

First Edition Books: Evaluating Your Find

By John Crawford

Over the course of the five years I have been associated with the Betty MacDonald website and fan forum (bettymacdonald.net), I have received many inquiries from fans and members who wanted to know if their copy of *The Egg and I* (or if I knew whether or not any other book they own) was a valuable collector's item. Let me begin by saying that not all first editions are valuable, even if it is the only edition.

It all depends on several factors. For instance, a first edition of Tom Sawyer likely would not be as valuable as a first edition of *Huckleberry Finn*, mainly because *Huck Finn* was/is the most read, most popular and, most controversial of Twain's works.

Two Basic Questions to Consider

When looking at putting a value on books, particularly first editions, there are two categories to consider: scarcity and condition. Here is some information which might help you on both counts:

SCARCITY: Again, please bear in mind that all first editions are valuable! Just like in any other business venture it is all about supply and demand. For example, in 1979 I bought a nice little book entitled *The Flesh Eaters* by L. A. Morse. It was only released in the mass-market format. That book never made it to the bestseller list, but stayed on those wire book racks found mainly in drugstores - the kind that went round and round till they made you quite dizzy. It went out of print in 1982 and today this book is going for \$99.00 on eBay, depending on its condition. Also, if is a book published by a small publishing house whose author is in high demand today, the supply could be low and high demand would drive up the value of such a book. Recently, a first edition of *Wuthering Heights* sold at a London auction for 114,000 pounds! The owner said he'd found the rare three-volume set in a secondhand store and had paid only 2.00 pounds for it.

CONDITION: The most important factor in determining if your yard sale treasure is of any value is its condition, and that includes whether or not it has its original dust jacket. If your lucky find has any noticeable flaws, i.e. bent corners, names written the fly leaf, faded spine, broken spines, torn pages or, the horror of all horror's, a child decided to play connect the dots or use the book for coloring, you may as well use it as kindling to start your fireplace or BBQ. I know a book collector who took out a second mortgage on his house to purchase an entire collection of Charles Dickens that was appraised at half a million dollars - that is, until his three-year old decided that the black and white illustrations needed some color. Needless to say his collection is now worth about \$200.00. Later, I will give you some useful tips on keeping your prized collection free of bookworms, fading and those adorable little darlings and their need to express their artistic talents.

Some Tips for Determining If Your Book Is a First Edition

There are several methods used to identify whether or not your treasured find is a first edition or a later pressing. Some publishers use what is called a number line, i.e., on the copyright page you will see a series of numbers (1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9) that indicates the edition number. If the numbers from 1 to 9 are shown, then you probably have a first edition. The omission of the first number would indicate that your book is a second edition and so on. However, this rule does not always apply.

Some publishers (such as Random House) state that the book is a first or subsequent edition. In the case of Betty MacDonald's books, Lippincott usually stated what printing it was and what year that particular printing took place. Prior to the mid-1920's there was NO indication what printing the book was. Some publishers quite simply stated that there were no further printings, often using the code "NAP" (NAP is an abbreviation of "No Additional Printings") to indicate that it is the final printing. Buyer beware - there are a few crooked booksellers who will tell that they are selling an actual first edition, when what these n'er-do-well's are actually trying to sell you is a book club edition, also known as a BCE.

A BCE is easily spotted once you know what to look for. Such as: 1) If the dust jacket does not have a book price. If the corner of the front flap has been cut away, that can be an indication that the book is a book club edition and the seller is trying to fool you (some may tell you it was a reduced or donated copy and that they cut off the price); 2) If the outer edges of the books pages are cut very unevenly, be suspicious. Book club editions are often slightly smaller than the original book; 3) Inspect the book carefully; there may be a blind stamp impressed into the back cover of the book. Turn the book over and look in the lower left hand corner near the spine. There may be a small shape impressed on the cover. This also indicates a book club edition; and, 4) Check the copyright page. Some book clubs inform you that the volume you possess is a book club edition.

I should mention that while some book club editions are sought by collectors, most are not.

Using the Internet to Find and Research Your Book

People have asked me, "How do I know if my book is of any value?" To me, all books are valuable. But to get an unbiased assessment, there are quite a few web sites to try. One I would suggest is Abe Books (abebooks.com). Because Abe Books (and sites like it) broker for sellers all over the world, you also can research the value of a book in your collection on the site. They have everything from newly published books to rare antiques.

But is buying a first edition online safe? You must be careful and diligent when buying a collectible book online. Ask plenty of questions, look at the photos, and check the seller's feedback. Ask the seller to scan and email you a copy of the copyright page. A good bookseller will be only too happy to help you and answer

all your questions, as well as offer a refund policy if you are unsatisfied with your purchase.

Caring for and Cleaning Your Collectible Book

Recently I was asked, "I have a first edition book without a dust jacket and the cover needs cleaning, how do I clean it?" You must be very careful when cleaning old books! I sometimes use a dry eraser sponge and lightly go over the outside of the book only. DO NOT try to clean the printed pages! If the book is valuable, however, you should take it to a reputable book dealer that specializes in cleaning and restoring rare books and have the book cover and pages professionally cleaned and/or restored. If you have a true first edition (or other valuable find) it will be well worth the cost.

To help keep your books looking new and crisp, avoid putting them in direct sunlight - it will fade the spine. Dust your books at least twice a month and, once every 6 months take the books off the shelf, dust the entire book and the shelf and inspect the book and shelf for bookworms or silverfish. If your book has been exposed to any form of dampness and smells of mildew, place the book in a plastic bag, sprinkle in some unscented baby powder, then seal the bag tightly and place it in a closet or dark area for about a month. This process should remove the offensive odor. However, do not do this with a valuable book. Take it to a book antiquarian and let them assess the depth of the odor and ask for their suggestions for removing it.

I could go on for hours discussing the dos and don'ts of collecting and caring for your books, whether they are first editions or just an old paperback book that is well-loved and well read. Please, gentle reader, use a bookmark, don't bend the corner of the page in an effort to save your place. Books, like children, are a very precious commodity and should be taken care of, well loved, and, most importantly, preserved for future generations of children. I remember as a child, my mother having a copy of Jane Eyre that had belonged to her mother, who handed it down to my mother, who was to hand it down to her daughter. Being that I was an only child it was handed down to me and, being ignorant of its sentimental more than financial value, I didn't take care of it and lost it for all time.