

ONLY GENIUSES CAN BE WRITERS

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Our American culture and education has cultivated quite the romantic idea of authorship. Instruction in language arts and literature consistently and often forcefully exposes students to writers who have been canonized as The Greats: geniuses of thought, master wordsmiths, and inspired creators—in a word, authors—who transcended humanity and mortality. Shakespeare, Emerson, Orwell, and so on—these were truly writers!—they say. These writers sat at grand mahogany desks in remote cabins ensconced in the most still and people-less of lakes and forests. These writers sequestered themselves from all influence and feverishly scribed brilliant works only their peerless minds could produce. But these writers, great as they may be, have been the most damaging to our current perceptions about writing.

The image of this autonomous, genius, and origin-ary author bears great consequences; it designates a coveted status against which many, if not all, writers are compared. It is etched into intellectual property debates, woven into anxieties and uncertainties over plagiarism, and intricately bound to the economics of writing. Worst of all, it stubbornly refuses to die, despite persistent attempts to overthrow its reign on literacy instruction and cultural production.

The Weight of Genius

As graduates of U.S. education, we've personally experienced (and continue to experience) the damage this myth has wrought on those who write. The genius writers were enlightened, wise, and shrewd observers of the world and humanity. They wrote the truth as only they could, and that fount flowed freely and easily. But that's not how writing works for us. Writing is *hard*. So many writing tasks we meet are impenetrable, fortified on every side with

bulwarks tall and steel. We pound and press against those walls—but nothing. Our work often stalls out, halted in place. We obviously cannot be true authors, right? This should be that easy. Why doesn't it just come out? These unrealistic expectations cannot be the only way to be an author.

These genius authors misguide many writers. Their most damaging effects are the unrealistic expectations they pose for everyday writers. Writing scholar and plagiarism expert Rebecca Moore Howard believes the notion of the solitary, genius author has perpetuated a climate where novice writers fear being unoriginal and must strive to prove their own creativity and genius. You need only glance at the branding language of the plagiarism detection service Turnitin, a self-proclaimed “originality-checker,” to see how this manifests in real-life scenarios. The demand for originality frustrates many writers, who do not see how they could ever have the genius to discover an original thought.

Other writers, both within and outside of academic settings, similarly struggle when they feel their writing process doesn't live up to the lauded image of The Greats. In a short essay in *The Irish Times*, author and musician Josh Ritter writes about how he wrestled with the image of genius authors. He never felt his songwriting counted as real writing, which can only happen upon grand escritiores, penned with quill and ink and set in parchment. He writes, “Never mind that for my entire writing life I'd been writing at my kitchen table, with my guitar on my knee and a pen and notebook handy, if I wanted to be a real writer, I would need a desk. [...] And without the desk, how could I write my novel?” Ritter finds himself limited by the image of writing and writers that a desk represents. Without a desk, Ritter can't imagine he has the ability to produce a worthy piece of writing, just as many don't feel like true writers if they struggle and strive when they write. But Ritter comes to a conclusion we also share: remote cabins along isolated lakes, grand writing tables carved from cedars, brilliant manuscripts born in one candlelit sitting—these don't accurately represent what writing looks like for anyone.

Well-hidden between pristine white pages and well-crafted words lies the same trying process many endure each time they open a document or hold a pen as well as the same unyielding barricades that keep them out, which often only give way when they are influenced and inspired by others. Tales of genius writers who pour out perfectly structured prose all on their own recount fables rather than reality. (See Teri Holbrook and Melanie

Hundley’s chapter elsewhere in this book for more on bad myths about writers.) Instead, these writers were certainly very much like ourselves—nervous, frustrated, harried, and tired, looking for help at 1:38 a.m. while trying to meet a deadline. What help we do find rarely comes from genius, self-willed epiphanies. Instead, we find solace, support, and success when we look outside ourselves, borrow ideas, remix other texts, talk to others, and collaborate with their thoughts. The Lone Genius author doesn’t exist. And it never did.

Yet, such an understanding of authorship has become so commonplace, so naturalized, that few ever interrogate its origins. A closer look at this myth reveals that the author was forged only recently in Western history. According to literary historian Martha Woodmansee, the invention of the author in its current configuration can be traced to 1st-century Europe. It was during this century, according to Woodmansee’s analysis, when a larger cultural shift began to take place, and out of a swirl of change—technological, legal, economic, and cultural—a new definition of the contemporary author began to emerge. This is the author that largely sticks today: the creator, owner, and proprietor of unique, original works such as essays, books, poems, and so on.

The Invention of Genius

Views of writing that lead to modern ideals about authors developed along with the circulation of popular treatises on originality. In 1759, for example, the influential writer and poet Edward Young’s “Conjectures on Original Composition” began to draw deep divides between original and imitative authorship. Originality, Young claimed, sprung forth naturally from an inherent root of genius, like a plant bearing fruit. Imitations, on the other hand, were artificial inferiors built from the work of others. Young’s essay, and many others like it, began to forcefully redirect the locus of inspiration. They claimed that true authors are not inspired by the outside world; they are inspired by their unique selves. True authors are not imitators; they are originators. True authors are not made; they are born.

This redirection of inspiration also coincided with the birth of a new class of writers: professional authors. Now, essayists, poets, and other public intellectuals claimed an occupation where writing was their primary means for earning a living. Thanks in large part to the expansion of a larger reading public due to advances in

printing technology, a need grew to find ways for professional writers (and the publishing industry) to earn money from their printed works. Enter copyright. Early copyright laws, according to historian Mark Rose's analysis of copyright, helped to form an understanding of the author as an owner and proprietor of his or her individual ideas. In other words, copyright helped to define the author as author: an autonomous individual whose original ideas merit legal protection and deserve monetary rewards.

There are many reasons why this understanding of the author persists today. Tenets of originality, property, proprietorship, and genius have become etched into the fabric of Western authorship. Genius authorship is coded into our legal and economic systems and is further upheld through years of education. Our understandings of an author are also a product of the publishing industry itself. Publishers present a polished and finalized copy of writing and thereby dilute the messiness of the writing process. The idea that authors derive their writing abilities from their natural intellect is difficult to shake because it is inscribed in the very word *author* itself.

But such was not always the case. A deeper look at history, together with today's digital writing practices, reveals how the myth of the lone, original genius can be challenged. Specifically, alternatives to genius see value in imitation, collaboration, and remix. Authors don't act in isolation but rather find themselves surrounded by other ideas, people, and writing.

The Alternative to Genius

Before the idea of genius authorship took hold, Woodmansee notes that authors were commonly depicted either as vehicles (receiving ideas from some outside source) or craftsmen (forging new materials out many disparate sources). An even deeper history reveals a more esteemed regard for imitation. Practices of imitation—drawing inspiration from outside sources by borrowing, adapting, and altering models from a rich stockpile of sources—were largely valued in ancient cultures. Imitation was how students learned their craft, and it was viewed as a way to invent new meanings out of existing materials. In fact, ancient philosophers and poets often used the metaphor of a transformative bee to describe the work of imitation. As Seneca described in the 4th century BCE, “We should follow, men say, the example of the bees, who flit about and cull the flowers that are suitable for producing honey, and then

arrange and assort in their cells all that they have brought in.” This metaphor suggests the act of producing a new work involves gathering bits and pieces from many different external sources.

These historical practices and ideas about authorship demonstrate what writing once was and what we believe it still should be: a collaborative endeavor in constant and deep conversation with the works and ideas of others. In other words, instead of the reclusive genius, we aim to be social writers. Instead of inspiration from within, we seek influence from without. Writing requires talking to friends, asking help from colleagues, finding answers and ideas in others’ writings, and indulging in those practices. We embrace collaboration over isolation, and it is precisely this model of writing that we argue education should promote to writers and students everywhere.

In a way, it’s odd to call for more collaborative writing or writing influenced by others, because it’s already happening everywhere. Many scholars attest that collaboration, rather than isolation, is the dominant approach to everyday composing. Writing scholars Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford, for example, have studied the work of writers in diverse fields, including engineering, psychology, chemistry, and even sanitation. They find that the professionals in these fields rely heavily on collaboration to succeed in their writing tasks. Likewise, writing researcher Joan Mullin confirms that many artists—painters, architects, fashion designers, graphic artists and more—always feel their work is collaborative and often learn by mimicking, imitating, and even copying the work of others. These writers and artists rely heavily on others’ thoughts and ideas to help them learn and succeed, and their success exemplifies why this should be the default approach to all writing.

What’s more, collaboration involves more than the act of writing with other warm bodies in the room. It also involves a different kind of collaboration: reusing, recycling, and repurposing existing materials for new uses. In our digital age, everyday people increasingly have access to vast reservoirs of archived materials. Significantly, these materials can be put to use for new purposes. Rhetoric scholars Jim Ridolfo and Dànielle Nicole DeVoss refer to this remix process as “taking old pieces of text, images, sounds, and video and stitching them together to form a new product.” Writing, if viewed this way, isn’t predicated on values of isolation, inward inspiration, or originality; rather, it sees values in sharing, explicit influence, and renewal. Perhaps surprisingly, as media researcher Henry Jenkins notes, the language of remix resuscitates

older, pre-Romantic ideals of authorship. A turn toward remix and borrowing, for Jenkins, “is not that radical when read against a larger backdrop of human history,” despite the deeply entrenched ideal of creative genius propagated in recent history.

As both history and contemporary practice demonstrate, writing has always required deep social engagement and influence, and no writer has succeeded solely due to preternatural intellect or talent. The pervasive idea of the reclusive author and genius birthing prose free from influence must die—and in its wake, a renewed idea of productive and meaningful collaboration (with other writers and their texts) will thrive.

Further Reading

To learn more about how today’s writers actually compose, consider Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford’s *Singular Texts/Plural Authors: Perspectives in Collaborative Writing* (Southern Illinois University Press), Carol Petersen Haviland and Joan A. Mullin’s *Who Owns This Text?: Plagiarism, Authorship, and Disciplinary Cultures* (Utah State University Press), Majorie Perloff’s *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century* (University of Chicago Press), and Kevin Goldsmith’s *Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in the Digital Age* (Columbia University Press). Additionally, Josh Ritter’s article “Paperback Ritter” is his story about how he personally was affected by myths of authorship while writing his book.

For more on remix, look into Lawrence Lessig’s *Remix: Making Art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid Economy* (Penguin Press), Jim Ridolfo and Dànielle Nicole DeVoss’s “Composing for Recomposition: Rhetorical Velocity and Delivery,” Kirby Ferguson’s web series *Everything is a Remix*, and Jonathan Lethem’s article “The Ecstasy of Influence: A Plagiarism” in *Harper’s Magazine*.

Conversations about originality often intersect with questions about plagiarism. To explore this connection more, see Rebecca Moore Howard’s *Standing in the Shadows of Giants: Plagiarists, Authors, and Collaboration* (Ablex), Susan Blum’s *My Word! Plagiarism and College Culture* (Cornell University Press), and Nicolous Kulish’s *New York Times* article about author Helene Hegemann’s best-selling book, controversial for its plagiarized passages.

To read more on the history and theory of authorship, look to Andrew Gallax’s “In Theory: The Death of the Author,” Mark Rose’s *Authors and Owners: The Invention of Copyright* (Harvard University Press), and Martha Woodmansee’s article “The Genius and the

Copyright: Economic and Legal Conditions of the Emergence of the ‘Author’” (*Eighteenth Century Studies*).

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Enrique Paz studies authorship and plagiarism and teaches writing. He’s interested in how people come to see themselves as writers or authors. Working with many other writers, he’s published essays on how writers can collaborate effectively and specifically how educators and students can and should collaborate to promote learning and success. You can find him on Twitter @eepaziii.