



Boy Scout Books

The ISCA Getting Started Collecting Series

There is one item that every Scout has, and that is a Scout book. This is true if you started in Cubs, Boy Scouts, Venturing, or even Girl Scouts. Books are not only something that every Scout needs, they are also very collectible. Here are the questions about book collecting that I would expect most new collectors to ask.

How many types of Boy Scout books are there?

The short answer is a lot! Scout books come in two categories, fiction and nonfiction, and there are many types of nonfiction books.

What are fiction books?

These are storybooks written about Scouts and Scouting, some of which were written before the BSA became a national program in 1910. Publishers recognized the value of telling adventure stories to young boys through Scouting. Several authors wrote them, and there were usually several books in each series. Stories of Scouts fighting in battles, taking on dangerous gangs of men, and fighting fires were common and very popular. After the BSA was chartered by Congress, the national office began using its copyright to try to change the content of the books to something less dangerous for fear that its Scouts would begin acting out the stories. This worked with varying degrees of success.

In 1914, BSA began approving certain fiction books and they were issued by the BSA as part of a series known as Every Boys Library (EBL). These can be identified by their distinctive hardbound covers. The covers have a First Class sign inside a circle with crossed semaphore flags behind the circle. Although these came with dust jackets, most no longer have them. The EBL books include many famous stories, including “Ben Hur” and also “Animals I have Known” by Ernest Thompson Seton.

What are nonfiction books?

Nonfiction books include handbooks, Merit Badge books, biographies, pamphlets, Scout diaries, Patrol Leader Handbooks, Songbooks, the Service Library, and countless others. Space does not allow us to discuss each type, but here is some information on the most popular categories.

Boy Scout Handbooks

Probably the most popular nonfiction books are Boy Scout handbooks. BSA began issuing handbooks in 1910. Since then, nearly 40 million handbooks have been issued. Handbooks are usually grouped by their cover designs, of which there are 14.

Many of the covers were painted by Scouting's most famous artist, Norman Rockwell. Handbooks are a great collectible not only for show, but they also provide a wealth of information about Scouting's history. If your dad was in Scouting as a boy and still has his old handbook, take a few minutes to read some of the things that Scouts did in his day. You may find information on tracking animals, signaling using semaphore flags or Morse code, and making a wifflepoof or bean-hole beans.

Merit Badge Books

Merit badge pamphlets are highly collectible. The original pamphlets had white covers, which were followed by tan covers. In all, there are 9 different types of merit badge pamphlet covers. These were also published with hardbound covers, frequently used in libraries. In addition, there were some merit badges that had special covers. The Air Scouting merit badges had a blue cover.

Scout Diaries

Beginning in 1913 and up to 1959, the BSA printed Scout diaries. These books contained a calendar for you to record your Scouting functions, and they also they contained other useful information as well. The Diaries for the years of World War II had airplane identification charts for enemy aircraft so that Scouts on Civil Air Patrol in their neighborhoods could spot enemy planes overhead.

Patrol Leaders Handbooks

First published in 1927 as a Boy Craft booklet, these books came with nine different covers, the most common being the Scout sitting by the fire. The late William Harcourt, better known as "Green Bar Bill", wrote these for many years. Bill was a Norwegian Scouter who moved to the United States and began working with the BSA in its early years. Bill was well known at local and national Scouting events, often sitting at a table signing bookmarks or the books he authored. Much of the advice Bill gave in the older patrol leader books is still good to know today.

With so many types of books, to collect how do you decide what to collect?

The best answer is whatever you want so long as it's fun. The important thing to remember is that unlike patches, books can take up a great deal of space, so plan accordingly. Some people collect all issues and printing of Handbooks, other collect merit badge pamphlets for badges they have earned. Still others collect fiction books by certain authors.

What are good resources for collecting Boy Scout books?

As with any area of collecting, it's important you know your stuff. There are two great resources for books. The first is Collecting Scout Literature, a Collectors Guide to Boy Scout Fiction and Non-Fiction by Bearce and Fisk, 2nd printing, 1999. This book contains a

complete list of all the fiction and non-fiction books ever issued by or for the BSA. It also includes checklists so you can keep track of what you have and what you need. The second is Kahunas Catalog of Boy Scout Handbooks, written by the late Joe Price, which is presently out of print. This book is a great resource if you plan to collect Boy Scout handbooks, patrol leaders books or Scoutmaster Handbooks. It lists every printing and provides detailed information on what was contained in each printing, so you can figure out exactly what issue you have. Another great resource is the Internet Scout Museum (www.internetscoutmuseum.com). This site is maintained by John Burkitt, and it has pictures of most of the Scouting books issued by the BSA. It can help you identify approximately when a book was issued.

How do I get started, or where do I find Boy Scout books?

The sources are endless. Start with your Scout leaders in your unit. Chances are they were Scouts as a boy and may have copies of their handbooks. They might be willing to part with them or at least show them to you. Another place to look is flea markets and public library sales. I can't ever remember walking through a flea market and not seeing at least one Scout book. A Public library will usually have a book sale at least once a year to sell duplicate and obsolete books. Libraries can be a source for hard-cover Scout books, which are among the toughest issues to find. The really great part is that they usually sell for a \$1.00 or less. Another source is Internet auctions. You can usually find hundreds of books listed on auction sites such as eBay, sometimes at very reasonable prices. Be sure you know exactly what you are buying. It can sometimes be difficult to tell which issue a book is just from a picture. Be sure to ask the seller for more information if you need it. Finally Trade-O-Rees (TORs) are another great place to find Scout books. A TOR is essentially a flea market for Scout stuff. Dealers or sellers set up tables selling or trading their Scouting memorabilia. These people are also a great resource for information about collecting. Most if not all are happy to answer questions or help you understand more about collecting. They are sometimes very generous to new collectors and will discount or give an item to you. I have always given away something to a new collector at a TOR.

What else should I know?

When collecting books, the most important thing to look for is condition. Since many Scout books, especially handbooks, were actually used by Scouts, the ones you find are often written in, with cracked or broken spines, or pages missing. I have always found that it is better to spend or trade more for a mint or near mint book, than try to save and get a fair or poor condition one. Price like beauty is in the eye of the beholder. There is not enough space to give price ranges for all the different types of Scout books. The general rule is, the older and rarer the book, the more expensive it is. Boy Scout Handbooks from the 1950's and 1960's generally cost between \$5.00 to \$10.00 in good condition. Merit

badge books from the same area cost around \$1.00 each. Fiction books can vary from \$5.00 to \$500.00 depending on the author and number printed. Cub Scout books are usually very cheap, unless they are from the 1930's, and then they can be worth \$15.00 to \$25.00.

Sometimes it can be difficult to tell which printing a specific book is. While many handbooks say which printing and edition they are, some do not. Here's an easy trick to help. Inside the cover on most books or on the title page in the lower right hand corner you will see a notation similar to the following: 350M1082. The first number is the number of books printed in thousands, 350,000. The second number is the month and year that printing was printed, October 1982. So a book with a notation of 50M541 had 50,000 copies printed in May 1941.

Finally, have fun! Collecting anything in Scouting, unless it's what you do for a living, is a nice diversion and not a means to an end. Don't forget why you joined Scouts the first place.

If you still have questions, send me an e-mail and I'll be glad to try to help.

-- John K. Shaffer (vigilatty@aol.com)