

Professors Who Plagiarize: Academe's Dirty Little Secret

We worked well together, and on the whole I was a willing partner, interested in the job and fascinated by the psychological processes involved on both sides. Over the years I learned a great deal about vanity, the desire to belong, the lengths a man will go to in affecting to be something other than he is. And the lengths a woman will go to in colluding with the pretence. (Erdal, 2005, p. xiii)

Margaret Alice Boell, AM'26, PhD'31, a writer and librarian, died August 25, 2002, in Boston. She was 97. Boell ghostwrote *Biography of the Gods* (Macmillan, 1941) for Chicago comparative-religion professor A. Eustace Hayden [sic]. She worked as the librarian for Chicago's Meadville Lombard Theological School for 26 years. Survivors include two nieces and a nephew, Benjamin Muckenhoupt, MS'55, PhD'58. (*The University of Chicago Magazine*, 2005, p. 69)

During the years in which the book has been taking shape, I have had Dr. Margaret Boell with me as research assistant and collaborator. Her critical judgment and careful scholarship are so woven into the words, arrangement and materials that the final result is a joint product. For her untiring helpfulness I here record my deep gratitude. (Haydon, 1941, p. ix)

The story introduced by the preceding epigraphs and contained in the following “e-dialogue” concerns one of the more egregious and least examined areas of intellectual theft in the academy: plagiarism committed by professors who steal from their students. While an entire industry has grown up around educating and admonishing the latter to give credit where credit is due, the former rarely feel the sting of opprobrium when caught in the act. This is, indeed, the academy's dirty little secret, and the example presented here by the family who “outed” it is not for the faint of ethical heart, or for the eyes of a bright, aspiring graduate student who might be looking to the ivory tower for fellowship and guidance. In a word, beware.

Fact: Some professors plagiarize from their students. It happens often enough that in my relatively brief tenure as an undergraduate and graduate student (9 years) I knew personally of three such instances, each one resolved by hushing it up, the institution heavy-handed in its privileging of professor over student. I have presented the problem as a case study via actual e-mail correspondence in order to give Margaret Boell's family their say about the theft, for theft it surely is, even if one attaches to it the rather

coy, oxymoronic term of “legitimized plagiarist.” In brief, according to Boell’s family, a very popular, successful, acclaimed professor, at the height of his fame and teaching career, had a female Ph.D. write what was to become a bestseller (published twice by major trade presses), for which he merely acknowledged her “untiring helpfulness.” Her family knew different, but, presumably, no one else did. Upon publication of her obituary in her school’s alum magazine, only a couple of us noticed and cared enough to make an inquiry. One would have thought that the very word “ghostwrote” would have set off all sorts of alarms for the magazine’s editor. The fact that it did not says volumes about one of the unspoken rules of the academic game: speak no evil about “marquee” professors, at least when it merely involves intellectual exploitation of, or thievery from, students.

Two issues come to mind: first, what makes academic ghostwriting wrong? After all, ghostwriting, a.k.a. the aforementioned “legitimized plagiarist,” would appear to be a huge business on the internet, openly welcoming all comers. Those who ply this trade in the internet guarantee that their own work is original and not itself a plagiarized piece. The ghostwriter is ostensibly more than willing to sell his or her work and not claim authorship (as was Erdal), and said ghostwriter is compensated, undoubtedly quite well. So where’s the foul? Boell’s nephew, himself a professor, observes that he thought what she did was simply the work of a research assistant, as that task was conceived of in those days. Erdal, clearly a talented writer in her own right, wrote every single word her employer required, from love notes, to fiction and non-fiction books, to interviews, you name it. For this she was generously paid. Her employer became even more famous, was enriched, and enjoyed the benefits of her talent. If I were to earn a Ph.D., a teaching position, get published, and gain tenure due to the efforts of a hired gun, not a word or idea being my own, but all “legitimately” purchased, what would I be called? According to the academy, I’d be called “Doctor,” or “Professor,” and, should my paladin be as talented as Erdal or, having read her book, as Boell, I’d be called, as Haydon was, an erudite scholar.

Second issue: What recourse does a student have when a professor outright steals his or her ideas or actual words? Granted, in Boell’s case, she willingly surrendered what her family believes to be her book, on the promise of a teaching career. She “ghostwrote” for an I.O.U. After her mentor, whom she thanks profusely in her dissertation’s acknowledgements, failed to keep his end of the bargain, she had no way to call him on it and demand an academic job. His name was on the title page, not hers. He gave her credit for her “untiring helpfulness.” She became a librarian, and only her immediate family knew that part of Haydon’s reputation was based on a lie. During my graduate school years, two of my peers, whose original ideas along with their very words became the property of a distinguished professor were told by a dean that they would be ruined academically should they protest. They, my fellow graduate students, essentially, did their “ghostwriting,” unwillingly and without compensation, hardly what they imagined

they were destined for when they set out to become members of the ancient and august community of scholars. We call one kind of intellectual theft “ghostwriting,” the other plagiarism. But really, in the case of professors who plagiarize, is there a difference?

Obviously, this raises the larger question of how far will an academic institution go to pander to the whims and wishes or needs of professors whose names and works grant them veritable star status. Such superstar scholars are all too often given carte blanche to do as they wish, hire whom they will, and, it seems, as the Tom Lehrer song has it, “plagiarize, plagiarize, plagiarize.” A lesser light on the faculty might be severely punished or dismissed for passing off as his or her own someone else’s work. Oddly enough, in my experience it has not been lesser lights who steal from their students. It has also been the case that the students who are so abused, both by the theft and by the university’s quashing of the accusation of same, fail to fulfill the promise they had evidenced in their graduate studies and writings. Could they have become stars in the academic firmament? Could Boell, with her best-selling survey of world religions, have become an early, achieving female professor of comparative religions? Not very likely, with the foot of a professor who plagiarizes resting on her neck.

24 Feb 2005

Dear Professor Muckenhoupt: The obit on your aunt Margaret Boell in the U. of C.’s alum magazine caught my eye, my fancy, and my curiosity enough that I checked out her dissertation and the purportedly ghosted book, “Biography of the Gods.” I want to drop a note to the magazine, although I’m not sure it will be published since it certainly casts a different light on the achievements of what then probably would have been styled a “marquee professor.” I came through the U. of C. educational process later in life (I was a 30-year-old first-year student in 1970, got my PhD in History of Culture nine years later) and therefore was more observant and frequently more outraged by what I and some other of my peers experienced as part of the system: discrimination, coercion, and simple plagiarism. I know what the latter did to a couple of my fellow grad students, and how the powers-that-be handled it (badly and unfairly). I am curious about the “back story” in the notice on your aunt. I’m writing you because I assume you contributed the information in the notice. And if so, you are a loving and possibly angry nephew. If I’m wrong, enlighten me. If I’m right, thank you for the wonderful quest.

Gwen Layne

10 March 2005

Dear Gwen Layne: A quick response to your note on Aunt Margaret. I am Ben’s wife and a very fond niece-in-law to Margaret Boell. She was an intelligent, knowledgeable, gracious woman. She was the favorite aunt to her nieces and nephews and to their families, and we all held her in admiration. It is marvelous that even in death she

could spark your interest so that you would do some research. She would have loved that! Thank you for your interest
Mary Kay Muckenhoupt

20 March 2005

Dear Gwen Layne: I think you are looking for something more sinister in my Aunt's ghostwriting than is justified. Actually Dr. Haydon was fairly generous in his acknowledgement of Margaret. The preface to that book concludes with the following: "During the years in which the book has been taking shape, I have had Dr. Margaret Boell with me as research assistant and collaborator. Her critical judgment and careful scholarship are so woven into the words, arrangement and materials that the final result is a joint product. For her untiring helpfulness I here record my deep gratitude."

I'm sure that she would have preferred to have been listed as a joint author. The preface statement, however, would presumably have been enough to let a prospective academic employer know that the book was largely her work. My understanding is that Dr. Haydon originated the idea for the book and organized it while Margaret did the writing. Dr. Haydon's statement also suggests that she did most of the research.

Margaret was a research assistant in the religion department at Chicago from 1931-41 and I assume that ghostwriting was a standard part of such positions. My understanding is that during that period she tried to get an academic appointment. These were scarce or nonexistent because of the depression and she was not successful. She eventually settled for being the Meadville librarian, a position for which she was certainly overqualified.

There may have been marketing considerations in leaving Margaret off the title page. A joint work of Dr. Haydon and an unknown coauthor might have suggested the book was an expanded doctoral thesis; with only his name it was the work of a well known expert. My daughter ran into a similar problem when she wrote the "Advanced Placement Examination in Psychology" review book for the Research and Education Association. The title page gives the author as "Staff of Research & Education Association, Dr. M. Fogiel, Director". My daughter's acknowledgment was considerably less than Margaret's. It did, however, really admit that she wrote the book. "In addition, special appreciation and recognition is extended to the following persons for their significant contributions: Margaret Muckenhoupt, for her compilation and research of the AP course review material, Laura Calvert, for her significant editorial contributions." Meg was certainly annoyed that the Research and Education Association wouldn't put her name on the title page. When she protested, they told her that they could easily get someone else to write the book.

Unfortunately, I do not know any more of the "back story" of Margaret's relationship to Dr. Haydon. I was seven years old when the book was published and was

never told much about it. The living person with the most knowledge of the circumstances and Margaret's feelings about them is probably my cousin, Rachel Dyal, one of those anonymous nieces in the obituary. She is ten years older than I and visited Margaret frequently during the relevant period. I have sent her a copy of the obituary as it appeared, your e-mail and this response. I have also asked her to respond to your inquiries if she has anything to add.

I hope that this response will help to satisfy your curiosity and that Rachel can do more. I'm pleased that someone read and was interested by the obituary that I wrote.
Benjamin Muckenhoupt

25 March 2005

Rachel sent me the appended message. Since she didn't say whether she sent you anything directly, I am forwarding it to you.

24 March 2005

Dear Ben, I really don't know much more for sure. There were a lot of impressed people in the family when this book came out – how much was because she actually did it, and how much because she was associated with such an undertaking. I know my mother took a dim view of Margaret's association with Prof. Haydon, whom she did not like very well. She thought he exploited her and that they had an emotional relationship which allowed him to get away with it. Nothing sexual – that would really [have] outraged my mother who was almost as opposed to sex as her mother was.

Women were certainly kicked around in the academic world in those days. I ran into the same sorts of thing when I was in school a generation later. I got tired of the attitude and eventually said the hell with it. (My big mistake was not going to a women's school. A friend here who is a Mt. Holyoke graduate said they said, "Of course you will be a chemist." Forget being a secretary, a research assistant, or even a librarian.)

Considering the times and the place, Margaret was lucky to be able to do what she did. Had she gotten the degree 15 years later, someone might have been desperate enough to hire her as an academic, although it was sort of discouraging to see the better jobs reserved for males lucky enough to be 4-F in the draft.

Incidentally, my grandmother's reaction to her working for Prof. Haydon was initially negative. She thought of Unitarians being only a small step farther from hellfire than Catholics; Margaret had to assure her that the job did not mean she had to go to church.

One of the courses I took in library school was a survey of the humanities and social sciences; we were supposed to read a book in each of the 12 areas and write a review. Never having read Margaret's book clear through, I chose it for Religion. My

professor referred to it as "... your aunt's book..." I always took it for granted, although there were probably not many people in the class who could review a relative's book.

Margaret's theses were two that I looked up one time when I was visiting the library with some friends. Both theses are in the OCLC list. It was interesting that her master's paper was cataloged and is held by the Univ of Chicago. The PhD thesis was cataloged by the Library of Congress, and UC did not admit to having it at that time! (Something has happened to theses in the last 10 years or so; a lot of them that have been lying around for years have been dug out and entered online.) (I just looked it up, and there is still only one holding listed!)

It's interesting that your daughter has had a similar experience, and is also named Margaret. But some things are different now in some ways, although some are the same. I've heard of PhD advisors stealing their advisees' ideas. However, with the new paranoia about discrimination, sexism, etc., I know personally of several PhDs who were pushed by their advisors and probably were not all that "worthy," whatever that means. Well, it is disillusioning to look too deeply even into academic politics which ideally should be free from such pettiness, but certainly is not. My daughter Carole was upset when she got into the higher reaches of an adult situation, where all her life she thought would be full of people who knew what they were doing, and turned out not to be when you look even casually, forget carefully.

Rachel

29 March 2005

Dear Benjamin Muckenhoupt, Your Aunt Margaret's story gets better with the expanding of it. But I am very aware of how touchy the subject matter is and will not use anything you tell me, without your permission. I read Dr. Haydon's preface with an entirely different eye from yours (I think you are being kind, generous, and tactful in the extreme), for I have seen such acknowledgments many a time in my brief, but intense, involvement with academia and the ways of professors who "don't know where my work ends and yours begins," as one prof told a student who wondered why his ideas were presented in print as those of his famous, published prof. One of my profs, also well known and published, plagiarized from two of his students, who, upon protesting, were told by their advisors that they'd best back off if they wanted their careers to go forward. Both of them, though male, never achieved the promise they had evidenced. I knew them both and I think they were emotionally crushed by the experience. As with your aunt's work for Haydon, the glory, credit, academic recognition/position goes to the one whose name is on the title page. As an academic, you know the game—"largely" one's work is meaningless. The phrase "a joint product" in a preface is by no means even in the ballpark of one's name on the title page as a joint author. In your aunt's case, if she wrote the book, it was hers, and should have been so published, with an acknowledgment in her preface about how grateful she was for whatever help her mentor/professor had given her. If he had been a good man and an honest academic, he would have given her the

assistance she deserved by helping her get a publisher and thereby a possible career as a working scholar.

Question: why did they do this? He was nearing the end of a spectacular career. He could easily have lent his power and prestige as persuasions to a publisher to have her, at the very least, listed as joint author. Of course, in today's world, what would now be called a "marquee professor" turns out many more publications than are listed for Haydon. Perhaps it just wasn't that easy to get published then. Even so, even so . . .

Please feel free to share this e-mail with Rachel. As far as I'm concerned, there are three stories that want telling: Margaret Boell's, your daughter's, and Rachel's. (They are all part and parcel, in fact, of a too familiar story—women in academics, as students and as professionals.) You have opened the door for such a narrative. Let's hope it gets walked through.

Gwen

3 April 2005

Dear Gwen, Thank you again for your interest in Aunt Margaret. I thought you might be interested in Ben's (and my) experience with feminist issues. A year or so after Ben joined the Math Dept at Rutgers in 1960, a new department chair was chosen. The university was expanding and there was federal money to support science, so the new chairman, Ken Wolfson, set about to modernize and improve what had been a small not-much-research department. Ben was one of the recent hires who was doing research – as well as taking teaching seriously.

In 1963, Ben took a year's leave to teach at all-women Mount Holyoke College, which is where we met. I was an assistant in the Dean of Students office, with a BA in Sociology from nearby U of Mass. We were married the summer of 1964 and continued at Holyoke through 1965. The modern feminist movement was getting going. Betty Friedan was a guest speaker and there was great interest in women's issues. Of course the faculty and staff was full of strong accomplished women and there was great pride in alums who had broken stereotypes. Strangely, the math majors were, by and large, not very serious about their academic work. One who was, Jean Taylor, was something of a loner and considered odd by her fellow students. We were pleased that Jean became a highly respected mathematician. To Ben's delight, she eventually joined the Rutgers faculty. She retired recently.

When we returned to New Jersey, Ken Wolfson had started his campaign for the math department. One important thing he did was look for talented, able mathematicians who were undervalued where they were. Most of them were women. When he started, there was only one woman in the department, Helen Nickerson, who specialized in geometry. There were some women mathematicians at Douglass, the women's college associated with Rutgers. Somewhat after this time Rutgers ceased being all men, but

Douglass continued all women. The Douglass faculty was separate from Rutgers. In the 1960s Wolfson hired Jane Scanlon, Barbara Osofsky and Joanne Elliott. Later came Amy Cohen, Tilla Milnor and Jean Taylor. All of these women were welcomed into the graduate faculty. They are all respected mathematicians.

Along with the faculty, and probably because there were women on the faculty, came more female graduate students. Ben has had four PhD students, and two of them were women. One of his students was Eileen Poiani who went on to be very active in the national Math association.

During this time I was active in the feminist movement. With two children, I was at home, but the family joke was that when Daddy came home Mama went to a meeting. With strong and capable women in both of our families, we had great role models. Ben's comment to the anti-feminists was "Why would anyone want to be discriminated against?" I finished a MA in Sociology at Rutgers, and in my fifties went back to school to learn something about horticulture. Seven years later I graduated again with a BS in Landscape Architecture. I do some consulting now, but we consider ourselves retired (Ben is officially retired) and do a lot of traveling.

I hope this expands your introduction to Ben. By the way, a U of C housemate, Larry Lerner, also saw the obituary and got in touch with Ben about Margaret. Mary Kay

06 April 2005

Dear Benjamin, I have sent our e-mail correspondence to the alum magazine and am drafting a letter to Mary Schmich of the Chicago Tribune to see if she would be interested in telling your aunt's story. I think, given the current uproar created by Harvard's president regarding women's intellectual shortcomings in certain departments (I know, he was just being provocative—but the turmoil has yet to die down), she just might find this intriguing enough to do an article on it Gwen.

07 April 2005

I have no objection to you writing about the things I have told you.
Ben

18 December 2005

I did check with Rachel. She has no objection to having her remarks appear in print. She also offered to answer any questions you may have directly.

My daughter Meg has no objection to publication of my remarks concerning her ghostwriting experience.

In today's "Google-ized" world, if you can dream it up, it's there for the asking. Of course, it's going to cost you. But a paper, a dissertation, even a book can be yours, free and clear of the encumbrances and embarrassments of research, originality, and the judgment of peers and colleagues. Back in the day, a Margaret Boell got nothing: no money, no academic position, just promises and paltry thanks in the preface of a book that got her professor a twice-published book and another entry on his resume. This article rights a wrong, but one that continues in far too many corners of academe. Students who plagiarize are more than likely desperate, naïve, dishonest, or just plain lazy. Professors who steal from their students are ethically bankrupt, period. As are the institutions who protect and coddle them. Dr. Boell, may you rest in peace.

Final note: The U. of Chicago alum magazine's obit on Dr. Boell, quoted as one of the epigraphs to this article, was found to have been glued into one of the copies of *Biography of the Gods* in the University of Chicago's Regenstein Library, at the end of the preface. Not I. Someone else felt strongly enough about this matter to make her/his statement stick.

References

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