

### Introduction

There is no other concept or terminology in the book industry that causes as much confusion and difficulty than that of **'first edition'**. Entire books and websites have been devoted to the topic and the task can feel overwhelming to start with. Identifying a first edition is as much an art as a science, not least because for all the general rules which indicate a first edition; there are always exceptions. But understanding some basic principles can take you a long way towards becoming an expert.

This document sets out why and when the edition of a book matters and gives guidance on identifying first editions in these circumstances, to support you in creating accurate book listing for BookAddiction. It also contains a little general background on first editions and their production. The intention is, having read this, that you will **know more** than you need to start identifying first editions with confidence and accuracy.

### Terminology

In the book collecting world more generally, the terms **printing** (as in first printing, second printing etc.) and **impression** are interchangeable. They mean the same thing.

The publisher's **number line**, discussed below, is also known as a **printer's key** and **publisher's code**. The terms mean the same thing.

### When and Why Edition Matters

Identifying whether a particular volume of a work is a first edition is particularly relevant for

- Fiction (novels, short stories etc)
- Poetry
- Some scholarly, research and academic works

If the volume you have in hand is not in one of these categories, you do not need to discover the edition; but if it is obviously stated in the volume, it's worth including in the listing.

The edition for fiction and poetry tends to matter more to collectors, perhaps because they are keen to acquire copies that have authenticity and the closest possible connection to the author's original intent (authors are usually more closely invested and involved in the production and printing processes of a first edition, often correcting proofs themselves for instance, than in later printings) or perhaps because they are attracted to the novelty and uniqueness of a first edition. A first printing is also closer in time to the writing of the book, which may mean a more accurate reflection of the historical and social context in which the work was written and the author's mindset at the time. For collector's there's also a cache associated with owning a great book before it received any critical acclaim – it's kind of cool to have a humble, scrappy first edition that dates from before a book became famous or collectible.

### First Editions – Publishers' Terms

The first source of confusion is that the publishing industry and book collectors use the term differently. In publishing terms, an **edition** is all the copies of a book printed from the same setting of type. Typically, book is only described as a **second edition** by the publisher if substantial changes have been made, such as the inclusion of a new chapter, or a foreword, or a new series of illustrations. Publishers rarely change the edition of a book for minor changes such as correcting spelling or minor factual errors. If the first **'print run'** of book sells out and the publisher

decides to print more using the same typeset, this would be described as a **first edition, second printing**. But if substantial changes are made, it would be a **second edition**.

You cannot, therefore, describe a book as being a first edition for a collector simply because the publisher says it is. The statement **first edition** printed on the **copyright page** by the publisher cannot be taken at face value for the collector.

## Guidance

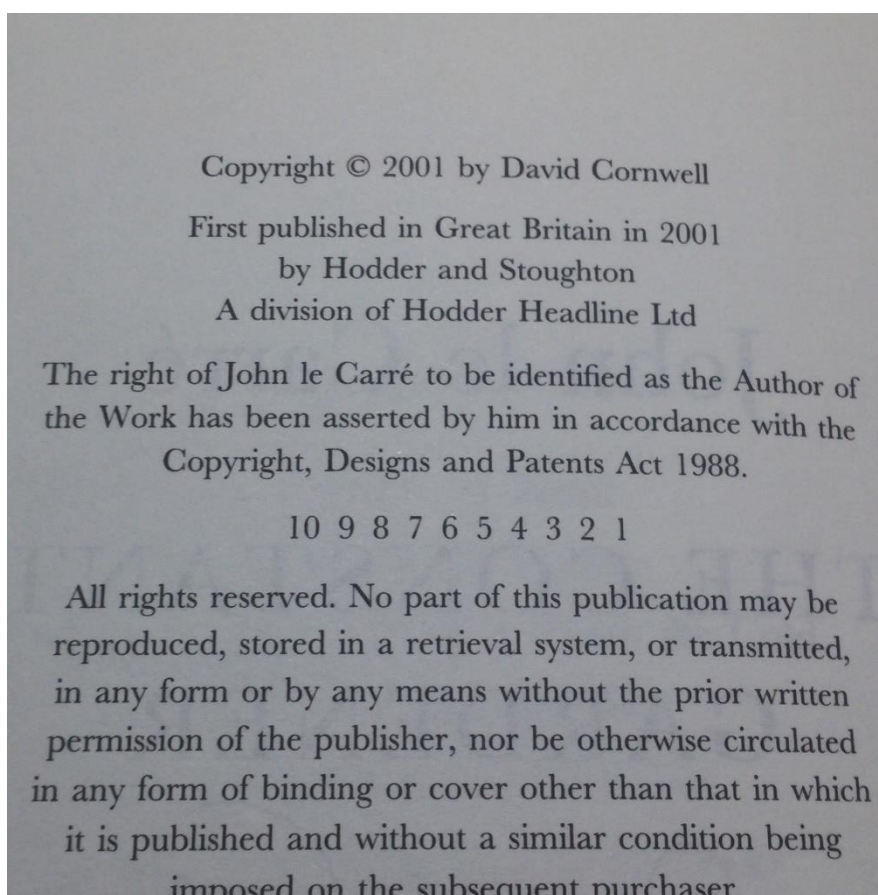
### First Edition, First Printing – Vintage Books

Books published between around 1850 and 1920 are generally easier to identify as first editions than later publications, as publishers generally put the date on the title page or less frequently on the last page of the book, of the first edition. For these books, if there is a date on the title page (or last page) and no other indication of earlier printings, you can be reasonably certain the volume is a first edition.

### First Edition, First Printing – Number Lines

As early as the 1940s some publishers began to include number lines on the copyright page of their books. From the 1970s onwards, most publishers have done so consistently. The number line is also known as a printer's key or publisher's code. Most modern, post-1970 books will have a number line. The number can be used to identify the printing of the book.

There is no industry standard for the formatting of the number line. Most often it is a simple string of numbers.



Generally, the lowest number in the string indicates the number of the printing, so if '1' is present in the number line, it indicates the volume is a first printing; if '2' is the lowest number in the string, it's a second printing (and therefore not a true first in collectors' terms), and so on.

Sometimes the number line can give even more information, such as the year of publication.

A number line which looks like this

17 18 19 20 21 APC 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

indicates both that the volume is a first printing (because '1' is the lowest number present) and that the volume was printed in 2017, because '17' is present before the code letters. The code in the middle – usually a string of three or four letters – indicates the printer to whom the publisher outsourced printing. In this hypothetical example, the number line shows that that volume is a first printing, printed in 2017 by the Acme Printing Corporation.

### Exceptions to conventions

Some publishers use slightly different number line conventions.

- Random House: between the 1970s and 2003 indicated a first printing with the statement 'First Edition' on a number line with '2' as the lowest number on the copyright page.
- Oxford University Press: Until the 1980s there was no first edition statement but later printings were noted on the copyright page.
- William Morrow: Intermittently put the statement 'first edition' on the copyright page of first edition, first printings; but notoriously bad at removing the statement from later printings.

Details of more publishers' conventions and anomalies in the use of first edition statements and number lines can be found online, [here](#). The most comprehensive resource on publishers' practice is "A Pocket Guide to the Identification of First Editions" by Bill McBride. Now in its Seventh edition (2012), the information is not available online.

### First Editions and Book Collectors

In collecting terms, however, a rough description of **first edition** would be when it is the very first appearance of a work in a printed book.

Identifying a first edition is often about proving a negative, that is establishing that there are no earlier printings. Any indication of earlier printings (such as on the copyright page, or the presence of two, separately dated introductions, or the proclamations on the dust jacket of the book having been popular or featured in a list of best-sellers, is grounds to discount a book being a first edition.

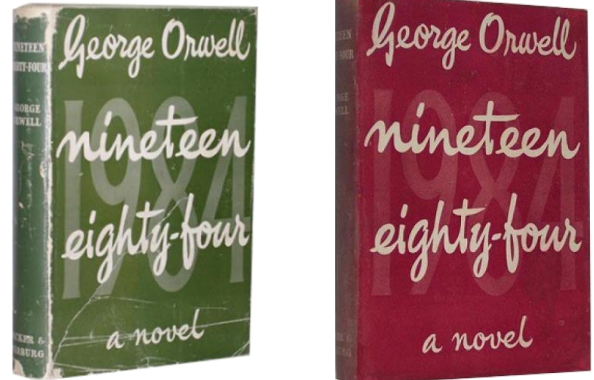
To the collector, a first edition is the very first appearance of a work in print, and the term first edition, first printing is applied. The first edition is usually a trade edition, that is one that is intended for sale to the general public. Occasionally there may be an edition preceding the first trade edition, perhaps a limited edition, or one produced privately by the author for distribution among friends and supporters. If this is the case, the true first is still the very first appearance in print but the first trade edition can still be considered a type of first edition and may well still be of interest to the collector, not least because they may find it very difficult to obtain or afford one of a very small number of the earlier copies or because their collecting interest extends to trade editions.

Checking the copyright page is the first stage. There may be a full printing history there, or clues about earlier printings. At the very least, for a first edition, the copyright date should match the date on the title page if there is one. It's also worth a sense check that the copyright date is consistent with the style and production of the book. The copyright date seems earlier than the general style of the book's production, the volume is unlikely to be a first edition.

### First Thus

To make matters even more confusing, if a new publisher releases a book, or if it comes in a new format (perhaps with added illustrations or printed and bound in a different way), the publisher may describe this as a first edition – it is for them – but to a book collector it's a **first thus**. That is, it is not a **true first** but the first time that this work has appeared in a specific format. You will sometimes see this as **first edition thus** or **1<sup>st</sup> thus**. It's the same thing.

For example, George Orwell's famous novel, 1984. The first UK hardcover edition was published by Secker & Warburg in 1949. The first US edition was published by Harcourt Brace in the same year. The UK edition is considered the true first because it was published first (but would also be considered the true first even if published simultaneously with the US edition as Orwell was a UK writer and involved and engaged with the UK publisher). The UK first came in both a red dust jacket and a green dust jacket. Although, it is not known for sure which was printed first for sure, there is a consensus that the red jacket came first.



### Points of Issue

Not all first edition books conform to the standard criteria for identification. There are sometimes **points of issue** that can help identify a first edition with certainty. Points of issue are some bits of a book which have change during the first printing (that is, without the typeset being broken up). The most common type of first edition points of issue are typographical mistakes in the original typeset which are corrected during the print run. In these cases, copies with the mistake are considered the most desirable because they represent the earliest state of the first edition. Copies which contain these first editions can be called, **first edition, first printing, first state**. Those without the point of issue are described as **second state** or third state and so on.

As an example, perhaps the most well-known points of issue are in the first edition of the first books in the Harry Potter series, Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone. Only five hundred copies of the first edition hardback were printed, of which 300 were sent directly to libraries, leaving only 200 for sale to the public. So a first edition, first printing is a rare thing and highly desirable to collectors. To be a first edition

- the volume must have 'Bloomsbury' named as a publisher on the title page (Bloomsbury was the UK publisher, so this distinguishes the book from those published in the US and Canada)
- the latest date listed in the copyright information must be 1997
- the number line on the copyright page must read '10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1' (to make sure it is a first printing) AND
- as a point of issue, on page 53, in the list of school supplies that Harry receives from Hogwarts, the item '1 wand' must appear twice, once at the beginning and once at the end of the list.

The double printing of '1 wand' in the list was a printing error, which was corrected for the second printing of the book. It reappeared in some later printings – and was never removed from the Canadian edition – so all four features need to be correct for a true first edition, first printing of Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone.

Most books on book collecting will contain further information on points of issue but few are freely available online. The [FEPDO](#) website explains points of issue further. It also contains a database where you can enter the details of a first edition book to find out if there are any points of issue to watch out. It does not contain every book ever published but is reasonably comprehensive for collected fiction and poetry.

Look too other reputable sellers' listings for the same book and compare. They will often contain relevant information; or, if there are listings for earlier editions of the same book, you do not have a first edition.

### Paperback firsts

Collecting first paperback editions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is a recognised subset of book collecting. Usually a 'paperback first' is technically a 'first thus' – that is it the first time a work has appeared as a paperback but it has already been published in hardback. It may contain new material by the author or commentator.

In a few cases a title appears in paperback before it does in hardback. If this is the case, the paperback is the **true first**. Many titles in genre fiction – science fiction, fantasy and westerns for example – appear first or only as paperback (perhaps later followed by a book club edition, if they prove popular).

### Common-sense Checks

Application of some general knowledge and common sense can a long way towards determining if a particular volume is a first edition or, more correctly, determining if it's a later printing.

- Look to see of the book, or dust jacket, carries statements of the book having been nominated for or won awards. If there are such statements, it's very unlikely to be a first edition as a book will not have been nominated for an award prior to publication.
- Similarly, watch for statements proclaiming the book has featured on best seller lists or something like 'millions of copies sold worldwide' or 'now a major motion picture'. All these indicate the volume is not a first edition.
- If the manufacturing style of the volume is obviously much later than the time at which the author was active, such as a 20<sup>th</sup> century printing of a novel by a 19<sup>th</sup> century writer like Charles Dickens or George Gissing, edition is largely irrelevant and does not need to be noted. It is certainly very unlikely to be a first edition.

### Identifying Reprints and Book Club Editions

#### *Reprint Publishers*

Check that the publisher is not a 'reprint house' (that is a publisher who almost exclusively reprints books published by others previously). If the book is from one of the following publishers it is very unlikely to be a first edition:

- Sundial Press
- Triangle Books
- Grosset and Dunlap
- The Reprint Society
- Heron Books
- Reader's Digest
- Cassell & Co
- Hurst
- Folio Society
- Tower Books...

#### *Book Club Editions*

Check too that the book isn't a from a Book Club. Book Club Editions are generally not firsts and have little collectable value. Subscription book clubs republished mass market books and offered them to members at substantially reduced prices. Many 20<sup>th</sup> century fiction and non-fiction titles were published as Book Club Editions. They often physically resembled the true first trade editions but they are reprints and cannot be first editions.

Common Book Clubs include:

- Book Club Associates (also published, in the mid-1980s, as Guild Publishing (Book Club Associates) or, more commonly, as BCA)
- The Mystery and Thriller Club
- Just Good Books
- The Softback Preview (TSP)
- The Fantasy and Science Fiction Book Club
- The Military and Aviation Book Society
- The Literary Guild
- World Books
- Book of the Month Club, aka BOMC (a US book club)
- First Edition Library (a club that makes facsimile first edition books)

Here are some of the signs that may indicate a volume is a Book Club Edition.

- No price on the dust jacket (although note that some university publishers do not usually put prices on their dust jackets).
- A small, blind stamp on the lower right-hand corner of the back cover – they come in a variety of shapes and sizes.
- A short string of numbers and capital letters printed vertically near the gutter on the last page before the rear free endpaper.
- Sometimes, book club editions are smaller in dimension than the standard trade edition and/or printed on lower quality paper.
- A five digit code, typically black numbers in a white background box on the back of the dust jacket

### Academic and Scholarly Texts

The importance of edition for academic and scholarly book is less about the cache or collectability of fiction and poetry but to do with enabling readers and researchers to be certain which version of the book is being referred to, and whether it has the additional material that may come with later editions. Academic and scholarly non-fiction publishers, aware of the needs of their audience, usually make this straightforward by putting an edition statement on the title page or, more recently the copyright page. For these sort of books, different printings within an edition are less important and do not need to be stated in listings.

### Further resources

1. McBride, Bill, [\*Pocket Guide to the Identification of First Editions\*](#), Seventh Edition, 2012 (content not available online)
2. McBride, Bill, [\*Points of Issue: A Compendium of Points of Issue of Books by 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> Century Authors\*](#), Third Edition, 1996 (content not available online)
3. Ahearn, Allen and Ahearn, Patricia, *Collected Books: A Guide to Identification and Values*, Quill and Brush Press, 2011
4. [First Edition Points](#) website/database. This helps to understand the identification criteria and any first edition points of issue by describing details such as a book's binding, a specific typographical error, or a dust jacket review that can only be found on the earliest printings.