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Lawrence A. Cunningham

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## CONTRACTS IN THE REAL WORLD

Contracts, the foundation of economic activity, are vital, fascinating, and misunderstood. Through a series of engaging stories – involving such captivating individuals as Maya Angelou, Clive Cussler, Lady Gaga, Paris Hilton, Martin Sheen, and Donald Trump – this book corrects the misunderstandings. Capturing the essentials of this subject and reviewing the classic cases, the book explores recurring issues people face in contracting. It shows how age-old precedents and wisdom still apply today and how contract law's inherent dynamism cautions against exuberant reforms. The book will appeal to the general reader and specialists in the field alike, and to both teachers and students of contracts.

Lawrence A. Cunningham is the Henry St. George Tucker III Research Professor at the George Washington University Law School. He has been a professor of law and business for more than twenty years at Boston College, George Washington University, and Yeshiva University. Cunningham is the author of many books, notably *The Essays of Warren Buffett: Lessons for Corporate America*, and editor for many years of the leading treatise on contract law, *Corbin on Contracts*. His writing has appeared as op-eds in *The New York Times*, *The Financial Times*, and *The National Law Journal*.

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# Contracts in the Real World

## **STORIES OF POPULAR CONTRACTS AND WHY THEY MATTER**

**Lawrence A. Cunningham**

*George Washington University Law School*



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*For Stephanie,  
My Dream Come True*

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## ANNOTATED CONTENTS

### 1. GETTING IN: CONTRACT FORMATION

Tools to distinguish enforceable promises from others – seals, writings, deals, and reliance – and to evaluate intention to bargain: offer, acceptance, and mutual assent.

#### A. Gifts, Bargains, Reliance: MLK and BU

Why bargains but not promises to make gifts are enforceable as contracts and how to tell the difference, using the case of Martin Luther King's donation of his papers to Boston University.

#### B. Ads or Offers: Pepsi and Harrier Jets

The difference between an unenforceable ad and an enforceable offer, using the case of a consumer's effort to hold Pepsi to a deal for a military fighter jet based on a humorous television commercial.

#### C. Frolic or Acceptance: Boasts on "Dateline NBC"

The difference between mere talk and valid offers that can be accepted to form a contract, using the case of a law student taking up prominent criminal defense lawyer J. Cheney Mason's boast on "Dateline NBC" about the strength of his defense in a capital murder trial.

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[More information](#)**D. Mutual Assent: Spyware and Secret Clauses**

Why mutual assent is required to form contracts and how it is tested, using controversial cases of software users subject to restrictions buried electronically or appearing inside the product's packaging.

**E. Policies or Pacts: The Cleveland.com Blogger**

The rising struggle about whether corporate policies, especially about privacy on the Internet, are enforceable as contracts, using the example of a blogger at Cleveland.com and analogizing today's challenge to contract law's resolution during the 1990s of disputes about whether employee handbooks are enforceable as contracts.

*Synthesis:* Why neither formal rules and pure objectivity nor pure context and subjectivity are sufficient to determine the existence of an enforceable contract.

**2. FACING LIMITS: UNENFORCEABLE BARGAINS**

Boundaries of enforceable contracts, which exclude those merely disguised as bargains and those bordering on illegality or violating prevailing sense of public policy.

**A. Unconscionability: Gail Waters's Annuity Swap**

Why courts rarely examine the fairness of exchange but will probe contracts on massively lopsided terms plagued with bargaining irregularities, using the example of an impressionable young woman's agreement to sell for \$50,000 cash an annuity contract with a cash surrender value of \$189,000.

**B. Blackmail: Michael Jordan's Paternity**

Why courts resist enforcing bargains amounting to blackmail and how to distinguish those from valid contracts, highlighting the context of patrimony, and illustrated using a case involving Michael Jordan.

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**C. Palimony: The Rapper 50 Cent**

Why courts struggle against enforcing contracts for personal services among unmarried cohabitants except when other elements of a bargain appear conspicuously, using the example of claims of a paramour against the rapper 50 Cent.

**D. Gambling: Octogenarian Powerball Sisters**

Why courts defer to people's freedom of contract yet still identify a class of cases as illegal bargains that courts would not enforce, using the case of two elderly sisters who made an agreement about lottery tickets.

**E. Making Babies: Baby M, Baby Calvert**

Continuing struggles in law, society, and technology concerning human reproduction, addressing contracts involving multiple participants in child bearing, contrasting competing approaches states take, from banning, to regulating, to endorsing this field of human endeavor.

*Synthesis:* Why neither pure freedom of contract nor excessive judicial second-guessing of the legitimacy of contracts is desirable.

**3. GETTING OUT: EXCUSES AND TERMINATION**

Legitimate grounds to excuse an otherwise enforceable contract, such as mutual mistake, impossibility, infancy, mental illness, fraud, and express termination clauses – albeit not including hysteria resulting from public outrage or private embarrassment.

**A. Mistake and Warranty: Madoff's Ponzi Scheme**

Why problems existing but unknown when a deal is made, owing to mutual mistake or warranty, can justify excusing contractual obligation, using the case of a divorcing couple's settlement agreement based on the existence of a Madoff account that turned out to be fictional.

### **B. Impossibility and Force Majeure: Donald Trump**

Why problems arising from supervening events like fire, flood, and other catastrophes that make performance impossible or impracticable can justify excusing contractual obligation, using the case of Donald Trump's effort to delay loan repayment duties in light of the 2008 financial crisis.

### **C. Infancy: Craig Traylor of "Malcolm in the Middle"**

Why minors and mentally ill persons have the right to elect to affirm or disaffirm otherwise valid contracts they make, using the case of child actor Craig Lamar Traylor who elected to disaffirm a contract with his personal manager, Sharyn Berg.

### **D. Outrage: AIG's Employee Bonuses**

Why public outrage is not a ground to rescind a bargain, and how the terms of a contract govern whether it must be performed or not, using the example of the bonuses AIG paid employees during the 2008 financial crisis.

### **E. Embarrassment: The New York Mets and Citi Field**

How contracts can be used to promote business relationships with parties who can become an embarrassment and why this does not excuse the obligation, using the example of the contretemps over the deal Citicorp made to name The New York Mets' home field, at the crest of the 2008 financial crisis.

*Synthesis:* Why ancient doctrines like *caveat emptor* (let the buyer beware) or *pacta sunt servanda* (promises are kept) are vital but cannot be absolute, and how contracts and contract law rather than politics and ideology rightly define the terms of bargains people make.

## **4. PAYING UP: REMEDIES**

Remedies for breach of contract, primarily compensation for disappointed expectations, along with limits on remedies.

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### A. Interests and Limits: Paris Hilton and “Pledge This!”

Contract law’s remedies for breach of contract designed to protect interests in expectancy, reliance, and justice, subject to limitations requiring losses to be shown with reasonable certainty and foreseeable as a result of breach, using the example of Paris Hilton’s agreement to promote the raunchy film “Pledge This!”

### B. Compensation: Paris Hilton and Hairtech

Differences between how contract claims award remedies to compensate and tort claims that can include damages to punish, using the case of claims by Hairtech International against Paris Hilton for failing to promote hair care products as promised.

### C. Markets and Mitigation: Redskins Season Tickets

Standard market references contract law uses to measure damages from breach and associated limitations on recovery for losses that can be avoided with reasonable diligence, using the case of claims by the Washington Redskins against season ticket buyers who breached their agreements to buy tickets.

### D. Stated Remedies: Sprint’s Early Termination Fees

The possibility of contracts stating the remedy for breach and how courts police these for excess, using the case of early termination fees in cell phone service contracts.

### E. Specific Performance: Tyson Chickens and IBP Pork

Limited times that courts require contract parties to perform their promises specifically, as opposed to paying money damages, when money would not be adequate to protect an interest because of unique features of the bargain, using the case of a merger agreement between Tyson Foods and IBP.

*Synthesis:* Why awarding money damages in most cases works while holding out the possibility of specific performance in extraordinary cases, as well as the possibility of restitution when all else fails.

5. REWINDING: RESTITUTION AND UNJUST ENRICHMENT

A body of law intertwined with contracts, called restitution, available to promote justice when contract law’s standard tools break down, recognizing obligations where contract law might not and awarding remedies to prevent unjust enrichment.

A. Gratuity or Exchange: Caring for Aunt Frances

Difference between those conferring benefits gratuitously and those doing so in the expectation of compensation or reimbursement, using the example of family caretakers.

B. Mere Volunteers: Battling Alaskan Beetles

Limits of restitution, not extending to cover mere volunteers, using the example of a prospective buyer of Alaskan timberland voluntarily preparing a site study amid Alaska’s beetle epidemic that threatened the state’s forests.

C. Trailing Promises: Lena Saves Lee’s Life

Why promises made after someone else has conferred a benefit are rarely valid, using the case of one neighbor saving another neighbor’s life.

D. Novel Ideas: The Making of “The Sopranos”

When no contract is formed but one person shares ideas with another who exploits them for gain, a claim in restitution can arise so long as the ideas were novel but not otherwise, using the example of a municipal judge’s claim to a share of the profits from the hit HBO television series “The Sopranos.”



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### E. Off-Contract Remedies: Rod Stewart at the Rio

When a contract is too indefinite to resolve a dispute over entitlement to money, off-contract remedy of restitution to prevent unjust enrichment can apply, using the example of a \$2 million advance paid to Rod Stewart for a concert he could not perform because of complications arising after his throat surgery.

*Synthesis:* Why formal rules of contract should be resisted to enable the flexible protection of interests that the doctrine of restitution enables.

## 6. WRITING IT DOWN: INTERPRETATION, PAROL, FRAUDS

The significance, problems, and requirements of putting a deal in writing.

### A. Plain Meaning I: Eminem's Digital Records

How courts interpret written contracts, evaluating whether contractual expressions manifest a plain meaning or require additional evidence, using the case of rapper Eminem's claim against his record producer about whether recordings marketed as iTunes and ringtones are "sales" or "licenses."

### B. Plain Meaning II: Dan Rather's Last Broadcast

Example of plain meaning interpretation that complements the preceding story, showing how telltale linguistic cues convey a plain meaning, using the example of CBS's termination of Dan Rather following controversial news broadcast about President Bush's Vietnam-era military service two months before the 2004 presidential election.

### C. Parol Evidence: The Golden Globes

Why complete and final written agreements prevent consideration of evidence about previous or contemporaneous deal making, using the example of a production contract for the Golden Globes.

**D. Scrivener’s Error: Who Owns the L.A. Dodgers?**

Effects of fraud and mistake on determining obligations, using the example of scrivener’s error in preparation of postnuptial agreement between Jamie and Frank McCourt about ownership of the Los Angeles Dodgers baseball team.

**E. Statute of Frauds: Cliff Dumas’s Phantom Radio Deal**

Limited but important circumstances where contracts must include a writing to be valid, along with exceptions and how the requirement is met, using the example of country music radio personality Cliff Dumas’s employment with a local radio station.

*Synthesis:* Why “putting it in writing” is not always the surest path to contractual certainty, but how it remains an appealing way to iron out the details, contract law taking the pragmatic middle ground between those who invest full faith in written expression and those incapable of believing that sometimes words have plain meanings.

**7. PERFORMING: DUTIES, MODIFICATION, GOOD FAITH**

What having a contract entails and how duties may be adjusted during performance.

**A. Implied Terms: Butch Lewis and Maya Angelou**

The role good faith can play to fill in gaps in indefinite, incomplete, or tentative agreements, using the case of the entertainment impresario Butch Lewis’s deal to promote the poet Maya Angelou’s work as greeting cards with Hallmark, in a deal that generated hundreds of millions of dollars for the card company and many millions of dollars in royalties.

**B. Express Terms: Clive Cussler’s Movie “Sahara”**

The relation between express contract terms and standards of good faith, using the case of best-selling adventure novelist Clive Cussler’s deal with billionaire Philip Anschutz’s Crusader Entertainment to make a movie of Cussler’s book, “Sahara.”

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### C. Unanticipated Circumstances: Deutsche Building

Why unanticipated circumstances can justify departing from literal terms of a contract, but how promises extorted by duress are unenforceable, using the example of Bovis Lend Lease's fixed-price contract to demolish the Deutsche Bank building in Lower Manhattan, rendered dangerous by 9/11.

### D. Accord and Satisfaction: Lady Gaga

Why parties may settle bona fide disputes by contracts called "accord and satisfaction," using the example of disputes between music producer Rob Fusari and pop performer Lady Gaga.

### E. Adjustment: Conan and "The Tonight Show"

Renegotiation of contracts, role of good faith, covenants not to compete, and remedies using the 2010 dispute between Conan O'Brien and NBC over "The Tonight Show."

*Synthesis:* Why the prevailing scope of the duty of good faith and respect for the express terms of a bargain properly balance the need for flexibility in contractual relationships with aversion to holding contracting parties to standards of conduct to which they did not assent.

## 8. HEDGING: CONDITIONS

Why and how parties limit the scope of their promises with conditions, express or implied, and how contract law's tools reinforce bargains and protect their fruits rather than encourage parties to walk away and scatter losses.

### A. Interpretation and Effect: Kevin Costner's Bison

How to determine whether a contractual expression makes a promise, whose breach entitles the injured party to remedies, or states a condition, whose non-occurrence excuses duties, using the case of Kevin Costner's commission of fine rural American sculpture inspired by his film "Dances With Wolves."

**B. Order of Performance: Charlie Sheen and Warner**

How to minimize problems arising from finger-pointing about who breached first with constructive conditions to regulate the order of performance, using the example of the saga of actor Charlie Sheen’s role on the Warner Brothers television show “Two and a Half Men.”

**C. Partial or Total Breach: Sheen and Warner II**

Why contract law encourages parties to use self-help and other steps to promote performance and protect the bargain, highlighting different calibers of breach, especially partial and total breach, continuing the example from the saga of Sheen and Warner.

**D. Waiver: Sheen and Warner III**

How parties can make minor adjustments, but not major modifications, to their ongoing deals by waiver, opening disputes about whether some commitments are promises or conditions, rounding out the saga of Sheen and Warner.

**E. Substantial Performance: Sandra Bullock’s Lake House**

Why a party in default can recover anyway, at least if they substantially performed, compensating the other side in money, using the example of Sandra Bullock’s contract to build a mansion in Austin, Texas.

*Synthesis:* Why parties should be encouraged to use self-help, backed by the strength of judicial enforcement.

**9. CONSIDERING OTHERS: THIRD PARTIES AND SOCIETY**

The limited rights and related duties third parties have concerning contracts to which they are strangers.

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### A. Beneficiaries: Supply Chain Abuse at Wal-Mart

Scope of rights of third parties to enforce contracts to which they are strangers, highlighting the case of foreign employees against Wal-Mart for violations of local labor laws by its suppliers.

### B. Assignment: JP Morgan's Cablevisión Loan

Scope and limits of party's rights to transfer contract interests, using the example of JP Morgan's attempted sale of a loan contract to a competitor of the borrower.

### C. Interference: New England Patriots and StubHub

Limitations on the rights of third parties to interfere with the contracts of others, using the example of the New England Patriots challenging the online ticket service StubHub for arranging sales of Patriots' season tickets.

### D. Torts: Katie Janeway's Tragic Accident

Why courts police bargains that purport to exculpate people from civic obligation, like negligence, using the example of contracts purporting to relieve sports and recreational facilities from liability for grossly negligent behavior.

*Synthesis:* Why law rightly limits the rights of strangers to contracts to enforce them and protects the interests of parties in contractual relationships from impairment by assignment or by tortious interference from others and law's interest in standards of behavior that may trump freedom of contract.

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