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friendship's Offering: The Literary and Artistic Appeal of Gift Books

As reading audiences grew, literary annuals or gift books became a highly profitable publishing endeavor from the 1820s through the 1860s. During this time period, over 1,000 gift book titles were available. They ranged in price from 37 cents to \$20, but usually sold for \$2 or \$3. Many sold 7,500 copies an issue.

Published annually, these anthologies of fiction and poetry were presented to friends and family members as Christmas or birthday presents. Pretty illustrated volumes were the customary gifts of the season because “no more elegant and convenient form [has been] yet devised for a token of friendship or family affection,” reported the *Illustrated London News*.

Gift books were modeled on pocket diaries and literary almanacs. Published annually, these popular keepsakes included calendars and weather forecasts, together with ruled pages on which to note engagements and events. Engraved illustrations, together with prose and poetry selections, complemented useful information.

Forget Me Not is assumed to be the first English literary annual. It was published by Rudolf Ackermann and edited by Frederic Shoberl in 1822. Ackermann and Shoberl believed that there was a demand for elegant pocket-books. According to the advertisement to the first volume of *Forget Me Not*, they were “designed to serve as tokens of remembrance, friendship, or affection, at that season of the year which ancient custom has particularly consecrated to the interchange of such memorials.”

In 1825, the Philadelphia publishing house of Carey & Lea published the first American annual. Known as *The Atlantic Souvenir*, it included poetry and fiction and was illustrated with engravings. It was so well received that a second version was immediately started.



Front cover: *The Atlantic Souvenir; A Christmas and New Year's Offering*. Philadelphia: Carey, Lea & Carey, 1829.

Eloquent, romantic tales about love, nature and children appealed to a public that was anxious to improve themselves. Distinguished authors like William Wordsworth, Sir Walter Scott, Charles Dickens and Washington Irving contributed to gift books. Edgar Allan Poe's "The Pit and the Pendulum" was published in *The Gift* of 1843.

Soon, the gift book audience grew to children. Juvenile annuals consisted of stories with morals that would teach "young friends good lessons."



Presentation Plate from
The Token and Atlantic Souvenir.
Boston: Otis, Broaders, & Company, 1840

Gift books featured an elegant presentation plate that could be inscribed with the names of the book's giver and recipient. Detailed garden scenes, ornate

baskets of flowers, and fountains set an elegant tone. Inscribed presentation plates made the book even more meaningful.

Pictures of women and children, animals, nature scenes, or characters from famous novels were common gift book illustrations. Steel, copper or wood engravings that complemented the text were of a very high artistic standard.

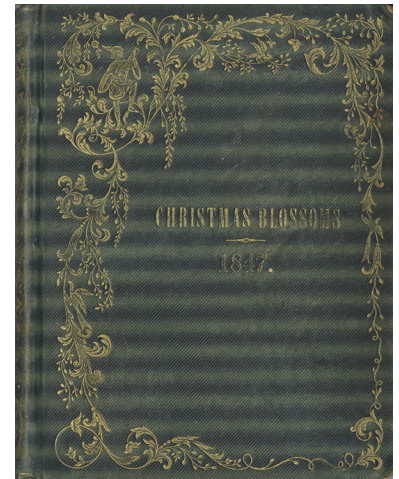


"The Dreams of the Youthful Shakespeare"
The Bijou; or Annual of Literature and the Arts. London: William Pickering, 1828

Young ladies could accept annuals as tokens of friendship or affection, so it was important for their size, look, and feel to appeal to a female. Gift books

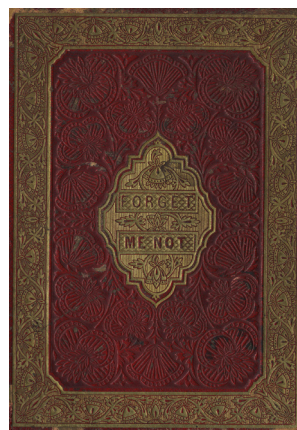
were also attractive objects that owners liked to display publicly on their drawing-room tables as visible symbols of their cultivated taste, wealth, and respectability.

Gift books were perhaps the most elegant, fine books that the United States had produced. Usually made of stamped or embossed leather, gift book bindings are representative of styles of 19th century publishers' bookbindings. In the 1850s, ornamented book bindings – often in red – reached new heights. Elaborate, lavish gilt-stamped designs decorated both the front and the back covers. Large-scale embossed



Front cover, *Christmas Blossoms, and New Year's Wreath*, for 1847.
Boston: Phillips & Sampson, 1847

pictures were often specific to the topic of the book. In addition to featuring a remarkably textured and patterned binding, *The Forget-Me-Not* even includes a decorative red-and-white-striped headband, attached to the top of the book's spine. Patterned cloth bindings like that for *Christmas Blossoms* are especially sought-after today.



Front cover, *The Forget-Me-Not: A Christmas, New Year, and Birthday Gift*. New York: Leavitt & Allen, ca. 1850-1859.

Increased competitors and production costs affected the long-term appeal of the gift book, but fine examples continued through the early years of the 20th century. Some gift books for children were marketed through the appeal of illustrators like Howard Pyle and Walter Crane. Other gift books were used as fund-raisers for hospitals and other endeavors supported by royalty.