the beginning it was going to be a fantasy novel for adults. Finally I had enough done to show it to a friend who was a librarian—which is what I wanted to be at the time—and she said it really was a young adult novel. I was surprised because there is a good deal of cursing in there and sexuality and alcohol. But she said I had to understand that books for 'young adults' were being read by kids 12 to 14 years old and up, and those topics are relevant to them."

Tithe's heroine is a 16-year-old girl who always feels like a strange outsider and leads a grubby life with her wannabe rock star mother. When she returns home to New Jersey and rescues a handsome young man, she discovers she actually is a changeling faerie and gets caught up in a battle between two faerie kingdoms. Critics described it as "dark," "edgy," and "beautifully written." The New York Public Library put it on its list of the "Best 2002 Books for the Teenage," and teenage readers cried out for a sequel.

In preparation for Holly's visit to TCNJ, Jean Graham, professor of English, had read, and encouraged her students to read, *The Spiderwick Chronicles*. It's an adventure story, Holly writes in the introduction to the book, that was told by three children whom

she and her illustrator, Tony DiTerlizzi, met at a book signing. The children—Jared, Simon, and Mallory Grace—related an amazing and complex story about what happened after the three moved in with their aunt Lucinda and uncle Arthur Spiderwick. The children said the uncle had given them a "field guide," a book that explained all about faeries and how to protect oneself from them. They shared their subsequent adventures with Black and DiTerlizzi and the result was the five volumes of *The Spiderwick Chronicles*. Its short chapters with cliff-hanger endings and fascinating illustrations have made it highly popular with new, elementary school-age readers.

In the past two years, Holly has spoken with scores of groups of youngsters and their parents, most of whom asked the same question: "Do you believe in faeries?" Rarely is she asked that any more, because she always anticipates the question and offers this observation: "I don't have any personal evidence that they exist, but a lot of people have told me stories in which they have seen them or have seen evidence of their having been there. I can't invalidate all those experiences of people I have met. I have to believe they *could* exist, and I have seen lots of things that might have been left behind by faeries—a piece of cloth, a little shoe, you know."

Many children—and some adults—have told Holly in detail of their experiences with faeries at book signings around the country. She says their

memories of bells tinkling under beds, voices from a closet, a cat that disappeared, a suspicious path across a lawn, and (for younger children) direct sightings after dark are not uncommon. She never questions or scowls at such reports but remains interested and enthusiastic. After all, they are coming from her readers, her fans.

In person, Holly appears both child-like and a bit mysterious. She has dark eyes and black hair that, on the day she came to campus, was highlighted with a very slight purple sheen. Clothed entirely in black, save for the white lettering on her tee shirt that advertised a Manhattan night spot known for its "underground" hard rock music, she was quick to flash a wide, inviting smile. Although Holly claims not to have been prepared for the amount of public speaking that being a published writer entails, she clearly enjoyed telling her student audience how difficult it was getting started as a writer.

As a child, Holly loved the books her mother gave her. Filled as they were with magic and mystery, they whetted her appetite for fantasy, reading, and writing. She wrote a lot of poetry in high school, she said, and produced one "terrible" novel as part of a gifted and talented class in West Long Branch. Much later she realized she had known nothing about the value of more than one plot or the need to weave layers of character development, dialogue, and setting into a logical whole so that the ending is the understandable result of what has gone before.

"I planned and tried and wanted to be a writer, but I never, ever thought I would be able to live off my own writing," she says.

Holly's field is fantasy; not the science fiction or aliens-from-outer-space sort of story, but the far more believable genre that involves real people whose lives occasionally intersect with a variety of good and evil beings: faeries, hobgoblins, unicorns, ogres, boggarts, elves, brownies, trolls, or bogeys.

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Over the years she immersed herself in the classical myths and legends that have intrigued and entertained ordinary people since before anyone could write. W. B. Yeats' retelling of the ancient tales of Ireland and Britain, Katharine Briggs' *Vanishing People: Fairy Lore and Legends*, superstitions through the ages, and collected folk tales common to many cultures—all have nurtured her work.

More recently Holly has been reading what she views as the modern classics: the graphic novels and comics of Neil Gaiman, the romantic fantasies of Ellen Kushner, and stories of magical beings in conflict with urban dwellers by Charles de Lint. Keeping up with the competition and being aware of changing tastes are essential to writers in the growing, shifting niche of young adult and fantasy literature.

A major challenge, Holly told TCNJ students, has been to find helpful criticism of her work in progress. Writing groups, in which budding writers meet and critique one another's efforts, did not work well for her. Once her first book, *Tithe*, was published, she became the de facto expert in such groups. Everyone then looked to her for comment, and held off making any suggestions to an

obviously successful author.

In recent months, Holly has taken to settling down with her laptop and writing in a local coffee shop in Amherst, MA, where she and Theo have just bought an old house. Other writers often hang out there and Holly, who has nicknamed herself the "queen of caffeine," says the atmosphere is congenial and productive. "Having another person in the room who's doing the same thing helps me keep some focus," she says. "What people say about the loneliness of writing is true. It's the kind of lonely where talking to friends doesn't help, but sometimes just sitting next to someone who's also writing does."

Just because her stories depend upon faeries and goblins does not mean reality has no place in her work. Her goal is to create characters—whether they be schoolchildren, father figures, trolls, or old maids—who are believable. Likewise with places: Holly may change the names or the geography, but when she writes of a street scene, a subway, or a decrepit mansion, she has been in places just like it. Her characters talk and behave as do people she knows. For example, parts of young Jared's attitude and experience in *The Spiderwick Chronicles* are borrowed directly from her husband's boyhood.

Of course, reality is rarely squeaky clean or simple. In her young adult books, characters often curse; they fight and hurt one another, and Holly makes no apologies for that. When some particularly emotional pet owners raised a hob about the gratuitous killing of a cat in one book, her response was: "What do you expect? A goblin killed the cat and goblins do bad things!"

She observes that "When some people complain 'there are no good books for kids,' they forget what kids

really want. What the critics seem to want are clearly stated, positive lessons for young readers to take away."

But the truth, she says, is that young readers are not entertained by such writing. They want a thrilling adventure, in settings they can imagine and believe, and with endings that make sense based on what happens before. They like having some violence and want to know more about sex at a level to which they can relate. And when they are engaged by a well-told story, the fact that good triumphs over evil is not lost on them.

As for her books for young adults, *Tithe* and the forthcoming *Valiant*, she's firm about including sexual situations. She says, "The sex should be there. Teens need to deal with it, but at a level that works for them." She is well aware of the changing behavior of teens and is both understanding and scornful of the "hooking-up" habits of today, which she

sees as too often unequal and hurtful.

Perhaps the best way to get to know Holly Black is to sample her online journal. She admits to being an Internet junkie and to "wasting" hours and hours chatting with people when she might better be writing. Her journal (found on her Web site, www.blackholly.com) allows her to invite bosom buddies and perfect strangers to follow along as she reports on nearly every aspect of her life. A posting (they vary from two or three to a dozen or more a month) very likely will prompt a chatty response from a fellow writer, which then becomes available for everyone to read and respond to.

Holly's journal thus can be seen as a crafty device for priming the pump of public reaction to her work and nurturing a growing network of fans. It keeps her human and accessible to her readers. In January she reported on a trip

with three friends to the mid-winter meeting of the American Library Association in Boston. Their mission, she told her worldwide audience, was to come away with as many free advance reader copies of new books as possible, "even though we are not librarians." Her journal friends were treated to details of the campaign strategy and celebration of victory.

Holly doesn't hold much back from her journal commentary. After a while a reader imagines himself as her psychiatrist, listening as she unloads a range of confessions, opinions, worries, and joys as if she were a patient on a couch. She chatters on, in moods ranging from "bouncy" to "bored," about her friends, her fellow writers, her trouble getting started on a story, her delight over the latest rankings of her books on best-seller lists, her exhaustion from book signing tours, and her (usually

Holly Black's Journal: gems on being a writer



Just before Thanksgiving, 2003, Holly was starting her second novel, *Valiant*, due out this summer. The work was not going well and she wrote in her online journal: "I wrote some more ... I started the first chapter. I have been pushing around some words on that for a while. I need to get my groove on, like they do in the movies about writers where there is a swell of music and the writer begins to grin insanely and pound at the keyboard. But first, a home to clean, a turkey to touch inappropriately, and stuffing to stuff myself with."

Last year she was able to see the proofs of *Faery Reel*, an anthology of fantasy tales containing one of her own short stories amid those by some big-name writers. Her reaction: "Kill me now and I will die a happy girl."

How much does she like writing? In May 2004 she confided: "What makes me really happy is a lovely line of description. It also makes me sit there admiring it and not writing anything more. ... Ellen Kushner: She is one of the few authors that I would cut off both my hands and write forevermore with my toes if I could craft sentences like hers."

After a period of semi-discouragement early last year, she rallied to describe ...

"My moment of Zen. I just realized something: My job is to make up stories and write them down. How cool is that? It is exactly the job I always dreamed of and it is mine, mine, mine for—at least—four years."

dismal) progress in learning the latest computer game. She discusses her shyness, her body, her plotting problems, her deadlines, her taste in coffee, her contacts with her publisher, her meetings with movie producers, the books she's reading, the evidence she's gathered suggesting her Amherst house is haunted, and her plea for recommendations on a very good school for writers.

In brief, her journal reflects her personality: funny, talkative, imaginative, open-minded, insatiably curious, modest to the point of self-deprecation, clever, and very cool.

America is sure to be hearing more about Holly and her faerie worlds. A follow-up to the *Chronicles* is due out about the time this article is published. To be called the *Spiderwick Notebook*, it will be an interactive workbook, with very short stories to spark the young readers' interest and projects for them to explore possible areas of faerie activity in or near their homes. Also this summer, Simon and Schuster publishes her second novel, *Valiant*, which is set in the same world as *Tithe*, but with different characters. This fall will see publication of *Arthur Spiderwick's Field Guide to the Fantastical World Around You*, reportedly to contain all one needs to know to keep ahead of "the little people," and sure to give younger fans a fresh fix of fantasy after digesting the *Chronicles*. Next, but certainly not finally, Holly will begin work on *Ironside*, the sequel to *Tithe* for which its readers have been waiting since 2002.

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editor of TCNJ Magazine

We are indebted ...

to Simon & Schuster, publisher of *The Spiderwick Chronicles*, for permission to use a number of illustrations from the series by its co-author and illustrator, Tony DiTerlizzi. A native of South Florida, DiTerlizzi attended art schools there and turned to freelance illustrating in the gaming field on projects such as "Dungeons and Dragons," and the trading card phenomenon "Magic the Gathering." It was through the gaming industry that he met Holly, who worked for a while at d8, an independent gaming magazine, in New York City. Later he turned to children's books, mostly fantasy. Critics loved his own book, *Jimmy Zangwou's Out-of-this-World Moon Pie Adventure*, and his work for Mary Howitt's *The Spider and the Fly*, for which he won the 2003 Caldecott Honor Medal and a best-seller reputation. Tony lives near Holly, as does everyone else in the small college town of Amherst, MA.



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