



## IS THAT FIRST EDITION ON YOUR BOOKSHELF REALLY A PRIZED FIRST EDITION AFTER ALL?

*Richard Hopkins*

I HAVE BEEN collecting modern firsts for the past few years, initially with attention to Canadian novelists, but then eventually branching out to American and British novelists as well. In that time I have built up a small but growing collection of first editions of some of the novelists I like to read myself. Of course, as someone interested in first editions, my interest is in reading the novel in the state that it first appeared to the public. That means, ultimately, not only the first edition of the work, but the first printing or first state of the work as well.

Now I thought that I was as careful as the next collector when it came to identifying the first edition of any particular work. After all I carefully examined the work in hand giving particular attention to the wording on the verso of the title page. I scrupulously looked for such words of warning as “second printing,” “Book Club edition,” and so on. It was only after speaking to a local secondhand bookseller in Vancouver, who told me that it was becoming increasingly difficult to identify first editions from other editions, that I decided that I had better pay a little more attention to the matter.

Like so many other things I turned to the World Wide Web due to its sheer convenience. As someone who teaches research strategies at a library school I believe it is a useful strategy to turn to the web for an *initial* search. I say initial because so often I have found, and my students have found in a research project, the resources on the WWW are very often quite superficial. So my strategy was, find out what you can on the identification of first editions from the Web, and then turn to print sources for greater depth.

I did in fact find two very useful websites very quickly. The first of these sites is Book Collecting by Rebecca Hanneman (<http://collectbooks.about.com>) and the other is the website of The International Book Collectors Association (<http://www.rarebooks.org>). Rebecca had four entries that proved to be useful: “First Printing or Fifth Printing? How Can You Tell?”, “How to Identify the First Printing of a Book,” “Identifying a True First Edition Book,” and “No Number Line? No Problem!” The IBCA website had an excellent series by Glenn Larsen entitled “First Edition Identification.” Glenn’s subheadings were “What is a First Edition?”, “Knowing the Reprint Publishers,” “Information on Book Club Editions,” “Numbers on

Books,” and a section on the idiosyncratic practices of some 70 individual publishers. What follows now is a summary of what I learned from these two websites.

First, from the article entitled “How to Identify the First Printing of a Book”, comes some general advice about identifying first editions, first printing:

(1) Is the book published by a reprint publisher like A.L. Burt, Collier, or Grosset & Dunlap? If so, its unlikely the book is a 1<sup>st</sup> printing.

(2) Examine the dust jacket (DJ). Does it mention “Book of the Month Club” or something similar? The book is probably a Book Club Edition (BCE) and not a true first, unless the author secured a BOMC deal prior to the 1<sup>st</sup> printing.

(3) Is the price listed on the DJ? If not, the copy may be a BCE, not a true first.

(4) Examine the DJ and front and back cover. Is there a blind stamp (a raised impression, for example a dot or maple leaf)? Blind stamps normally indicate a BCE.

(5) Look at the title page. Does it mention BOMC, Book of the Month Club, or something similar?

(6) Look at the copyright page. Is there any mention of prior printings? If so, the copy in question is obviously not a 1<sup>st</sup> printing.

(7) Also on the copyright page, is there a publisher number or a letter line? If yes, does the number/letter line include 1 or A (regardless of the order of the numbers/letters)? The number 1 or letter A generally indicate a 1<sup>st</sup> printing.

(8) Consult a bibliography or other reference work to determine when the book was first printed, then note the date on the copyright page. Does it match the date the book was first printed?

(9) Consult a bibliography or other reference work and note any “points of issue” (what differentiates the 1<sup>st</sup> printing from later printings). Does your copy have the same features (or lack of features)?

In a second article entitled “No Number Line? No Problem!” several other points to remember in identifying first printings are listed:

(1) Colophon (logo or publication history). Colophon has two meanings, both relevant to this discussion: (1) Colophon can refer to the publisher's emblem or log. Some publishers print their colophon (logo) on the copyright page or at the back of the book to indicate a first edition; (2) Colophon may also be defined as an inscription detailing a volume's publication history that is usually found at the back of the book.

(2) Same Date: The same date appears on the copyright page and the title page.

(3) No Additional Printings: With this method, if there is no mention of subsequent printings, the book may be assumed to be a first edition, first printing. This method is widely used.

(4) First Published Year: Some publishers state "First Published" followed by the year or the month and year of publication. If no additional printings are mentioned, you may assume the copy in question is a first edition.

(5) First Edition/Printing/Impression: A publisher may state "First Edition," "First Printing," or "First Impression" on the back of the title page, or on the copyright page.

(6) No Designation for First Editions: A publisher may choose to identify later printings and editions. Thus, a first edition, first printing copy would have no designation at all.

If this isn't confusing enough the author offers this one final caveat: "Please keep in mind that while some publishers use a designation method consistently, others are more haphazard in their approach and may use a variety of designations." Good grief!

Perhaps the most widely discussed method of identifying first editions, first printings, however, is the "Publisher's Number Line." If you haven't noticed these consciously before you have undoubtedly noticed them on the verso of the title page in at least a subliminal way. Do the numbers 123456789 look familiar to you? These numbers constitute the publisher's number line. This is such an important device for identifying first editions, first printings that I will reproduce explanations from both websites:

The number (or letter) line indicates the printing history. For example: 123456789 shows the collector that yes, indeed, this is a

first printing, as is 987654321 or even 13579864, whereas 23456789 normally indicates a second printing (Random House is an exception to this rule. On some volumes they state First Edition and start the number line with 2. Go figure). Don't concern yourself with the order of the numbers, just look for the number 1! When publishers use letters, A=1, B=2, and so on (Hanneman).

Many modern publishers use a number system or letter system to designate first editions. Publishers using this system have numbers or letters similar to 123456789 or ABCDE where the 1 or the A indicates a first edition. If the 1 is missing as in 23456789 then that book is probably a second printing as designated by the remaining 2. Sometimes you'll find that numbers appear differently or in reverse as in 10987654321. Regardless of the way the numbers look, you want to spot the 1 or the A (Larsen).

If all of this whets your appetite to learn more, or even more likely if all of this leaves you even more confused, then you might want to consider purchasing a copy of one or more of the following books:

McBride, Bill, comp. *A Pocket Guide to the Identification of First Editions*. 6<sup>th</sup> Rev. Ed. Hartford, Conn.: McBride, 2000.

McBride, Bill, comp. *Points of Issue: A Compendium of Points of Issue of Books by 20<sup>th</sup> Century Authors*. Hartford, Conn.: McBride, 1996.

McBride, Bill, comp. *Points of Issue: A Compendium of Points of Issue of Books of the 19th and 20th Centuries*. 3rd ed. Hartford, Conn.: McBride, 1996.

I purchased the first title over the Internet from Amazon.com. It cost me only \$12.95 U.S. funds. Unfortunately the rapid shipping cost me more than the actual book coming in at about \$16.95 U.S., for a grand total of about \$40 Canadian for a rather slim, although useful, paperback of 112 pages.

A cheaper solution might possibly be to consult a copy of one or more of these books at a local library. In Vancouver, for example, the first title listed above is available for consultation at the University of B.C. Library.

Well that's it for now. On a cautionary note, "Caveat Emptor!" On a friendlier note, happy hunting for that first edition, first printing that you have so long been searching for.