

[Abraham Aesop, pseud.], *Fables in Verse*. (5th ed.) London: [J. Newbery], 1765. 38 woodcuts, 4 3/16 inches x 2 7/8 inches (106 x 72 mm), 144 pages.

This book begins with a “Life of Aesop” by the publisher, followed by some anecdotes concerning Woglog the Giant (a good fellow who helps the afflicted and corrects the foolish), with a plug for Newbery at their end. Next are the thirty-eight “Fables in Verse” of the title, attributed by some to Newbery. Among the fables—each accompanied by a woodcut illustration, most with a moral, and many with a further reflection—are the familiar “Ants and the Grasshopper” and “The Fox and Grapes.” The volume is rounded out by “The Conversation of Animals,” a series of short tales drawing parallels between the actions of humans and their animal kin. Also included is a seven-page advertisement for Newbery’s children’s titles.

John Newbery (1713–1767) was an English publisher considered by some to be the inventor of children’s literature and by others to have been the first to recognize its commercial potential. Newbery’s publishing career began in 1730 when he was hired by William Carnan, printer of the *Reading Mercury*. Newbery must have pleased his employer, as he inherited a portion of Carnan’s estate in 1737 and married his widow Mary two years later. By 1740 Newbery had begun publishing books in Reading, and he relocated his business to London in either late 1743 or early 1744. His 1744 *Little Pretty Pocket-Book*, often referred to as the first children’s book, was intended to “make Tommy a good Boy, and Polly a good Girl,” as stated by the publisher on the title page. A motto in the book, “Instruction with Delight” neatly sums up Newbery’s approach to children’s literature, which underpinned his success. Perhaps a reflection on Newbery’s own history, the children who peopled his tales succeeded or failed according to their virtues. The most noteworthy example can be found in *The History of Little Goody Two-Shoes* (1765), believed to have been authored by Oliver Goldsmith. Newbery also issued books for adults, among them works by Samuel Johnson and the poet Christopher Smart, who wed Newbery’s stepdaughter Anna Maria. Newbery supplemented his publishing business by selling patent remedies, as indicated in advertisements that appeared in certain of his books.

After Newbery's death in 1767, the publishing business was conducted by two separate firms, one headed by Newbery's son Francis and stepson Thomas Carnan, and the other by Newbery's nephew Francis and Francis' wife Elizabeth. Relations between the competing firms were not friendly, and Carnan and Newbery's partnership dissolved after a time, with Carnan continuing to publish and Francis selling patent medicines. Eventually John Newbery's publications became the property Elizabeth Newbery, and numerous publishers came to specialize in children's literature. The American Library Association's annual Newbery Medal commemorates his contributions to the genre.

This book is now in the Douce Collection at Oxford University's Bodleian Library. Francis Douce (1757–1834) was a British antiquary and the Keeper of Manuscripts at the British Museum from 1807 to 1811. His bequest of more than 19,000 volumes contained printed books from various periods, including nearly 500 incunables, as well as roughly 425 manuscripts. Eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century children's books numbered among Douce's wide range of collecting specialties. This copy of *Fables in Verse* is in a contemporary binding of boards covered with Dutch floral paper. On the front free endpaper, an inscription reads "Lydia Heaton | her Book | April 2 | 1770"; the title page bears the stamp "EX DONO FR. DOUCE | BIBL. BODL."

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