

Oct 2011 - TONY DiTERLIZZI / Books for Keeps

We met, Tony DiTerlizzi and I, in the foyer of the May Fair Hotel and spent the next five minutes looking for a place where the disco muzak and the final-days-of-London-Fashion-Week hustle were at their least intrusive. This turned out to be perched on one of a pair of decorative, artfully cushioned 'benches' on the mezzanine floor. A first for both of us.

I wondered, as a way of getting things started, if would be true to say that Tony came from a storytelling background. He agreed. "I think that would be a safe thing to say; even though I started out as an illustrator, I always, even when I would do one drawing, had a story, often just in my head, that went with it. I graduated from art school in Florida in 1992, and I felt unsatisfied, I felt like I still hadn't learnt enough and - a lot of people don't know this - I then studied under Will Eisner for a little while..."

[This statement may not mean a lot to anyone who isn't a comics fan; but, as a life-long comics aficionado, I was amazed, and hugely jealous, that Tony had actually met and been taught by one of my all-time heroes. For those who wish to find out more, why not take a moment to visit http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Will_Eisner]

"...Will had retired, and was living in Fort Lauderdale not far from the art school, and I signed up for this comic class. So it was me and a couple of friends from art school, and the rest were just comic book collectors who couldn't draw a line, but wanted to say that they'd been in his class. I learnt so much in the one semester he taught about sequential art.

"In illustration classes it would be 'Draw someone who's angry, or draw someone who's full of joy', but Will would be like 'Draw *jealousy*, draw *envy*', right? And that was always the thing I loved about looking at the Old Master illustrators like Rackham, or in America like Norman Rockwell, that those drawings, those characters are *really* acting. *Really* telling a little bit of story and adding to whatever the words are. So, yes, I think it would be safe to say I come from a storytelling background." Tony goes on to add that he very much looks at the illustrations in a book as "pieces of a whole", and

thinks an error that a lot of illustrators make is that they have in mind they're going to paint, draw, *render* a masterpiece, when it's really a component; for him, he says, the end piece of art is the book.

Tony is, heart and soul, an artist - someone who, right from the word go, has always drawn his world - and he came from what he calls a 'crafty' family, lucky enough to have always had encouragement at home and throughout his schooling. "In 5th Grade [Yr 6] I was having trouble with my book reports, with comprehension, and my teacher suggested I do drawings of my own to accompany my reports, to get extra credit; I couldn't copy from the book, I had to come up with my own drawings. I was very lucky I had people like that in my life...this was a public school, nothing special." Encouragement, he says, goes a very long way with kids.

Words joined the pictures very soon after he left art school, beginning a successful career as an award-winning picture book creator. But it was meeting Holly Black, who had come to interview him for a magazine, that was to change everything. "The origin of the *Spiderwick* stories have kind of a strange genesis, because they started with the notebook that I filled up one summer, when I was 12 years old and hopped up on Brian Froud and fairies and *Dungeons and Dragons*, all the stuff from the 80s that I just loved."

He spent hours drawing trolls and monsters and wrote down a lot of quasi-scientific information, and then summer was over and he forgot all about the notebook. Returning to it much, much later he found himself thinking there was something there. "Early in 2000 I started pitching a story about this man who was like an Arthur Rackham meets John James Audubon, [but] who could see the fairy world. And as the story grew we immediately realised it wasn't just a field guide, there's a story *about* a field guide and the man who created it, and then the field guide itself.

"I was curious about the symbiotic relationship between two *totally* different types of books, and could they work apart from each other, or were they always better suited to feed off each other? It was about that time that Holly came out to interview me on my work for *Dungeons and Dragons* and we hit it off immediately, she knew the folklore really well."

And once *Spiderwick* started to grow in scope and take off as an idea, Tony knew it was bigger than him and he didn't feel confident enough in his writing. Suggestions were made about people he could work with, but he just knew that it had to be Holly. And the rest is publishing history.

If the idea for *Spiderwick* had been around since he was a callow youth, what was the provenance of his latest, one-man production, *The Search for WondLa*? “The earliest sketches I could find are from 1997, 1998, and at that point I was gearing up to do my first book for Simon & Schuster, and I was really starting to evaluate all the dream book ideas I had waiting in the wings. If you look at my old sketch books, on one page you'll see drawings of what would be Thimbletack and Hogsqueal and you turn the page and there's Eva, [my heroine], Muthr and Rovender.

“So what's interesting about that is that I remember thinking *Spiderwick* was about coming forward into the future, and I started thinking about a story set in the future that comes backwards into the past. And the great thing is I had ten years to mull it, let it stew, let it percolate; figure out what it is and what it isn't. I knew I had a lot to say and it's very much *me* talking to *me*...the characters are all me - Eva's me when I was 12, Muthr's the part of me that's over-protective, Rovender's the part of me that's like ‘Yeah, the kid's fine, let her play in the woods...’.” And what about the ‘ruffian and thug’ character Besteel? “Well, when I was a kid I did like catching bugs and putting pins in them, so there's probably a bit of me in him, too.”

The Search for WondLa is certainly one of the biggest, most complex pieces of world-building I've encountered, and I wondered how deeply immersed he got in this living, breathing place - with all its detailed flora and fauna, its weather systems and its sociology - when he was working on the book. “My wife will tell you that when I'm writing I sit at the dinner table with this faraway look in my eye till the writing is done; I've recently got out of that stage with the second book and now I'm just doing the drawings and I can finally put music back on, disconnect and go have dinner. When I'm writing I'm submerged.

“The challenge for me, once I’d figured out the rules and what happened, then was, how do I describe enough to make it lush, but not so much so that it brought everything to a screeching halt? That was very tricky for me. Early drafts had barely any description, until my new editor, David Gale, asked ‘Are you just going to describe things with the pictures?’, and I said no, it’s just that I didn’t want to slow the plot down. He said that I should describe some of the scenes in more detail.”

WondLa does have a lot of illustrative material - although it was never Tony’s intention that it would be a graphic novel - and the book’s evocative two-colour production is a deliberate harking back to a retro 30s and 40s-styling; Tony credits Bruce Selznik’s *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* with opening the doors for him to do something more than just a regular book. “After Brian’s success I knew the publisher wouldn’t be freaked out by *WondLa*, they’d be very open...[doing something different] can be like getting a dinosaur to take a step sometimes, it wants to be sure there’s firm ground for it to walk on.”

With the wealth of material Tony has created for the project was there, I wondered, going to be a guide to Eva’s world? More than likely. “I have three books mapped out, and then for the fourth book what I want to do is more like a travelogue, rather than a field guide...I wanted to get to draw all the little extra stuff that I saw, and Simon & Schuster were completely up for it.”

What Tony has done with *The Search for WondLa* is produce a virtually seamless melding of science fiction and fantasy, or, as he says some people have called it, a 21st Century fairy tale. “I don’t think it’s a fairy tale, but I suppose it does have these total fairy tale tropes: a girl lost in the woods; evil huntsman after her; wicked queen...they’re all there, just not as blatant, I guess. Eva was totally drawn from Dorothy Gale, Wendy Darling and Alice Liddel, and all those stories are about heroines leaving home and going into a Neverland or a Wonderland and kind of learning and understanding what home and the family is, gaining that knowledge.”

In *WondLa*, Tony treads what you could describe as a dangerous path, taking Eva, and his readers, into treacherous places and desperate

circumstances where, without giving away too much, there is more-than-mild peril, murder, torment and loss. Somehow, though, he manages to leave you with a feeling of hope, and a real, visceral need to know what happens next. While he was writing, was he ever worried about whether he could pull this trick off? “Yeah, terrified...originally I was going to play it safe, with Eva being orphaned by Besteel and then Muthr was going to come and take care of her; there are lots of orphan stories - Cinderella, Harry Potter - and they really free you up to do a lot.

“But for me to write Eva I just tapped into 12-year old me and thought about what would happen if I’d lost my parents at that age, and I thought about being a dad and what would happen to my daughter if she lost us. And I realised, this is too convenient for me, I need to explore the process that leads up to that and Eva is going to have to learn a really hard life lesson; but it’s going to shape her and in the end it’ll be good for her. And that’s life, we go through really rough parts and the thing you hold onto is hope, and you hope and pray that something will happen to make it better - I didn’t want to make it *bleak*, but I wanted her to go these permutations we go through. So, it was not in the plan *at all* to end the book the way I ended it, but as I was getting closer to the end I knew I had to be a responsible storyteller; this was the way I had to go, and I couldn’t pull any punches.”

Book 2 is delivered and in the editing stage, the illustrations for it are being done and then Tony will take a deep breath and go straight into Book 3. Does he know how the whole thing ends? “I have roughed out the end, and I have a reoccurring image of what I *think* the ending is, but you don’t know until you get there - you think you know, and then you get there and you’re trying to put a square peg in a round hole.”