Friday, April 28, 2006

Plagiarism is no laughing matter. If you are found guilty of doing it, you can fail a class or be expelled from school. A In the real world, the penalties are much stiffer. In 2003, a 27-year-old New York Times reporter, Jayson Blair, lost his job after he admitted to copying other journalists’ writing and faking reports. B

In 2006, the person in the spotlight was Kaavya Viswanathan.

Slightly adapted from “Kaavya Viswanathan: Unconscious Copycat or Plagiarist?” by Sandhya Nankani from WORD: Official Blog of Read and Writing magazines, Friday, April 28, 2006. Reproduced by permission of Weekly Reader Corporation. No alterations of any type may be made to this selection without the explicit permission of the copyright holder.
The Harvard student was given a $500,000 advance by the publishing giant Little, Brown to write a novel about an overachieving high school senior’s attempts to get popular and gain admission to Harvard University. The book: *How Opal Mehta Got Kissed, Got Wild, and Got a Life*.

In February, I read an advance copy of the book with much interest. It’s not every day that a new “young literary genius” is discovered and publicized by a major publishing company. Kaavya was 17 when she got her book deal; she was the youngest author signed by Little, Brown in decades.

My friend and colleague Pooja read *How Opal Mehta* . . . too. The following week, we got together for lunch and talked about it, dissecting it bit by bit. Literary tastes aside (there were a few things about the book that bothered us), we decided that any 19-year-old who could write a 250+-page novel deserved to be credited for her accomplishments. After reaching this conclusion, we sat back and waited for the book to come out—we were curious to know what others would think, whether our concerns would be mirrored by critics and readers, and whether the book would be as big a hit as the publisher had hoped for.

On April 1, Kaavya Viswanathan’s much-anticipated book came to life in bookstores. A flurry of reviews followed in all major newspapers and literary outfits. Then, things took an unexpected turn. The downward spiral began.

Neither Pooja nor I had expected this.

Last Sunday, *The Harvard Crimson* newspaper published a story alleging that Kaavya had plagiarized over 40 sections from two young adult novels by Megan McCafferty, *Sloppy Firsts* and *Second Helpings*.

In an email she sent on Monday, Kaavya said that she had “internalized” McCafferty’s work without realizing. That is, she had been such a fan of McCafferty’s books since high school and had read them 3 or 4 times and had copied her style without realizing. “Any phrasing similarities between her works and mine,” Kaavya wrote, “were completely unintentional and unconscious.”
Many were not convinced . . .

I read one document at Publisher’s Weekly that cited 49 different examples. Some seemed a stretch and others were pretty compelling. . . .

The plot thickens.

Tuesday: Kaavya’s publisher issued a statement saying that they would reprint the book with revisions and an acknowledgment to McCafferty.

Wednesday: Kaavya appeared on NBC’s Today Show. “When I was writing, I genuinely believed each word was my own,” she said.

Later Wednesday: At an interview at her publisher’s office, she also added that some of the plagiarism may have happened because she “had a photographic memory.” She also admitted that she had help developing the plot from 17th Street Media Productions, a “book packager.”

Thursday: Publisher Little, Brown essentially pulled the book off the shelves. They “sent a notice to retail and wholesale accounts asking them to stop selling copies of the book and to return unsold inventory to the publisher for full credit,” said Michael Pietsch, senior vice president and publisher of Little, Brown.

Is this the end of Kaavya’s story? Has she had her 15 minutes of fame, and will everyone forget about her by next Friday at this time? I’m not sure.

This controversy does not seem so black and white to me.

Is Kaavya an intentional plagiarist or an unconscious copycat? What role did her editor(s) and the marketing company play in this story? And if she did sit down and cut and paste the alleged 49 sections, did she think it was OK because she was paraphrasing—i.e., rewriting another writer’s words in her own words and changing the nouns, names, places, and things around?

As writers—whether we are writing for fun, for school, or for money—we all bear a mighty responsibility to our readers and to ourselves. That responsibility is to select each word we
use with precision and to do our utmost best to offer original thoughts and words to the world.

That task is not always easy—and in this respect, I empathize with Kaavya. There have been many occasions when I have written something and thought, “Hmmm, that sounds familiar. Did someone else say that?” As a writer, I need to be responsible for looking it up, investigating, poking around to see whether that is the case. If I find that yes, my words do sound a great deal like someone else’s, I need to go back and delete and rewrite.

Of course, there are some things that there just aren’t too many ways of saying:

Her name was Lucy. She lived in a house.
She was named Lucy. In a house she lived.
Lucy was her name. She resided in a house.

If you rewrite something like that or state a fact that’s widely known—“There are 12 months in a year”—that’s not plagiarism. Plagiarism is copying someone else’s writing without noting the source. That’s very different from being inspired by another writer and learning from his or her style.

You see why this is so complicated? I’m still trying to wrap my brain around it. What I think we should take away from this is not a sense of glee (“Aha! Kaavya got caught. Serves her right!” I’ve been hearing a lot of that out there.) Rather, we should step away from this situation and use Kaavya’s experience to remind us of the importance of consciously choosing our words. We should use it to remind ourselves that when it comes to writing, there’s nothing better than writing in our own voices.

At the end of the day, when Kaavya’s book has disappeared from bookshelves and her life has returned to a sense of normalcy, I hope that she will pick up a pen again and ask herself: What is my original writing voice? I wish her good luck in finding it. From what I’ve seen so far, it is a voice that glimmers with wit.