

Interview with the Honey & Wax Prize Recipients, 2017–2020

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Where are the young women collectors, and what are they acquiring? These are the questions that led antiquarian booksellers Heather O'Donnell and Rebecca Romney to establish the Honey & Wax Book Collecting Prize in 2017. This is an annual award of \$1,000 for an outstanding book collection conceived and built by a young woman, aged thirty or younger, from the United States. The prize was named after the antiquarian bookselling business that O'Donnell founded in 2011, and which Romney joined in 2016. According to the company's website, entries can include "a collection [of] . . . books, manuscripts, and ephemera; and it may be organized by theme, author, illustrator, publisher, printing technique, binding style, or another clearly articulated principle. Collections are judged not on their size or their market value, but on their originality and their success in illuminating their chosen subjects."

Based on their own experiences in the male-dominated book trade, O'Donnell and Romney knew that the shortage of young women buying at book fairs and represented on booksellers' mailing lists did not signify their absence. Indeed, as women have done for centuries in the face of social, cultural, and economic barriers, they were likely working outside, or on the fringes of, traditional channels. The Honey & Wax Prize seeks to find these women and to give them a platform for sharing their fresh approaches to collecting with the broader antiquarian book community.

Two factors in particular inspired O'Donnell and Romney to establish the prize. First, they wanted to create a counter-narrative to the prevailing view among members of the trade that "young people don't collect." While this observation may be true of traditional high spot collecting, many young collectors have developed alternative, and more affordable, ways of meeting the enduring human need to gather and find stories in assemblages of textual artifacts. Second, they noticed that the women they encountered tended to be more hesitant than men to self-identify as collectors, and they hoped that the application process would help more women to see their collecting for the accomplished, goal-oriented, and

legitimate activity that it is. Another objective was to offer a book collecting prize for young people outside the boundaries of an academic institution. The National Collegiate Book Collecting Contest (NCBCC)—jointly led by the Antiquarian Booksellers' Association of America (ABAA), the Fellowship of American Bibliophilic Societies (FABS), the Grolier Club, and the Library of Congress—is the primary channel in the United States for young collectors to achieve recognition, community, and support. The restriction of this contest to college and university students creates obvious barriers to inclusion. By opening the Honey & Wax Prize to all women, regardless of whether they are enrolled in a degree program, O'Donnell and Romney invited a new and larger community into the fold.

This interview with the Honey & Wax Prize recipients from 2017 to 2020 shows unequivocally that, in spite of the rapid growth of digital technologies, physical artifacts continue to mediate the experience of the world for younger generations in ways that are just as personal, complex, and charged as they have always been. Through questions that highlight the roles of craft, design, age, and gender in the development of their collections, these four women reveal new paths in collecting that are guided by creativity, originality, and personal vision rather than allegiance to traditional canons. The results should inspire confidence in the heart of anyone who is concerned about the future of collecting.

2020. MIRIAM BORDEN (MB): "Building a Nation of Little Readers: Twentieth-Century Yiddish Primers and Workbooks for Children." Borden is a PhD candidate at the University of Toronto, where she is a Yiddish teacher, translator, and collector, and a walking tour guide with the Ontario Jewish Archives. She conducts oral histories for the Yiddish Book Center in Amherst, MA and sits on the board of the Ashkenaz Festival of Jewish Culture.

2019. EMILY FORSTER (EF): "Crimes of Passion: Collecting Fan-made Comics and *Dōjinshi*." Forster is a cartoonist



Miriam Borden, Honey & Wax Prize Winner, 2020



Emily Forster, Honey & Wax Prize Winner, 2019



Jessica Jordan, Honey & Wax Prize Winner, 2018



Jessica Kahan, Honey & Wax Prize Winner, 2017

from Hawaii. She currently lives in New York City, where she self-publishes comics and zines with The Yam Fam.

2018. JESSICA JORDAN (JJ): A collection of books designed by prolific American illustrators Leo and Diane Dillon. Jordan is a former bookseller and current PhD candidate in English at Stanford.

2017. JESSICA KAHAN (JK): "Romance Novels of the Jazz Age and Depression Eras." Jessica Kahan is a collection development manager at a public library. She collects antique romance novels and reviews books from her collection on her blog, *thegoodbadbook* (thegoodbadbook.wordpress.com).

Can you please tell us a little bit about your collection? Why does the subject interest you?

MB I collect Yiddish textbooks, primers, and other educational materials produced for children in the Yiddish school system, from its heyday in the 1920s to its twilight years in the 1970s. Teaching children Yiddish in the twentieth century held a special significance: it was one answer to the question of what language best captured modern Jewish expression and identity at a moment of national and cultural awakening, a new era of self-definition. Hebrew, ancient and sacred, was one answer. Yiddish, modern and vernacular, was another.

As a teacher of Yiddish, I am captivated by the passion and fight of the individuals and institutions that came before me and inspired by their commitment to sustain this thousand-year-old language. I collect the evidence of those efforts—the schoolbooks, song sheets, Jewish holiday-themed coloring books, ephemera—in order to remember the fire that once burned, and to learn how to rekindle it.

EF I collect fan-made comics and zines. These days, most people are aware of what "fan fiction" is—the books that make up my collection are essentially fan fiction in comic

book form. While there are many examples of fan art out there, I'm focused on sequential art because I am a comics creator myself. The majority of the books in my collection are Japanese fan comics called *dōjinshi*.

I am drawn to fan comics partly because I love the cycle of inspiration they represent. Each book is the product of someone being so affected by another person's story that they put in an incredible effort just to channel their thoughts somewhere. I am also fascinated by the divide between fan comics and "real" books, and the semi-underground, semi-legitimized world of *dōjinshi* in Japan.

JJ I collect works that feature illustrations by Leo and Diane Dillon, a husband and wife duo whose career together spans over fifty years (Leo passed away in 2012; Diane is still working). They were remarkably prolific, and they are best known for their illustrations in children's books—they remain the only artists to have won the Caldecott Medal in consecutive years, 1976 and 1977—and on science fiction and fantasy book covers. The Dillons' work can be found on records, advertising materials, textbooks, and more. I began collecting their work for the simple reason that I find it astoundingly beautiful, and because it graced some of my favorite childhood novels. It's also a really fun area to collect in; there is no bibliography of the Dillons' work, so a lot of it depends on trusting my eye to recognize their art when I see it. As an interracial couple, they also did a lot of groundbreaking work for representation, and that needs to be documented and remembered.

JK I collect first edition romance novels from the 1920s and 1930s, all in their original dust jackets. My collection consists of American editions, and mostly American authors, with a focus on settings contemporary to their publication. They often first appeared in magazine serializations or syndicated newspaper features before being published in a hardcover edition. The hardcovers fortunately can withstand a gentle reading, as they have sturdy bindings and non-brittle paper.



Emily Forster's fan-made comics and *Dōjinshi* collection.

perfect-bound softcovers, still newer coil-bound or stapled mimeographed booklets, Xeroxed coloring pages. Between the boards, a variety of Yiddish typefaces interplay with different handwritten fonts that change over time, as Yiddish competed with—and was influenced by—aesthetic changes in Israeli Hebrew as it developed through the 1950s and 60s (they share the same alphabet, with differing aesthetic conventions).

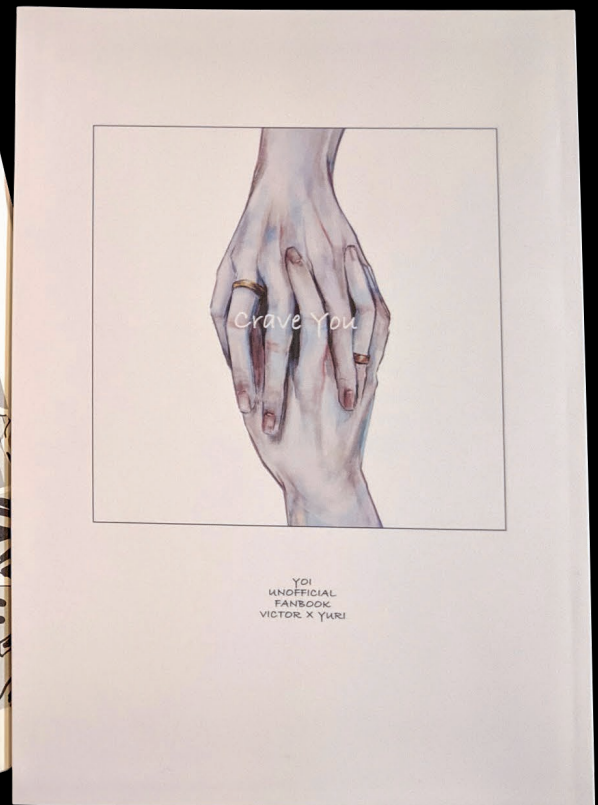
I also look for marginalia that reveals the personality and creativity of their authors as they sat, bored in class, embellishing (and vandalizing) their schoolbooks. Clean copies are good archival specimens, but I especially enjoy marked-up books that were visibly used: students' names scribbled in inside covers (sometimes multiple students, if books were recycled), additional illustrations and commentary (sometimes lewd), workbook exercises that have been attempted. Blank books are only evidence of a language that *could* have been learned, that *might* have been taught. But books that have been visibly used (and abused) are evidence of that learning. They are also foils to the pristine, idealized fantasy world the primers depict: in this world, children at school are happy, helpful, polite, tidy, smart, inquisitive, compassionate, well-behaved. Books that have been scribbled in attest to the world of *other* children: disinterested, irreverent, distracted by classmates and hormones. Workbooks are sites of victory and failure, places where kids make mistakes, where they get gold stars and checkmarks or red Xes. These



messier copies show the learning process at work, acting as material witnesses to the dynamic transmission of the language.

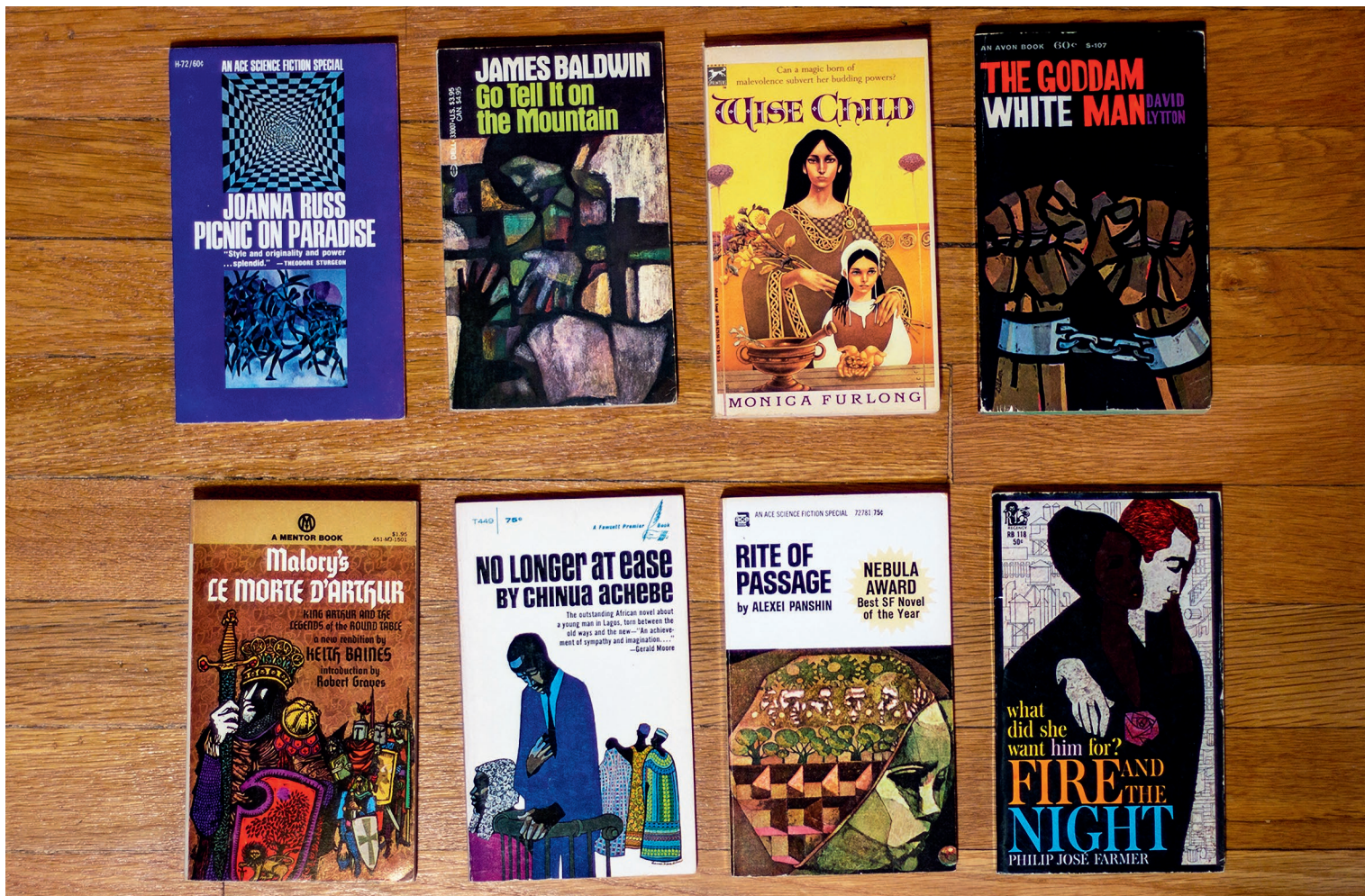
EF For the most part, fan comics are no-frills, the only end goal being something affordable the artist can distribute. The rare ones that show attention to the craft of the book itself always stand out as my favorites. I collect plenty of unassuming comics based on how interesting the artwork looks, but a well-made book definitely tempts me even when I don't have any idea what's inside! Even something as simple as a deliberate choice of paper and ink color can give a book personality and make the object itself shine. Embellishments like transparent paper overlays or metallic accents on covers are not uncommon in *doujinshi*, and I've seen those used in very charming ways. On the other hand, I also have a fondness for hand-stapled or hand-folded photocopy zines. There's something more personal about the most humbly made comics, knowing they came to you directly from the artist's hands.

In my essay for Honey & Wax, I wrote about one *doujinshi* in my collection that enchanted me most: a little book with a die-cut half-sleeve that hides the bottom of the cover and reveals a bustling crowd of characters when removed. I love the way it uses such a simple method to create a surprising change in the mood of the cover art, transforming a still and silent composition into a lively scene.





Jessica Jordan's collection of books designed by Leo and Diane Dillon.



JJ Because my collection is focused around two artists, design is obviously an inextricable part of what draws me to the artifacts I collect; in addition to creating the illustrations, the Dillons often also worked as the graphic designers for the books that bear their art. And what's fascinating about Leo and Diane is that they never confined themselves to one medium or style. Watercolors, woodcarving, pastels, acrylics—I would have to be much more well-versed in art techniques than I am to accurately represent their technical ability, but I can appreciate the remarkable variety of the effects that they achieved, which makes collecting their work such a joy and a pleasure.

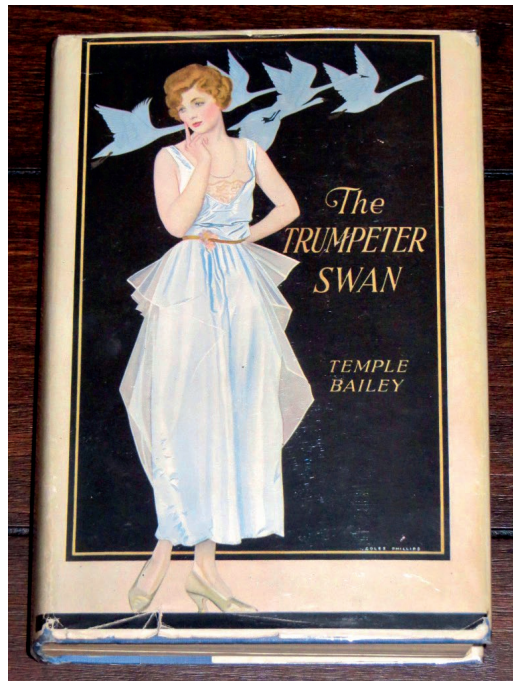
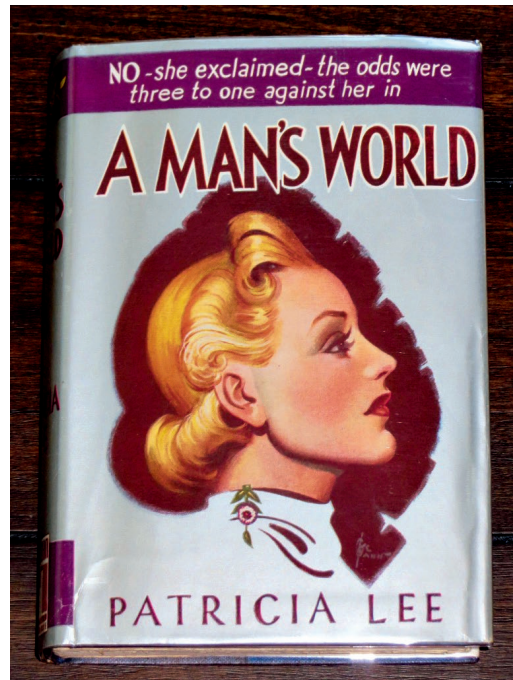
The fact that so much of their work was for the trade market can make the question of quality in book production a little dicier. They did several covers for *Time Life Books* in the 1960s, which are so brittle now they can barely be opened, and early illustrations for science fiction pulp mags are similarly delicate. But I actually love how widely their work has circulated in its various forms. For every child who saw themselves in one of their picture books, or person who fell in love with the world they painted on a cover of a novel, the Dillons' art is part of that relationship. It's a part of people's lives, and if sometimes that means books come into my collection a little battered, it doesn't bother me—the deeply human connection someone had with this book, which has been captured through signs of use, is also a beautiful and rare thing. Of course, hunting down pristine copies of these well-loved and sometimes ephemeral works can also be

very rewarding, as success represents the opportunity to experience the work as the artists originally intended.

JK I have to say, these books were mass-produced for quick consumption. The hardcover editions, when new, ranged in price from seventy-five cents to two dollars. They were meant to be affordable. That said, the materiality of the books I collect is very important to me, particularly their dust jackets. I don't even consider adding a book to my collection if it is missing its original dust jacket. So many titles that are now eighty to one hundred years old have missing or badly damaged dust jackets.

Without a doubt, the dust jackets are my collection's visual hook. They're beautiful and eye-catching. Their style evolves with the times, changing throughout the years. After seeing enough of them, it becomes relatively easy to place cover art within a few years with just a quick glance. My collection includes dust jacket cover art by Peter Driben, Paul Galdone, Polly Hill, Charles L. McCann, Coles Phillips, Alfred Skrenda, Modest Stein, Mach Tey, Charles R. Wrenn, and many others.

The titles I select to join my collection often have cover art that is very similar to others already in my collection. In some cases, a dust jacket will literally be a repeat! The publisher Grosset & Dunlap sometimes recycled their dust jacket designs, sometimes even for the same author. I tend to select covers with illustrations of women on the dust jacket. These illustrations could be close-cropped, or a full-body picture including a fashion



element, with a love interest, or a solo visage, stylized in an art deco fashion, or more realistic rendition. There's some variation, but a bright, attractive dust jacket is a must.

The Honey & Wax Prize is designed for women collectors under the age of thirty. Has your age or gender identity informed your collecting choices or practices?

MB My interest in Yiddish has always been somewhat unusual precisely because of my age. The history of the Yiddish school system is evidence that postwar efforts to

promulgate Yiddish among young people ultimately failed. My age has therefore always been a feature of my work with Yiddish. Individuals who donate their books to me do so with a sense that they are ensuring the future of the language. The people whose books I collect tend to be a few generations older than me, and our shared ability to speak Yiddish allows me to access not only their books, but their memories and stories. Many ask me if I plan to teach my future children Yiddish someday; here again, youth and continuity is a deep concern. But that question is also connected, I believe, to the widespread characterization of Yiddish as the *mameloshn*, the mother tongue. It's a loving term for the language that indicates, in heavily gendered terms, the affective bind of speakers to Yiddish. It is one's mother tongue, the language of one's childhood, the language of one's mother and grandmother. Even those who come to language as adults refer to Yiddish as their *mameloshn*. I cannot say whether this directly informs my collection practices. But subliminally, I suspect a link between my position as a young Yiddish-speaking woman and the generational, future-oriented gaze of those whose Yiddish books I collect.

EF Gender plays a large role in my collection in that the types of fan comics I collect are overwhelmingly made by and for women. You might draw a parallel to the genre of romance novels in prose fiction. Both are spheres completely dominated by female creators, where elsewhere in the arts you will still find plenty of spaces where women struggle to achieve notoriety equal to their male counterparts. Indeed, many fan comics (though not all) have a romantic or erotic focus. While it's not the driving force behind my collection, a lot of the admiration I have for these comics comes from delight in seeing what women create when they have no one to appeal to but themselves. And I don't just mean that the artists are unconcerned with the opinions of men—they are generally unconcerned with any outside opinion. It's not unusual at all to find a *doujinshi* centered on, for example, an imagined romance between two tertiary characters in an unpopular TV series. Perhaps only four other people will ever appreciate such a book, but in the world of fan comics, there is no need for an audience or for editorial approval—only the compulsion to create matters. As an artist I can't help but cherish what comes out of such uninhibited creativity, and as a woman I believe it is an incredibly special thing to find any place where women make all the rules.

JJ This is kind of a funny question because I think it suggests a kind of intentionality which isn't necessarily there. Do I think that my collection and myself as a collector have been taken less seriously because I am young and a woman? Yes, unquestionably. But I also don't think that, for the most part, the rare book community does this on purpose (not that this makes it any less of a problem).

Statistically, women make less money than men, which means they often have fewer resources to build respected collections. Everyone applying to this prize has also spent their entire adult life enduring one economic crisis after another—we don't have money to own houses or start families, let alone collect the kind of books I love to gaze at longingly during book fairs. So it's worth mentioning that this isn't just an issue of gender, or of age, but also one of class.

I understand this issue as being inextricably bound up with a centuries-old anxiety about the proximity between women and books. Women are and have been routinely derided for their taste in books, for their book-buying habits, and for all of the “wrong” ways in which we read. So when Heather and Rebecca point out that a primary motivation for starting this prize was because they frequently encountered women who were clearly collecting books but not identifying as collectors, that observation is deeply tied to all of the ways women have been excluded from the story we tell about how, why, and which books matter.

JK My gender will always be inherently linked to my collection, for I collect within the romance genre. Collecting romance fiction shouldn't be much different from collecting mysteries, science fiction, fantasy, or Westerns, but so often it is. For example, while many antiquarian bookstores, websites, and virtual book fairs often have entire browsing categories devoted to those other genres, finding a browsing section on romance is a rarity.

The stories I collect are mainly for and about women, and often written by women. I don't doubt that contributes to their being undervalued. While these stories were

popular at the time of their publication, they're nearly gone now. They often weren't valued institutionally, and most titles have few holdings in OCLC [an online catalog of worldwide libraries]. I think a lot of the damage is done by dismissing romance novels of a certain era, made clear by how few copies survive, especially in collectible condition. I consider my work in helping preserve an expansive corner of forgotten works by mostly women writers to be a feminist act.

When I began my collection a decade ago, I was approximately the same age as the protagonists in the books I collected. That changed over the years. Now I'd be considered well beyond the pale by the standards of that era! The exception is the trope of the career woman who has made it to thirty and is “missing something” from her otherwise fulfilling life, but I suppose I'm aging past that age bracket as well. Time marches on.

How has your collection developed since you won the prize? Did it convey any other benefits that you would like to mention?

MB A delightful oral history project has emerged from this prize: following a recent presentation I gave, a number of people came forward with tales from their days as children in the Yiddish school system. Some had used the very same books in my collection, some had memories of teachers, some had stories about how their Yiddish education went on to shape their lives. As part of my doctoral dissertation in Yiddish Studies, I plan to develop an oral history project around these experiences. Maybe a podcast, too? Wherever that project leads me, I am both tickled and fascinated by the way my collection of Yiddish



Selections from Jessica Kahan's romance novels collection.

Lux Mentis, Booksellers



Artist books, Design bindings & more ...



The nth Convention
(second edition)
[Julie Rafalski;
David Henningham;
Tahu Deans –
Edition of 30
2009
United Kingdom]

Fahrenheit 451
[ArtistBook Series]
[Ray Bradbury;
Joan
Fontcuberta
[artist]
Edition of 20
2020
Mexico]



Person Woman Man Camera TV
[Mike Talor
2020]

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schoolbooks has elicited a response that highlights the same generational perspective, nostalgia, and concern for the future of Yiddish that the books themselves convey.

EF My collection continues to grow, but strangely, I feel that winning the prize allowed me to slow down a little bit! The process of thinking about what drives me to collect and writing it all down took some of the feverish edge off my obsession. I suppose just being able to share my passion with other people gave me satisfaction that I didn't realize I was looking for. Of course, I don't see myself ever giving up collecting, but I feel like I can be a little more discerning these days and focus on the books that strike me as particularly special. As for the prize money, I've set it aside to go towards buying a risograph printer that my little comics collective and myself hope to use to keep making our own comics, both original and fan-oriented.

JJ Just entering the competition gave more direction to my collecting, since it prompted me to pay close attention to the kinds of items I had, and to research the trajectory of the Dillons' career. It felt really validating to win, and the excitement I felt naturally deepened my interest in creating a bibliography of their work—it is absolutely mind-blowing to me that, to my knowledge, one doesn't exist. My collection has probably tripled since I won the prize; an exciting recent acquisition is the original art for an Avon paperback Western from the mid-1960s—I have no idea the title or author of the book it was intended for, but I am determined to find out! Beyond that, the connection to a broader collecting community, especially one composed of women, has been really meaningful for me. I'm looking forward to the end of the pandemic when some of those connections can begin to happen in person again.

JK I've noticed my collection has taken a more research-driven turn since I attended the Colorado Antiquarian Book Seminar (CABS) in 2019. I have a small reference library of subject-adjacent bibliographies and have been creating publisher checklists to identify collection holes. My personal catalog of the collection has expanded past forty pages and is split into two copies: one with item-specific information (e.g. finding an original owner in the 1930 census) and one that I hope could someday be the beginning of a subject bibliography without the item information but mixed with "ghost entries" of titles yet to join the collection.

Winning the inaugural Honey & Wax Prize was an enormous accomplishment and has meant so much more than the prize itself. It has opened the doors to all sorts of experiences for me and launched a new chapter in my collecting career!