

## Tekst 5

# Fingers in the word-till

Mark Lawson

The best image of plagiarism I can think of is that of someone being caught with their fingers in the word-till. Unfortunately, it wasn't me who thought of it, but Martin Amis.

Is it possible, 7, that having read and admired that metaphor many years ago, I might somehow have buried it in my subconsciousness so that it jumps out one day as my own fresh phrase? And, even as I wrote that scrupulously attributed opening paragraph, a fear lurked that this thieving-from-Amis conceit had been used in a previous column on plagiarism. But was it by me or by DJ Taylor?

This panic about language-theft is 8 by Kaavya Viswanathan, the teenage American writer whose debut book - *How Opal Mehta Got Kissed, Got Wild, and Got a Life* - has been withdrawn from bookstores and her publishing contract cancelled after the discovery that her first novel incorporated portions of books by four other writers, including Megan McCafferty and Salman Rushdie. This case seems to have some similarities with those of two American journalists - Stephen Glass of the *New Republic* and Jayson Blair of the *New York Times* - whose writing was proved to be fraudulent, 9 the techniques slightly varied: Glass was fictionalising material, Blair stealing it from others. Viswanathan seems to have combined these approaches by passing off the fiction of others as her own.



**Kaavya Viswanathan: debut book withdrawn**

The young novelist has not yet given her tearful apologia to Oprah or had a movie made about her but Glass and Blair, who have suffered such analysis, seem to have behaved as they did because their desire to be journalists was greater than their talent or aptitude for it. It seems a reasonable guess that Viswanathan was also inventing a persona that she was 10 unable to become.

The key question - for psychologists and perhaps also attorneys - will be whether the 19-year-old knew what she was doing and, if she did, whether she accepts that it was plagiarism. These issues may not be clear-cut. 11, all authors are plagiarists: they begin their career by carrying out a style-heist from writers they admire. The bookstores are full of novels that adopt the rhythms and interests of Amis, Rushdie, or Muriel Spark, but have the names of much younger writers on the cover.

For example, someone who once admired Amis's description of plagiarism might end up comparing word-theft to being caught wheeling a trolley out of the phrase-vaults, an image that could not have existed without Amis's but also 12.

Viswanathan, though, went far beyond homage. Comparison between her novel and its models suggests a photocopier fitted with software to dictate 5% variations. In her only public defence before events or lawyers encouraged her to shut up, she blamed her recycled writing on a "photographic memory" - but she really needs to forget that one. A person who truly has camera-like recall retains an image of even where the phrase lies on the page, and it seems

unlikely that the little matter of who had initially 13 the perfectly-remembered sentences would somehow slip their mind.

Like doctors faced with a Shipman, the British GP who murdered many of his patients, publishers will convince themselves that Viswanathan is a monstrous one-off. But there are two reasons to fear that many other writers may copy her copying.

University teachers admit in private that it is now wise to assume that an essay will contain pre-written material. The job of a don is to adjudicate on whether it has been deftly used or well disguised. And much of the art to which the young have been exposed exhibits 14: sampled music, found sculpture, movies created through visual quotation. The phenomenon of music downloading is a direct assault on the very idea of copyright.

But, if Viswanathan came to believe that karaoke prose is a strike for the freedom of information, her publishers may have encouraged her downfall by subjecting her to another modern pressure.

In a time when authors need to make their mark against ever more competing entertainments, the story behind a book has become at least as important as the one the volume tells. In this year's previous American 15, James Frey admitted to having exaggerated the addiction memoir, *A Million Little Pieces*.

While neither Frey's nor Viswanathan's publishers would have released the books if they had known the provenance of the content, the business must bear some responsibility for leading the authors to their deceptions. Frey lied to provide what the current publishing market most wanted, which was accounts of sensational experience. What the big publishing houses also badly want at the moment is young attractive writers with cross-cultural appeal, and perhaps the Indian-American student moulded herself to fulfil this 16. The plagiarist deserves shame but perhaps publishing - with its craving for striking talent - left, as it were, the word-till open.

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### Tekst 5 Fingers in the word-till

*Kies bij iedere open plek in de tekst het juiste antwoord uit de gegeven mogelijkheden.*

1p 7

- A as a result
- B for example
- C in short
- D though

1p 8

- A cut short
- B exploited
- C prompted
- D shared

1p 9

- A although
- B because
- C so that
- D whereas

1p 10

- A in this fashion
- B nevertheless
- C otherwise

1p 11

- A At heart
- B In some sense
- C Moreover
- D Therefore

1p 14

- A a contempt for authorship
- B a striking lack of taste
- C the influence of idolisation
- D the mystifications of modern art

1p 12

- A devalues it
- B has an independent life
- C lacks creativity
- D smacks of dishonesty
- E takes its place

1p 15

- A commercial fiasco
- B copyright crisis
- C publishing scandal

1p 13

- A criticised
- B re-used
- C stolen
- D twisted
- E written

1p 16

- A artistic ambition
- B corporate need
- C cultural duty
- D promise of literary fame