

MODERN FIRSTS

Which comes first?

For two centuries of book collecting the most desirable books have usually been the first appearance of a title, commonly the first printing of the first edition. There are two imperatives underlying the desire to possess the “true first”: the belief that it is important to own a significant title in the condition and form in which it was first made available; and the belief that the first appearance of a text is most likely to be the closest to the author’s intent.

Before the first printing of the first edition often comes the proof copy. This is produced for internal distribution to the publishing house sales force and for external distribution to reviewers and those who may purchase subsidiary rights. The unassuming proof copy is both poorly produced and likely to be read. Routinely produced in fewer than a hundred copies, proofs hold the appeal of scarcity in good condition and, in some instances, contain text that was subsequently revised by the author (or even better, the publisher’s libel lawyer) prior to publication. For obvious reasons such examples of an evolving text are important to both collector and scholar. By the mid-1970s the modern firsts market was in the midst of what one book dealer described to me as “proof mania.” Dealers used connections with publishers or book reviewers to obtain proof copies of books by collectable authors to catalogue, almost always at a higher price than the first trade edition.

In the 1980s publishers introduced an interesting promotional tool that appears to have undermined the traditional assumption that the first appearance is the most desirable: the advance reading copy (ARC). Produced months in advance of trade publication, ARCs have the look and feel of a trade paperback. They are distributed in the seeming thousands to the retail book trade to generate buzz, increase retail orders and encourage “hand selling” (booksellers recommending a book to a customer). Anyone who has attended a publishing trade fair will attest to the ubiquity of ARCs, with stacks at each publisher’s booth, often accompanied by the author dutifully signing copies for lines of booksellers.

Although most ARCs display the statement “NOT FOR SALE” on the cover, they routinely turn up in the used book trade. It is here that

the collecting tenet “the first is the best” is broken: even though the ARCs appeared first, they typically are priced lower than the first hardcover trade printing. The only reasons for this I can deduce are that both collectors and dealers assume that if ARCs are given away they can’t be worth much, and in the first months following a book’s publication they are more likely to be available in the second-hand market than the trade edition.

Proof copies and ARCs should be an important component of any author collection (although most collectable literary authors will not have their books appear as ARCs). It is not uncommon for there to be different states of proofs for the same title, which increases the interest for the collector. One of my favourite sets of advance copies for an author I collect are the two very different proofs of Cormac McCarthy’s *The Crossing*, volume 2 of the Border Trilogy. (I should state that these are the two states I possess and there may be others.) The earlier proof, marked “Preliminary,” is an 8½ by 11-inch double-sided typescript bound with black tape on the spine. The cover provides fascinating details on the sales record of McCarthy’s five previous novels. A secondary proof in blue wraps presents the final page layout of the hardcover edition but with significant textual variations. Whenever I get a proof copy of a novel I care about, I compare it with the trade edition to check for intervening revisions. In the case of *The Crossing* the proof text was five pages shorter, despite having an identical page layout to the trade edition for the first 300 pages. On page 303 additions to the text start to appear.

I’ll conclude with what I believe to be the most desirable Canadian modern first edition proof: Alice Munro’s *Who Do You Think You Are?*, published by Macmillan of Canada in 1978. Douglas Gibson, Munro’s editor, recounts getting a call on a Sunday morning from Munro asking if it would be possible to delay publication, for she had decided that the second half of the collection of linked stories needed rewriting. At this point the book was at press and, yes, proof copies had been distributed. Gibson swallowed hard and agreed to halt printing, and Munro revised the text. I knew about this at the time but am still in search of a proof copy of the original text.

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