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The Official Blog of Read and Writing Magazines



Caricature of Sandhya Nankani.

Kaavya Viswanathan: Unconscious Copycat or Plagiarist?

by Sandhya Nankani

Read with a Purpose

Read the following pro and con arguments to help you decide if Kaavya Viswanathan, a Harvard student, intentionally plagiarized another writer's work.

Build Background

The first selection you are about to read is from a blog, an online journal. In addition to teaching, its writer, Sandhya Nankani, has written for WORD, *Weekly Reader's* literary blog. The second selection is by Joshua Foer, a freelance writer who specializes in science writing.

Plagiarism is no laughing matter. If you are found guilty of doing it, you can fail a class or be expelled from school. 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.

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

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.

A **Informational Focus** Evaluating Arguments What claim about plagiarism does the writer make? What example does she provide to support her assertion?

B **Informational Focus** Evaluating Arguments For what purpose does the writer offer her first impressions of Viswanathan?

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 acknowledgement 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?

 **International Issues** Evaluating Arguments What evidence supports the claim that Viswanathan plagiarized another writer's work?

Vocabulary **internalized** (ihn TUR nuh lyzd) *v.*: adopted as one's own.

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. D

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. E

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. E

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.

D Informational Focus Evaluating Arguments In this portion of the blog, what new idea is the writer presenting? Is her idea a fact or an opinion? How can you tell?

E Informational Focus Evaluating Arguments Do you find this type of evidence convincing? Why or why not?


E Informational Focus Evaluating Arguments What final idea does the writer present? Has her overall argument been logical and comprehensive? Explain.

Kaavya Syndrome

by Joshua Foer

April 27, 2006


Kaavya Viswanathan has an excuse. In this morning's *New York Times*, the author of *How Opal Mehta Got Kissed, Got Wild, and Got a Life* explained how she "unintentionally and unconsciously" plagiarized upward of 29 passages from the books of another young-adult novelist, Megan McCafferty. Viswanathan said she has a photographic memory. "I never take notes."

This seems like as good an opportunity as any to clear up the greatest enduring myth about human memory. Lots of people claim to have a photographic memory, but nobody actually does. Nobody. 

Well, maybe one person.

In 1970, a Harvard vision scientist named Charles Stromeyer III published a landmark paper in *Nature* about a Harvard student named Elizabeth, who could perform an astonishing feat. Stromeyer showed Elizabeth's right eye a pattern of 10,000 random dots, and a day later, he showed her left eye another dot pattern. She mentally fused the two images to form a random-dot stereogram and then saw a three-dimensional image floating above the surface. Elizabeth seemed to offer the first conclusive proof that photographic memory is possible. But then in a soap-opera twist, Stromeyer married her, and she was never tested again.

In 1979, a researcher named John Merritt published the results of a photographic memory test he had placed in magazines and newspapers around the country. Merritt hoped someone might come forward with abilities similar to Elizabeth's, and he figures that roughly 1 million people tried their hand at the test. Of that

 **International Focus** Evaluating Arguments What claim has the author made in this passage?

number, 30 wrote in with the right answer, and he visited 15 of them at their homes. However, with the scientist looking over their shoulders, not one of them could pull off Elizabeth's trick.

There are so many unlikely circumstances surrounding the Elizabeth case—the marriage between subject and scientist, the lack of further testing, the inability to find anyone else with her abilities—that some psychologists have concluded that there's something fishy about Stromeyer's findings. He denies it. "We don't have any doubt about our data," he told me recently. Still, his one-woman study, he says, "is not strong evidence for other people having photographic memory."

That's not to say there aren't people with extraordinarily good memories—there are. They just can't take mental snapshots and recall them with perfect fidelity. Kim Peek, the 53-year-old savant¹ who was the basis for Dustin Hoffman's character in *Rain Man*, is said to have memorized every page of the 9,000-plus books he has read at 8 to 12 seconds per page (each eye reads its own page independently), though that claim has never been rigorously tested. Another savant, Stephen Wiltshire, has been called the "human camera" for his ability to create sketches of a scene after looking at it for just a few seconds. But even he doesn't have a truly photographic memory. His mind doesn't work like a Xerox. He takes liberties. . . .

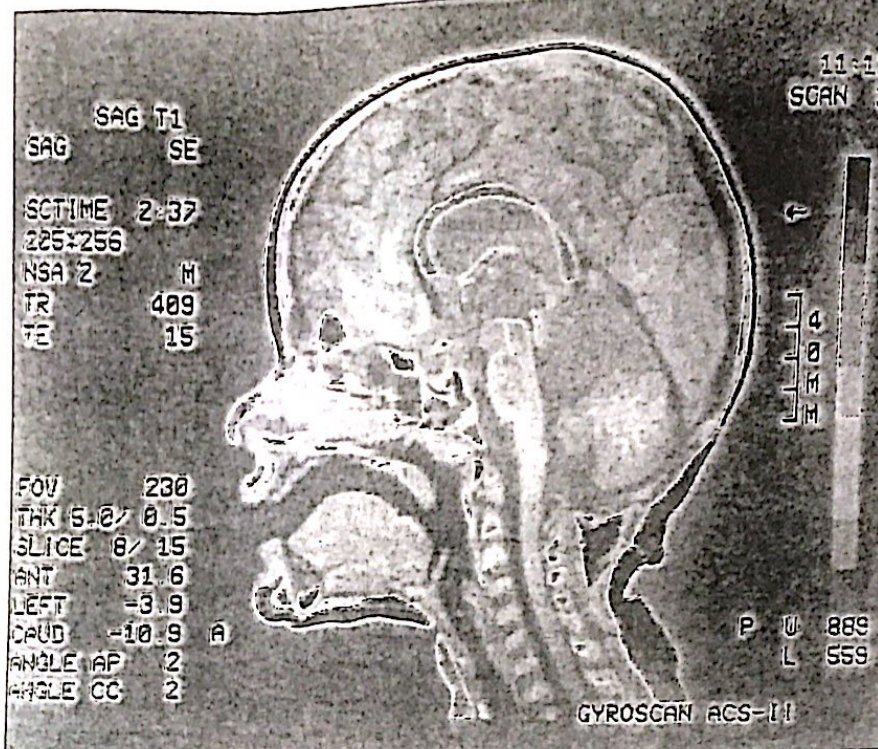
In every case except Elizabeth's where someone has claimed to possess a photographic memory, there has always been another explanation. A group of Talmudic scholars² known as the Shass Pollaks supposedly stored mental snapshots of all 5,422 pages of the Babylonian Talmud. According to a paper published in 1917 in the journal *Psychological Review*, psychologist George Stratton tested the Shass Pollaks by sticking a pin through various tractates of the Talmud. They responded by telling him exactly which words the pin passed through on every page. In fact, the Shass Pollaks probably didn't possess photographic memory so much as heroic perseverance. If the average person decided he was going to dedicate his entire life to memorizing 5,422 pages of text, he'd probably also be pretty good at it. It's an impressive feat of single-mindedness, not of memory.

Truman Capote famously claimed to have nearly absolute recall of dialogue and used his prodigious memory as an excuse never to take notes or use a tape

1. **savant** (suh VAHNT): person with a mental disability who displays exceptional skill in a specialized field.
2. **Talmudic** (tahl MUD ihk) **scholars**: people who study the Talmud, a collection of writings on Jewish civil and religious law.

Informational Focus Evaluating Arguments What evidence does the author give to support his claim? What effect does the use of the word *trick* to describe Elizabeth's accomplishments create?

Vocabulary **perseverance** (pur suh VIHR uhns) *n.*: sticking to a purpose; never giving up.



Analyzing Visuals

Viewing and Interpreting How might scientists today utilize technology to help them better understand people like Elizabeth?

recorder, but I suspect his memory claims were just a useful cover to invent dialogue whole cloth. Not even S, the Russian journalist and professional mnemonist³ who was studied for three decades by psychologist A. R. Luria, had a photographic memory. Rather, he seemed to have implicitly mastered a set of mnemonic⁴ techniques that allowed him to memorize certain kinds of information.

Viswanathan is hardly the first plagiarist to claim unconscious influence from memory's depths. George Harrison said he never intended to rip off the melody of the Chiffons' "He's So Fine" when he wrote "My Sweet Lord." He had just forgotten he'd ever heard it. And when a young Helen Keller cribbed from Margaret Canby's "The Frost Fairies" in her story "The Frost King," Canby herself said, "Under the circumstances, I do not see how any one can be so unkind as to call it a plagiarism; it is a wonderful feat of memory." Keller claimed she was forever after terrified. "I have ever since been tortured by the fear that what I write is not my own. For a long time, when I wrote a letter, even to my mother, I was seized with a sudden feeling, and I would spell the sentences over and over,

3. **mnemonist** (nih MAHN ihst): someone who is able to recall large amounts of information.

4. **mnemonic** (nih MAHN ihk): aiding or intended to aid the memory.

Informational Focus Evaluating Arguments How does the writer explain opposing arguments about photographic memories?

to make sure that I had not read them in a book," she wrote. "It is certain that I cannot always distinguish my own thoughts from those I read, because what I read becomes the very substance and texture of my mind."

Psychologists label this kind of inadvertent appropriation cryptomnesia, and have captured the phenomenon in the laboratory. In one study, researchers had subjects play Boggle against a computer and then afterward try to recreate a list of the words they themselves found. Far more often than expected, the researchers found that their subjects would claim words found by the computer opponent as their own. Even if cryptomnesia is a real memory glitch that happens to all of us from time to time, however, it's hard to figure how it could lead to the involuntary swiping of 29 different passages. 6

Then again, who knows, maybe Viswanathan really does have a photographic memory. She could be the first (or second). Earlier this year, a group of memory researchers at the University of California-Irvine published an astonishing article about a woman called AJ who can apparently remember every day of her life since childhood. Such people weren't supposed to exist. Her case totally upends everything we thought we knew about the limits of human memory. The scientists even had to coin a new name for her disorder, hyperthymestic syndrome. If Viswanathan really wants to stick to her story, I know a few scientists who'd probably like to meet her. She might even be able to get a syndrome named after her. 6

Read with a Purpose What is your verdict? Did Viswanathan intentionally plagiarize another writer's work? Why do you think as you do?

D Informational Focus Evaluating Arguments Given the evidence about cryptomnesia, do you find the writer's conclusions about Viswanathan convincing? Why or why not?

E Informational Focus Evaluating Arguments Does the writer's tone, or attitude toward his subject, strengthen or weaken his argument? Explain.

Vocabulary **inadvertent** (ihn uhd VUR tuhnt) *adj.*: unintentional; accidental; not done on purpose.