

DUST JACKETS (and how to keep dust off of them)

by James Dawson

The dust jacket is the paper cover that wraps around a book to protect it. Many people strip off these jackets and throw them away. Bad idea! As with toy collecting, where the box the toy came in is worth more than the toy itself, a nice dust jacket can be the major part of the value of a book.

Dust jackets came into use in the late 1800's. People who collect Shakespeare first folios don't have to worry about them. The first dust jackets were just a plain piece of paper which protected cloth bound books from scuffs and scrapes until sold. Leather bound books don't have them. Sometimes the jacket had simple lettering telling the title and author, and sometimes it was blank; occasionally these blank jackets had a circular or oval opening in them through which the lettering on the book's spine would be visible. As you might guess, very few of these early dust jackets have survived.

Publishers soon found out that jackets were a great selling tool, and by the early 1900's they started to come with artwork on their front panel, sometimes in color and often by famous artists. The jackets could also give short excerpts from the book. It's difficult to buy a book without knowing what it is about and in the days before dust jackets, this information would be on the title page. This is why you often see very wordy subtitles on early books. Jackets could also give a biography and picture of the author and advertising blurbs with rave reviews telling how wonderful the book is. Anything to grab the attention of a potential reader.

By the 1920's the jacket had matured into an important part of the book. Now publishers were discovering that it was cheaper to have the cover art just on the dust jacket so the decorative front covers which many books had were being phased out. Fancy books with plain jackets were out and plain books with fancy jackets were the norm.

Dust jackets often supply important information about the book, not available in the book itself. With many Maurice Sendak books, the only way to find out if the copy is a first is by the price on the dust jacket. Later editions would have higher prices. If the price is clipped off or if the jacket is missing, then the collector must assume it's a later printing.

Like books, jackets sometimes have states if a mistake was found during printing and corrected. The first batch with the error is called the first state of the jacket and can be collectible. One example is on the first issue dust jacket of Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. The back panel of the jacket had a photo of Hemingway, but the photographer's name was accidentally omitted. This mistake was corrected as soon as it was discovered, so the first edition came with two different state dust jackets- the earliest didn't have the photographer's name, the later ones did. That difference is worth hundreds of dollars to the value of a first edition.

Serious collectors want their treasures to be in in pristine, original condition and this is definitely true of books. Since the paper dust jacket is fragile it is the first part of a book to be lost or damaged. Collectible books with jackets may be worth many times what an unjacketed copy would be worth. The condition of dust jackets is graded: mint, fine, very good, good, fair and poor just like books. This information is often abbreviated

in catalog descriptions of books, for example VG/g. The capital letters are the condition of the book and the lower case letters are the condition of the jacket, so this book is in very good condition in a good dust jacket.

The fragile dust jacket is usually not in as good condition as the book itself, for obvious reasons and even a few tears can effect its value. The few pristine jackets on rare books that have survived, command a premium price. In 1995, the only known first edition of *The Marvelous Land of Oz* from 1904 to have survived with its original dust jacket sold for \$27,000. Not bad for a piece of paper.

I recently sold a beautiful copy of a 1931 edition of *Frankenstein* which was illustrated with stills from the famous movie with Boris Karloff. The jacket had a nice full color illustration of the monster, which was not in the book. It was worth about \$400. The same book in equally nice condition but without a jacket would be worth about \$25.

I heard that a novice collector spent thousands of dollars buying expensive science fiction first editions. The dealer later found out that the customer threw away the jackets because he didn't like them! Major mistake. That unthinking act instantly turned a collection worth many thousands of dollars into a collection worth hundreds of dollars. He could have sold them back to the dealer! Even more ordinary books look better with their jackets on.

Years ago, I bought a first edition of William Faulkner's 1927 book *Mosquitoes* at a library sale for a quarter. The book was a beat up discard with pages falling out, but by a stroke of luck the dust jacket was in a clear plastic protector and was in great shape. Even better than that, the library markings were on the plastic dust jacket cover and not on the dust jacket itself, so it was very clean. The design of this jacket was unique to the first edition. A dealer in modern first editions had a nice copy of the first edition with no jacket and offered me several hundred dollars for my dust jacket. I was happy to sell it. Replacing a jacket this way is perfectly legitimate because it was a genuine first edition dust jacket being replaced on a genuine first edition book. This is called a marriage. If a jacket from a later printing or book club edition is altered in some way and put on a first edition then that is called fraud.

Of course, it is only with collectible books worth hundreds and thousands of dollars is when the dust jacket is so important. And these are usually on "modern" first edition fiction and children's books. Dust jackets aren't as crucial to non fiction. And just because a book has a jacket doesn't mean that its automatically worth hundreds of dollars. A book worth ten dollars with a dust jacket might be worth \$7.50 without one. The more valuable the book the more crucial the jacket. The tiniest tears and chips can lower the value.

Beware of fake dust jackets that are color xerox copies of original jackets. They have rows of tiny lines on them so small you need a magnifying glass to see them. These would never be on an old jacket. Beware of dust jackets with a clipped corner on the inner front flap. If they are on a first edition, there is no guarantee that they are first edition jackets.

Dust jackets on rare books should be professionally restored if damaged. Don't put scotch tape on them. Its horrible stuff and will yellow and stain the paper in a few years. For do it yourself repairs, use only archival acid free materials; and put any tape on the back of the jacket, not on the front. Once someone brought in a collectible book to sell that was so bright and clean that I just knew that the owner must have just just

thrown away its raggedy original dust jacket so the book would look “nicer”. What a shame.

I have heard of collectors who took the jackets off their books and stored them in a drawer to keep them safe, but that is not necessary. To keep jackets like new, put them in clear plastic dust jacket covers like libraries use. These come in various sizes and keep the dust jackets from getting dusty and torn. Some clever booksellers sell them. They keep new jackets looking new, and protect and preserve older jackets.

Isn't that just like collecting? You not only have to protect the book, but you have to protect the thing that was made to protect the book. You have to put a cover on the cover. Some 1930's and 1940's books came with a clear acetate protector on their dust jackets. This early plastic usually gets brittle and tears and I've even put plastic covers on them! Thus, I was putting a cover on the cover of the cover of the cover. Is it any wonder that non-collectors think that we collectors are nuts?

Dust jacket covers provide cheap insurance for your nice books.

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