

John Cowen: Collecting

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John Cowen runs Ransome Books, a postal book-collecting business. Although he buys and sells other authors, books by Arthur Ransome are his first love – hence the name of his business, intended to attract attention, and, hopefully, plenty of exciting books. It worked. His own collection is now mouth-wateringly good and includes a copy of Pigeon Post, with a half title (pictured above) signed by AR himself and illustrated with a doodle of Swallow in red.

It is not easy to explain the fascination of first editions, except to romantics. In some mystical way, a first edition takes one closer to the author. There is a sense of excitement in owning a book which at the time of issue was unknown to the world, although later it became popular enough to be reprinted year after year.

The pleasure of ownership is even greater if the book is complete and in such fine condition that it appears new although it is fifty or sixty years old. Most copies of Arthur Ransome's novels have been much loved and read to tatters! At any level of collecting, the condition of the book is the key to its price. Notice that I do not say value. I believe the value of the book is in its contents. The price, on the other hand, is an arbitrary amount fixed by the bookseller and is based on the willingness of collectors to pay more for first editions in very good condition.

The first editions of a new author tend to be small, which explains why first editions of Ransome's earliest children's novels are much scarcer (and correspondingly more expensive) than those of the later books which the publishers were confident of selling in quantity. First editions of the later novels can be purchased at quite reasonable prices.

When *Swallows and Amazons* itself was first published in 1930, it had no illustrations, although it did contain a wonderful endpaper map by Stephen Spurrier, which was also featured on the original dustwrapper. It was issued in a more blue-green cover than that of the sequels and its own later editions. They called the cover colour of Jerome K Jerome's *Three Men in a Boat* 'Thames Green' – perhaps the familiar deep green in which the series settled down should be christened 'Coniston Green'.

Top to bottom: 1930. 1931 1938

The first edition of *Swallowdale* was illustrated by Clifford Webb, who also illustrated the second edition of *Swallows and Amazons* -both published in 1931, and both now scarce. The first edition of *Peter Duck*, the first book

illustrated by Ransome (officially by 'the Swallows and Amazons Themselves'), is also seldom seen. The first year of editions of *Swallows and Amazons* and *Swallowdale* with Ransome's own illustrations was 1938; both are worth looking out for.

First editions of *Great Northern*, *Missee Lee* and *The Picts and The Martyrs* are still easier to find than the rest of the series. *Pigeon Post* is more elusive than *The Big Six* and *Secret Water*. *Coot Club* is not easy, and *Winter Holiday* is becoming scarcer.

Dust wrappers are interesting. Books issued at the turn of the century were protected in paper wrappers. They were often removed by booksellers before display in the shop. Gradually advertising was introduced on dustwrappers, usually listing other titles by the same author or publishing house. This led to more elaborate decoration as a promotional feature. Some of the Agatha Christie novels of the twenties have very evocative pictures on the dustwrappers.

Today the collecting of first editions in their dustwrappers has become a cult. Often the collector is prepared to pay several times the price of the book alone, if the dustwrapper has remained with the book. I share this interest in the dustwrapper. Who can fail to be moved by the exciting pictures displayed on the dustwrapper of the *Swallows and Amazons* series? To many of us who have read and reread the books, that scatter of miniature illustrations brings memories flooding back.

How do you tell one edition from another? Ways of distinguishing them are important to collectors, and these 'issue points' are eagerly identified. Fortunately, there are few issue points with the Cape editions. The publisher made the print date clear on the reverse of the title page. A first edition should have 'First Published (followed by the year)' proudly printed there, with no mention of subsequent editions or impressions.

The dustwrapper is more difficult. With one exception, the titles listed on the back panel should only contain titles which were issued prior to the date of first publication. The exception is *Missee Lee*, for which the dustwrapper does carry a description of *Missee Lee* on the back panel. But notice that it is a publisher's description rather than a press review.

The books mentioned on the back panel give useful clues to the authenticity of dustjackets: certainly a dustwrapper on *The Big Six* with a review of, say, *Missee Lee* on the back would not be a first issue wrapper, because *The Big Six* was published in 1940 and *Missee Lee* was published in 1941. There are other issue points, and more could be said on this topic, but a gentle introduction is all I offer at this stage. Good Hunting!