

Copycat – When Your *One and Only* Turns Out To Be a Clone

BY LESLIE WHAT

“Gozzi maintained that there can be but thirty-six tragic situations. Schiller took great pains to find more, but he was unable to find even so many as Gozzi.”—Goethe

“There’s nothing new under the Sun.”
– My mother

Can it really be true? Is it all the same old story, but with a twist? While the whole time I was deluding myself into thinking I was an original until that fateful day a few years ago when I was exposed as a copycat.

I stumbled into an online discussion where a story of mine, published in *Asimov’s*, was being compared to one published twenty-something years ago in *F&SF*. Imagine my surprise when it turned out there were certain, shall we say, *similarities*, that made my creation look to some like a clone of the original.

My story, “Say Woof,” is about a big woman who didn’t fit into a society that values petite. You’ll recognize this idea as a complete fiction. She gives up her dream of becoming an actress, instead settling for a job giving limited performances as a temporary pet. She’s a Doberman pinscher, guard and companion to an annoying old lady. Our heroine finds that once she puts on the dog suit, she stops speaking and adapts rather well to barking for treats. While on duty one day, she meets an oddball fellow working as a parrot. Something about his bird suit attracts her, but she’s drawn even more so to the real man inside. Although our Doberman is eventually fired for not being cute enough to suit her owner’s tastes, she’s a gutsy dog who still manages to find love. It’s a tale of desperation that, in a thematic sense, comes straight out of Chapter Seven, “Falling Prey To Cruelty or Misfortune,” from Georges Polti’s book, *The Thirty-Six Dramatic Situations*.

Gary Jennings’ “Tom Cat” was about a guy who puts on a cat suit, practices leaping, and becomes somebody’s pet.

Same old story? I’ll never know. It hurts too much to check it out.

A few readers online recalled “Tom Cat” with the nostalgic fondness of a parent remembering his child’s first voluntary visit to the potty, and were perturbed that I had written a story “just like” the one from yore. (Assuming that what I read accurately represents the work, Jennings followed Polti’s Ninth Situation: “Daring Enterprise,” so it’s not like he thunk it up either.)

Had I inadvertently written a translation story, substituting one domesticated mammal for another? Ohmygod! Say it isn’t so, Gary Jennings! Tell me I’m no copycat! Because I can’t stand it if on top of everything else, my mother was right.

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I can’t honestly compare the two stories, nor comment on intended or perceived—subtle or obtuse—differences in theme, tone, plot, or the gimmick of dressing in a fur suit. I don’t know if the stories are even about the same things. Not being a cat person, I cannot imagine trying to portray the complex interdependent relationship that exists between human and dog with a cat. (No offense to writers who own cats, but I’ll take a terrier over a calico any day.)

A few words in my defense: if my story was “just like” that other, older, competing story, then why did the editor, who

has both a fabulous memory and excellent taste—after all, he published a reprint of “Tom Cat” in the 1984 *MagiCats* anthology—buy it? (This is a rhetorical question; I don’t really want to know, Gardner. Don’t tell me. It might hurt my feelings, okay!) To be completely honest, the story I was afraid I would get busted for imitating was Carol Emshwiller’s book, *Carmen Dog*, another offbeat tale of the transformative powers of dressing in fur. Not that my story was anything like *Carmen Dog*, but I worried readers might think I was being derivative. The novel was my inspiration.

Even though I swear on a short stack of Bibles I’ve never read “Tom Cat,” the accusation that my work wasn’t totally original stung and left me feeling terribly guilty, like I had committed some unethical act by writing something that resembled, or at least reminded readers of an earlier story. Worse, I could tell by the heated online postings that people were angry with me for tinkering with the perfection of remembered texts. Their reactions made me feel like I had cheated, gone all Doris Kearns Goodwin on them, and now must pay the price. I knew exactly how they felt. I remembered a story in one of the magazines that followed the plot of Walker Percy’s *The Thanatos Syndrome* a bit too closely for my tastes. I secretly suspected the author of having stolen the core idea of sneaking something awful into the water! Walker Percy was one of my favorite authors! How could this imposter claim to be a writer and not have read everything by him? Boy did that ever sizzle my oysters. I read her work with great suspicion for a couple of years. I eventually got over it.

My first reaction upon hearing about my being infected with the copycat syndrome was to feel shame. I wanted to run away, maybe change my name and write for another genre, perhaps accept the assignment of foreign correspondent for *Dentistry Today*. I had always seen myself as an original thinker, not that I haven’t

done my share of reconstituted fairy tales “just like” the rest of you. And I’m not against stealing an occasional newspaper headline or turning a scientist’s research project into a fiction I can sell for six cents a word. Because in case you missed the proverb, here it is again: It’s not the idea that matters. It’s what you do with it. But dang! I really thought I’d made up the whole temporary-pet-thing.

Moving on, my second reaction was to try to profit from my shame. I wondered if my experience might make an interesting article, and thought about pitching the idea. My smugness over my seeming triumph over my “Deliverance” (Politi) didn’t last. No sooner had I gotten the assignment to write this article when a friend informed me she remembered reading an article “just like” it in some writerly magazine. And my friend hadn’t even read my piece! How could she say mine was just like something else?

I hang my head in shame.

Apparently, the copycat syndrome happens to the best of us. A well-known novelist of my acquaintance was horrified when she received a chiding postcard from a reader that her new book was “just like” one published in England several years ago. I was horrified too, but in my acquaintance’s defense. How dare someone accuse her of imitation! It turned out there were some striking similarities in the central plotline (which combined the Sixth Situation: Disaster; the Thirty-Third Situation: Erroneous Judgment; the

Thirty-Fourth Situation: Remorse; with the Thirty-Sixth Situation: Loss of Loved Ones), but the books did not at all read the same.

So how come nobody ever got on Sol Yurick’s case when he re-wrote *The Odyssey* (Third Situation: Crime Pursued by Vengeance) and called it *The Warriors*?

I guess the difference is that Yurick meant to do it.

Oh yeah. I meant to do it. I just didn’t know that until later.

Sometimes, writers are outed as copycats before their work sees print. I can’t be the only one who has received a rejection along the lines of, “I quite enjoyed this story and came close to buying it. Unfortunately, I just bought a *Nematode-grows-wings/Develops-consciousness-and-intelligence/Is-enslaved-by-high-school-drop-outs/Forced-to-burrow-through-the-earth-to-China/Mates-with-silk-worms/Spins-dirt-into-kimonos/results-in-death-of-moth* story (The Seventeenth Situation: Fatal Imprudence). Do send me your next.”

Right.

Just as devastating is when the junior most member of your workshop swears he read something “just like” your most recent submission in last month’s *Mad Magazine*.

Is nothing seminal?

I once tried to crack the *Reader’s Digest* “Life in These United States” column. Week after week I wrote out true-life anecdotes and sent them off to disappear like sons to the Russian Front. I never saw a

dime from the *Digest*. Instead, my anecdotes were scooped time after time by others who had missed their connecting flights, or met a wisecracking country doctor in the restroom, or effortlessly managed to capture hilarity and wisdoms spilled from their three-year old’s grimy lips. It turns out everyone has had similar life experiences, except the smart people had the forethought to have their experiences a little earlier than the rest of us.

The solution is simple: Give up, or forge on. Undaunted (or maybe slightly daunted, but foolhardy nevertheless) I choose the latter. Critics be damned! I’m doing it my way, following my own words, even when it turns out I’m lip-synching like Ashlee Simpson.

If I had it to do over again, I might clothe my Doberman in Armani, but a dog is a dog is a dog. Meaning, “Say Woof” is my unique interpretation of the age-old story of people sniffing around for a mate (Situation Twenty-Eight: Obstacles to Love). It might be an old story, but dabnabbit, it’s mine. ■

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