

Book Review

Who Owns This Sentence? A History of Copyrights and Wrongs by David Bellos and Alexandre Montagu

by Jesse Goodwin

At the very start of *Who Owns This Sentence? A History of Copyrights and Wrongs*, David Bellos and Alexandre Montagu lay out their goal: not to present a guide to copyright law but to track how the landmark idea that authors should hold ownership over their work for a brief time morphed into the multibillion-dollar intellectual property (IP) industry. The book takes its time spelling out this intricate (and sometimes circular) history and connecting it to what we see in the modern day—from Plato to artificial intelligence (AI)—in almost 400 pages. Frankly, with the amount of history, concepts, and terminology to cover, the two do a pretty good job vis-à-vis their goal.

Bellos and Montagu go to lengths to make the narrative palatable regardless of the reader's understanding of copyright, translating everything from legalese to layman's terms. Each chapter follows the same loose structure, mixing both historical context and anecdotes to illustrate the birth of a particular copyright and how it was used (or misused—often both) to shape whatever came next. Some stories are much more engaging than others; blurbs on lawsuits over circus posters and Charlie Chaplin's on-screen persona go down much smoother than several pages on the Stationers' Company in eighteenth-century London.

Most importantly, the book outlines how the moral rights that were the cornerstone of early copyright law—which is to say, the personal rights of authorship and authors' desires to maintain the integrity of their works—now feel at odds with current law, which is in the back pocket of media conglomerates

eager to keep their exclusive ownership of popular assets forever.

This dichotomy was brought into the public eye at the start of 2024, when the version of Mickey Mouse depicted in *Steamboat Willie* (and only *Steamboat Willie*) entered the public domain, prompting those previously uninterested in copyright to become experts overnight to avoid Disney's aggressive litigious reputation. Ruth Okediji, a renowned IP law scholar, noted the imbalance in an interview with NPR in January as *Steamboat Willie* mania took hold: "[It is] my hope that either Congress or the courts will restore the full balance between the protection of creativity and the protection of the public domain, which is also the protection of creativity" (Ulaby 2024).

The explosion of technology and its effect on content has brought moral rights back into focus, turning an ongoing conversation typically centered around economic interests to concerns about preserving the integrity of culture and knowledge in the digital era. Whether the two are at odds or aligned is yet to be seen—the debate is actively unfolding. The recent boom of AI is at odds with the author's desire to protect their work from getting crunched up by the machine. Once that concern is resolved, AI may pave the way for new advances in copyright law.

Who Owns This Sentence? is not a surefire guide to avoid being sued by Disney, but for anyone with even a passing interest in the subject of copyright, the book is an excellent starting point.

References

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- Ulaby, Neda. 2024. "'Steamboat Willie' Is Now in the Public Domain. What Does That Mean for Mickey Mouse?" NPR. January 1, 2024. <https://www.npr.org/2024/01/01/1221606624/mickey-mouse-public-domain-disney>.
- Sundara Rajan, Mira T. 2019. "Moral Rights: The Future of Copyright Law?" *Journal of Intellectual Property Law & Practice* 14, no. 4 (January 31, 2019): 257–258. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jiplp/jpz008>.