



PUBLIC DOMAIN DAY

POPEYE, 'THE SKELETON DANCE,' AND 'SINGIN' IN THE RAIN' ENTER THE PUBLIC DOMAIN

Alfred Hitchcock's first sound film, literary classics by Dashiell Hammett, Virginia Woolf, and William Faulkner, and additional Mickey Mouses are now fair use as of Jan. 1, 2025

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The first iteration of Popeye the Sailor, literary classics by Dashiell Hammett and William Faulkner, Alfred Hitchcock's first sound film, and songs like "Singin' in the Rain" and "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" are among the copyrighted works that will enter the public domain on Jan. 1.

As the calendar turns on New Year's Day, thousands of copyrighted works across literature, film, and music from 1929 become open to fair use. This year's slate also includes the French comic icon Tintin, Disney's still-iconic The Skeleton Dance short (38 million views on YouTube!), Ernest Hemingway's A Farewell to Arms, and the first English translation of All Quiet on the Western Front (the original German text became public domain last year).

Jennifer Jenkins, the director of Duke Law School's Center for the Study of the Public Domain, documents each year's Public Domain Day highlights on the center's website.

“For copyrighted culture, the public domain arrives only after a long wait,” Jenkins wrote of the 2025 entrants. “Works from 1929 were first set to go into the public domain after a 56-year term in 1985, but a term extension pushed that date to 2005. They were then supposed to go into the public domain in 2005 after being copyrighted for 75 years. But before this could happen, Congress hit another 20-year pause button and extended their copyright term to 95 years. Now the wait is over.” (For sound recordings, the copyright term is 100 years.)

Public Domain Day in 2024 was highlighted by the arrival of Mickey Mouse and Minnie Mouse, as the first iteration of those characters — as featured in the 1928 short *Steamboat Willie* — became free to use.

This year, a dozen more Mickey Mouse animations, including his first speaking role in *Karnival Kid*, will join “Mickey 1.0” in the public domain, with the same caveats as last year: Any use of these Mickeys must not suggest it is produced by or representative of Disney at large. It also cannot infringe on Mickey’s later look, as those versions remain under trademark. (“More modern versions of Mickey will remain unaffected by the expiration of the *Steamboat Willie* copyright, and Mickey will continue to play a leading role as a global ambassador for the Walt Disney Company in our storytelling, theme park attractions, and merchandise,” a Disney spokesperson said in 2024.)

A similar situation could play out with Popeye, who first appeared on Jan. 17, 1929, in the comic strip *Thimble Theatre*. That version alone — and not the Popeye who began appearing in animated shorts five years later — will enter the public domain in 2025. Still, the character is now available to play the hero or the villain in a slasher film — a la *Winnie the Pooh* — if some enterprising filmmaker wants to take advantage of the fair use.

Other notable Public Domain Day works include Hammett’s *The Red Harvest* and *The Maltese Falcon* (the latter featuring detective Sam Spade, who an earlier court ruling found was an un-copyrightable character), Hitchcock’s 1929 movie *Blackmail* (the legendary director’s first sound film), German director G.W. Pabst’s *Pandora’s Box* starring Louise Brooks, artworks by surrealists Salvador Dali and René Magritte, Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*, and 1929 sound recordings by Louis Armstrong, George Gershwin (notably “*Rhapsody in Blue*”), and civil rights icon Marian Anderson’s “*Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen*.”

“This year, we get new iterations of Mickey and Minnie, and the first versions of Popeye and Tintin (plus the dog Snowy),” Jenkins wrote. “Looking ahead, an

exciting new cast of characters will become public domain in the coming years: Betty Boop and Pluto (originally named Rover) in 2026, Goofy in 2028 (originally named Dippy Dawg), Mary Poppins and Donald Duck in 2030, Superman in 2034, Batman in 2035, Tom and Jerry and Bugs Bunny in 2036, and Wonder Woman in 2037.”