

# MY FIRST EDITIONS

by Phyllis Reeve

“Wow.” exclaimed the learned houseguest. “You have a First Edition of *Beautiful Losers*.” Do we? Doesn’t everyone? It seemed that we do and that everyone does not. The learned houseguest fondled the homely little volume, which had cost me a princely \$5.95 only yesterday, in 1968.

My consciousness newly raised, I scanned our shelves for likely First Editions. I would have been more impressed with our largesse if I had not recognised its cause. We bought *Beautiful Losers* when it was first published, and by definition a First Edition. Anyone who buys a lot of new books buys a lot of First Editions. And the book buyer who cannot bear to discard a book once bought, and whose parents and whose spouse’s parents also bought and did not discard a lot of new books, in due course becomes a collector.

I mis-spent an afternoon looking about the house for First Editions of Canadian novels. I have certainly missed a volume tucked in a headboard or under an end-table. I ignored novels published since 1980, as careless non-collectors have not yet divested themselves of *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The English Patient*.

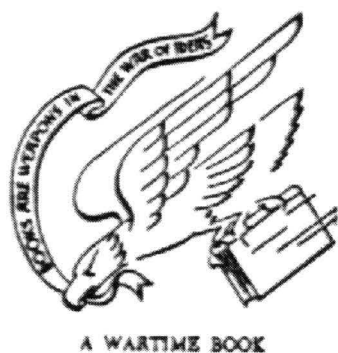
I became uncomfortably aware that I could not describe any of my First Editions as pristine. Every single one has been marked at least with an owner’s name, some with several owners’ names, or a bookplate. But we did not acquire Collectors’ Items; we acquired books, which we read and for which we built shelves and among which we live. Provenance parallels autobiography. When Morley Callaghan published *A Passion in Rome* (1961) we were living and studying in Montreal. Between Leonard Cohen’s *Beautiful Losers* (1968) and Malcolm Lowry’s *October Ferry to Gabriola* (1970), we returned to Vancouver from Los Angeles, launched my husband on his career, bought our first house and welcomed our final baby. The year before the appearance of Jack Hodgins’s *The Invention of the World*, (1977) I bowed to the inevitable and became a librarian by profession as I had always been by nature.

But our copy of Hodgins’s book belongs to someone else’s biography. I have forgotten how it came to us. We have no knowledge of Joan and Don immortalised in ink on the flyleaf: “Joan, ‘Of the making of many

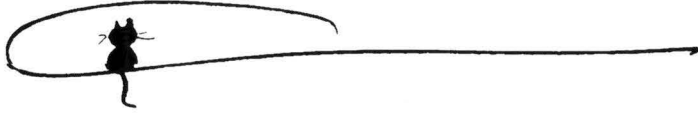
books there is no end, And much study is a weariness of the flesh.’ Here’s one book you don’t have to study — just enjoy it. Don.”

Perhaps the relationship soured and Joan donated the book to one of the church or school sales which I dutifully attended during my Vancouver days, and from which I returned staggering under the weight of other people’s discards, now My First Editions. Or we may have received the book third-hand from friends moving to diminished shelf space and regarding us a more literary repository than the recycling depot.

I picture myself, although I do not recall the incident, coming upon Paul Hiebert’s *Sarah Binks* (1947) in a used book store, and taking her home as a tribute to Bishop’s University Professor, Donald Masters, who used to devote an entire lecture of his Canadian history course to the sweet songstress of Saskatchewan. Robertson Davies’s *Leaven of Malice* (1954) strikes me as the sort of book someone might give to an Anglican priest, so I assume it belonged to my father-in-law. So probably did Hugh MacLennan’s *Each Man’s Son* (1951). Certainly he owned our copy of *Two Solitudes* (1945), or maybe he kept it on extended loan from the Calgary friend who had stamped his name inside. My mom-in-law’s maiden name, in the beautiful clear handwriting I know from years of letters, graces Mazo de la Roche’s *Jalna* (1927), as it does *Whiteoaks of Jalna* (1929, but alas, a second printing). But she returned to *Whiteoaks* to add her married name in ink of a slightly different shade.



Duell, Sloan and Pearce, the American publishers of *Two Solitudes*, emblazoned the copyright page with a line-cut of a determined eagle, bearing in his talons a book and in his beak a banner declaring “BOOKS ARE WEAPONS IN THE WAR OF IDEAS,” and beneath the eagle announced “A Wartime Book.” They explained, “The complete edition is produced in full compliance with the government’s regulations for conserving paper and other essential materials.” The



apology accounted for the book's beige tinge and brownish edges, which, since the type remained legible, did not worry me until I went looking for First Editions.

My own wartime First Editions have fared less well. I blame my parents for allowing me access to crayons. I would like to attribute the destruction to my younger brother, but he possessed artistic talent, and I do not. I fear the evidence speaks for itself. Mary Grannan's *Just Mary Stories* (n.d. 1942?) lost its back cover in the course of hundreds of bedtime readings and suffered my illumination of its drawings. I treated Grannan's *Maggie Muggins* (1944) more kindly, having matured into kindergarten by then, but her publisher, the CBC, had also succumbed to wartime stringencies, and poor *Maggie* has turned a much deeper shade of brown than the *Two Solitudes*. My youngest daughter suggests her generation might take some credit for the gratuitous decorating, but her thoughtful confession still condemns me for failure in parental guidance.

As a teenager, I inflicted a new indignity upon my First Editions. My mother's copy of Lloyd C. Douglas's *The Robe* (1942) survived a decade of adult readings and lendings with only a slight loosening of the spine. In 1953 the movie appeared at the height of my interest in Bible Class and historical novels, to say nothing of Richard Burton. I diligently cut scenes of the film from glossy magazines and scotch-taped the clippings onto the front and back leaves left usefully blank - or almost blank, for I saw no reason not to tape over the copyright and imprint. A few years later I realised my mistake, and removed clippings from a number of books. But by the time I returned to *The Robe*, I knew the tape had long ago caused irreparable harm, and I wondered if the clippings might be as useful as the book itself in documenting popular culture, and youthful vandalism.

Another biblical epic, Thomas B. Costain's *The Silver Chalice* (1952), fared better because, in 1954, it made such a terrible movie that I didn't bother to clip anything except an interview with the author, which I folded and tucked inside without attaching it. The imprint leaves us in doubt about the book's bibliographical status: "First Edition after the printing of a signed and numbered Limited Edition." I am relieved to report that

someone has left us an ordinary, unqualified First Edition of Costain's *Son of a Hundred Kings* (1950).

I conclude with my favourite First Edition: *Anne of Ingleside* by Lucy Maud Montgomery, published in 1939 and inscribed by the author to Marjorie Pyper, the daughter of my mother's best friend. About the time I learned to read, Marjorie joined the WRENS. Before she sailed off to war, she put away childish things, including her Anne books, a grand and grown-up gesture from which I benefited and which I have never emulated. I still have her Anne books, although I have let go to the extent of sharing them with children and grandchildren. At age eight I knew enough to write my own name on a page other than the autographed flyleaf. L.M. Montgomery completed her signature with a flourish incorporating a drawing of a tiny inky cat, a gesture which never fails to charm me when I open the book. I delight too in the frontispiece in colour by Charles V. John, who painted cover illustrations for historical romancers such as Georgette Heyer. He idealised Anne, removed her freckles, and made her arms strangely thin, but he painted her hair red, so I recognise her. I love this little book, battered though it is about the edges and spine, defaced with my childish signature and on one page a highlight (of which I am not guilty), but carrying a trace of the DNA of my first love amongst authors. A rare book. A First Edition.

