



An Interview with Diane Dillon

Many books encourage children to aim high, but few take on the small, internal voice that discourages them—the voice that says, “You can’t do that!” Diane Dillon’s *I Can Do Anything! Don’t Tell Me I Can’t*, the first book she’s written without her husband and longtime collaborator, the late Leo Dillon, imagines a girl who learns to put the little voice in its place. Zoe has brown skin, curly hair, and big dreams. Dillon shows Zoe exploring everything from astronomy to deep-sea diving and learning how to tame her internal doubts along the way. *PW* spoke with Dillon about doing research in pajamas, managing pastel dust, and learning to quiet her own little voice of discouragement.

Where did the idea of the conversation with the little voice come from?

I wrote the story in the year after Leo died. It was something that just came to me. I felt like kids need to know that they don’t have to listen to that voice, and they can talk back. I thought the voice should be a character, a little mosquito, or a little character on her shoulder. As I thought about it, I realized that it was a personal thing that each child has, a thing that they picture themselves, and I decided not to give it a personality or a body.

Once you had the idea, did the writing come easily?

I never considered myself a writer. We’ve worked with so many really good authors that I’ve always felt intimidated about that. I’m almost more of a reporter than a writer, I think.

But I’m part of a group of five others and myself who are all friends, and we formed a writing group. I wrote this during that period and when I brought it to them, they were very encouraging.

Then I showed it to [editor] Bonnie [Verburg] and she liked it immediately.

You imagine Zoe as a child of color. What were your thoughts about her?

I was hoping that many children could identify with her. When I first got to know Leo, we compared our childhoods. Leo never saw himself in the picture books that he had. I just took it for granted that I could identify with the books I read. We dedicated ourselves to including people in our work who hadn’t been included. It’s important that children see themselves and feel a part of this world—that they not feel left out or invisible. It subtly gives them the feeling that they don’t belong.

This girl has an idea she’s going to be something. She has much more spunk than I did.

I grew up in the 50s, when girls were taught to be good mothers and wives.

How did working with Bonnie help shape the story?

One of the things she thought about was the little voice. She took the dedication from the copyright page (“This book is dedicated to discouraging the frightened, negative little voice inside our heads...”) and she put it on the beginning page. She clarified it so that people would be sure that that was the source of the voice. And she suggested the subtitle: *Don’t tell me I can’t*, which I think really gives it a spark!

Another thing that she did was that, on the very last page, when Zoe says, “But first I have to learn to read,” I had her holding her book upside down. It was supposed to be funny—she’s a girl and she doesn’t know how to read yet. But Bonnie said, “She’s too smart. She can’t read yet, but she would know which way the book went.” I had to redo that one.

I want to say something about Kathleen Westray, the art director, too.

Oh, good, I was going to ask about that!

I figured out the way I wanted the pages to look, with the borders and the space where the type was going to be, but the images of Zoe infringe on the type space, and I wondered what she would do with that. I think she did a beautiful job! And the way she set apart the voice with a different color was great. It's visually different from the other text. On the dedication page, I gave her that panel and she added a very thin border around it—it's such a nice touch.

The spreads look like paintings, but they have a kind of crisp-edged look, too. How do you do them?

It's a combination of pastel and watercolor. It takes time and patience, but the effect is unique. I work everything out in pencil first, and that's the most difficult part, working out the composition. The drawing is done on vellum and then glued to a surface—usually Strathmore Bristol Board—and then areas are cut out with an X-Acto knife. I shave pastel dust on that area and brush it with a bristle brush and then pull out the highlights with a kneaded eraser.

If the pastel goes onto an adjacent area it has to be carefully erased, or it can be brushed over the first color. When you put down a color it might not be exactly what you imagined. You have to keep adjusting it to what you've already done. If you were using a computer you could just erase it, but with this you can't. You have to change your vision of what you were going to do.

Did you do research for the spreads with the dinosaur and the deep-sea scene and all the rest?

Yes, and it's so amazing! We used to have to get on the subway, go to the main reading room in the library, look through dozens of folders, sign them out, take them home, take them back again when we were done. And now I can just go downstairs in my pajamas, turn on the computer and find what I need. It's marvelous! It's a miracle.

How hard was it to tackle the project on your own?

That was one of the fears in doing this book. Even if we had done something separately, we always signed everything Leo and Diane. Now Leo is gone and that little voice in my head says, "What if they say this is not up to our standard?" It was hard getting started. I kept thinking, "I'm going to be judged separately now." It was uncomfortable.

So you have a little voice, too. What does it say?

The voice just says the same things over and over. But you don't have to listen to it! The story is autobiographical, that's for sure.

Having Leo to bounce something off of, an extra pair of eyes to see something, that worked very well. A lot of people asked, "How can you work with someone else? Don't you think, 'This is your work, this is his work?'" But early on we realized we needed to join forces. We said, "We are one artist. We do something that neither one of us can do individually."

It sounds as if you took your own doubts and made them into a book.

Yeah! I think it's important that children know that that little voice can be stilled if you ask it questions. They can have courage to be anything they want to be. When I started this, it was before the Women's March, and this new awareness of women's self-image and strength, and the #MeToo movement—it was serendipitous that it has come out at this time. I hope it has a long life.

What are you working on now?

At first I said I'm going to retire [after this book], but I'm actually working with Bonnie on another book. It's about family and a rocking chair. Leo and I worked on it and did the drawings, but she wasn't interested in it. Then she looked through the files and she reread it and she said, "I really love this."



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