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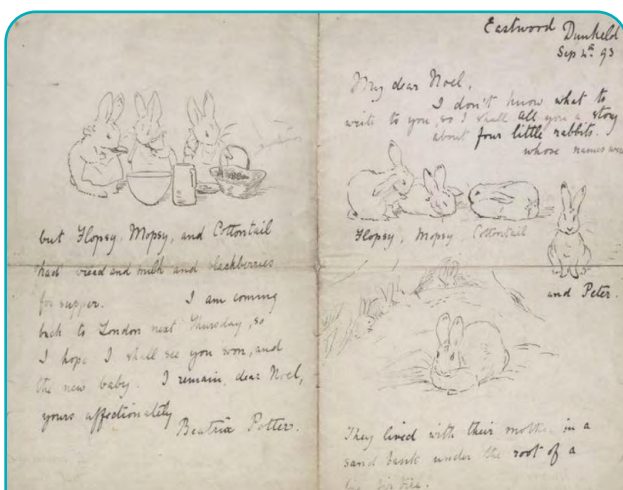
by  
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## UNEARTHING LITERARY TREASURES: THE FASCINATION OF COLLECTING BEATRIX POTTER FIRST EDITIONS

In the realm of literary works, few names conjure up the same sense of whimsy and charm as Beatrix Potter. The beloved author and illustrator has captured the hearts of readers young and old with her enchanting tales of mischievous rabbits, dapper mice, and adventurous squirrels. As a result, the quest to collect first editions of her works has become a passion for collectors worldwide, offering not only a glimpse into the history of children's literature but also a chance to connect with the magic of Potter's timeless stories and illustrations.

### The Tale of Peter Rabbit

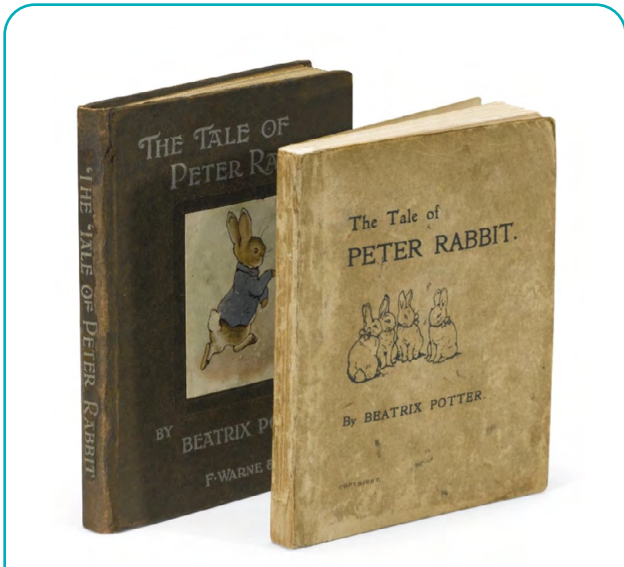
In September 1893 Noel Moore, the five year old son of Beatrix Potter's friend and former governess was unwell. To cheer him up Potter wrote the now famous Peter Rabbit picture letter. "I don't know what to write to you," she began, "so I shall tell you a story about four little rabbits". Noel was delighted with the letter and a few years later Beatrix decided to develop the story and turn it into a little book. Thus *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* was born, but it took a while for the story to make it into print.



Illustrated letter containing the origin of *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*; sent by Beatrix Potter to Noel Moore 4 September 1893 whilst on holiday in Dunkeld. ©Victoria and Albert Museum, London Victoria & Albert Museum Pearson PLC.

Potter approached many publishers with her manuscript but to no avail, so she resolved to publish the story at her own expense and sent the manuscript to a London printer Strangeways & Sons. Thus it was that on the 16 December 1901 an edition of 250 privately printed copies of her book were ready to sell or distribute to friends. To keep printing costs to a minimum the book had a card cover and only one colour illustration with the other illustrations being in black and white. The size of the book was also important: Potter believed that it should be of a size that a child could hold easily in their hands and the paper should be durable, so the pages were easy to turn.

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The Tale of Peter Rabbit. The first edition (December 1901), privately printed for the author in 250 copies, with the first published edition by Frederick Warne and Co. (1902) showing behind. Image courtesy of Sotheby's.

*The Tale of Peter Rabbit* was received with great enthusiasm by children and adults, so Potter ordered a second printing of 200 copies. The format remained the same as the first printing, but there were some minor changes to the text and the quality of the binding was improved. The colour of the boards changed from grey to olive green and the spine became rounded, rather than flat. Booksellers and collectors often describe these two privately printed editions as either 'flat backed' or 'round backed'.



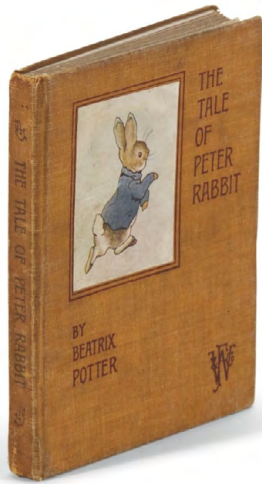
The Tale of Peter Rabbit, first trade edition in the very rare original glassine wrapper with the price 1/- net on the spine (a reason that the wrapper was often discarded). Image courtesy of Sotheby's.

### The first Trade Printing

In December 1901 Beatrix Potter received a letter from the publisher Frederick Warne which read: 'Dear Miss Potter, I must apologise for not having written to you earlier with reference to the "Bunny Book"'. Warne offered to print the story in an edition of 5,000 copies, on the condition that Potter supplied all the drawings in colour. They suggested a royalty of 1d (one pence) per book, rising to 3d (three pence) per book should there be any subsequent editions. Warne cautioned that: "we cannot tell whether the work is likely to run to a second edition or not, and therefore we fear it might not provide a reasonable remuneration for you."

Following some negotiations a contract was agreed and Potter set to work producing the illustrations in colour. So it was that in October 1902 the first published edition of *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* was offered for sale in book shops in Britain. Potter wanted the book to be affordable so there were different editions available: the book was available to buy in either brown or grey paper boards, retailing at 1/- (one shilling) or in pale green cloth, retailing at 1/6 (one shilling and sixpence). Warne suggested that brighter colours might sell better, but Potter was adamant that the colours of the boards needed to be in keeping with the natural colours of her animal world.

Warne's publication of *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, launched Potter's career as a children's author and has remained in print ever since. Subsequent titles, including *The Tale of Squirrel Nutkin* (1903) and *The Tale of Benjamin Bunny*, (1904) followed in quick succession, each adding to Potter's growing legacy.



The Tale of Peter Rabbit in a rare deluxe binding (1902). Image courtesy of Sotheby's.

## The Appeal of Beatrix Potter First Editions

What makes collecting Beatrix Potter first editions so appealing? At its core, it's a journey into the past, a way to trace the evolution of Potter's writing and illustration style, and to appreciate the craftsmanship of these hand-sized publications. Each first edition holds a unique story, from the initial print run to the hands that have cherished it over the decades. For many collectors, owning a piece of literary history is a way to pay tribute to an author whose work continues to captivate generations.

## Navigating the World of Beatrix Potter First Editions

For those embarking on the quest to collect Beatrix Potter first editions, understanding the nuances of the market is essential. Identifying true first editions can be a challenge, as publishers often made subtle changes to subsequent printings. Key indicators of a first edition include the presence of the phrase 'All rights reserved' on the title page, as well as the absence of later printings listed on the verso.

Additionally, examining the colour and condition of the dust jacket, if present, can provide further clues to a book's authenticity. Potter's books are notoriously difficult to date as the publisher Warne used a dating process which is not easily decipherable for novice collectors. In most instances Beatrix Potter first editions state the publisher as 'F. Warne & Co.' before Warne became incorporated in 1919 and the imprint changes to 'F. Warne & Co. Ltd'.

## The Rarity and Value of Beatrix Potter First Editions

While some of Potter's works were printed in large quantities, others had more limited runs, adding to their rarity and value. For example, *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* had an initial print run of just 250 copies, making first editions of this iconic book highly sought after. Similarly, titles such as *The Tale of Mr. Jeremy Fisher* (1906) and *The Tale of Jemima Puddle-Duck* (1908) are prized for their scarcity and charm.

In recent years, the market for Beatrix Potter first editions has experienced steady growth, with rare and pristine copies commanding high prices at auction. Collectors are willing to pay a premium for books in excellent condition, with original dust jackets or glassine wrappers, and minimal signs of wear. However, even well-loved copies with some wear and tear can hold significant value, particularly if they possess unique provenance or inscription by the author.

The value of a first edition can vary significantly, with pristine copies fetching five-figure sums, while worn copies without a dust jacket may be worth in the hundreds of pounds. While some early editions may hold value, the sheer number of subsequent printings means most are worth only a few pounds.

## Preserving a Literary Legacy

Beyond the thrill of acquisition, collecting Beatrix Potter first editions is also a means of preserving her literary legacy for future generations. By safeguarding these rare and cherished books, collectors play a vital role in ensuring that Potter's timeless tales continue to enchant readers for years to come. Whether displayed on a bookshelf or carefully tucked away in a protective sleeve, each first edition serves as a tangible reminder of the enduring magic of Beatrix Potter's imagination.

In the end, collecting Beatrix Potter first editions is about more than just acquiring rare books – it's a journey of discovery, connection, and appreciation for one of the most beloved authors in children's literature. With each new addition to their collection, enthusiasts pay tribute to Potter's legacy and celebrate the

enduring power of storytelling to ignite the imagination and inspire wonder in readers of all ages.



It doesn't always have to be a first edition to be valuable. Freddie Mercury's childhood collection of later printings of Beatrix Potter books sold at Sotheby's in September 2023 for £19,050. Image courtesy of Sotheby's.