

Plagiarism and Originality

Distinguishing Between the Two May Be Impossible

William Dean A. Garner
Principal and Senior Editor
Ghostwriter-Editor.biz LLC

If you look up the definition of “plagiarism,” it’s ludicrously stupid. [long pause while I throw something heavy across the room, hoping it doesn't break glass that'll take hours to pick up.]

Better yet, it’s really dumb. I mean, each and every one of us is a mush of hundreds of different people! Each life, from birth to present, really should be categorized as “schizy,” or having multiple personalities. When I was in first grade, my teacher said a hella bunch of cool phrases and silly things, some of which I use today. Why? ‘Cos they sound so cool and people around me react to them in a positive way! When other people hear me saying them, they think I’m witty and clever. Okay, so I have this ego thing goin’. Anyway, I don’t bother to stop people and explain that it was Miss Price who said those witty thingees first. And who knows where she got them! Maybe her grandmother was as smart as all getout, and used to flip these cute little aphorisms all over the house like her heavenly German pancakes.

Again, who knows? I’d venture to guess that most people will never tell their friends where they picked up those endearing behaviors. It would seem to say to everyone: I’m not really me, but rather a collection of all the cool people I’ve ever met, including Jimi Hendrix. C’mon! Who in their right mind would reveal how much of them is truly “original”?

These days, what’s “original” anyway? Did Einstein create his brilliant work in a vacuum? No. He stood on the coconuts of dozens of super-brilliant physicists who went before him, and formulated many of the details of his “original” thoughts, ideas, beliefs. Einstein even admitted it late in life, after he had amassed his fame and jumped into the pants or sneaked up the dresses of all his postdocs.

Writing has existed only a relatively short time. On this planet. If you believe some modern historians, most of what was written two thousand years ago was about history and philosophy. Baloney! You're tellin' me that no one made up stuff and wrote it down on parchment or carved it into some stone!?

Again, baloney. No one can say with absolute certainty, but there appear to have been quite a few authors of fiction in ancient Greece and Rome. Don't ask and I won't tell 'cos I'm not in the mood to debate it. 'Sides, I don't wanna spar with any historians over stuff that can't be genuinely verified. It'd be like sittin' at lunch with half a dozen Cal Tech theoretical physicists, pitching their latest hypotheses and theories about the origins of the universe.

What's funny as hell is that they all end their little speeches with the same ol' disclaimer: everything I just said might be bullshit, but how 'bout that fuckin' pastrami on rye!?

Where did Shakespeare acquire his prose? Was it all original? Historians of his work have based their PhD dissertations and life works on the thesis that the work of Shakespeare was brilliant and original. Oh, bullpuckey. I'd bet my savings (all \$3.45 of it) that Willy freely absconded with the work of many others, most of whom had little or no idea of his deeds, and even if they did, had no recourse.

If he had ripped off my "original" ideas or thoughts, I'da given him a slappin', then made him cite my work at the end of Romeo and Juliet and Midsummer Night's Dream. Don't knock it: I get my way with boys.

Two thousand years of writings, thousands of authors, millions of works of nonfiction and fiction. Gazillions of "original" ideas and thoughts and beliefs. And you're tellin' me that plagiarism is a crime? Anyone who writes for a living must read for a living. Reading is so flippin' fundamental to the whole process of writing! I've never met a writer who didn't devour several books a week! So tell me this: how could we writers NOT accidentally "steal" the work of past authors?

Our subconscious behavior hasn't even been categorized by neuroscience. No one knows how we gather intelligence or information. No one. Is it possible that we truly are victims of our own humanity, in that it is written in our DNA to gather all kinds of information from wherever we can, and to pass ourselves off as original?

It is written that we shall become rip-off artists. Well, some of us, artists; others, amateurs. So how are we not to claim even portions of others' literary work as our own, especially when we consume their work like air and food? While I do not condone stealing a passage verbatim from another author's book or work, I'm

finding it tough to understand how NOT to take some minute detail and keep it for myself for future use.

When authors are interviewed on TV or online, they're often asked who influenced them and their work. I've studied some of these authors and when I discovered whom they admired, I went back and checked out these older authors. Know what I found? Plagiarism. Plain and simple. Stolen words, phrases, thoughts, style. Did I mention stolen?

Was it necessary to castigate the young Harvard student whose first novel featured the "plagiarized" work of another author? Shame on the senior editor and publisher for destroying this young woman's career even before it launched. And I mean that in the most derisive and sadistic terms. Shame on that editor, that is.

And what about Hollywood, the other literary art form? Those flippin' directors and writers ALL rip off the work of others. If you listen to director's comments on a movie, most will freely admit to stealing the work of another. How do they get away with it? Oh, they pay homage to that person whose artwork they used in their own film. Hollywood is a planet unto itself.

Back to literature, the other literary white meat. Good for all those famous authors who came to the aid of Ian McEwan, who has recently been beaten to molecular poop for plagiarizing the work of another historical novelist.

I love Thomas Pynchon's letter in response to this hoolabaloo.. And if you have a problem with my having retyped it in its entirety, then please crawl inside the nearest microwave and ask your spouse to close the door, then to set it to "Potato: 15 Minutes."

Thomas Pynchon writes: "Given the British genius for coded utterance, this could all be about something else entirely, impossible on this side of the ocean to appreciate in any nuanced way-but assuming that it really is about who owns the right to describe using gentian violet for ringworm, for heaven's sake, allow me a gentle suggestion.

"Oddly enough, most of us who write historical fiction do feel some obligation to accuracy. It is that Ruskin business about 'a capacity responsive to the claims of fact, but unoppressed by them.' Unless we were actually there, we must turn to people who were, or to letters, contemporary reporting, the encyclopedia, the Internet, until, with luck, at some point, we can begin to make a few things of our own up.

“To discover in the course of research some engaging detail we know can be put into a story where it will do some good can hardly be classed as a felonious act—it is simply what we do. The worst you can call it is a form of primate behavior. Writers are naturally drawn, chimpanzee-like, to the color and the music of this English idiom we are blessed to have inherited.

“When given the choice we will usually try to use the more vivid and tuneful among its words. I cannot of course speak to Mr. McEwan’s method of proceeding, but should be very surprised indeed if something of the sort, even for brief moments, had not occurred during his research for *Atonement*.

“Gentian violet! Come on. Who among us could have resisted that one? *Memoirs of the Blitz* have borne indispensable witness, and helped later generations know something of the tragedy and heroism of those days. For Mr. McEwan to have put details from one of them to further creative use, acknowledging this openly and often, and then explaining it clearly and honorably, surely merits not our scolding, but our gratitude.”

Pynchon’s simple and elegant letter has given me some new material to rip off and include in my own future works of literature. I think I’ll start with “coded utterance” and “color and music of this English idiom” and then graduate to “tuneful.”

Let’s end things on a positive, if only slightly threatening, note: without much effort, I can find acts of “plagiarism” in the works of many great and prominent, if not well-paid, authors.

Bet me. . . .

William Dean A. Garner is a bestselling ghostwriter and editor of fiction and nonfiction books. He also is the principal and senior editor of Ghostwriter-Editor.biz LLC. Please contact him at start.here@ghostwriter-editor.biz