

Couples who Collaborate

Tony and Angela DiTerlizzi

MARY-KATE SABLESKI

If you are feeling a bit cranky, the best antidote might be reading Angela and Tony DiTerlizzi's hilarious picture book, *A Very Cranky Book* (Quill Tree, 2023). The first official collaboration from this mega-creative couple, this is a comedic look at a book feeling just a bit "cranky." Inspirational, funny, and creative, Angela and Tony DiTerlizzi are just getting started with their book collaborations.

Tony DiTerlizzi is the creator of the Caldecott Honor-winning *The Spider and the Fly* (2002), as well as the bestselling *Spiderwick Chronicles*, created with Holly Black, to name just a couple highlights of his successful career. Tony began creating art for *Magic: The Gathering* and *Dungeons & Dragons*, eventually achieving his dream of becoming a children's book creator with his first book, *Jimmy Zangwov's Out-of-This-World Moon Pie Adventure* (2000).

Angela DiTerlizzi is the author of picture books *Some Bugs* (2014) and *The Magical Yet* (2020), among many others. Angela began her career as a makeup artist for productions such as *The Today Show* and *Saturday Night Live*, and then found her calling as an artist and an author.

Angela and Tony live in New York City with their daughter, Sophie. As our newest couple who collaborate, they offer a model of a collaborative relationship that seamlessly crosses both professional and personal lines with ease.

Q: How did you begin working on books together?

Tony: Well, *The Cranky Book* was actually not our first collaboration. Angela has been with me since before I started making children's books. She always had input and thoughts, and helped me and supported me, long before my first book was published.



I worked for *Dungeons and Dragons and Magic: The Gathering* all through the nineties, with big dreams and aspirations to one day illustrate children's books. When Ange and I first met and started dating, she noticed a poster I had hanging in my bathroom. It was a promotional poster I found for *Bently and Egg* by William Joyce. I told her how I would love to be able to illustrate like that someday.

Ange said, "All right. Well, let's figure out how to get you there." That is how she is—resourceful, determined, strong, and supportive. Those are her superpowers. Eventually, we decided to move to New York. Angela began as a makeup artist. She worked for NBC; I continued to work for *Dungeons and Dragons and Magic: The Gathering* while trying to make some kind of inroad at the big publishers. I was not making much headway, until a representative for Scholastic Book Fairs showed up in Ange's makeup chair.



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Angela: Yes! Prior to working at *Saturday Night Live* and the *Today Show*, I worked for a company called Mac Cosmetics in Soho, in New York. I had a woman come, and she was going to be with me for about an hour and a half to have her makeup done. She had a tote bag from Scholastic. I took that hour and a half to tell her all about Tony, and that he was an aspiring author/illustrator. She gave me her business card, maybe to get me off her back a little bit. She said, “Yeah, sure, have him contact me.”

Tony: Didn’t you do the makeup on one eye, and you said, “I can do the other eye, but it’s going to cost you?”

Angela: Yes, the negotiation tactic! Immediately, I called Tony, and he contacted her that day. He ended up meeting his editor, Kevin Lewis, who edited the *Spiderwick Chronicles*, among many other books by Tony. Really, even that moment was a collaboration of us saying, “Okay, I’ve got the ball. I’m handing it to you. Run it into the end zone.” We’ve been together for thirty years, and that is pretty much how we do it every time, whether he’s teeing it up or I am. We both take the ball and run with it.

Tony: I am very blessed that Ange has supported me all these years. I was the kid who always drew in the back of the classroom. I drew from kindergarten all the way through high school, and I did not really know what to do with that skill. My senior year of high school, I had a semester long project with my art teacher, in which he wanted me to come up with an amazing portfolio piece to try to get into art school. I did not know what to do, but my brother, who’s nine years younger than me, was reading *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* for a class assignment. I forgot how much I loved that story! I came back to school and said, I want to try illustrating *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. My art teacher told me it was a great project, but said I would need to redesign all the characters, and, by the way, the sketches are due this week. That was basically a truncated version of what my life would become as a children’s book creator. The fact that I finished this book, this version of *Alice in Wonderland* and all my peers loved it, I just felt like I got this validation in the microcosm of high school that I so desperately needed. It was like the universe telling me this is what you should do. I was reminded of that point in my life, for me it was about fifth/sixth grade, where I went from reading books, not because I had to, but because I wanted to read them. I wondered if I could make books for that sweet spot, where reading is not necessarily an assignment, but something you do because your friends are reading a book, or people are talking about a book, or even your parents have read the book. And that set me on that trajectory, but I didn’t know how to get there. Thankfully, I met Angie, and she was able to help me get there. That was a big part of my journey.

Angela: I was the theater kid. I was the kid who was in the chorus. I was the kid who loved doing makeup, but I never saw myself as an artist. No one ever said, you are an artist. It was not until I met



Interior illustration from *A Very Cranky Book* by Angela DiTerlizzi, illustrated by Tony DiTerlizzi (Quill Tree, 2023). Used with permission.

Tony that I realized, there’s someone like me, who has creativity. It finds itself in many forms, whether making puppets or doing makeup, or writing poetry. All of a sudden, I started to form this version of myself, seeing Tony’s creativity.

Tony: When I look back there’s a constellation of people in my life that helped me at pivotal points. I grew up in a creative household where my parents were very encouraging. I didn’t feel self-conscious about being artsy at home. At school it was a little different, but at home, in that safe space I felt I could be as crafty as I wanted. But you need it validated from the outside world as well to continue on the path.

Angela: In high school, we had an assignment to write a poem. My teacher returned everyone else’s assignments except for mine and called me up to her desk. She said, “You’ve got an amazing talent. You should keep writing.” I didn’t hear it then, but I hear it now as an adult. I got this affirmation that I was not really ready to recognize at the time, but now, thirty-five years later, it resonates with me, and I still hear her voice.

Q: Can you tell us about your process of creating books together?

Tony: Well, it is pretty simple. I will read aloud her latest picture book manuscript and tell her I would love to illustrate it, and she’ll say, “No, this one’s not for you.” She just keeps me circling the hook until she finds the one she might let me illustrate. She literally did a book about bugs (*Some Bugs*), and I am obsessed with insects, and she said, “Yeah, this one’s not for you.” I looked at her and said, “But, it’s bugs!”

Angela: I think that goes to the fact, although I do not paint and draw, I am so visual in that way. So, when I write, I do get a mental picture of what I think the final book could look like. Tony is just so beautifully detailed and precise and meticulous in all of his work. And for *Some Bugs* I just felt it was not a match. The book needed to be colorful and inviting—more like Eric Carle. I found the work of Brendan Wenzel and brought him into the publisher,

and said, this is the guy. I think that speaks a lot about our relationship.

Tony: That was a big thing for you early on. You saw how hard it was for me to break in. So, your big thing for many years was to find an unknown illustrator and try to help them get that break into children's publishing that was so difficult to find. In this field, an author saying, "I really want this artist," that can have a lot of sway with the editor and the art director. You do not always get it, but you did a lot of times.

Angela: Absolutely. I love working with new talent, because at one point we were both new talents.

Tony: And the great thing is, we still work together on the book behind the scenes. We work together at every stage of the book making process, whether we have our names on the book or not. That is just how we have always done it.

Angela: We see the whole picture, really.

Tony: An editor is dealing with multiple book projects at a time, but for us, our book is our main focus for months and months at a time.

Angela: We think about the book holistically. And, our careers for that matter. We have the perspective of being together for thirty years. We think about this in terms of, what does a thirty-year relationship look like, and what does a thirty-year career look like, you know?

Tony: Our stories are grilled, cooked, burnt, remade many times over before they even get to the editor.

Angela: In terms of *The Cranky Book*, this was a manuscript I came up with over COVID. We were thinking a lot about feelings. Obviously, we were all having discussions about how we were feeling during this difficult, unprecedented time. For me, I started thinking about Pixar movies. I was thinking, "Fish have feelings and cars have feelings, and, feelings have feelings." I remember one day looking at the bookshelf, and thinking, "What if books had feelings?"

I started on this manuscript, and I would sit at the table every morning and read a bit to Tony back and forth. He would start sketching, and I would say, no, that is not what he looks like. One day, I ran into the library, and I grabbed a book off the shelf, and I told him, "What if this is what he looks like? He's a physical book. We should photograph this, and you draw the features and then we will put them together."

Tony: I loved this, because this was so out of my wheelhouse, and that is what gets me excited. We set up a little photo shoot in the studio. We messed around with the book and just photographed it with our phone. We wondered, if we could just put it into Photoshop, and start drawing on it. That part was very organic, just playing.

Angela: And pushing ourselves right out of our comfort zones.

Tony: Absolutely. So, my art brain immediately thought alright, if we are using a photo, a real element, we could possibly photograph real elements throughout for gags or what have you, then we can contrast that with a very Crockett Johnson-like *Harold and the Purple Crayon* background. Angie liked that a lot. But, for some ideas I had, she said, no, I don't think this is quite right.

Angela: And that is collaboration, right? We end up coming up with this third thing that would not have existed had both of us not given our input into it. That is the beauty of that process. I get energy through collaboration. When you first have an idea, you are creating on your own. You have to try and keep that momentum up throughout the process. But when you are collaborating with someone, they are there to support you. There might be a day that I am not feeling as motivated, but Tony is there to lift me up, or vice versa, and that energy propels us throughout the entire process.

Q: How is it different to work with someone who is not your family member as opposed to working with each other?

Tony: I can't bend them to her will! But seriously, at a certain point, with *The Cranky Book*, I told Ange, "You see this so clearly. I will be your hands and let you make the thing you see in your head." There are plenty of books I created that look like the thing I see in my head, so I was ready to try something new, and this was it.

Angela: For me, being that we are working together, and living together, and parenting together, everything we do is collaborating in every single facet of our lives. At the end of the day, when I get sketches from another illustrator that I have never seen before, there is that moment of surprise of what it all is going to look like, whether it is what I envisioned or not. I do not get that moment with Tony, because I see it incrementally along the way. It is rewarding in a very different way. It is the ultimate trust to know he is there and always wanting what is best. We check our egos. We are best friends. We want to make the book the best possible, just as with making the best choices for our child.

Tony: We really broke it down and rebuilt it a few times, and I just kept asking her really difficult questions, and that was challenging. They were gray, where no one is quite sure of the right answer.

In an earlier version of the book, Cranky just kept getting tortured by the reader, which was funny. But I said at a certain point, "What if this was our daughter? What do we do when she is cranky? What do we do when I am cranky? Or when you are cranky?" I wanted to think about our audience as a parent reading or a teacher reading this book to kindergartners, what would they do? And Angie said, "Well, we would either ask them to take a time out, or just tell them maybe they need a little time out. And, sometimes they give themselves a timeout." So, we thought, that is what needs to happen in this story. We need to figure that out. At some point, Angie said, "But I want them to know they are still loved. That you can be cranky, but as a parent I still love you." And I told her, "That is the end of your story."

Angela: Although we were laughing at his cranky voice, it did become a conversation about social emotional learning. When I wrote *The Magical Yet*, that was really a conversation about growth mindset. I like to think about how to apply these concepts that are really so relevant to students and educators. How can I offer an opportunity to begin those important conversations with our youngest audiences?

Q: Would you describe your workspace for us?

Tony: We are in a fairly modern, new construction home that Ange found during peak Spiderwick, when I was working all of the time on the books. The house was framed out, and she said we could finish the attic or the basement for my studio. So, the art either catches on fire or gets flooded. I chose the basement because this space is unbelievable. It is a big, walk-out basement. It is kind of a weird mutation of my bedroom at ten years old, because I have to be ten so often when I am working.

There are toys, some of my actual toys. Some are recaptured toys from when I was that age. And, lots of books. Ange bought me a Pac-Man machine, and there's a pinball machine. It is a super creative space that is cluttered with toys and books and other stuff.

Angela: We have sofas down here, so we can sit and have meetings and talk about things when we need a break. He has the computer area, a drawing table, and he can step outside for a break. I have an office upstairs, two floors away, so I can also have my own space. I feel like we create in all the spaces of our home, not just one room. Sometimes, we will be in the library and set up with a laptop. Other times, we like to be in the living room or in the kitchen, with all of the hustle and bustle of the household, and our daughter and our dogs. I feel like for the most part, usually, we are together.

We have a lot of original art work from Tony and a lot of other artists whose work we love as well around the house. We have really thought about surrounding ourselves with inspiration. I think that is why we tend to kind of hop around to different places because each one of those spaces almost evokes a different energy.

Q: What has it been like to share your work with children?

Tony: One of the most rewarding aspects, other than creating, in the creative process is getting to share my stories with kids. I love seeing the work do the job that it was intended to do. When COVID happened, I did not have that opportunity. I am so happy to get back out on the road.

Angela: I write books for the six-year-old version of myself. It is so rewarding when I get to sit with children, get their feedback, and see them make the connection with the words or the illustrations.

Tony: It is very validating. You can see how all the decisions you made to create this story and do it the way you did impact people. Winning awards and being on best seller lists are great, but those things are very ephemeral compared to when you meet a child, or

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the parents, and the book is all beat up and the covers are taped back on, or they are dressed up as your character. That is the stuff that you really remember.

Q: Do you have advice for couples who might be considering collaborating on books for children?

Angela: Respect one another's perspectives. And remember what causes you to want to collaborate together in the first place. This is just another facet of our lives that we collaborate in, whether I am making a meal, and we are having a conversation about how to julienne the carrots, and Tony is the sous chef, or if we are working on a picture book together, we respect one another's thoughts and opinions and strengths, and support one another in all of it.

Tony: How do you separate work from life? So, if we are having a heated conversation where I say, I think *The Cranky Book* should be yellow or red, and she says, no, it is blue, it can get heated. We cannot just leave the studio with that argument, and go up to watch TV or whatever. We have to work through the issue, together.

Angela: It took us a while to figure out how to separate our personal and professional lives well, and to see what those dynamics look like. Sometimes I step back and I remind myself, Tony is an artist. He is going to have a perspective. He is going to have a vision, and I respect that. Now sometimes I think that my perspective is better, or my opinion should carry more weight in this case, but figuring that out is important. And just like in this conversation, we are allowing space for both of us to have our own thoughts. What makes any relationship work? It is respect, and the ability to listen, and the desire to have someone become the best version of themselves. &