

Stephen Ambrose And the Rights Of Passage

In a Growing List of His Books,
Others' History Repeats Itself

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What can be said about Stephen Ambrose, the flag-wrapped historian of Lewis and Clark, Eisenhower and Nixon and The Greatest Generation, now that he's being accused of plagiarism?

Well, there's this: As any writer knows, when you start cranking out books as fast as assembly lines crank out cars, there's a danger that the books, like the cars, will all start looking alike. And that you may find yourself pressed into hurriedly borrowing parts from similar models.



FILE PHOTO

Historian and bestselling author Stephen Ambrose is facing a growing number of complaints that he lifted the material of others.

In seven years, Ambrose has published nine books of history, plus the eighth edition of a co-authored survey of American foreign policy. In the last two years alone, he's published four books, including "The Wild Blue" and "Nothing Like It in the World." Many of his books have become bestsellers.

Since the popular rediscovery of World War II in 1994, to which his book "D-Day" contributed in

no small part, Ambrose has become a major cash cow for his publisher, Simon & Schuster, as well as a celebrity-spokesman for the one-time GIs of the European theater.

Four years ago, in an interview with The Washington Post, he spoke with some astonishment of having two books at once on the bestseller list and receiving seven-figure royalty checks. Since then, the pace of his life—and the profits—have only increased.

Envy always stalks a prolific author, particularly a rich one, so it should be no surprise that there have been dark mutterings in the less munificent corridors of academic historia—and elsewhere—that

See AMBROSE, C4, Col. 1

Historian Ambrose, Repeatedly Tripping Over His Own Footnotes

AMBROSE, From C1

Ambrose's work is, well, less disciplined than some might have it.

In December 2000, three railroad history buffs went online with a Web site titled "The Sins of Stephen Ambrose," accusing the author of "offensive" shortcomings in the research, analysis and editing in his book "Nothing Like It in the World." They cited 63 errors of fact, interpretation and/or typography in his story of the transcontinental railroad.

Then this year, the Jan. 4 edition of the Weekly Standard came out carrying a cover story headlined "Stephen Ambrose, Copycat." It cited sentences in Ambrose's current bestseller, "The Wild Blue," that were almost identical to those of Thomas Childers's previously published World War II aviation book "Wings of Morning."

Tuesday, Forbes magazine's Web site, Forbes.com, reported that Ambrose's "Crazy Horse and Custer" contains similarly duplicative passages to Jay Monaghan's "Custer."

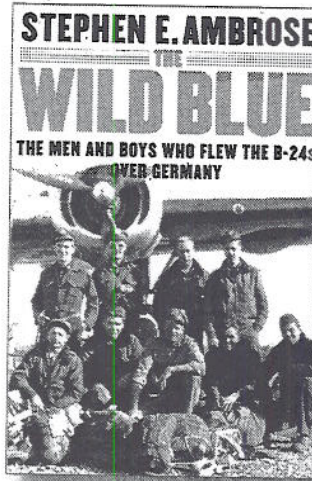
What's going on here?

"Well, the first thing to realize is that sloppiness *does* occur" with authors, says Thomas Mallon, author of the 1989 volume "Stolen Words: The Classic Book on Plagiarism."

"The second thing to realize is that sloppiness is the first excuse claimed by a plagiarist. Because sloppiness is just a professional sin. Plagiarism is a moral one."

Mallon won't pronounce on the case of Ambrose. He hasn't examined the texts in question. But he says simply crediting another author's work in footnotes, as Ambrose has in the Custer and "Wild Blue" books, is not enough to meet the standards of original work.

The question in such cases, he says, is whether an author is lifting passages wholesale—without quotation marks—or whether he's paraphrasing.



Ambrose has acknowledged that "The Wild Blue" includes passages from another author's earlier work.

What's the difference?

"A paraphrase should not involve the replication of vivid phrasing, chains of syntax or sequences of ideas," he says. "When those things are involved, direct quotation marks should be employed."

But if they aren't employed, has the author really stolen something or merely appropriated it through thoughtlessness or sloth?

"That's where it becomes slippery," Mallon says. "When questions like this come up, the public tends to apply an all-or-nothing standard. The author tends either to be let off scot-free or [his offense is] a career killer. But you can usually apply a test of common sense to these things and reach some judgment in between. Motive counts for a lot."

Ambrose did not return calls seeking comment for this article, but he apologized promptly after the Weekly Standard's disclosure for the duplications in his aviation book. And he told the New Orleans Times-Picayune this week that "I should have put quote marks" around the duplicative passages in the Custer book.

The Associated Press has since found passages in his 1998 book "Citizen Soldiers" that are similar to passages in Joseph Balkoski's 1989 work "Beyond the Beachhead," for which Ambrose wrote the foreword. Ambrose acknowledged in an author's note in "Citizen Soldiers" that he "stole material profitably if shamelessly" from Balkoski. Asked if his other books had similar problems, Ambrose said: "I don't know. It's a lot of books."

Deconstructing the history texts of Stephen Ambrose is no doubt suddenly becoming a growth industry for journalists and scholars. Author David Bain of Middlebury College acknowledges "a natural tension" between academic historians and more popular narrative historians like Ambrose, David McCullough and others.

The resentment, he said, is fueled not only by envy of the blockbuster sales of the Ambroses of the publishing world but also by the fact that "popular history is almost the only serious nonfiction that's selling really well these days."

Bain himself has a unique view of the Ambrose affair. His own book on the transcontinental railroad, "Empire Express," was published six months before Ambrose's, and though it has logged nothing like Ambrose's mega-sales, it has been well reviewed, won some awards and rung up about 40,000 hard-cover sales.

Does he think Ambrose copied anything from him?

"Well, I haven't gone over the books line by line. Mine is more than 800 pages . . . his is considerably less. I noticed he did lift without attribution my transcription of some handwritten letters. It's a small thing, nothing actionable, and I don't want to sound ungracious about it. I'm very pleased with how my book has done."

But the current controversy around Ambrose, he says, "does make you wonder."