

PLAGIARIZING A PUSHCART PRIZE

What do you do when a poem from your first poetry book is plagiarized, then is nominated for a Pushcart Prize? Do you protest publicly like Rachel McKibbens did in a November 30, 2018 tweet, "I HOPE WE WIN!"? What do you do when the poem actually wins, but not for you? McKibbens found out fast when Ailey O'Toole plagiarized poems from McKibbens book *blud* (2017) in the most public way possible.

Rachel McKibbens is far from an obscure poet. She has a higher profile than most with bio pages in both the American Academy of Poets and the Poetry Foundation sites. The Poetry Foundation in particular is very high profile and the source for prestigious prizes including the Lannan Prize as well as being the publisher for *Poetry*, the journal founded in 1912 by poet Harriet Monroe that is a longtime benchmark for achievement. Where did T.S. Eliot first publish "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"? *Poetry*. Only the most notable poets have bio pages on the foundation site and McKibbens' page notes that "poet, activist, playwright and essayist Rachel McKibbens is the author of the poetry collections *Into the Dark and Emptying Field* (2013) and *Pink Elephant* (2009)." Her latest book, *blud* (2017), which contains the poems that O'Toole plagiarized, is published by Copper Canyon Press, one of the top poetry presses today, publishers of other well-known poets such as C.D. Wright, Jericho Brown, Bob Hicok, and Chase Twitchell. The Poetry Foundation bio goes on to note that "Her poems, short stories, essays and creative non-fiction have been featured in numerous journals and blogs, including *Her Kind*, *The Los Angeles Review*, *The Best American Poetry Blog*, *The Nervous Breakdown*, *The Rumpus*, *The London Magazine*, *The Acentos Review*, *World Literature Today*, *Radius*, and *The American Poetry Journal*." These are all journals that those in po-biz know and respect. She is also a past performer in the poetry slam circuit and it is easy to find her performances on YouTube. *The Huffington Post* is also a fan and has posted video of her performing her poetry more than once.

For those outside the creative writing world and not familiar with the Pushcart Prize, the Pushcart Prize is a well-known and prestigious award, possibly even more so because of its nomination system, which takes nominations from journals themselves and from past winners. Each past winner gets two nominations. This two-prong system ensures that the Pushcart doesn't devolve into a prize that is only awarded to work from certain privileged journals or presses. Having working writers who have shown their excellence nominate gives balance and also keeps the prize on the forefront of what is currently happening in literary fiction, poetry, and creative nonfiction.

So, how does a plagiarized poem end up nominated for a Pushcart Prize? The question more accurately should be, how can this happen now when online journals make poetry so easy to find? Plagiarism in literary publishing has been a dirty little not-

so-secret for centuries. What is so surprising is not that it happened but that it was found out. That is what's new.

The controversy became public, not because the journal editors or McKibbens noticed the poem and its similarity, but because of reasons that became clear later, Ailey O'Toole contacted McKibben herself. In the social media-intensive poetry world, O'Toole felt comfortable reaching out to McKibbens, presenting her poems as a tribute rather than plagiarism. *Bustle* details this in its December 3, 2018 article, writing that "O'Toole contacted McKibbens on Twitter to state that she "lift[ed an] image" from the *blud* poem "three strikes," and "paraphrased too closely for comfort" in her own poem, "Gun Metal." Perhaps the Pushcart nomination made O'Toole uncomfortably aware that McKibbens might actually read the poem. McKibbens' Twitterstream sequences her research into what happened and when; in it she notes that at the point that O'Toole contacted her via Twitter, she had already lost her book contract. At the same time, O'Toole's Twitter contact could be seen as a way to frame the similarity in a positive way and salvage her career as an emerging poet. Her defense was logical – tribute poems exist. It is also true that model poems are a common teaching device for workshop and equally true that poets often write poems "after the style of [famous poet and her/his equally famous poem]." It is also common to see published poems that riff off an epigraph from a well-known poem. However, the ethic behind such exercise poems is that the result needs to be new – a distinctive piece that is the poet's own, not a rendering of an old master in the same way art students copy paintings in museums. Those art students most definitely do not follow up by selling the copy under their name. Poets using the model poem technique then, would not use a model poem less than a year old since it needs to be recognizable to a large audience in order for the resonances to work.

After O'Toole's contact with McKibbens on Twitter, the story travelled quickly from Twitter to Facebook poet groups, more general interest news blogs, then to more traditional media, including *The Guardian*. Accelerating the story was McKibbens' social media savvy and the active creative writing community on Twitter. She openly tweeted about the situation and was not shy about sharing with other creative writers and to media.

The next step in the social media progression was the December 3, 2019 *Bustle* article, which expanded and promoted the readership of the Twitter thread by screenshotting many of McKibbens' tweets, essentially showing how the story developed through her side by side poem comparisons. For example, in the poem "three strikes," McKibbens' writes, "Hell-spangled girl / spitting teeth into the sink, / I'd trace the broken / landscape of my body / & find God / within myself." In comparison, O'Toole writes in the Pushcart-nominated poem "Gun Metal," "Ramshackle / girl spitting teeth / in the sink. I trace the / foreign topography of / my body, find God / in my skin." The shared "spitting teeth" image is telling, and in conjunction with the landscape/topography image and the finding God within

/self/skin trope, the overlap becomes much to close for comfort. Add to that the personal nature of the original poem, and the line between exercise and plagiarism is no longer in question. As McKibbens points out in a December 4, 2018 article for *Vulture*,

She [O’Toole] thought that teeth were a metaphor,” McKibbens tells me over the phone. She sounds incredulous, and for good reason: The phrase tattooed on O’Toole’s arm isn’t a metaphor but a memory — real teeth falling into a real sink, casualties of an abusive childhood that left McKibbens with a mouthful of orthodontia before she was even in second grade.

The book *blud* then is based on highly personal life experiences, a contemporary version of confessional poetry, only even more specific and revelatory. Besides the images then, O’Toole’s poem also lifts McKibbens’ own life experiences, her stories of trauma and abuse. McKibbens declares in a 11:34 PM 12/01/2018 tweet, “Tired of fools suggesting I respond to plagiarism w/more ‘compassion’ when we know damn well girl never thought twice about stealing from a working-class Xicana writer/mother of five living w/ chronic pain, PTSD, anxiety & bipolar disorders.”

As the story develops even further, it becomes clear that the plagiarism involved more than just one poem. O’Toole had a book contract for her first collection when she states in an interview for *The Rumpus*, that she views “Gun Metal” as the most representative poem for the collection. McKibbens cites this interview when she tweets the reason why she simply can’t accept O’Toole’s “apology,”:



When O'Toole asserts that "Gun Metal" is "the best representation of her "collection as a whole" without any mention of McKibbens or *blud*, it is clearly more than an oversight. The *Rumpus* interview was also brought up in *Vulture's* article "Poetry Twitter Erupts over a Plagiarist in Their Midst," which notes that the interview

reads now like a confession of guilt, as it turns out that "Gun Metal" is very much a collection of reassembled pieces: pieces of other poets. O'Toole's bizarrely brazen act of plagiarism – stealing lines, phrases, and structural elements from the work of at least three other writers – was uncovered last Friday, unraveling her career at the speed of Twitter, the medium by which her fledgling reputation lived and died. Within 24 hours, the literary press Rhythm & Bones had canceled her forthcoming book of poems, and the insular world of poetry Twitter had already gone through a cycle of blame, bafflement, and measured defense.

Yet, there's more. McKibbens searches and as the *Vulture* article notes, finds other poems, more similarities. Then another poet, Hieu Minh Nguyen, reaches out to McKibbens on Twitter November 30, 2018 to let her know that "I found the poem and she plagiarized me too! For 3 different poems. Lol. Group piece." McKibbens has strong support from the writing community also and they join the commentary on Twitter. For example, a 9:13 PM 11/30/2018 tweet from Sarah Freligh to McKibbens comments, "Gives new meaning to 'paraphrased.' Whoops. I paraphrased that six-pack from the 7-11." McKibbens' twitterstream from November 30, 2018 through December 1, 2018 tells the story cogently, logically, and with good corroborating links, such as the one to the cancellation notice for the Kickstarter that was supposed to fund O'Toole's first collection, *Grief and What Comes After*. McKibbens speculates in a 9:36 PM 11/30/2018 tweet, "and I can only guess that either the Pushcart peeps clocked the line snag or someone read that shit on Rumpus, because there's this cancellation: <https://kickstarter.com/projects/1659156625/preorders-grief-and-what-comes-after>." *Vulture* confirms the cascading aftereffects from the *Rumpus* interview and details another twist, also seen through McKibbens' Twitterstream, how an acquaintance of O'Toole's, Kristina Conrad, after seeing a line from "Gun Metal," tattooed on O'Toole's arm, googled it to find two mentions: one the *Rumpus* article quote, the other McKibbens' book *blud*:

Conrad was appalled: "[To say] that it was part of a trauma for her when it was clearly somebody else's trauma, that's what I found really egregious." Knowing that O'Toole was on the verge of releasing a poetry collection through a small literary press called Rhythm & Bones, Conrad sent an email to the publisher on November 29. "To whom it may concern," she wrote, "I wanted to inform you that poet Ailey O'Toole has plagiarized her poem 'gun metal.'"

The now viral news finally filters to more mainstream media, including *The Globe* and *The Guardian*. For the most part they reiterated what Twitter knew days before: there

was dirty work afoot but also that retribution was swift: the Pushcart Prize for “Gun Metal” was rescinded and O’Toole’s contract for her first poetry collection also pulled. The aftereffects linger still. For example, the social media site Goodreads has a page for *Not A Book: Grief, and What Comes After* by Not a Book, possibly a Goodreads user-created page with the purpose to amplify that O’Toole’s acts were not acceptable. The page has a series of one-star ratings with comments naming Ailey O’Toole and consistently mentioning plagiarism in what is identified as “Not a Book.”

If this were a “moral to the story” kind of situation, the swift retribution would be the point. However, as mentioned in the beginning, plagiarism is not new to the literary world. What is new is how the formerly powerless voices in this conversation, the authors, can now quickly raise support via social media and prompt publishers to do the right thing, not that publishers didn’t want to before, but that they were far less likely to know that a poem – or book – was plagiarized. This social media induced transparency is a powerful tool for the preservation of intellectual property. At the same time, the swift, possibly not always vetted calls for action typical of Twitter could also land a firestorm on the heads of the innocent. In the case of McKibbens and O’Toole, the case was clear. It may not always be so for others.

WORKS CITED

Copper Canyon Press. Poet Community page. www.coppercanyonpress.org

IP Annual 2017. cccc.ncte.org/cccc/committees/ip/2017-developments

Goodreads. “Not a Book: Grief and What Comes After.” Goodreads book page.
https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/42920720-not-a-book?fbclid=IwAR3AdcEeoHf-xt1rLRC_N2nGgr4_RPEy4xDiz1JVtaDiz2gnryBq58H0J6g

McKibbens, Rachel. “How I came to Embrace my Mental Illness.” Video performance.
Huffington Post. www.huffingtonpost.com/author/rachel-mckibbens

McKibbens, Rachel. Twitter Homepage. twitter.com/RachelMcKibbens

Poetry Foundation. Rachel McKibbens Bio page.
www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/rachel-mckibbens

Pushcart Prize. “The Pushcart Prize Nomination Process.” Pushcart Prize site.
www.pushcartprize.com/nomination.html

Rosenfield, Kat. “Poetry Twitter Erupts over a Plagiarist in Their Midst.” *Vulture*.
www.vulture.com/2018/12/poetry-twitter-erupts-over-plagiarist-ailey-

otoole.html?fbclid=IwAR0icoIXJhkRrZPkv2AmSX6GIN68jTuo4dTqxczBu-
10VzgrUIyfLr6SSt4

Wilson, Kristian. "A Pushcart Prize-Nominated Poet Has Been Accused of Plagiarism
By Numerous Poets. *Bustle*. [www.bustle.com/p/a-puschart-prize-nominated-
poet-has-been-accused-of-plagiarism-by-numerous-poets-13234488](http://www.bustle.com/p/a-puschart-prize-nominated-poet-has-been-accused-of-plagiarism-by-numerous-poets-13234488)