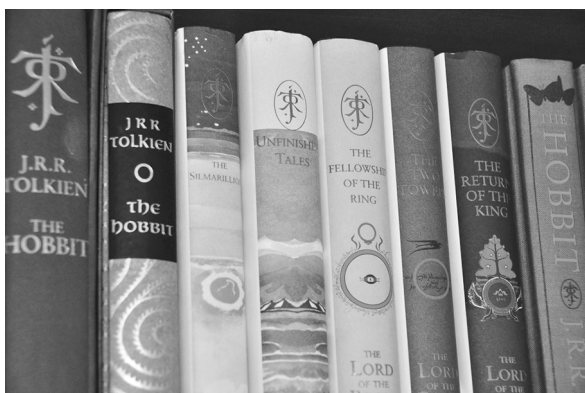


A great find

By Andy Hewson



- 1 I work in central London, and some years ago there was an animal welfare charity shop near my office called Paws. I'd go in there in my lunch break, mostly to chat to Michelle, the friendly lady who ran the shop. There was always loads of stuff in there: I guess to Michelle it was organised chaos. You'd see the same people come and sit in there every day for a bit of company. It was a real community hub.
- 2 I was there one day when I noticed a copy of The Hobbit. It was a nice book. The dust jacket had an illustration of trees and mountains in blue, green and black with Tolkien's name beneath. I started reading it on the train back and forth to work. I'm not a fast reader so I was still getting through it a month or so later when, as I was leaving work, a woman from our finance team came up to me, having spotted it in my hand. She said it looked old and that I should look into whether it was worth anything.
- 3 I ended up down an internet hole looking at first editions of The Hobbit. I learned that there were 1,500 copies printed in the first run in 1937. You can check if you have one by looking for the reference to another writer called Charles Lutwidge Dodgson – better known by his pen name Lewis Carroll – printed in notes about the novel on the dust jacket. On the first edition, the name was misspelled as “Dodgeson” and had to be hand-corrected by the publishers. I checked the back and found the crossed-out e. I was thinking, “This can't be.”
- 4 As luck would have it, my girlfriend Jenna was working as an event coordinator at auction house Christie's at the time, so she put me in contact with a specialist in the books department. I talked him through the details and I remember him saying, “I think you might have a very valuable book on your hands.” I took it in to show him and he asked me what I thought it was worth. I'd done my research and said that I was hoping for about £7,000. He agreed that was a good estimate.

- 5 I had to wait four months for an auction. There was a lot of interest. The auction started at 2.30pm in one of the rooms at Christie's, with about 40 buyers in attendance. Most of the lots before mine were going for about £2,000. I was thinking, even if I make 500 quid, it would still be amazing. I only paid 50p for it. So when it came to my book and the auctioneer said, "We'll start the bidding at £3,000," I was already 11. The bids started going up in jumps of £500: "£4,000, £4,500, £5,000." My heart was racing. "£6,000, £6,500, £7,000..." I started to feel a bit nauseous, but was trying to hold it together. The bidding had reached £10,000 before I knew it. It was very quiet in the room. My girlfriend had come to watch with a couple of her colleagues. As it got to £13,000, they were mouthing, "Oh my gosh!" to me. It finally went for £16,000.

- 6 I was 28 at the time. My girlfriend persuaded me to put on a photography exhibition – something I'd always wanted to do. Then I spent the rest on a deposit for a flat. I would never have been able to get the money together to buy my own place without it. We're still living here now. I carried on going back to Paws until it closed a couple of years ago. I made a small anonymous donation, but never told them what had gone on. I know it sounds strange, but I didn't want to change the relationship. I just popped in the next lunchtime as if nothing had happened.

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