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The AI Revolution Is Coming for Novelists

The fiction business may survive, but not in any way that we recognize.

By *Jay Baron Nicorvo*

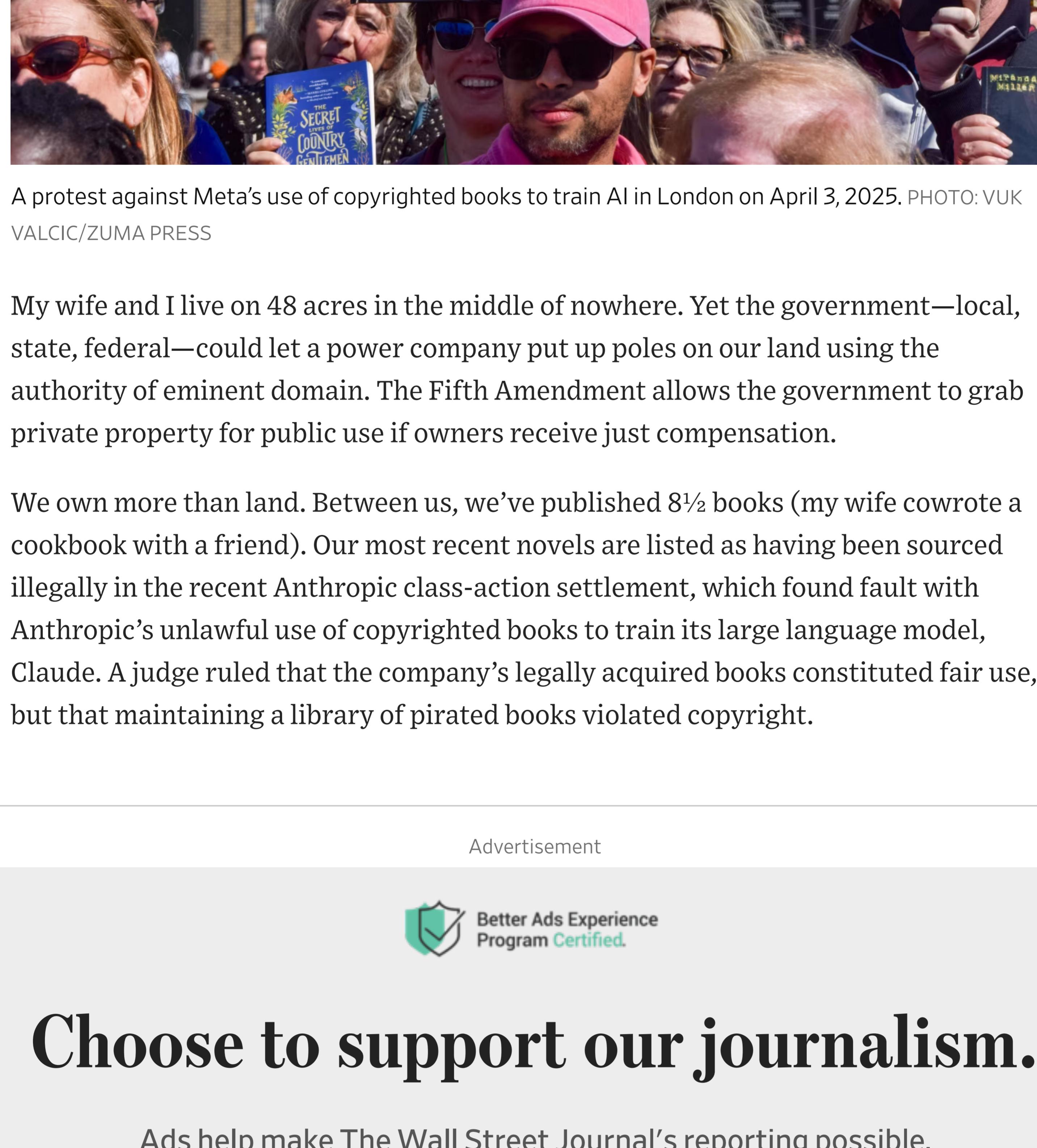
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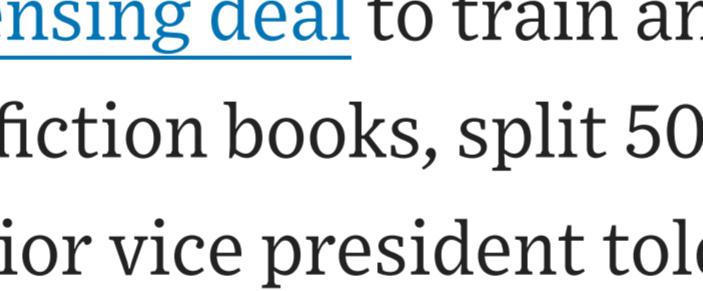


A protest against Meta's use of copyrighted books to train AI in London on April 3, 2025. PHOTO: VUK VALCIC/ZUMA PRESS

My wife and I live on 48 acres in the middle of nowhere. Yet the government—local, state, federal—could let a power company put up poles on our land using the authority of eminent domain. The Fifth Amendment allows the government to grab private property for public use if owners receive just compensation.

We own more than land. Between us, we've published 8½ books (my wife cowrote a cookbook with a friend). Our most recent novels are listed as having been sourced illegally in the recent Anthropic class-action settlement, which found fault with Anthropic's unlawful use of copyrighted books to train its large language model, Claude. A judge ruled that the company's legally acquired books constituted fair use, but that maintaining a library of pirated books violated copyright.

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As claimants, we each stand to receive \$3,000, half owed to our publishers. The

settlement will cost Anthropic more than \$1.5 billion. But it's peanuts next to the

[costs of the hardware](#) that powers Claude.

Just compensation for private property is pegged to market value. When it comes to intellectual property, AI is forcing us to ask: What is just? We may not like the answer.

I clocked 4,500 hours over five years writing "The Standard Grand." My agent at the time got me \$40,000 from St. Martin's Press for it, less her 15%. I grossed \$7.11 per hour. My wife's third novel took her twice as long to write. She got \$50,000 in 2016, minus her agent's cut, for "Our Lady of the Prairie." Does the Anthropic settlement offer us just compensation?

HarperCollins, one of the Big Five publishers, got a better deal with [Microsoft](#) in 2024. The terms of its three-year [licensing deal](#) to train an AI system provide \$5,000 per title, restricted to backlist nonfiction books, split 50-50 between author and publisher. A HarperCollins senior vice president told me few of her writers, who must opt in to the deal, have taken it. But the Anthropic settlement makes it look sweeter.

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There's a better way. Microsoft could offer a just compensation package for the high-value data it seeks. Rather than condemning our books and souring us on AI, Big Tech companies could allow writers to sell the rights to our work for AI use.

Instead, writers are losing their livelihoods and revolting. Harlequin France, owned by HarperCollins, [announced last week](#) that it's testing "AI-assisted translations" for future romance novels. The Bookseller, an industry trade publication, [reported](#) that dozens of Harlequin translators are being let go. Writers are now [attaching](#) anti-AI riders to their contracts.

Such measures will only delay the inevitable. Though the technology is new, the scenario is as old as culture. AI will do to translators what Guttenberg and his printing press did to medieval scribes.

But the printing press also ushered in the Enlightenment and gave birth to the modern novel. Anthropic's Claude won't kill the novelist. The camera didn't kill the painter. Motion pictures didn't kill the photographer. [Video didn't kill the radio star](#). It couldn't even kill radio. Radio simply moved to satellite. Its stars realigned. They went to MTV.

Generative AI will alter the novel, however. Non-AI novelists will have to innovate in response to AI's [artificial ingredients](#). Don't expect a windfall of cash for novelists. We're artists first. Few of us have ever done it for money. The business of the novel will suffer. The novelist has always suffered.

My wife and I won't expect just compensation anytime soon. We never did. We will continue squatting in the sticks, living like upper-heartland bohemians. Home prices are [lower](#) here. For now, we'll be fine on a single professor's salary (hers). We'll continue doing what we've long done: making stuff for less compensation than we deserve.

Mr. Nicorvo is a novelist whose books include "Best Copy Available" and "The Standard Grand."