



In Praise of the Title *Verso*

**Interview with
Richard Charkin**

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KENNEALLY: You may read a book front to back, cover to cover, and still miss the title *verso*. But not Richard Charkin, because that's where he starts reading.

Welcome to CCC's podcast series. I'm Christopher Kenneally for Velocity of Content.

Title *verso* – by law and by tradition, every book you read will have one. *Verso* is Latin for reverse. The title *verso* is the text behind the title page, including always an ISBN catalog number, sometimes the publisher's name and contact information, and occasionally details on printing history and typesetting.

Critically for Richard Charkin, however, the title *verso* is where to find who is the copyright holder.

Richard Charkin has held senior posts at major publishing houses including Bloomsbury, Macmillan, and Oxford University Press. He is a former president of the International Publishers Association and the United Kingdom's Publishers Association. Currently, he is founder and sole employee of Mensch Publishing. Richard Charkin joins me today from London. Welcome to Velocity of Content.

CHARKIN: It's a pleasure to be here, Chris. Pleasure to see you and talk to you.

KENNEALLY: The very same, and we're very happy you can join us, Richard Charkin. You recently wrote for *Publishing Perspectives* about your obsession with this most boring bit of any book. So what exactly is the attraction for you of the title *verso*?

CHARKIN: Well, I suppose it is about people's perception of what publishers do. If you read the media, the general mainstream media, there's something about publishers as stars, as sort of literary creators in some sort of way. I've always felt the opposite. The authors are the stars. They are the literary creators. We are as publishers lucky people to be between them and their audience and to help them.



But never lose sight – publishing is a business. Books are a business. If you were to buy a car, it's true you might be excited by literature about the car, but actually you really want to know where are you buying it from, what it is, maybe what the size of the engine is. It's not a creative thing. It's a factual thing. The title *verso* of a book is like the descriptor of a car. It tells you the size of the engine and where you bought it from and who owns it in terms of its intellectual property.

KENNEALLY: A title *verso* is as fundamental to a book as the cover, the endpaper, and all the printed pages between them, yet the title *verso* is not fixed, but has evolved over past decades. Tell us the ways that it has changed, Richard.

CHARKIN: If you look at books from, say, the 19th century, almost certainly there would be almost nothing on the title *verso* page, maybe the name of the publisher. That's about it.

Now, particularly books that come from the bigger conglomerated publishers, there's slews of information. It's published by John Murray, part of Hachette Book Group UK, part of Hachette Book Group France, part of – I don't know who. But they will list it all, and very surely it is.

The other change that's happened is a real focus on both the copyright owner and the moral copyright owner, those two distinctive categories of being an author. Again, like the car, I want to know whether it's a BMW or, I don't know, a Ford Mustang, and the copyright line tells you that – all rights reserved. There it is in the copyright line. It's not the publisher's book. It's the author's book or the copyright owner's book, whoever that might be. That tells you something.

KENNEALLY: Take us on a tour, Richard Charkin, of two contrasting copyright pages, from a 1964 Jonathan Cape edition of Hemingway's *A Moveable Feast* to a hardback edition in the United Kingdom of Donna Tartt's *The Goldfinch*, published a half-century later.

CHARKIN: There's quite a lot of difference in terms of the amount of verbiage on the later book, but there's something interesting. In both cases, the copyright is not in the name of the author *per se*. It's in the name of the author company limited or whatever. I can't remember off the top of my head. So what they're saying there is the author has actually granted the copyright to some other entity, presumably for tax or other reasons. I don't know. But that tells you something in itself.

I have written a book. If I were to write a book, it would be in my name, because there's absolutely no point in my putting that into a tax creation. It's just me. But those two are both very successful authors, and clearly they had to deal with this in some way or other.



I suppose the other thing was that the original was just one publisher. It was an independent publisher. Jonathan Cape was a standalone publisher in London. The later book was part of a conglomerate, and it shows. You can feel the difference. I'm not saying one is better than the other. They're just different.

KENNEALLY: Well, I think in the case of the 1964 edition of the Hemingway book, it was copyright in his estate. So I think that makes the point that copyright is something which even lasts beyond the author's life.

CHARKIN: Way beyond – under current legislation, 70 years beyond, which incidentally for English-language publishers and authors is the greatest protection we could have. It is why publishing companies – frankly, why publishing companies very rarely go broke. They get bought (laughter) before they get broke. And the reason that they get bought is because the intellectual property which they control one way or another has a value of at least 70 years and possibly – I always think of J. K. Rowling, please God she lives for at least another 30 years, which gives Bloomsbury and Scholastic roughly 100 years to maximize revenues on her behalf – or her estate's behalf.

KENNEALLY: Can you decode for us the message in certain UK editions that reads, “the authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland”?

CHARKIN: I don't know how much your audience followed the catastrophic decision of the British electorate to decide to leave the European Union, having been fed a bunch of lies by people with vested interests. However, assuming they are now aware that the United Kingdom is not part of the EU, this has erected trade barriers between the UK and the EU. This has really quite heavy tax duties and an enormous amount of bureaucratic hassle. Now, I'm not absolutely certain, because I'm not a lawyer, but these lines appearing on the title *verso* in recent years postdate the Brexit vote, and I can only assume that they're using that representative office in Ireland, because Ireland remains – sensibly, incidentally – part of the EU to circumvent the worst of these restrictions. It's very interesting how they've appeared.

KENNEALLY: And EEA stands for – remind us?

CHARKIN: The European Economic Area, which includes Norway, I think Switzerland – people who aren't in the EU but have an association, and Britain would benefit enormously from being part of the EEA. But really, the main thing is to get over this EU barrier.

KENNEALLY: On every title *verso*, Richard Charkin, you will see, “all rights reserved.” Why are those three words so important to authors and to publishers?



CHARKIN: I think in a way, they're more important to authors than publishers. I mean, they are important to publishers. But "all rights reserved" means, "all rights reserved." For instance, when Google decided to set up the Google Library Project, they digitized all sorts of books and said if you don't like us to do this, tell us, and we'll take them down. All rights reserved means all rights reserved. They have to ask permission before they do anything. It's incredibly powerful. And the fact that it's only three words makes it more powerful than the longest – the 100-page documents you see as contracts in some cases. All rights reserved – it means all rights reserved, and rights means all media. It means everything. Of course, the publisher of that edition may not have all rights in that book. The author does, which is why I say I think in a way, it's more important for the author.

KENNEALLY: Richard Charkin of Mensch Publishing and columnist for Publishing Perspectives, thank you for speaking with me.

CHARKIN: Well, thank you for listening to me. I hope that all your listeners, viewers, fully understand how important copyright is – not just for the authors or the publishers, but actually for creativity, civilization. It is the single most important part of our intellectual property, and long may it reign.

KENNEALLY: Hear, hear, Richard Charkin. Thank you very much again for joining me.

That's all for now. Our producer is Jeremy Brieske of Burst Marketing. You can subscribe to this program wherever you go for podcasts. You can also find Velocity of Content on YouTube as part of the CCC channel. I'm Christopher Kenneally. Join me again soon on Velocity of Content.

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