

# The BiblioFiles: Tony DiTerlizzi

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DR. DANA: The Cotsen Children's Library at Princeton University Library presents The BiblioFiles.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Hi, this is Dr. Dana. Today my guest is multiple award winning and *New York Times* bestselling, author and illustrator, Tony DiTerlizzi. For 20 years, DiTerlizzi has infused the children's book world with his brilliant imagination, endless creativity, and considerable artistic talent. His first series, *The Spiderwick Chronicles* (created in collaboration with Holly Black), details the adventures of the three Grace children, and their discoveries on the other-worldly estate inherited from their relative, Arthur Spiderwick. Their much-loved adventures resulted in a spin-off series, *Beyond the Spiderwick Chronicles*, several companion books, and a feature film.

DiTerlizzi's second series, the *WondLa* trilogy, is an epic science fiction fantasy. It centers around human girl Eva Nine as she emerges into a world distantly removed from planet Earth – a world on the brink of an alien civil war and global reawakening. The books are illuminated with DiTerlizzi's gorgeous illustrations of airships, alien species, battle scenes, and beautiful moments. It's simply amazing.

In addition to his chapter books, DiTerlizzi has produced a number of picture books, including *The Spider and the Fly*, which won a Caldecott honor in 2003, *The Story of Diva and Flea* with Mo Willems, and *The Adventures of Luke Skywalker, Jedi Knight* with Lucasfilm. In 2018, the Norman Rockwell Museum hosted a 20 year retrospective on DiTerlizzi's work titled “Never Abandon Imagination.” He has been featured in *Time* magazine, *USA Today*, and a guest on CNN, PBS, NPR, BBC, and *The Today Show*. Tony DiTerlizzi, welcome to The BiblioFiles.

TONY DITERLIZZI: Thanks for having me, Dana.

DR. DANA: You earned a degree in graphic design in 1992 and one of your first jobs was as a freelance illustrator for TSR's role playing game, *Dungeons and Dragons*. Your work with fantasy illustration continued, of course. Can you tell us a little bit about your early days and your relationship with D&D?

TONY DITERLIZZI: Yeah. Well, of course. First of all, I always say...

[RASPY VOICE]

Dungeons and Dragons.

[DR. DANA LAUGHS]

There's always— I figure that like, heavy metal, I think. You know? Growing up as a kid of the late 1970s and early 1980s, Dungeons and Dragons was a huge part of pop culture along with MTV and Rubik's Cubes and parachute pants. It was kind of that— kind of that moment. And so lots of folks were playing Dungeons and Dragons in the early 80s and I was certainly one of them.

And it always— it left a really big impact on me. And I think when I think back on that time in the 80s, I would have been in middle school and I was, to be honest with you, not a great reader in middle school. I had read a lot, I was a voracious reader in elementary school, but it had kind of waned by middle school. I think middle school stuff as it is, and so I often resorted to reading comic books or going back to reading easier books, like *Frog and Toad* or things like that.

DR. DANA: In middle school?

TONY DITERLIZZI: In middle school. Yeah.

DR. DANA: [LAUGHS] I love it.

TONY DITERLIZZI: Yeah. But Dungeons and Dragons opened a lot of doors that I didn't realize. It introduced me to not just mythology and fairy tales, but to Robert E. Howard, *Conan the Barbarian*, Edgar Rice Burroughs' *Martian* books, like *A Princess of Mars*, and ultimately, obviously JRR Tolkien and other fantasy writers of the day, like Piers Anthony comes to mind. I was a big Piers Anthony fan.

So it really was an incredible gateway that brought me to my next level of reading in a time when I was not particularly interested in reading. I was interested in stories and certainly in fantasy because it's the time of *Star Wars* and *The Dark Crystal* and all these other fantastical movies that were happening. But I wasn't necessarily enjoying those in a book, and Dungeons and Dragons changed that and I never forgot that.

And so I think when I got out of art school, I had wanted to do children's books, but living in South Florida, that was a pipe dream, it was really hard to do. All the publishers were based in New York and it was still at a time when you would go— it was the very end of an era where— obviously way before the internet and social media and things like that, where you would actually go into the publisher on a Thursday afternoon and drop off your portfolio, and then you come back Monday morning and pick it up. Maybe they'd leave a note in it and ask you to meet with the art director or they wouldn't.

And I couldn't really— I tried mailing it, doing stuff like that from Florida, but it just wasn't happening for me. But I started playing Dungeons and Dragons again at a college with some friends and they encouraged me to submit my artwork to TSR. And I did over the course of a summer, and by that fall, I was working for them as a freelance illustrator. And it was an unbelievable experience. I didn't realize how impactful it would be at the time, but I understand it more now.

DR. DANA: Your academic background is in art and your canon of illustrated work is vast, but you are also an author. Do you feel like writing was a divergence from your art or an extension of it?

TONY DITERLIZZI: I think that both skills were intertwined, but I didn't know it as it was developing, although I think it was probably apparent to others. So, for instance, my mom told me that when I was younger and I would draw by sitting at the kitchen table or in my bedroom drawing, I would often make sound effects when I was drawing, so it'd be dinosaurs roaring or X-Wing fighters, you know, "pew, pew," things like that.

And I think that's when— I do remember when I was young and when I would draw, I wasn't necessarily drawing up a pretty picture. I was often drawing a moment or a scene in a little story that was unfolding in my mind. And so I was definitely that kid that if an adult or someone's said, oh, what are you drawing? I would point to the characters and go, well, you know, this guy, he's been shrunk down to the size of an ant and this ant isn't sure whether it should eat him or would let him use him as his steed, you know? It was like a whole— it was never just a picture.

DR. DANA: This is a horse, right?

TONY DITERLIZZI: Right. Exactly.

DR. DANA: It's an elf.

TONY DITERLIZZI: Yeah. Exactly. I think that it slowly just kept developing, but I didn't take creative writing courses or anything like that. My natural ability and inclinations were always towards visual arts because I grew up in a very artistic household. I mean, my mom was an artist, both my brother and sister are visually creative, as well. And so I think the aspect and the idea of writing, I don't think I felt confident enough for many, many years. It was my first editor at Simon & Schuster, a man named Kevin Lewis, who really encouraged me and really taught me a tremendous amount of writing.

Because, frankly, I thought I would be an illustrator for other people's stories for many, many years. And if I was fortunate, they might be interested in publishing a story that I wrote. From the very beginning, from the get go, Kevin had encouraged me to write my own stories, which was just an unbelievable leap of faith on his part.

DR. DANA: How different is your creative process with developing a story versus developing an illustration?

TONY DITERLIZZI: Well, I mean, a story is bigger. An illustration is like a moment or a series of moments encapsulated in a single image of a story. So I think if I think of it in as a way of writing versus drawing, I tend to work somewhat similarly, so where an artist might do a little series of sketches, I do a little series of bulletpoint outlines when I write. When an artist does a very detailed sketch before they prepare for a painting that would be equivalent to me writing a rough draft or a first draft of my story. You're doing homework and research for visual things like how do I draw a car, or what do the clothes look like, or how do I figure out the anatomy of

this creature. And that's no different than how do I write about a car, how do I describe the clothing this character is wearing, how do I describe the anatomy of a monster or a creature.

So there are a lot of similarities, but I think the best analogy I can probably give you is perhaps a musical one that if you are a person who can play a guitar or piano or any sort of instrument and also write and sing your own lyrics, you need both of those things, I feel, to successfully tell your story. At least that's the approach I've taken.

DR. DANA: Tell us how *The Spiderwick Chronicles* came to be.

TONY DITERLIZZI: The *Spiderwick* books were the fourth projects that I did at Simon & Schuster. I had done three picture books prior to that. And my third picture book was the illustrated poem for Mary Howitt's *The Spider and the Fly*. And that book changed— that's a real pivotal book in my career because it made it onto the *New York Times* bestseller list, which is a very tough feat and it was certainly much— very difficult back in the early 2000s, when I think there were only two lists for children, so we were on the list with *Harry Potter* and Lemony Snicket and— jeez, I don't remember, all the really heavy-hitter books, so I was amazed that we even made it on that list. And then, of course, it won an award from the American Library Association, the Caldecott Honor, the following year.

And I got asked a question as this book was gaining in momentum and unpopularity. I got asked a question that I knew was an important and pivotal one in my life. And basically the folks at Simon & Schuster said, “If you could make any kind of book, what kind of book would you make?”

DR. DANA: Awesome.

TONY DITERLIZZI: It's pretty awesome, right?

DR. DANA: Yeah, it is.

TONY DITERLIZZI: Because knew I had the wherewithal to understand that this was like a moment and I had to choose carefully. And I thought back to a book that I had made. We're going to go back to *Dungeons and Dragons*. This is a book that I had made when I was in middle school over the summer.

Growing up in South Florida, I just went to public schools. And over the summer— I'm the oldest of three, so I would basically help my stay-at-home mom, take care of my brother and sister, do chores around the house, and basically try not to get into too many arguments or fights or torture my siblings too much so that everyone would have a relaxing summer. But sometimes it would get really, really hot. Usually, that meant going outside and playing. My mom would say, “Go outside and play, get out of the house.”

DR. DANA: Mind the gators.

TONY DITERLIZZI: You're driving me crazy.

[DR. DANA LAUGHS]

And so it would sometimes get pretty hot down in Florida, as anyone who's been to South Florida in the summer can tell you. And so I went into my room and— I had done this before, and I do it periodically since— I started drawing and I would do like a drawing a day. And I still do this to this— I did the series last year, as well. I was looking at all the things in my room, and I was pretty bored and I had this probably like a Trapper Keeper full of old notebook paper from school and a couple of school supplies and pencils and markers and things like that.

And I was looking at the things that I loved, and I looked at the Dungeons and Dragons books that I had and I really loved the *Monster Manual*, which is basically just a big catalog of all the monsters one...

DR. DANA: Oh, yes.

TONY DITERLIZZI: ...could encounter in Dungeons and Dragons. But I also was a Boy Scout and I had a lot of field guides. Golden Books used to put these out these little pocket-sized field guides and you could get them about *Birds of North America*, *Rocks and Minerals of North America*, *Reptiles of North America*. I had a whole bunch of them that I had collected. And I loved reading those books.

I loved the words that I learned that I would go and look up from reading those books, words like indigenous, or nocturnal, or omnivore. I loved all that natural history, the way they spoke in those books. And so I started drawing like fantasy monsters, dragons and trolls and monsters, and then I would write about them in using this kind of faux natural history, my best attempt at 12 years old of writing in this kind of natural history jargon. And then, because I watched Bugs Bunny and specifically Roadrunner, I also knew how Latin worked.

[LAUGHTER]

So I would-- you know, I would do the dragon like “badus fire breathus,” you know? That's Latin for “dragon.” And so I would do one or two drawings a day. And at night I would write. I would fill a whole notebook page on each one, writing all about it, and I created this explorer who saw all these creatures and could see all these things. By the end of the summer, I had filled the entire notebook. And then I forgot about it. Many years later, while I was working for Dungeons and Dragons, I came across it and thought about it again and wondered if it was something that TSR would be interested in publishing. But they didn't know what to do with it, they liked the idea, but they didn't know what to quite do with it.

And so when I was asked in 2002 by Kevin and the team at Simon & Schuster, I thought back on how much I loved making that book and that no one had really done a book like that. There were certainly people who'd come close, but nothing quite like that. And so I pitched this idea to do a natural history guide to trolls and goblins and all the monsters of folklore. And so we started developing it.

And we started to realize it was going to be a tremendously huge project, and there were a bunch of different ways that we tried to do it. Originally, it was just going to be Arthur Spiderwick's field guide and it would be these plates a la, you know, John James Audubon intermixed with recollections or journal entries by Arthur Spiderwick about— and it really kind of chronicle the story of how he could see into the fairy world, how he felt he was going to be the next great naturalist, but then no one could see the stuff that he was seeing, and even his wife starts to doubt him. And so it kind of ends where he kind of would go off into the fairy world and never to return and only the book was left behind. And it was depressing and— as my wife, Angela put it, “I don't think any kids want to read about a 100-year-old guy that just goes off into the woods and dies.”

[DR. DANA LAUGHS]

DR. DANA: Right?

TONY DITERLIZZI: So we started thinking about the story and the field guide. And we liked the idea of a story that— we liked the idea of two books having a symbiotic relationship, kind of relying on one another, one would be a narrative story, the other would be almost a prop of the efforts— a prop from the story world. And Kevin was thinking maybe the story needs to happen in modern times with modern kids.

So at the same time that this was kind of developing, I had met Holly Black and become fast friends with Holly. And she was helping me do a lot of research on the folklore of the creatures that would be in the field guide because she knew that stuff inside and out. She knew it much better than I did. And she was also at the same time going to school to be a librarian and writing her first young adult novel.

And so I just— it's all compressed now because it's been so many years, but a lot of things happened at once. I had gone away on a trip for something, maybe for an event or something. Anyway, Holly had sent her young adult novel over, and Angela, my wife, had read it over the weekend that I was gone. And I got home and she's like, “Tony, I read Holly's book, it's unbelievable, it's a tremendous book, it's really— we have to help her get it published.”

So Angela kind of marched it into Simon & Schuster and said, “You guys need to publish this book or you're going to regret it.”

[LAUGHS]

And so Kevin--

DR. DANA: It's every author's dream.

TONY DITERLIZZI: Right?

DR. DANA: Right.

TONY DITERLIZZI: Kevin loved it. He ended up publishing it. It was Holly's first book, *Tithe*. And so at the same time that all that's happening, *Spiderwick* is now coming up to speed and developing. And it's becoming very clear to me that it's a much bigger project than I can handle. And we were also thinking that the story would be 400 or 500 pages possibly, and I was worried that it would go into direct competition with *Harry Potter*, which was on the rise at the time. *The Series of Unfortunate Events* had been launched at the time, I think *Artemis Fowl* might have even been out. There was a lot of these fantasy middle grade books that were pretty hefty in size.

And we kind of brought in for our comps *Magic Treehouse* and *Time Warp Trio*. I mean, we were thinking of books that were much slimmer, smaller adventures because our protagonists were, you know, in third or fourth grade. And so that kind of led to taking the main story and then breaking it up into the five smaller stories. And Holly wrote them and we worked together on the plots, but ultimately she did all the writing. It was very collaborative, it was very unusual. I showed Holly all the art, she had input on the art. It was a great and an incredible experience. We had no idea they would do as well as they did, but there it is. We made something special.

And all I can think back on, even as the movie was happening and we'd be on the red carpet doing our interviews and stuff, and all I could think about was, you know, this came out of me being bored one Spring— one Summer back in the early 80s in a podunk town in Florida and just the idea of being bored and what happens once you're bored, like what do you do? What do you create? And that this thing was born from that little seed.

DR. DANA: How would you describe meeting young fans of *The Spiderwick Chronicles*?

[LAUGHTER]

TONY DITERLIZZI: All my fans— it's interesting, Dana, because I'm here in a studio that's the bottom— it's the basement of our house and it's a beautiful space. It walks out into the backyard, and I have a studio manager who comes in a couple of days a week and helps me out with all the important stuff that I don't know how to do, and obviously I have Angela and my daughter. But for the most part, it's pretty quiet here and it's pretty solitary. And that's really most of the creative process for me. I mean, I'm showing it to people and getting feedback, but the real like I got to sit down and write, that's days and days, weeks and weeks, months and months of sitting in a chair and writing. And when I'm doing the art, it's the same thing, but I'm just sitting in a drawing table sketching or painting.

So anytime I'm in a public space and I'm doing an event or a book signing, I cannot express in words how that love from the people who read my books, young and old alike, who've been following my career from the beginning or have just learned about who I was that day, telling me they love what I do and allowing me to continue to do what I do is incredibly validating because I'm making it for myself, but I'm also making it to be consumed by other people. And so to hear that people grew up reading my books or young kids love *Spiderwick*, they're now college age or older, you know, loved *Spiderwick*, I'm incredibly flattered and I'm very touched. The high school kid who dreamed of making kid's books never thought it would get to where we're at now.

DR. DANA: Switching to another series, your *WondLa* science fiction trilogy, I'm wondering if you could read a passage from the first book, *The Search for WondLa*.

TONY DITERLIZZI: I'd be happy to.

DR. DANA: I'll introduce it by saying that Eva Nine is a human girl who has emerged from her underground sanctuary into an entirely alien world. She is journeying with two other non-human characters, and along with her robot mother, is about to enter an alien village for the first time, as is the reader.

TONY DITERLIZZI: "They entered the base of the tower through a high archway with stairs spiraling up through it. Rovender pointed to one of the many colored lanterns illuminating the passageway.

"Ooeeah! Look, there are green lights. That means there are vacancies, should my friend not be able to accommodate us. Come." Rovender led them on.

The threesome made their way up the abandoned spiral stairway into the tower and emerged in a circular courtyard. They were surrounded by a proliferation of round huts built upon one another in an irregular manner. There were so many of these shacks and shanties stacked high overhead that the dwellings formed a conical bowl that towered up toward the moody sky. In the dim glow that emanated from the numerous windows, Eva could tell that the bottom huts were storefronts and that the travelers had arrived in the middle of an open-air marketplace. Many of the shops were closed, their colorful cloth signage swaying quietly in the abandoned plaza.

"What simple domiciles," Muthr said, observing the architecture, "Yet there is an exquisite intricacy in how they are all intertwined with one another."

"It's amazing!" Eva's voice rang through the quiet square as she captured holograms with her Omnipod. "Can we look around?"

"Not until we find out about Besteel, and put that infernal device away!" Rovender barked.

"What?" Eva dropped the Omnipod so that it hung from her wrist. "I'm not doing any harm."

"I know." Rovender stared up at the pitchy night. "But Besteel may be able to sense the electrical charges that your device emits. Now stay close. We're almost there."

He scanned the area, then ushered Eva and Muthr to a shaky staircase that led up to a lighted, circular doorway on the second tier of huts. Rovender appeared anxious as he helped Muthr up the last few steps. He waved his hand over a blue light embedded in the door, and it switched to yellow. A voice within replied, "Enters." Rovender swung the thick door open and the trio stepped inside.

A smell like wet rotting flowers permeated the air as they entered the cozy, dimly lit home. The antechamber was constructed from a series of wooden circular archways woven together to form

the ceiling and walls. A curtain doorway separated the trio from the rest of the home, and Eva could hear several voices chatting behind it. A lone Halcyonus emerged through the thin curtains into the lighted entry, allowing Eva to take in the creature's physical details. The individual was draped in brightly patterned fabric, which only enhanced the distinct markings of its skin. Eva also realized that the Halcyonus had two mouths—one on top of the head below the nostrils, which she could hear breathing, and one lower, which she soon learned was used for speaking.

"Rovender Kitts!" said the female, for that is what Eva determined she was. "So good to see you agains."

"Hostia Haveport." Rovender approached her with his hand raised. Both pressed their flat palms together in a greeting. "It does my weary spirit good to see you again. Tell me, how is your family?"

DR. DANA: Thank you. One can argue that picture books have word count limits, books set in the real world have realistic parameters, but science fiction, like *WondLa*, has no limits, not language, not species, not laws of physics, like this alien village you are basically world-creating. Was it intimidating to write this series? Exhausting? Exhilarating?

TONY DITERLIZZI: It was all those things, it was all those things. I mean, you asked earlier about my experience working for TSR and Dungeons and Dragons, this is a direct product, a result from all my years of working with Dungeons and Dragons. At the time that I was an illustrator for TSR, I erroneously thought I'm going to draw really cool monsters and a lot of cool wizards and knights and hobbits fighting those monsters. And in reality what I drew were the towns, the villagers, the cities, the armor, the artifacts, the magic items, the things they do, the factions, the philosophies, all the things that are interconnected that make that fantasy world so enriching.

And so I applied— Holly is also a big D&D gamer, I should add. And so we applied a lot of it to *Spiderwick*, but here is where I'm really going full tilt with it because it's an invented world, not a real world, as you said. And so I had to figure out the rules of the imaginary world, so the Wonderland or the Never Neverland, or whatever you want to call it, or Oz. You have to figure those rules out. But really, insomuch as you have to figure out what the main plot is, what the main character has to go through, and then enough of land and world around that character so that it feels both big but not too big, rich with detail but not overwhelming, but really just serve the story. It's really just got to serve the plot.

And so there was a lot of stuff I cut out of it. When I look back now, the first book is very heavy in description. I thought at the time that the book needed that because it was not our world, it was describing the alien world and I wanted it to feel as visual and real as I could. I would probably edit it down a little more today, but in that, it allowed me to move quicker in the second and third book of the trilogy because at that point I assumed everyone's read the first book. It really makes no sense really to start in the second or third book. And so I could move faster through the narrative and the plot in those subsequent titles.

But it was incredibly inspiring. And it was a story that took nearly a decade to figure out what it was actually just about. And I had ideas and images and notes and thoughts about this futuristic world somewhat spun off of *Spiderwick* because *Spiderwick* is a story about the past coming forward to the present, right? Arthur Spiderwick created this field guide nearly a century ago, modern day kids find it, adventure stories happen. And so I thought of the inverse of, well, what if I go a couple hundred years into the future and then bring a story back to the present? What's that like? And so I thought of what that might look like and how that would be, and the things that I liked about fantasy, and the things I liked about science fiction, and the things that I didn't like.

And I was also thinking about classic fairy tales. I was thinking about *Peter Pan and Wendy*, and *Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, and *Alice in Wonderland*, and all those stories and what was similar about them and what was it about them that I loved as a very young kid when my mom or teachers, librarians would read them to me, what was it that I loved when I learned how to read and would read them on my own and shared them with my younger brother and sister, and what was it that kept me still coming back to them?

And my takeaway was that even though the text may feel a little dated or out of touch with our current sensibilities, the stories were still about home and family, even the most crazy ones like *Alice in Wonderland*, I mean, she still wants to get home, she just wants to get back to her sister. And certainly with *Peter Pan* it's a huge, huge thing. And obviously with the *Wizard of Oz*, it's more strikingly so. And that got me thinking, could I do it but skin it in aliens and robots and technology and stuff like that?

DR. DANA: For those listeners who are currently frozen in awe of your talent, can you please tell us what you do when you mess up a drawing or can't get a paragraph to sound right?

TONY DITERLIZZI: Oh, my gosh. I am— well, listen, it's never— I never get it right the first time. And if your listeners don't believe that, you have plenty of outtakes of the reading from *WondLa* to show them that I don't get right the first time.

I think I learned a lot in being an artist and going to art school in that I'm very comfortable and understanding that refinement and reworking and returning and revamping is all part of the process to get to a finished piece of art. And so I apply all that to my writing. I've written horrible stuff that, thankfully, some of it we were able to trim out before it went to press, some of it got to press and it's not so great. I'd like to think I've written some good stuff, as well.

I think as a creator, I am very ambitious and I try to push myself and challenge myself to see what I can achieve and see what I can do and change it up so I'm not telling the same story over and over and over again. I think that would not only make me stale, but I don't think the readers would appreciate it as much either.

I drive the publisher crazy because I will rework and refine right up until it goes to press. The day it goes to press, I'm usually fiddling with it. So I'm a total perfectionist. We're changing little words and where to put one word in this sentence, you know? And I want to do one little last

little tweak on the art in Photoshop and just try to get this thing just right before we send it off, and then I let it go. And then it's out in the world and it's going to do what it's going to do.

DR. DANA: Tony DiTerlizzi, thank you so much for coming on The BiblioFiles today.

TONY DITERLIZZI: Thank you so much for having me. It was a great chat.

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