



Leo and Diane Dillon

Author Program In-depth Interview Insights Beyond the Movie

Leo and Diane Dillon, interviewed in their home in Brooklyn, New York on September 2, 2005.

Program available at www.TeachingBooks.net beginning December 2005.

The answers shown here are transcriptions of the spoken word and are edited by TeachingBooks.

TEACHINGBOOKS: The two of you collaborate on each illustration, creating what you call a “third artist.” Please explain how this works for a married couple living and working together.

DIANE DILLON: The third artist is the combination of Leo and me together. It’s a combination of the two of us who does something that neither one of us could do separately. The third artist concept took a big load off of our shoulders, because we then realized we should leave that third artist to do what it does, and not interfere or try to pull it back to what our separate visions are.

Our collaboration is worth all of the trouble it caused in working it out. We had a hard time at first. Like with anything good, there are rocky times. We had our arguments over how we saw a piece being done. But we learned over the years that there’s more than one way to do something.

It took years to learn how to do that. It didn’t just happen. We learned by trial and error. We found we would sit at the table talking about a manuscript and both agreeing with each other, but when one of us started it, it wasn’t at all what the other one was thinking. So a lot of the initial way we were working was trying to pull the images back to our own concept, and there was always this pulling.

It’s great having someone who can come over and say, “That’s beautiful, but that finger is too long.” And now the hairs on the back of our neck might bristle, but it’s comforting to know that there’s another pair of eyes that can see something, not let it go by, and make it come to life. After almost 50 years, we still have a lot to say to each other.

LEO DILLON: We gave away our separate styles [with the Third Artist], and in doing so realized that we opened ourselves to every style that ever existed on the face of the earth. We try to fit our style to the story that goes with it.

When we decided to get married, we realized that we wouldn’t last a week if we didn’t collaborate because we knew what competitive natures we had after our years together at art school. So we began to embark on a specific program to discover how two people can work together. We always believed that life is a technique; this was simply another technique to learn.

After working together almost 50 years, collaborating is easier than working by ourselves. We always have a friend to lean on, so we can embark on anything.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How do you make your illustrations look so cohesive when you are both creating them together?

DIANE: We've learned over the years how to copy each other, so if he starts it in a certain way, I can come along and continue it in the same way, and vice versa so that we are able to make the whole book look as one piece. If we were to take them separately and Leo would do one complete page and I would do another, they might look different, because we have different touches. Leo likes to do what you call "stumble" where he blends, and he does it beautifully, and he can blend things that are just unbelievable. I tend to "stroke."

So, when we work together, we pass it back and forth and work over each other's work so that the whole piece looks the same. And whatever way we decide to do a book, every page is done that way, so that the whole book has a cohesive quality to it.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your collaborations have earned praise and awards for decades, including . Caldecott Medals for *Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears* in 1976 and for *Ashanti to Zulu* in 1977, as well as five Coretta Scott King recognitions. At this point in your long and acclaimed career, how do you approach new projects?

DIANE: We have the ability now to pick and choose and turn down some manuscripts for various reasons. Usually when we choose a story, we choose it because of the message or visual opportunities it has.

When we start a book we think, "This one's going to be easy." But, it never is; no matter how simple or how graphic it looks, it's never simple. For instance, *Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears*, looks much more simple than *Ashanti to Zulu*, but it took twice as long to do each spread in *Mosquitoes* than it did for *Ashanti*.

Every time we start a new job, we use a medium that we hadn't used for maybe two years. So we have to get used to it all over again. We always have the feeling of discovery, but it's also a time of anxiety because we may get partway through the book before we really get the feel of the medium that we're using and then we have to go back and redo the beginning again. It's interesting. But it keeps us from being bored.

LEO: Yeah. And then when the book is over, we forget that style, that medium, that process and start a new one. And it begins all over again.

TEACHINGBOOKS: When creating the illustrations for *Mosquitoes*, what theme or feel were you going for?

LEO: *Mosquitoes* was one of the first picture books we ever illustrated, and we had in our minds huge graphic images. They would be massive pictures that would seem like fabric. They would be simple to look at, but in that simplicity would say what the words were saying. I remember we looked for an artistic style with the white linear qualities of African batik. We were going for color and form. We were also thinking in terms of movie editing — creating certain close-up views that would concentrate on the feeling of the characters.

DIANE: And *Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears* is very different because there there's no border to hold in the art. It just flows from page to page. In order not to have it boring and to have everything from the same viewpoint, we came in close and then moved back to show the distance, hoping to give it more of an interest from page to page.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You must have done a lot of research before illustrating *Ashanti to Zulu*, which won the 1977 Caldecott Medal.

LEO: We wanted to portray in *Ashanti to Zulu* that it's just not Africa as one big place, but that, like the rest of the world, there are many, many diverse cultures.

DIANE: Also, Margaret Musgrove, the author of *Ashanti to Zulu*, provided one point about a group of people. We thought you can't sum up a whole people with two sentences, so we caused ourselves a lot of trouble with that book by deciding that in each one of those pictures, we'd include the dwelling, a man, a woman, a child and artifact, an animal and some landscape and a bird. It got to be a massive research problem.

LEO: And we pretty much found the things we were looking for.

DIANE: One of the greatest compliments we received was that an African young man said to us that in *Ashanti to Zulu* "You've shown my country. Thank you." We hadn't been there, because we do most of our research through books, so we were very relieved and happy when he reacted that way.

TEACHINGBOOKS: One of you is black, the other white. When you first got together 50 years ago, the racial climate in this country was so volatile. What was that like for you?

LEO: When we first met, we thought that there would be vast differences between us since we were different races and from different cultures. It wasn't long before we began to understand that there really is no difference between people. There might be ideas that you've grown up with and believe are true. But you realize early on that those are really surface things; that underneath it all, we're the same.

DIANE: I think when we first started going together we were both very concerned. And I think our families were, too, on both sides. They were worried, our friends were worried; people advised us on the problems we would have. And it occurred to us at some point that most of the people that had the most advice were people who never had been in the situation that we were in. It was based on beliefs. And I think that when you get to know people, you're able to discover that the things you've been taught are not always true.

In our work, we set out to show all people as beautiful and reflect who they are, so that any child could look at a book and feel proud that he exists in the world. We take as much time as possible to research and make sure that we don't make a mistake when representing a culture.

TEACHINGBOOKS: In the early years of your career, you illustrated mostly science fiction and fantasy books. More recently, you have illustrated many folk tales. What is it about these genres that attracts you?

DIANE: Folk tales and fantasy are fun to do because they offer us freedom to let our imaginations fly, rather than doing something that's very technical or factual. We prefer to have that freedom to invent, and we can do that best with folk tales.

LEO: We still do a lot of science fiction and fantasy work. For instance, we illustrated the covers for *The Abhorsen Trilogy* by Garth Nix, published 1995-2003.

TEACHINGBOOKS: *The People Could Fly* was first a story in a collection of American black tales that won the 1986 Coretta Scott King text award and also won you a CSK illustrator honor. Then, you illustrated a stand-alone picture book by the same name that won you the 2005 CSK illustrator honor. What stands out about this story and the pictures you have created for it?

LEO: I think *The People Could Fly* is one of the greatest images of people aspiring. Virginia Hamilton addressed much more than the escape from slavery — she spoke of the ability of the mind to rise above any adversity that's put in your path. You can soar above it with imagination. She found such a lyrical way of stating it.

DIANE: When we did illustrations for the collection of black American tales, we were limited to black and white for the inside illustrations, and there were maybe two illustrations per story. Shortly after Virginia Hamilton died in 2002, her editor called and asked if we would like to do *The People Could Fly* as a picture book. We said we'd love to, because there was so much in that one story, and we welcomed the chance to have 32 pages to really concentrate on emotions, rather than landscape or surrounding visual images. We showed feelings of hatred, anger, fear, exhilaration, the joy of freedom, and so forth.

When illustrating the story for the collection, we discussed how we were going to show people flying; we didn't want them flapping their arms. We said, "We want them lifting, lifting." So we showed people in this effortless lifting and floating feeling rather than flying and flapping.

LEO: I think *The People Could Fly* is about the power of imagination and the power of believing. I think that those two things are the central theme of that story.

DIANE: I think it sends the message to never accept where you are — that there is a better place to be and to strive for it. It was really about escaping, either physically or mentally from the terrible situation that they were in. And it seemed hopeful to me.

LEO: I think that Virginia Hamilton is one of the greatest writers we have. It always boggles our minds as to where she gets her information, because to read one of her books is to find out about lives and things going on that you had absolutely no idea of under the sun.

DIANE: I think, also, she did what we hope to do in our career, and that was to include people who'd never been included before in things like fairy tales and myths and fantasy. Some of the first projects that we did for her work were the covers for the Justice series: *Justice and Her Brothers*, *Dustland* and *The Gathering*. You rarely ever saw black children in science fiction stories. She just opened up a whole world there.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You've authored books as well, including *Rap a Tap Tap: Here's Bojangles — Think of That!* a 2003 Coretta Scott King Illustrator Honor Book.

DIANE: We don't consider ourselves authors at all. We wrote *Bojangles* with a lot of trepidation, because we have illustrated some of the greatest authors, including Virginia Hamilton, Nancy Willard and too many to name. And we felt that it was kind of cheeky to try to compete with that, because we're not writers. We felt we could get away with it if we kept the text very simple.

LEO: And we could cover the emotion of *Rap-a-Tap-Tap* in the pictures. It's a picture book in the true sense of the word, in that the words are really just openings into the illustration.

DIANE: We just wrote another book on jazz, called *Jazz on a Saturday Night*, which is sort of a companion to *Bojangles*. And, again, we used just very simple rhyme, two or four lines to a page.

TEACHINGBOOKS: The book *Earth Mother* has peaceful yet thought-provoking text, for which you created breath-taking and symbolic illustrations. What was your reaction to the chance to illustrate *Earth Mother*?

DIANE: The manuscript for *Earth Mother* had everything. It had visual opportunities, it had a message and it was just beautifully written. As soon as we both had read it, we said we've got to do it, no matter what.

Earth Mother tells a story in so few words but says so much about acceptance and about not trying to change things or force people to be different than who they are. The message is to accept each person's viewpoint, to accept that they all think differently and all things are perfect in their own way. It's a wonderful message.

LEO: We choose books in part because of the spiritualist quality of them. And if we find something in those books that resonates with us, that's the book we choose.

Earth Mother tends to exemplify everything we're after in a children's book. It was really a pleasure to illustrate in part because it is really kind of a statement about our intent in life. We have learned to accept things as they are — not to try to change them, but simply go with them — and everything will be fine. Life is its own perfect thing, and I can't think of another story that's said it better than this one. I think that's one of the things that drew us so strongly to that story.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Using *Earth Mother* as the example, please walk us through your illustration process.

LEO: When we receive a manuscript, we both individually read it and get our own thoughts. Then, we sit down and talk to each other and find out what's in the other person's mind. Usually, after all this time, we both either like it or we don't. And if we like it, then we usually both like it for the same reasons. Then, we start talking and talking.

For *Earth Mother*, one of the first things we asked ourselves was, "Who is Earth Mother? What does she look like? What should we base her character on?"

DIANE: There are little hints in the story. Ellen Jackson mentions things like Kente cloth, so we knew it was about an African Earth Mother. There are other little clues. We read the manuscript over and over and over again to catch those little things, because it makes a complete difference if, for instance, we miss the fact that she said it was night. Also, we illustrate between the lines. An author may not mention foliage or the surroundings. But as illustrators, we build that world visually.

When we're creating a picture book, we think in terms of whether it happens in one day or over a period of days. We usually work from the first page to the last page. We don't jump around, because we want that consecutive feeling of the passing of time, the time of day. And we go back to just before the story started for the title page and the cover and then sometimes the back cover.

The process that we go through with all our books is, we discuss it first, then we draw little thumbnails so that we know what the other one is thinking — what the bubble is above our heads. We have learned over the years to throw ideas back and forth, rather than trying to convince the other person that our idea is the right one to choose, because we know there are many different ways to approach something. We also know that if you give the manuscript to five different illustrators, five very different results would happen. We do this for days, maybe even weeks, until both of us get excited about it. Of course, we also do whatever research needs to be done.

LEO: Thumbnail sketches are really our way of conversing with each other. We will do hundreds of thumbnails sitting at the table, just drawing them, and handing them back and forth to each other until we begin to get images that we really like. Then we'll take those thumbnails and begin to expand on them into preliminary drawings.

DIANE: We use a blue pencil because it's a softer lead a softer color, so that we can almost sculpt with the pencil and get a line that can then be tightened up from there. The preliminary drawing is also in a blue pencil, and it's done in actual size. And then from that we use graphite as well as the blue pencil and tighten it up. We work tightly because we work together, and we don't want to leave too much to guesswork.

Then, we make what's called a "dummy" so that the publisher knows what we're thinking. It's a miniature version of the book, with the pencil sketches in position. The whole process takes anywhere from four to eight months or sometimes more. It depends on the technique we're doing, and the amount of complication in the illustration.

TEACHINGBOOKS: There are subtle design elements in *Earth Mother* that seem to add depth and layers of meaning to the illustrations.

DIANE: In a way, Earth Mother is a mythical character, and anything can happen. So, we took some liberty with the illustrations, showing that as she is talking to each character, her cloak changes to reflect what is happening at the time.

LEO: When she's talking to the man about the thing that he loves, the frog is reflected on her cloak. When the frog is talking about the thing that he loves, the mosquito is on the cloak. And when the mosquito was talking about the thing that he loves, the man is on her cloak.

DIANE: Another touch was the flower on each page. We researched flowers from the desert, the marshland, the mountains...and included them as a design element and as a statement of nature.

Some things happened consciously, and some things happened unconsciously. For instance, partway through illustrating *Earth Mother*, we realized we were using a lot of brown in the book, which was sort of a subliminal statement about earth and Earth Mother. It's interesting, because we don't often work in brown.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Describe a typical workday.

LEO: We get up at about 6:30 and usually go to a gym a number of blocks away. Then, we come back, have breakfast and then we begin our work around 8:00 or 9:00. We will work all day until 6:00, with just a break for lunch.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Do you work side-by-side, or do you have separate studios?

DIANE: When we first started, we worked in the same studio, and our drawing boards were side by side. And we were constantly looking at what each other was doing. There was no privacy.

Luckily we now have studios on separate floors of our brownstone. We can listen to our own music, and we don't have somebody looking over our shoulders all the time. But we do get together and carry the work back and forth. Leo will bring it up, and I'll work on it for a while, then I'll bring it down to him. We call each other on the intercom when we're talking about a specific point that we want to clarify. We carry our research back and forth, and it's just an ongoing process. But we both enjoy having our own space.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You taught at the School of Visual Arts in New York City for a period of time. What did you teach?

LEO: They asked us which subject we wanted, and we said we wanted to teach materials and techniques because we feel that the ability to produce a style is as important as the concept. Though all things are as important as each other, having a good concept without the ability to be able to put it down on paper is completely worthless. We were at a school that, at the time, was into more conceptual art such as painting your body and rolling yourself in brown paper and calling this a nonobjective form of creation.

Being throwbacks to another time, though, we decided that people should learn how to draw and how to paint. And they should learn how to use different techniques, such as frisket, etching and lithography. We felt that would stand them in better stead than painting their hair with color and running headlong into a wall.

We did this, and we were proved right, since the school began to find that many people were asking for our course, simply because there was a complete lack of people knowing how to do technique. It was a very lovely time. We spent some ten years teaching, and then finally the illustration work got very busy, so we could not teach anymore.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How did you come to illustrate children's books?

DIANE: It's interesting, the sequence of events. We were students at Parson's School of Design, in an advertising course. Advertising was glamorous, and it paid well, so that's where we thought we wanted to go. We started out with album covers, newspaper ads and posters. And then one thing lead to another, and we found ourselves doing magazine work. From that we got into book jackets. Then, we got some work doing textbooks, and that led into young adult book jackets. An editor saw a cover that we had done for a young adult book and asked if we had ever illustrated a picture book. We agreed to illustrate a children's book, not knowing at all that it was 32 pages instead of one image....

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you do when you get stuck?

DIANE: Leave it alone. Let go of it.

LEO: Go away from it and then come back.

DIANE: Sometimes we can hand it to the other person, which is wonderful. If that happens, it's great. But sometimes, neither one of us can get inspired as to what to do, so we both let it go for a little while.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you like to tell children about your work?

LEO: A number of years ago we went to Brazil, and in a Brazilian paper we ran across the statement, "To the art of life, make life an art." We really were taken with that because we believe that if you approach everything you do as a high art, things around you will be very beautiful, and it would be a lovely way to live. And so we have tried to do that. We have tried to make everything we approach a beautiful thing, no matter what it is and how inconsequential it may be.

DIANE: When you start something, don't think of it as you're going to throw this thing out and that it is just a trial. Do everything you do as though it's going to be finished and it's going to be perfect, no matter what you have to do.

I think it's important for kids to realize, too, that talent doesn't flow out of your fingertips automatically. It is work, and it's scary. There are hard times, bad times that a piece will go through that you have to work through to get beyond that. We don't just draw the perfect drawing the first time we take pencil to paper. It's a process.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you like to tell educators?

DIANE: We like to thank them for taking our books and giving them life and introducing them to the children. It is a collaboration with them as well — the books would just be on the shelf if it weren't for them. They make these books available; they talk about them and they interest the child in them.

Books by Leo and Diane Dillon

- JAZZ ON A SATURDAY NIGHT, The Blue Sky Press / an imprint of Scholastic Inc., 2006
- EARTH MOTHER (written by Ellen Jackson), Walker & Company, 2005
- BETWEEN HEAVEN AND EARTH: BIRD TALES FROM AROUND THE WORLD, (written by Howard A. Norman), Harcourt, 2004
- PEOPLE COULD FLY, THE: THE PICTURE BOOK (written by Virginia Hamilton), Knopf Books for Young Readers / Random House, Inc., 2004
- PORCELAIN CAT, THE (written by Michael Patrick Hearn), Milk & Cookies Press / distributed by Simon & Schuster, 2004
- WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN? (written by Margaret Wise Brown), HarperCollins, 2004
- ABHORSEN (written by Garth Nix), HarperCollins, 2003 (Cover only)
- ONE WINTER'S NIGHT (written by John Herman), Philomel Books / a division of Penguin Young Readers Group, 2003
- RAP A TAP TAP: HERE'S BOJANGLES — THINK OF THAT!, The Blue Sky Press / an imprint of Scholastic Inc., 2002
- ENCHANTRESS FROM THE STARS (written by Sylvia Louise Engdahl), Walker & Company, 2001
- LIRAEAL (written by Garth Nix), HarperCollins, 2001 (Cover only)
- MANSA MUSA: THE LION OF MALI (written by Khephra Burns), Harcourt, 2001
- TWO LITTLE TRAINS (written by Margaret Wise Brown), HarperCollins, 2001

- GIRL WHO SPUN GOLD, THE (written by Virginia Hamilton), The Blue Sky Press / an imprint of Scholastic Inc., 2000
- BLUISH (written by Virginia Hamilton), The Blue Sky Press / an imprint of Scholastic Inc., 1999 (Cover only)
- WIND CHILD (written by Shirley Rousseau Murphy), HarperCollins, 1999
- TO EVERYTHING THERE IS A SEASON: VERSES FROM ECCLESIASTES, The Blue Sky Press / an imprint of Scholastic Inc., 1998
- HER STORIES: AFRICAN AMERICAN FOLKTALES, FAIRY TALES AND TRUE TALES (written by Virginia Hamilton), The Blue Sky Press / an imprint of Scholastic Inc., 1995
- SABRIEL (written by Garth Nix), HarperCollins, 1995 (Cover only)
- WHAT AM I? LOOKING THROUGH SHAPES AT APPLES AND GRAPES (written by N. N. Charles), The Blue Sky Press / an imprint of Scholastic Inc., 1994
- MANY THOUSAND GONE: AFRICAN AMERICANS FROM SLAVERY TO FREEDOM (written by Virginia Hamilton), Knopf Books for Young Readers, 1993
- SORCERER'S APPRENTICE, THE (written by Nancy Willard), The Blue Sky Press / an imprint of Scholastic Inc., 1993
- NORTHERN LULLABY (written by Nancy White Carlstrom), Philomel Books / a division of Penguin Young Readers Group, 1992
- PISH, POSH, SAID HIERONYMUS BOSCH (written by Nancy Willard), Harcourt, 1991
- MIRIAM'S WELL: STORIES ABOUT WOMEN IN THE BIBLE (written by Alice Bach), Delacorte Press, 1991
- TALE OF THE MANDARIN DUCKS, THE (written by Katherine Paterson), Gollancz, 1990
- COLOR WIZARD, THE (written by Barbara Brenner), Bantam Books, 1989
- MOSES' ARK: STORIES FROM THE BIBLE (written by Alice Bach), Delacorte Press, 1989
- PEOPLE COULD FLY, THE: AMERICAN BLACK FOLKTALES (written by Virginia Hamilton), Knopf Books for Young Readers / Random House, Inc., 1985
- THE GATHERING (written by Virginia Hamilton), Greenwillow Books / an imprint of HarperCollins, 1981 (Cover only)
- CHILDREN OF THE SUN (written by Jan R. Carew), Little, Brown, 1980
- DUSTLAND (written by Virginia Hamilton), Greenwillow Books / an imprint of HarperCollins, 1980 (Cover only)
- TWO PAIRS OF SHOES (written by P. L. Travers), Viking, 1980
- TALES FROM SCANDINAVIA (written by Frederick Laing), Silver Burdett Company, 1979
- JUSTICE AND HER BROTHERS (written by Virginia Hamilton), Greenwillow Books / an imprint of HarperCollins, 1978 (Cover only)
- WHO'S IN RABBIT'S HOUSE (written by Verna Aardema), Dial Books, 1977
- ASHANTI TO ZULU: AFRICAN TRADITIONS (written by Margaret Musgrove), Dial Books, 1976
- HUNDRED PENNY BOX, THE (written by Sharon Bell Mathis), Viking Press, 1975
- SONG OF THE BOAT (written by Lorenz B. Graham), Crowell, 1975
- WHY MOSQUITOES BUZZ IN PEOPLE'S EARS: A WEST AFRICAN TALE (retold by Verna Aardema), Dial Books for Young Readers, 1975
- BURNING STAR (written by Eth Clifford), Houghton Mifflin, 1974
- SONGS AND STORIES FROM UGANDA (written by W. Moses Serwadda), Crowell, 1974
- THIRD GIFT, THE (written by Jan R. Carew), Little, Brown, 1974
- WHILWIND IS A GHOST DANCING (written by Natalia Maree Belting), Dutton, 1974
- BEHIND THE BACK OF THE MOUNTAIN: BLACK FOLKTALES FROM SOUTHERN AFRICA (retold by Verna Aardema), Dial Books, 1973
- GASSIRE'S LUTE: A WEST AFRICAN EPIC (written by Alta Jablow), Dutton, 1971
- UNTOLD TALE, THE (written by Erik Christian Haugaard), Houghton Mifflin, 1971

- RING IN THE PRAIRIE, THE: A SHAWNEE LEGEND (written by John Bierhorst), Dial Books, 1970
- WHY HEIMDALL BLEW HIS HORN: TALES OF THE NORSE GODS (written by Frederick Laing), Silver Burdett Company, 1969
- DARK VENTURE (written by Audrey White Beyer), Alfred A. Knopf, 1968
- RIDER AND HIS HORSE, THE (written by Erik Christian Haugaard), Houghton Mifflin, 1968
- CLAYMORE AND KILT: TALES OF SCOTTISH KINGS AND CASTLES (written by Sorche Nic Leodhas), Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967

Note: Bibliography created in December 2005.

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