

FIRST EDITIONS AT FIRST GLANCE by James Dawson

In book collecting, everyone (including me) talks about first editions, but what everyone really means (including me) is the first edition first printing. All books have to have a first edition, but editions can be composed of printings and printings themselves can be composed of states. Usually book collectors want the earliest appearance possible of a collectible book and are willing to pay a premium for it. While a first edition tenth printing would technically be a first edition, it would not be the first edition first printing that a collector would value. As there can only be one first printing of a book, but as many later printings as a publisher wants to print and the uniqueness of the one and only first printing of a book can make it valuable.

An edition of a book is all of the printings of that book done from the same setting of type. Second and later printings are still done from the same setting of type. A second edition is done from reset or different type, often by another publisher. Each publisher has its own method of labeling its first. A printing is the group of books printed at one time before the type is removed from the press. Later printings may be made at any later date.

A first printing may have issue points or states which are changes that occur during a printing-either an error which was discovered and corrected and the uncorrected part of the first printing is the first issue, the corrected part the second issue. If there were no errors or if errors were not corrected during the printing, then there are no issue points. Most first editions don't have issue points, but it is important to know the ones that do. There's nothing like buying a first, then discovering that it doesn't have that typo on p. 42 and so wasn't the bargain you thought it was.

I used the word type in the above descriptions because books were once printed from type. In the later part of the 20th century, except for specialized private press books, books were printed from film and now from digitized word processing on computers, but the same rules hold true. A printing is all that group printed in one run whether from type or by computer.

Not all first editions are valuable or even collectible. It is usually only with collectible fiction that collectors become so obsessed with states and printings. All books must have a first edition or they wouldn't exist, but if the book is awful, no one cares if it's a first or not. Value is zip. First editions of the early books of collectible authors are usually valuable, but as that author becomes more popular, and the publisher printed more and more copies of these later books to meet the demand, these will never be hard to find and their value is minimal. This is true of best selling authors like Stephen King and Tom Clancy. What you want is a first of an unknown author's first book who later became very famous.

It is not always easy to recognize first "editions" (even guides to identifying first printings call them first editions- how's that for confusing?). I'm just going to call them firsts. Some publishers started identifying editions in the late 18th century, usually with a very clear statement of edition or printing on the title page but most did not. A general rule for very old books is that unless the book states otherwise, if the date on the title page, is the same as the date on the copyright page (the page on the reverse of the title page) then it *probably* is a first.

But there seem be exceptions to almost any general statement you can make about book collecting, sometimes the title page of a first might be dated one year later than the copyright page date. This usually happened when the copyright was received late in the year and the publisher put the coming years date on it. so the book would appear to be “new” for the next year. Only reference books will tell you when this happened.

If the title page is not be dated and you should consult reference books. You can’t depend on the copyright date alone to establish a first, because the copyright could be enforce for a couple of decades. A copyright gives the holder of the copyright, usually the author or publisher, exclusive rights to the printing of a book for a set period of time. When that runs out, then it is public property and other publishers can reprint it with no royalties paid to the author.

The problem with dating by copyright alone is that sometimes a first can have copyright dates a couple of years previous to the appearance of the first when a chapter or two was copyrighted and printed previous to the book’s publication in a magazine or periodical. This is confusing and the tip off here is to recognize the publishers who did magazines. A first edition is still a first even if parts of the text appeared perviously in another format. Also, books can’t usually be dated by the author’s preface even if it has a date. The original preface written by author would probably be printed in later editions as well. One tip off would be if the preface is titled something like author’s preface to the first edition. Language like that would ONLY be used on a later printing.

By the mid 20th century, many publishers started to make more of an effort to identify printings. Some publishers will state “first edition” or “first printing” on the copyright page. That’s easy. It says first edition and it is a first (usually). With other books, if the book does *not* say anything then it’s a first, because that publisher only identified later printings. Some will use a letter, or symbol or number on the copyright page or even on the last page of the text sometimes. Often a publisher will change their means of identification through the years, so one has to know that. But even worse than that, some books state that they are first editions, when they are merely reprints of books that someone else published, or with slight additional material added. In this case, the book would be a first thus or maybe a pseudo-first. Sort of a first, but not really. This will be fodder for a future article. Publishers themselves can’t always be trusted (can I say that?).

In the last 40 years or so, there has been more uniformity. Most publishers use a number code for the printing (and sometimes the year) on the copyright page. The lowest number is what it is. For instance, if you see “1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2” it is a first printing. These numbers might also run consecutively, it doesn’t matter, its the lowest number we’re interested in. If you see “99 00 01 02 03 04 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3” then the book is a third printing done in 1999. WARNING: if you see a number higher than “1” the book is not a first edition even if the copyright page states in big letters “FIRST EDITION”. (This one tricks me sometimes, when I get in a hurry and don’t read everything.) Naturally, there are a very few exceptions to that, and Random House is one of them, they state “FIRST EDITION” on their copyright pages, but their lowest number in their number code is “2”. These are firsts for them. But, if the lowest number is a “2” without stating “FIRST EDITION” then it is a second printing. Some publishers like Scribner used to use letters instead of numbers, thus “A” would be on their firsts.

Firsts of non fiction reference books might not be special because the collector wants the information only, and mistakes that might exist in these firsts could cause trouble. The collector here definitely would not want any errors in the book. In later printings or editions, the mistakes would be corrected and the book may be revised and enlarged with more information than the first would have, and so be far more useful and valuable to the collector.

There are far too many variables regarding how different publishers mark, or don't mark their firsts to give here. Three important guides to the insanity are: *FIRST EDITIONS: A Guide to Identification* edited by Edward N. Zempel and Linda A. Verkler; *A Pocket Guide to the Identification of First Editions* and *Points of Issue* both of these compiled by Bill McBride. Please refer to these and other guides as they have more information about the curious and sometimes confusing ways firsts can be marked.

With a little experience, all of the above is not as bad as it first seems. Information is crucial to collecting- it can get you a bargain that no one else recognized, or save you from an expensive mistake. Warning: some people selling old books on the internet have no idea of what they're doing.

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