

MISTAIKES IN BOOKS

by
James Dawson

Who would ever believe that collectors sometimes want to buy things that are imperfect, but turn up their nose at that same item when perfect? Mistakes can be valuable, but it has to be the right kind of mistake and it's usually only the mistakes in first editions of collectible books that open the pocketbooks of bibliophiles. The mistakes need to have been corrected quickly therefore making the few flawed copies that slipped by scarce and desirable items. An uncorrected mistake that ran through many printings, is completely uninteresting.

Common mistakes in books are binding errors where the cover was put on upside down, or when groups of pages (called signatures) were either left out or repeated. This happens during printing and binding and are common enough to not only be not collectible, but actually make the book undesirable. They are viewed as damaged goods. Quite a bit different from that famous upside down airmail stamp- there are different rules for each collectible, it seems.

The mistakes that collectors look for are usually printing errors. Misspellings, chipped letters and so forth that can help establish the earliest printing priority of a book. A book with a damaged letter in it was probably printed later than a copy where that piece of type was perfect (except when the opposite is true!). An edition of a book is composed of printings, and printings can be made of states or issues. Technically, a first edition is really a first printing. A printing is a single run of so many books made at one time. If a mistake was found during the print run and corrected then the printing would have two states or issues: the early uncorrected one and the later corrected one. The first state would be the more collectible. Collectors want the earliest form of the book possible. You can have a first first and a later first.

In the early days of printing, each letter was printed directly from a separate piece of type which were stored in drawers, and then replaced after the printing was completed. This was all hand done by printers assistants, who were often called printers devils. Its easy to see how mistakes were made because of all of this hand work. Imagine having to set up a book tens of thousands of words long, one letter at a time. Printers devils got their name because this boring work caused them to release pent up energy in pranks and other forms of mischief. Sam Clemens, started out as a printers devil and look how he turned out! Proof readers are folks who read over books before they are printed to try and catch mistakes, but that is one tedious job, and they don't always get them all. Sometimes instead of destroying damaged goods, printers insert an errata slip which is a cheap way of correcting omissions and typos. Typo is short for typographical error and you might say that the word errata is from the Latin for oops. One oops is an erratum, two or more are called errata. The later printings of the book which have been corrected would not need an errata slip.

Modern technology can not yet eradicate typos and misspellings. Even the spell check in modern computers can't be trusted 100% of the time, as the word may be spelled correctly, but be the wrong word. I can write that sentence as "Evan, a spill chuck en modem commuters can't bee trusteed" and I'll bet my computer will think it's just fine. Let me try....yes. See, what did I tell you! (And computers think they're so

smart! I think we have a little more time left before they finally take over the world). Mouses make errata. My point is, even in this word processed age, we haven't seen the last of typos and goofs in books.

One of the most famous mistakes is in the so called Devil's Bible printed in 1631. For whatever reason, the word "not" was omitted from the seventh commandment and so it read "Thou shalt commit adultery". One wonders is this mistake was really a mistake or the product of someone's twisted sense of humor. I guess they didn't call them printers devils for nothing.

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn must hold the record for most mistakes in a first printing. Some of them are as follows: on p. 57 line 11 "with the was" should have been "with the saw"; and on p. 155: the last "5" in "155" is damaged, and so forth. There are eight of these to look out for in the first edition. And to make matters even more complicated, these mistakes were not all found and corrected at the same time in the printing. And even worse than that, the pages later got mixed up at the binders, so instead of a logical order to the corrections, most copies are what is called mixed states where each copy has its own cornucopia of errors. The more errors the better as far as the value is concerned. A very early state first printing would be worth thousands of dollars more than a later state corrected first.

By contrast, some mistakes don't matter. There was only one printing with no states or issues of *Walden* by Henry D. Thoreau in 1854. Any Ticknor and Fields edition with that date on the title page is a first. The several mistakes in it were present through the more than twenty printings of the book up into the 1880s. Because the mistakes were uncorrected, they don't count because they were in all the early printings and can't be used alone to identify a first edition. Nevertheless, some reference guides and dealers catalogs tediously list them one after another, and tell you that their copy is a first edition because "port" was misspelled "post" on page 24 even though this mistake wasn't corrected for decades, and so collectors don't give two or more hoots (or hoota) about them. The map of Walden Pond was omitted from some copies, but since no priority can be established for that, it doesn't effect value except that most collectors would prefer to have the map.

Usually, these mistakes are harmless misstatements of facts or spelling errors, but occasionally firsts contain libelous material that was deleted from later printings. On rare occasions that material was later proved to be true and reinstated in later editions. Examples of this are *Behind the Nylon Curtain* (uncomplimentary material about the DuPont family) and *In The Spirit of Crazy Horse* (recalled and corrected after a lawsuit filed by the Governor of South Dakota and a government agent who were mentioned unflinchingly in the book which resulted in a ten year legal battle). The libelous first issues of both of these books are very collectible. Years later, both books were reprinted in their original form when the suppressed material was found to be true. And of course, the resulting publicity drew far more attention to the material than if the law suits had never happened. Actually, in these two examples, these mistakes turned out not to be mistakes at all (and so became mistakes by not being mistakes, or something).

Mistakes can be amusing. In the index of the 1934 first printing of Peterson's *Field Guide to the Birds*, the colloquial name for the American Bittern is printed as Bob Pumper instead of Bog Pumper (oh sure, good old Bob Pumper- he used to drive a red

Camero). Most mistakes are far less amusing and are only of interest to the specialist collector. Later states of first editions can sometimes still have value and a very serious collector would want examples of all the states. And many, many books don't have errors in them at all.

But of the making of mistakes, it seems, there is no end. Later editions can have mistakes, but these are interesting but not at all valuable. In my Thoreau collection, a turn of the century edition misspells his middle initial as "Henry B. Thoreau" (how the heck can someone misspell the author's name right on the title page?) and a paperback edition from 1987 that tries to pass off a picture of Robert Louis Stevenson as Thoreau. Imagine books that can't get the authors name right, or know what he looks like.

Points of Issue by Bill McBride; 585 Prospect Ave.,; West Hartford, CT. 06105 is a handy guide to the important mistakes. It is a pocket sized easy to use list of errors to watch for in first editions. Also, any knowledgeable dealer in old books should be eager to help you in your quest for that imperfect first edition.

Hoppy collecting!

This article originally appeared in the Sept. 2003 issue of *The Journal of Antiques and Collectibles* .