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, enchanting 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 Riggenbach 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 1999, to very favorable professional reviews and ecstatic responses from youthful readers and followed the next year with 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 or other events.

“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-outerspace 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, bogbarts, elves, brownies, trolls, or bogeys. (Uncle Spiderwick’s “field guide” lays this out for readers of the Chronicles.)

Over the years she’s immersed herself in the historical 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, superstitious traditions 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 the classical myths and legends that people say about the loneliness of writers where there is a swell of music and the writer begins to grin insanely about writers where there is a swell of music and the writer begins to grin insanely about writers where there is a swell of music and the writer begins to grin insanely about writers. 

"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 a kind of lonely place 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, fairies, or ogres—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 as 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 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 in, 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 growing, shifting niche of young adult and fantasy literature.

In January she reported on a trip to a dozen or more a month) very likely reports on nearly every aspect of her life. Holly doesn’t hold much back from her journal commentary. After a while a reader imagines himself as her psychologist. 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 (usuallyJustice 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 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.”

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FAERIES AND GOBLINS AND CHANGELINGS – OH, MY!

Holly Black is a writer of middle-grade fantasy novels. Her latest book, "Valiant," 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." Her goal is to create characters—whether they be schoolchildren, father figures, trolls, or old maids—who are believable.

Bruce VanDusen is editor of TCNJ Magazine. Her goal is to create characters—whether they be schoolchildren, father figures, trolls, or old maids—who are believable.

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 Zangwow’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.