

Collecting the Dillons: Six Decades of Unparalleled Illustration



When I was ten years old, I found myself captivated by the elegant hands on the cover of a small paperback novel called *Wise Child*, written by Monica Furlong. The hands belonged to two figures – a woman with intense eyes, one arm cradling a bouquet of spindly, dried-out wildflowers, the other resting protectively on the shoulder of a dark-haired girl, whose own hands open to reveal what appears to be a piece of a mask. I read and enjoyed the book, but what stayed with me most was not its characters or plot, but the cover which I found hauntingly beautiful.

A year or two later, another paperback volume caught my eye while browsing the local library – *Sabriel*, by Garth Nix. Again, a woman on the cover caused me to linger over the volume. She, too, had dark, wild hair and powerful hands, which held a sword and a bell as she faced off against a shadowy creature that lurked behind her left shoulder. I *knew* those hands, just as I recognized the otherworldly grace at play in the picture’s muted colors and intricate patterns. As I would later come to learn, both were trademarks of illustrator duo Leo and Diane Dillon.

This early fascination with the Dillons' work, coupled with the fact that their art graced the covers of many of my favorite books, eventually evolved into the desire to collect their work. I knew the Dillons' art primarily from fantasy novels for young readers, but it didn't take me long to learn that their body of work was far more extensive. Just as many lovers of science fiction and fantasy know the Dillons from their work on iconic book covers, children's book aficionados know them from their illustrations in classics like Verna Aardema's *Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears* and Margaret Musgrove's *Ashanti to Zulu: African Traditions*, for which the pair won consecutive Caldecott medals in 1976 and 1977 (and are still the only illustrators ever to have done so).



As I continued to delve into the Dillon archive, I learned that they were also regularly employed to produce covers for literary bigwigs like James Baldwin, Virginia Hamilton, and Isabelle Allende – and that’s not to mention their work in the 1960s and 70s creating covers for pulpy paperback editions of Chaucer and Shakespeare. In all, their published output comprises more than forty picture books and countless books for which they have provided cover or interior illustrations. And “countless” is barely an exaggeration; if there exists anywhere a comprehensive list of the Dillons’ work, it must be in a personal artists’ archive, and has not been made public.

Some might find the idea of collecting without knowing exactly what you’re looking for daunting, but, for me, it’s actually one of the things that makes collecting their work so much fun. I often scout book sales for Dillon titles without having any idea what I’m looking for. A hardcover? A paperback? A picture book? Of course, I sometimes come across titles that I’m already familiar with, but the real shot of adrenaline comes with the shock of recognition that floods through me when I identify the Dillons’ work on a book I have never heard of before. This is just what occurred when I stumbled onto a hardcover book club edition of John Brunner’s *The Jagged Orbit* from 1969 at a convention booth giving away old science fiction books. The Dillons were contracted by Ace – the publisher of *The Jagged Orbit* – from 1967-1971 to create covers for their Science Fiction Special Series, but until stumbling onto my copy, I had seen no record of these illustrations being used for any hardcover editions, book club or otherwise. There is a feeling serendipity that accompanies every new Dillon discovery I make; collecting their work perfectly epitomizes that old book-hunting adage, “You never know what you might find.”

The thrill of the hunt is heightened by the fact that the Dillons' work is unsigned on many of their early book covers – meaning that the burden of identification is left solely to my own abilities – and because the Dillons' style evolved drastically over the course of their career. In the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s, the Dillons were known for an innovative technique that allowed their paintings to appear as though they were produced using woodblock printing. This method, while striking, is a long way from the elegant lines I so admired in *Wise Child* and *Sabriel*: the images tend to be more monochromatic, though they still possess a dark palette, and render their subjects using stylized geometric shapes. Over the past three or four years, as I have grown my collection, I have also been training my eye to see what others don't, and nothing else puts a spring in a book collector's step quite like that feeling.

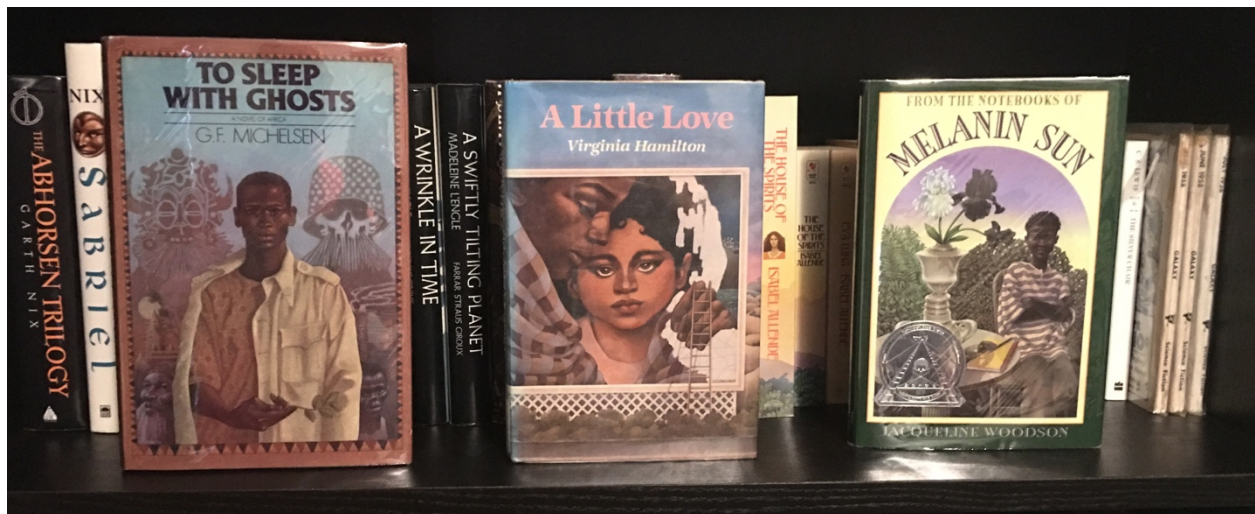


While my interest in the Dillons grew from work produced to accompany fantastic fiction – like their 1969 cover for Ursula K. LeGuin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (another Ace Science Fiction Special) and their now-iconic cover for the 1979 hardcover reissue of Madeline L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time* – learning more about their lives and work has interested me in another aspect of their oeuvre: its engagement with race and the African and African American literary traditions.

Leo and Diane met at Parson's School for Design in New York City in the early 1950s. According to interviews given by the artists later in life, their attraction to each other's work was instant; romance was slower to follow, as the pair found themselves competing to be at the top of their class. By 1957, the couple was married, though their early years were not without their share of challenges. Mostly, the pair was working out a system that would allow them to successfully collaborate for over fifty years, until Leo's death in

2012 – a system that would eventually become their concept of the “third artist,” who was neither Leo nor Diane but emerged from them both. But the young artists also had to navigate the challenges of being an interracial couple pre- Civil Rights Movement America.

Though the couple is notoriously private, generally sharing information only about their work rather than their personal lives, a 1981 book celebrating the Dillons’ work give a small glimpse into the difficulties the pair faced. In Byron Preiss’s *The Art of Leo & Diane Dillon*, Leo shares, “I always had the feeling that unless [clients] knew I was black we would be getting work under false pretense. If Diane went, I made it a point to show up...It raised a number of eyebrows, but we were still given work.” Rather than speak about their own experiences, the Dillons channeled them into their work; in 2002 joint interview, Diane stated, “We’re an interracial couple, and we decided early in our career that we wanted to represent all races and show people that were rarely seen in children’s books at the time.” This commitment is evident not only in their two Caldecott Award-winning picture books, but titles like Virginia Hamilton’s *The People Could Fly* (1985), Leontyne Price’s *Aïda* (1990), and their own works *Jazz on a Saturday Night* (2007) and *Rap a Tap Tap: Here's Bojangles—Think of That* (2002), as well as several others.



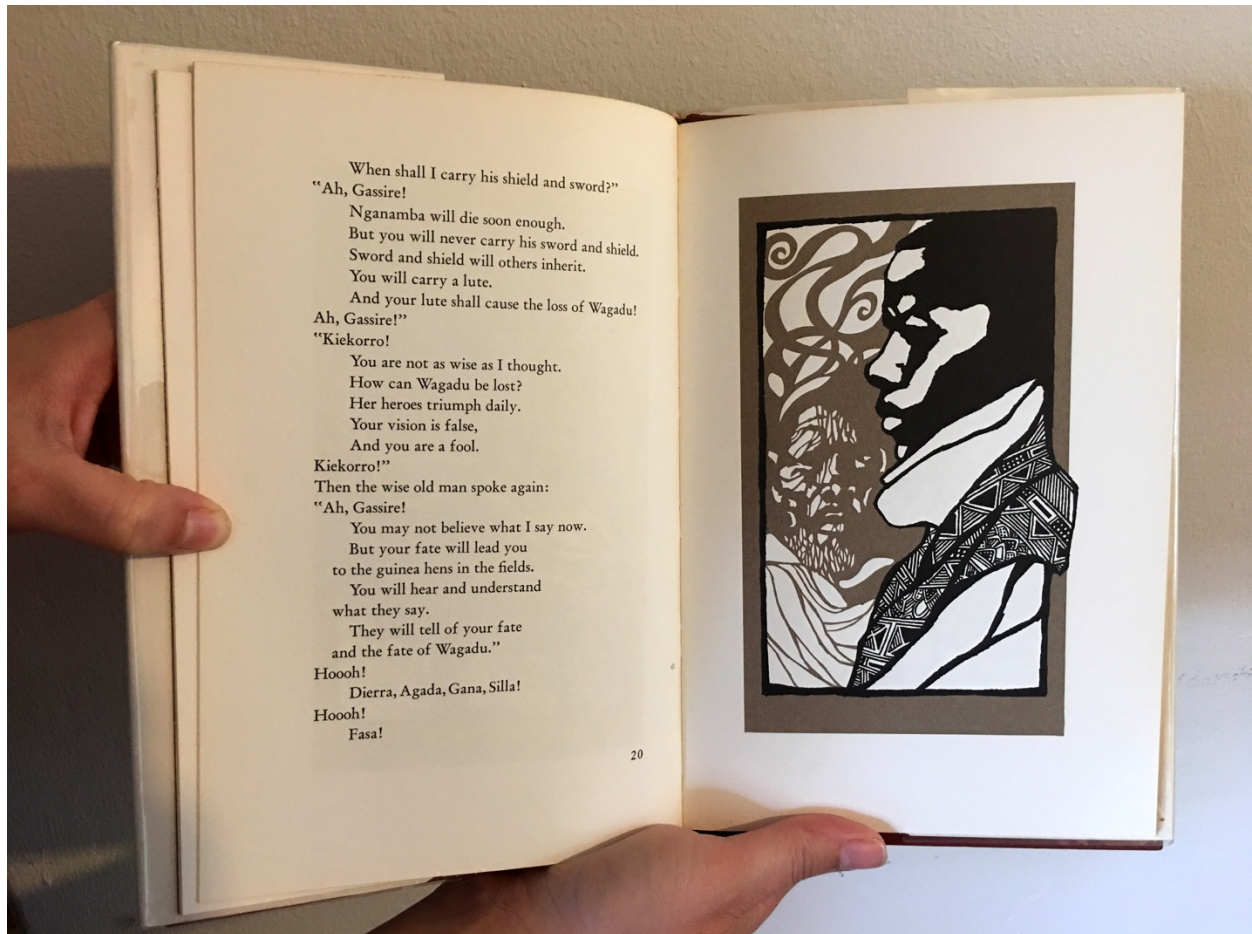
Lately, I’ve also become interested in the paperback covers they produced for writers like James Baldwin (*Nobody Knows My Name*, 1978 and *Going to Meet the Man*, 1976) and Chinua Achebe (*No Longer At Ease* and *Things Fall Apart*, both 1969). I’ve also read that some of their work was taken up and used by the Black Power movement in the 1960s, though I have not been able to find any record of which of their works was used, or in what manner. As my collection grows, I hope to discover more works which speak to the Dillons’ dedication to inclusion in picture books and on book covers.

I began collecting the Dillons because I find their artwork unparalleled – even today, I still find myself enchanted looking through their illustrations for works like Ray Bradbury’s *Switch on the Night* (1992) and Claire Martin’s *The Race of the Golden Apples* (1991). My interest in this collection has grown ever stronger as I have learned how influential and groundbreaking their career has been both for the field of illustration and the young readers who saw themselves for the first time on a Dillon book cover. In the future, I hope not only to discover more hidden treasures during my book scouting expeditions, but also locate prints of their work (now scarce) that were produced in the 1980s and 90s. After all, I can think of nothing more lovely than filling my walls with the art of Leo and Diane Dillon – but I can’t bring myself to cut up copies of their picture books in order to do it!

Bibliography

Picture Books:

Jablow, Alta. *Gassire's Lute: A West African Epic*. Illustrated by Leo and Diane Dillon. Hardcover. Clean, bright text and illustrations; clean and sharp DJ; former library book with accompanying stamps and markings. First Printing. Waveland Press, Long Grove, IL. 1971.



Interior of *Gassire's Lute*

Aardema, Verna. *Behind the Back of the Mountain: Black Folktales from Southern Africa*. Illustrated by Leo and Diane Dillon. Signed & Inscribed by the Illustrators: "To Joan, Our best, Diane Dillon/Leo Dillon, 1981." Hardcover. Clean, bright text and binding; DJ is price-clipped; one-inch tear to top of DJ. Second Printing. Dial Press, New York. 1973.

Belting, Natalia. *Whirlwind Is a Ghost Dancing*. Illustrated by Leo and Diane Dillon. Hardcover. Clean, bright text and illustrations; light wear on hardboard and jacket corners. First Printing. Dutton, New York. 1974.



Interior of *Whirlwind Is a Ghost Dancing*

Aardema, Verna. *Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears*. Illustrated by Leo and Diane Dillon. Signed & Inscribed by the Illustrators: "Best Wishes, Diane Dillon/Leo Dillon 1980." Ownership Inscription: "To Bryan - Your First Book - All Our Love, Mom & Dad - 5/21/83." Hardcover. Clean, bright text and illustrations; faded hardboards and jacket; Price-clipped DJ with edge wear (creasing and crumbling). Dial Books, New York. 1975.

Musgrove, Margaret. *Ashanti to Zulu: African Traditions*. Illustrated by Leo and Diane Dillon. Hardcover. Clean, bright text and illustrations; clean and sharp DJ. Twenty-Fourth Printing. Dial Books, New York. 1976.

Preiss, Byron, ed. *The Art of Leo & Diane Dillon*. Signed and Inscribed by Leo and Diane Dillon: "To Chris Jenison, Our best thoughts, Diane Dillon, Leo Dillon." Hardcover. Clean, bright text and illustrations; small dent to hardboards on bottom right; light wear to jacket edges; faint musty smell pervades. First Printing. Ballantine Books, New York. 1981.

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Hamilton, Virginia. *The Girl Who Spun Gold*. Illustrated by Leo and Diane Dillon. Hardcover. Clean, bright text and illustrations; light wear on jacket; sticker residue, hardboards slightly dented on spine. Second Printing. Blue Sky Press, New York. 2000.

Bradbury, Ray. *Switch on the Night*. Illustrated by Leo and Diane Dillon. Hardcover. Clean, bright text and illustrations; issued without dust jacket; Ownership stamp marks "M. Cutler;" slight denting on cover. First Printing. Dragonfly Books, Decorah, IA. 2004.

Hamilton, Virginia. *The People Could Fly: The Picture Book*. Illustrated by Leo and Diane Dillon. Signed & Inscribed by the Illustrators: "For Annie, Diane Dillon/Leo Dillon 4/3/09." Hardcover. Clean, bright text and illustrations; very light edge wear on top edge of jacket. Fourth Printing. Alfred A. Knopf, New York. 2004.

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Interior of *The Goblin and the Empty Chair*

Herman, John. *One Winter's Night*. Illustrated by Leo and Diane Dillon. Hardcover. Clean, bright text and illustrations; near fine hardboards and jacked. Third Printing. Philomel, New York. 2009.

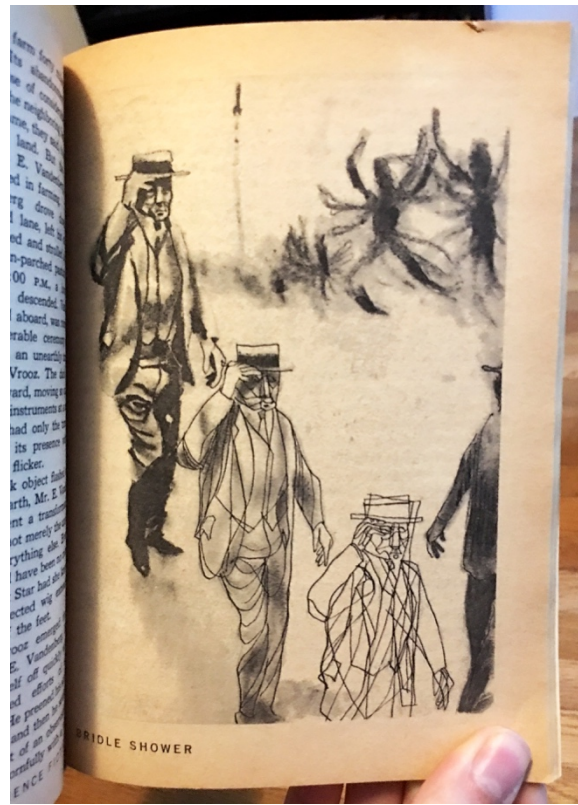
Dillon, Diane. *I Can Be Anything! Don't Tell Me I Can't*. Illustrated by Diane Dillon. Signed by the Author: "For Jessica, Diane Dillon." Signature obtained in person at exhibition of the Dillons' work at the Eric Carle Museum in Amherst, Massachusetts (May 31, 2018). Hardcover. Clean, bright text and illustrations; fine jacket and hardboards. First Printing. Scholastic, New York. 2018.

Other:

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"Bridle Shower" by Lloyd Biggle Jr.



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Text clean; pages yellowed; paper covers show significant spine creasing and
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“The Last Letter” by Fritz Leiber

Galaxy Science Fiction. July. 1958. Galaxy Publishing Corporation, New York. Magazine.
Text clean; pages yellowed; paper covers show significant spine creasing and
edgewear. Stories illustrated by Leo Dillon:
“The Back of Our Heads” by Stephen Barr
“Bullet with his Name” by Fritz Leiber

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Dillon. Clean, unmarked text; edge and spine wear to dust jacket; spotting on boards;
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Blish, James and Norman L. Knight. *A Torrent of Faces*. Cover art by Leo and Diane Dillon. Mass market paperback. Clean, unmarked text; some pages dog-eared; tight binding; dents to cover, creases on spine. Ace Books, New York. 1967.

Achebe, Chinua. *No Longer at Ease*. Cover art by Leo and Diane Dillon. Mass market paperback. Clean, unmarked text; tight binding. Fawcett World Library, New York. 1969.

Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. Cover art by Leo and Diane Dillon. Mass market paperback. Clean, unmarked text; tight binding; spine creases. Fawcett World Library, New York. 1969.

Brunner, John. *The Jagged Orbit*. Jacket art by Leo and Diane Dillon. Hardcover. Clean, unmarked text; tight binding; wear and creasing along edges of jacket; hardboards show shelf wear. Book club edition. Ace Books, New York. 1969.



Le Guin, Ursula K. *The Left Hand of Darkness*. Cover art by Leo and Diane Dillon. Mass market paperback. Clean, unmarked text; tight binding; corner and spine wear. Ace Books, New York. 1969.

L'Engle, Madeleine. *A Wrinkle in Time*. Jacket art by Leo and Diane Dillon. Hardcover. Clean, unmarked text; price clipped dust jacket; shelf wear and creasing on jacket; denting on tops of hardboards. Forty-fifth Printing. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York. 1978.

Seymour, Miranda. *The Goddess*. Jacket art by Leo and Diane Dillon. Hardcover. Clean, unmarked text; tight binding; slight wear to corners of jacket and hardboards. Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, New York. 1979.

Bull, Emma. *War for the Oaks*. Cover art by Leo and Diane Dillon. Mass market paperback. Clean, unmarked text; tight binding; spine creases. Ace Books, New York. 1987.



Allende, Isabel. *Eva Luna*. Cover art by Leo and Diane Dillon. Mass market paperback. Clean, unmarked text; tight binding; slight wear to back bottom corner. Eleventh Printing. Bantam, New York. 1989.

Allende, Isabel. *The Stories of Eva Luna*. Cover art by Leo and Diane Dillon. Mass market paperback. Clean, unmarked text; tight binding. First Printing. Bantam, New York. 1992.

Michelsen, G. F. *To Sleep With Ghosts*. Jacket art by Leo and Diane Dillon. Hardcover. Clean, unmarked text; slight wear on corners of jacket and hardboard. First Printing. Bantam, New York. 1992.

Allende, Isabel. *The House of the Spirits*. Cover art by Leo and Diane Dillon. Mass market paperback. Clean, unmarked text; tight binding. Forty-Third Printing. Bantam, New York. 1993.

Lewis, C. S. *The Chronicles of Narnia: Prince Caspian*. Cover art by Leo and Diane Dillon. Mass market paperback. Clean, unmarked text; tight binding. Harper Collins, New York. 1994.

Lewis, C. S. *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Silver Chair*. Cover art by Leo and Diane Dillon. Mass market paperback. Clean, unmarked text; tight binding; sticker on inside cover. Harper Collins, New York. 1994.

Nix, Garth. *Sabriel*. Jacket art by Leo and Diane Dillon. Signed by the Author. Hardcover. Clean, tight text and binding; clean and sharp DJ; some very slight wear to bottom spine. Thirteenth Printing. Harper Collins, New York. 1995.

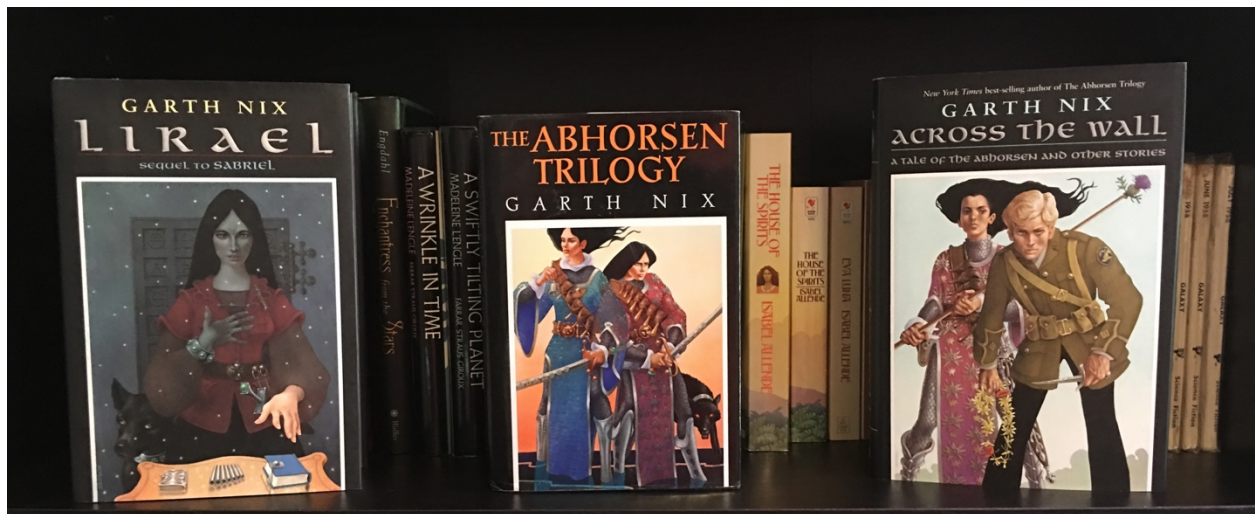


Woodson, Jacqueline. *From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun*. Jacket art by Leo and Diane Dillon. Hardcover. Clean, unmarked text; slight shelf wear on jacket; fine hardboards. Third Printing. Puffin Books, New York. 1995.

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Nix, Garth. *The Abhorsen Trilogy*. Jacket art by Leo and Diane Dillon. Hardcover Book Club Edition. Clean, tight text and binding; clean and sharp DJ with edge wear to top and bottom spine. First Printing. Science Fiction Book Club, New York. 2003.

Nix, Garth. *Across the Wall: A Tale of Abhorsen and Other Stories*. Jacket art by Leo and Diane Dillon. Signed by the Author. Hardcover. Clean, tight text and binding; clean and sharp DJ; slight edge wear to top spine. First Printing. Harper Collins, New York. 2005.

Wish List:

1. *The Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer (Washington Square Press, 1960).

This is the first book cover commission the Dillons received. Since this is where it all began, I would be thrilled to locate a copy.

2. *The Ring in the Prairie* by John Bierhorst (1970).

The Ring in the Prairie is the first picture book that Leo and Diane Dillon illustrated. Like their cover for *The Canterbury Tales*, this is a landmark text for the duo, marking the beginning of their foray into a long and storied career illustrating children's books.

3. Bantam Shakespeare Commemorative Editions, (1963 – ?).

While I know the Dillons began work on this series in 1963, I don't know which plays they created covers for, or how many covers were created in all. This is one of the fun "scavenger hunt" goals collecting the Dillons allows. While I do sometimes buy items online to add to my collection, Googling random paperback editions of Shakespeare plays from the early 1960s is unlikely to yield the results I want. I look forward to the day when I come across one of these titles at a library sale or used book shop.