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What Year Was The Hobbit Published

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The Enduring Question: What Year Was The Hobbit Published?

For millions of readers around the world, *The Hobbit* serves as the gateway to one of the most intricate and beloved fantasy universes ever created. Whether you are a lifelong fan of Middle-earth or a newcomer drawn by the recent spate of film adaptations, understanding the origins of this classic tale adds a rich layer of appreciation to the reading experience. The most fundamental piece of that origin story is a simple, yet crucial, piece of information: the publication date. So, what year was *The Hobbit* published? The answer is **1937**. However, the story behind that date is far more fascinating than a single number suggests. It is a tale of chance encounters, academic stubbornness, and the quiet birth of a literary genre that would eventually captivate the world.

To fully understand the significance of the 1937 publication, one must look beyond the date itself and explore the unique circumstances that brought Bilbo Baggins from a dusty professor's study to the bookshelves of a pre-war Britain. This article will delve deep into the publication history of *The Hobbit*, examining the context of its release, the journey of its creation, and the legacy that has ensured its longevity for over eight decades.

The Genesis of a Classic: How The Hobbit Came to Be

A Story for the Children

Before we answer "what year was *The Hobbit* published," it is essential to understand why it was written in the first place. J.R.R. Tolkien, a professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford University, was not initially an author of children's fantasy novels. He was a philologist, a lover of languages, and a scholar of ancient myths. The story of *The Hobbit*famously began on a quiet summer evening in the early 1930s. While grading a set of exam papers, Tolkien found a blank page in a student's booklet. On a whim, he scribbled the words: "In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit."

This spontaneous sentence was the seed of a much larger narrative. Tolkien had no idea what a hobbit was at that moment. The concept needed to be explored, and he did so by telling stories to his own children. The tale of Bilbo Baggins, a comfortable and unadventurous hobbit swept into a quest with a group of dwarves and a wizard named Gandalf, grew organically through these bedtime sessions. It was a private family story, not intended for public consumption.

The Accidental Publisher

The transition from a family story to a published book was largely accidental. One of Tolkien's former students, a woman named Elaine Griffiths, had read an early manuscript of the story. Years later, when a staff member from the London publishing firm George Allen & Unwin, Susan Dagnall, was visiting Oxford, Griffiths mentioned the manuscript. Dagnall, intrigued, borrowed a copy from Tolkien. She was so impressed by what she read that she insisted Tolkien submit the completed work for publication.

Tolkien was hesitant. He was a serious academic, and he feared a children's book might damage his scholarly reputation. Nevertheless, he finished the manuscript and sent it to Allen & Unwin in 1936. This leads us directly to the core of our inquiry: what year was The Hobbit published? The manuscript was accepted, and the publication process was remarkably swift for the time.

The Crucial Date: September 21, 1937

The First Edition

When discussing the publication of *The Hobbit*, the date of the first edition is paramount. George Allen & Unwin released the first print run on **September 21, 1937**. This date marks the moment when the world was officially introduced to Middle-earth. The first edition consisted of 1,500 copies. While this seems like a modest number by today's standards, it sold out quickly, proving to both Tolkien and his publishers that there was a genuine appetite for hobbits.

The initial reviews were overwhelmingly positive. The book was praised for its imaginative scope, its engaging narrative, and its unique combination of whimsy and peril. Newspapers and literary journals of the time recognized that this was something more than just a simple children's adventure. The publication of *The Hobbit* in 1937 was a quiet literary event that, in hindsight, signaled the dawn of modern fantasy literature.

Stanley Unwin's Secret Weapon: The Boy Reviewer

A fascinating anecdote related to the question "what year was *The Hobbit*published" involves the publisher's son. Stanley Unwin, the head of Allen & Unwin, was not entirely sure whether a children's book would be profitable. He asked his 10-year-old son, Rayner Unwin, to read the manuscript and provide a report. The boy wrote a now-famous review: "Bilbo Baggins was a hobbit who lived in his hobbit-hole and never went for adventures, at last Gandalf the wizard and his dwarves persuaded him to go. He had a very exciting time, fighting goblins and wargs. He won a ring from Gollum... This book, with its small pocketsize, and no ugly illustrations, is good for children between the ages of 5 and 9."

Rayner Unwin's report earned him a shilling, and his positive review was a significant factor in the decision to publish. This charming piece of history underscores the human element behind the 1937 publication date. It was not just a corporate decision; it was a personal, almost familial, endorsement.

The Evolution of the Text: Beyond the First Edition

Revisions for The Lord of the Rings

While we have established that "what year was *The Hobbit* published" is 1937, the story of the book's textual history does not end there. After the success of *The Hobbit*, Tolkien's publishers asked for a sequel. That sequel, of course, became *The Lord of the Rings*. However, as Tolkien wrote this darker and more complex narrative, he realized that the story of the Ring in *The Hobbit*did not perfectly align with the epic mythology he was developing.

Specifically, in the original 1937 edition, Gollum willingly bets his magic ring with Bilbo in a game of riddles. When he loses, he offers to show Bilbo the way out of the cave. This version of events contradicted the later characterization of Gollum as a tortured creature utterly enslaved by the Ring's power. Therefore, Tolkien went back and significantly revised the "Riddles in the Dark" chapter for the second edition of the book, which was published in 1951.

In the revised version, Gollum is far more sinister. He is enraged that he has lost the ring and realizes that Bilbo has found it. He still shows Bilbo the way out, but only because he intends to eat the hobbit later. This revision was crucial for the consistency of the legendarium, and it is the version that readers encounter in most modern printings. When you ask, "what year was *The Hobbit*published," you are technically referring to the 1937

original, but the text you are likely reading is the 1951 revision.

Later Editions and Legacy

Since 1937, *The Hobbit*has never been out of print. It has been translated into dozens of languages and has sold tens of millions of copies worldwide. Several distinct editions have been released over the decades, including:

- 1937 (First Edition): The original text, with Gollum's willing bet.
- 1951 (Second Edition): The revised text aligning the story with The Lord of the Rings.
- 1966 (Third Edition): Further minor textual corrections by Tolkien.
- 1995 (60th Anniversary Edition): A commemorative edition celebrating the book's enduring popularity.
- 2004 (Annotated Hobbit): A comprehensive edition with extensive notes by Douglas A. Anderson.
- 2012 (Film Tie-in Edition): Released alongside Peter Jackson's film adaptations.

Each new edition serves as a testament to the book's longevity. The fact that people are still asking "what year was *The Hobbit* published" nearly ninety years later is a testament to its timeless appeal.

The Cultural Impact of the 1937 Publication

A Turning Point for Fantasy Literature

The publication of *The Hobbit*in 1937 is often cited as a watershed moment for the fantasy genre. Before Bilbo Baggins, children's fantasy was largely confined to fairy tales and moralistic allegories. Tolkien created a fully realized secondary world—a world with its own geography, history, languages, and mythology. This level of world-building was virtually unheard of in children's literature at the time. It set a new standard for verisimilitude and depth.

The success of the book paved the way for more complex fantasy works, including Tolkien's own *The Lord of the Rings*, as well as the works of later authors like C.S. Lewis, Ursula K. Le Guin, and Terry Brooks. The answer to "what year was *The Hobbit*published" is, therefore, a milestone on the timeline of literary history, marking the birth of the modern epic fantasy novel.

The Creation of a Fandom

The Hobbit also created an early form of literary fandom. Readers were captivated by the maps, the runes, and the sense of a larger world beyond the immediate story. Letters poured into Allen & Unwin, asking for more stories about hobbits and the history of Middle-earth. This enthusiastic reception directly motivated Tolkien to begin work on his magnum opus. If *The Hobbit* had not been published in 1937, it is entirely possible that *The Lord of the Rings*would never have been written. The fandom that started with that first 1,500-copy print run has only grown exponentially over the decades.

Common Questions About the Publication Date

Was The Hobbit Published Before or After World War II?

This is a common point of confusion. *The Hobbit* was published in 1937, two years before the outbreak of World War II in September 1939. The book belongs to the pre-war period, a time of relative peace in Britain before the dark shadow of the conflict fell over Europe. This context is important because the tone of *The Hobbit* is generally lighter and more whimsical than its sequel, *The Lord of the Rings*, which was written during and immediately after the war and carries a much heavier weight of mortal peril and moral ambiguity.

How Does the US Publication Date Differ?

While the first publication was in the UK, the book was published in the United States in 1938 by Houghton Mifflin. The US edition is notable because it featured illustrations by the author himself, which were printed in

full color. The American market embraced the book just as enthusiastically as the British one, helping to establish Tolkien's international reputation early on.

What Year Was The Hobbit Published in Paperback?

The first paperback edition of *The Hobbit* was published much later, in the 1960s, when the book's popularity was surging due to the massive success of *The Lord of the Rings*in the United States. The paperback boom made the book accessible to a new generation of readers, further cementing its status as a cultural touchstone.

Conclusion: A Date That Changed Literature

To answer the central question directly and definitively: **what year was The Hobbit published? The answer is 1937.**But as we have explored, that date is just the beginning of a much larger story. It represents the birth of a world, the start of a legendary career for J.R.R. Tolkien, and a paradigm shift in the fantasy genre. From a scribbled note on an exam paper to a global phenomenon that has sold over 100 million copies, the journey of Bilbo Baggins began on a single day in September, 1937.

The book continues to be a gateway for new readers, young and old, who fall in love with the quiet courage of

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