General Information

Source: NBC Today Show  Resource Type: Video News Report
Creator: Katie Couric  Copyright: NBCUniversal Media, LLC.
Event Date: 04/26/2006  Copyright Date: 2006
Air/Publish Date: 04/26/2006  Clip Length: 00:03:40

Description

Harvard student and best-selling author Kaavya Viswanathan, accused of plagiarizing several passages from another author's books, says she loved the other author's work so much that she "internalized" passages and thought they were her own.

Keywords


Citation

**Transcript**

Young Harvard Novelist Talks about Plagiarism Accusations

KATIE COURIC, co-host:

The coming of age novel, “How Opal Mehta Got Kissed, Got Wild, and Got a Life” is having a wild ride of its own. Climbing the bestsellers list, written by first-time author Kaavya Viswanathan, who was signed to a book deal as a Harvard freshman for a reported $500,000. But now her future is on the line. She's facing grave accusations that she lifted at least a dozen passages from another writer's book.

The New York Times, Kaavya, reports that there are 29 examples of very similar passages between your book and two of Megan McCafferty's books. Meanwhile, Crown Publishers, McCafferty's publisher, says there are 40. How do you explain this?

Ms. KAAMYA VISWANATHAN: All I can say is that I've read both of Megan McCafferty's books, "Sloppy Firsts" and "Second Helpings" when I was in high school. I think the first one came out when I was about 14, and I read both those books three or four times each. I completely see the similarities, I'm not denying that those are there, but I can honestly say that any of those similarities were completely unconscious and unintentional, that while I was reading Megan McCafferty's books, I must have just internalized her words. I never, ever intended to deliberately take any of her words.

COURIC: But now you can understand why people are so upset about this, because whether it's 29 instances or 40 instances, clearly it seems as they were almost directly lifted from--from her books. So it's almost difficult to--to understand how they could be so similar if it was just a case of you internalizing her words and somehow they were in your unconscious, and then spilled out as you were writing this novel.

Ms. VISWANATHAN: When I sat down to write my novel, my only intention was to tell the story of Opal. I wanted to tell an Indian-American story, a college admissions story, and as I was writing, I genuinely believe that every single word I wrote was my own. I was so surprised and horrified when I
found these similarities, when I heard about them over this weekend.
COURIC: I know in an e-mail that was mentioned in The New York Times, you said that the characters were not similar, and yet in—in—in Megan McCafferty's book, it is about a high school girl who goes to Columbia—wants to go to Columbia, who gives a great graduation speech, who strives to make good grades. So in many ways, even thematically your books are very similar, don't you think?
Ms. VISWANATHAN: I think that the central concepts of our books are completely different. I wrote about what I knew, my personal experiences. I'm an Indian-American girl who got good grades, from New Jersey, who wanted to go to an Ivy League school, and I drew upon my own experiences, upon quirks of the people around me, and my culture to create my character, Opal Mehta.
COURIC: Do you believe that things will go on, that you'll apologize, that you'll mention Megan in the— the foreword of the book, and all will be well?
Ms. VISWANATHAN: I hope I would—I'm going to put an acknowledgement to Megan, definitely, in the front of the book. I hope that she can forgive me for whatever distress I've caused her.
COURIC: Do you think that's realistic, though, Kaavya, given all the controversy surrounding James Frey and his book, and the fact that now readers are much more skeptical about the things they read? Or do you think that—that they can forgive and forget?
Ms. VISWANATHAN: I mean, that's what I'd hope that people can do. I hope that people who know me will believe that I'm telling the truth, that I've never been anything less than honest in my entire life, that I'm so horribly sorry for this mistake. But that's all it was, a completely unintentional mistake.