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# Saying Good-Bye to Maurice Sendak, Jean Craighead George, and Leo Dillon

BY LINDA M. PAVONETTI

As I reflect on the passing of three of the greatest innovators in twentieth century children's and young adult literature, I think of all the compliments I have lavished upon Maurice Sendak, Jean Craighead George, and Leo Dillon during the years I have taught children's and young adult literature. One student confidently asserted that, years after his final exam in my class, he clearly recalled what I had labeled the most important book in the history of children's publishing: *Where the Wild Things Are* (Sendak, 1963).

Maurice Sendak died on May 8, 2012. He was the only American illustrator to win the Hans Christian Andersen Award, the most prestigious award in children's literature. *The New York Times* opened his obituary thus:

Maurice Sendak, widely considered the most important children's book artist of the 20th century, who wrenched the picture book out of the safe, sanitized world of the nursery and plunged it into the dark, terrifying and hauntingly beautiful recesses of the human psyche, died on Tuesday in Danbury, Conn. He was 83. (Fox, 2012, ¶ 1)

It was said that Sendak did not write for *children*, he wrote and illustrated for himself, for the child he was. Interviewer after interviewer reported this—some nodding in agreement, others shocked into silence by such a declaration.

A friend, with two young daughters, knew this about Sendak and yet offered him a home-cooked meal when he came to Houston to design the sets for one of his beloved Mozart operas. After dinner, Sendak graciously inquired of the 5-year old, "What's your favorite book?" The child thought for a moment, ran to her room, and emerged with *Pierre: A Cautionary Tale* (Sendak, 1962). *Pierre* is often considered gruesome because the lion swallows the child Pierre, but this 5-year old instinctually grasped that Pierre was a bad boy who deserved to be punished. Sendak understood the psyche of childhood.



Although not as well known outside American children's literature circles, Jean Craighead George and Leo Dillon both leave their imprint upon childhood, reading, and art just as Sendak does. In 1973, Jean Craighead George was the Newbery

Medal Winner for *Julie of the Wolves* (Harper, 1972), and *My Side of the Mountain* (Dutton, 1959), a 1960 Newbery Honor book. Both of these popular Robinsonades—*Julie of the Wolves* (with a rare female protagonist) and *My Side of the Mountain*—consistently rank high on the list of action novels for middle grade students. She passed away on May 15, 2012.

Ms. George, whose father, brothers, husband, and children all embraced careers in the natural sciences, wrote about nature and studied it in depth for her books. Many of her more than 100 books—both nonfiction and fiction—required travel to exotic locales. She followed an arctic wolf pack to ensure authenticity for *Julie of the Wolves* and its sequels. Even so, some of her best stories revolved around her family's pets: *There's an Owl in the Shower* (HarperCollins, 1995), included anecdotes about the owl that resided in the family's shower, and *The Tarantula in my Purse and 172 Other Wild Pets* (HarperCollins, 1996), related amusing tales of her family's disparate pets.



Leo Dillon, who died on May 26, 2012, was half of the artistic duo—and married couple—Leo and Diane Dillon. Referred to not only by their publishers, book-sellers, and friends as "The Dillons," they frequently related the story of their seamless collaboration that began as a fierce competition at Parsons School of Design. The Dillons married shortly after graduation and for a number of years, Diane was the couple's public face because in 1956, a white woman could secure jobs in illustration where an interracial couple could not.

Twenty years later, The Dillons won the Caldecott Medal for *Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears* (Dial, 1975) written by Verna Aardema, and the following year they received a second Caldecott

Medal for *Ashanti to Zulu: African Traditions* by Margaret Musgrove (Dial, 1976). In the 75-year history of the Caldecott award, they remain the only illustrators to win back-to-back Caldecott Medals, and Leo Dillon holds the distinction of being the first African American to win the Caldecott. *The New York Times* praised Leo Dillon as, “one of the world’s pre-eminent illustrators for young people, producing artwork — praised for its vibrancy, ecumenicalism and sheer sumptuous beauty” (Fox, 2012, ¶ 1).



Sendak, George, and Dillon each have left their individual mark on children’s literature. Their legacy—the books they have bequeathed to young people—will remain alive for generations.

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