

UF professor Twitchell admits he plagiarized in several of his books

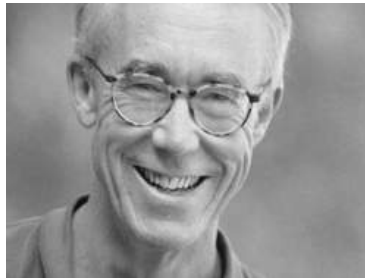
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A University of Florida English professor has admitted to plagiarizing in several of his books, triggering an internal ethics inquiry and potentially jeopardizing his reputation in academia and beyond.

James Twitchell, a widely published UF professor who writes about consumerism and pop culture, has lifted words verbatim from multiple authors in at least three books published between 2002 and 2007, a Sun investigation found.



University of Florida English professor James Twitchell.

Twitchell initially denied a pattern of plagiarism, but the 64-year-old professor was contrite and ashamed when recently confronted with a larger body of evidence.

"It's my responsibility to make sure that the words and ideas are my own and, if not, that they are properly credited. In many cases, I have not done this," Twitchell wrote in an e-mail Wednesday. "I have used the words of others and not properly attributed them. I am always in a hurry to get past descriptions to make my points, a hurry that has now rightly resulted in much shame and embarrassment. I have cheated by using pieces of descriptions written by others."

Simon & Schuster, Twitchell's publisher, is now delaying publication of a paperback version of his 2007 book, "Shopping for God," a spokesman said Friday. The publisher would be willing, however, to publish future books by Twitchell, the spokesman said.

UF has launched an internal investigation, which could lead to sanctions that include reprimand and termination, among other penalties.

"The University of Florida takes charges of plagiarism seriously, and if the charges are sustained, the university will take appropriate action," said Janine Sikes, a UF spokeswoman.

The initial allegations made against Twitchell illustrate how, in an Internet age, plagiarism is more easily identified. Roy Rivenburg, a freelance writer and former Los Angeles Times reporter, performed a Web search to find a story he'd written 10 years earlier. When he plugged in key words from the story, Twitchell's work started popping up.

"I got a hit from an excerpt from his book, and as I was reading it, I realized that it was my words," Rivenburg said in a phone interview.

Twitchell's borrowing ranged from single sentences to full paragraphs of both verbatim language and close paraphrases.

In one passage from "Shopping," Twitchell borrowed from a 1995 piece Rivenburg wrote about the marketing of Christian-related products. Here's Rivenburg's passage:

"Indeed, with the exception of furniture and major appliances, it is possible to outfit an entire home in Christian products — bird feeders to body lotions, luggage to lamps.

Twitchell's passage contained subtle changes:

"Indeed, with the exception of furniture and major appliances, it is possible to outfit your entire self and home in Christian products — bird feeders to body lotions, luggage to lamps."

Rivenburg forwarded his findings to The Sun, prompting the paper's months-long investigation into Twitchell's past writings.

Twitchell is a veteran UF faculty member, now in his 34th year on campus. Considered an authority on both Gothic literature and American culture, he has been quoted in the past several years by The Washington Post, The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal.

In his books, Twitchell takes on the voice of a cultural critic, sickened by a society that he says awards notorious behavior with publicity. He's a prolific author, having published a book just about every other year since 1995.

When Rivenburg confronted Twitchell in a February e-mail, Twitchell apologized profusely and admitted he had plagiarized in "Shopping for God," a book about the commercial marketing of religion. While Twitchell said he had no "excuse" for his actions, he attributed the lifts to a note-taking mishap.

"For what it's worth: I am so distressed by this that I am retiring from writing books," Twitchell wrote Rivenburg in a February e-mail. "I know that's small comfort to you but I think that this behavior shows that I've crossed the line."

Twitchell assured Rivenburg that he would properly credit him and other authors in the upcoming paperback edition of "Shopping for God," and Twitchell told The Sun that he has already made about 10 changes in a single chapter out of extreme caution against plagiarism.

After Rivenburg made contact with Twitchell, Twitchell told his department chair about the problem. But Pamela Gilbert, the chairwoman, did not forward along the allegations to UF's Office of Research to begin a misconduct investigation.

A subsequent investigation began this week, however, after The Sun put forward more evidence.

While Twitchell is sure to suffer reputation damage for plagiarizing, a spokesman for Simon & Schuster said the publisher would "absolutely" be open to publishing future books by Twitchell.

"From what we can tell here, this seems to be a question of methodology," said Adam Rothberg, spokesman for Simon & Schuster. "He is interested and deeply invested in making the appropriate corrections."

In past instances, Simon & Schuster — and other publishers — have pulled books from shelves outright because of plagiarism. But Rothberg said in an e-mail that, "We feel that delaying publication and making the corrections to the paperback edition is (the) right and appropriate thing to do at this point."

Plagiarism allegations have been made against renowned writers and public figures who managed to continue fruitful careers.

Doris Kearns Goodwin, whose latest book on Abraham Lincoln was a best-seller, and the late historian Stephen Ambrose, who came under scrutiny late in life, both weathered plagiarism allegations. More recently, Sen. Barack Obama, D-Ill., was accused of plagiarism in a stump speech, and he's still leading in delegates and the popular vote for his party's presidential nomination.

When interviewed, Twitchell never denied that he'd plagiarized. He did initially contend, however, that the passages discovered in "Shopping" were fluke acts of sloppiness — not part of a larger pattern.

"They are just little snippets, and that's exactly how I slipped past it," said Twitchell, who said the problems in "Shopping" were confined to a single chapter. "This is incredibly embarrassing. I'm hoping you're not going to do this story."

But in his 2002 book, "Living It Up: Our Love Affair With Luxury," Twitchell uses more than "snippets" without attribution. Describing a trip he says he took to Las Vegas, he provides an elaborate description of Caesars Palace. Discussing a Roman-themed mall inside the hotel, a place he says is unlike "anything I have ever seen," Twitchell writes:

"It has marble floors, stark white pillars, hermetically sealed 'outdoor' cafes, living trees, flowing fountains, and even a painted blue sky with fluffy white clouds that burst into simulated storms, complete with lightning and thunder. Every entrance to the Forum Shops and every storefront is an elaborate re-creation of a Roman portal. Inside the main entrance animatronic statues of Caesar and other Roman luminaries come to life every hour and speak."

The description, which goes on further is patently similar to one provided by Joseph Pine and James Gilmore, whose essay "Welcome to the Experience Economy" appeared in the Harvard Business Review in 1998. Discussing the same mall decor as Twitchell, Pine and Gilmore say "these include marble floors, stark white pillars, 'outdoor' cafes, living trees, flowing fountains — and even a painted blue sky with fluffy white clouds that yield regularly to simulated storms, complete with lightning and thunder. Every mall entrance and every storefront is an elaborate Roman re-creation. Every hour inside the main entrance, statues of Caesar and other Roman luminaries come to life and speak."

At one point, Twitchell actually appears to be in a sort of conversation with the very authors from whom he's borrowed. While Pine and Gilmore say the mall's "theme implies opulence," Twitchell says "the theme doesn't imply opulence, it shouts it."

Virginia Postrel, former editor of Reason Magazine, was among those from whom Twitchell borrowed information. In "Shopping for God," Twitchell took lines from a 2006 article Postrel had written for Reason. But The Sun's call to Postrel about the issue wasn't the first time she'd heard of Twitchell, or the first time she'd had concerns about his work.

"He's clearly compulsively copying other people's work in such a way that I would think a normal English composition student who did this at the college level — as opposed to in the third grade — would get in serious trouble for.

"I think he's a serial, compulsive plagiarist," she added. "He may also be a sloppy researcher."

Postrel says her concerns about Twitchell began several years ago when Twitchell forwarded her a manuscript of "Living It Up," asking her if she'd write a blurb for

him. Reading through it, Postrel said she was struck that Twitchell discussed a theory known as the Diderot Effect without attribution.

The term was coined by Grant McCracken, a researcher at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, to describe the tendency consumers have to purchase more and more new items. The concept is so named for Denis Diderot, an 18th century French philosopher who wrote an essay about how his other possessions seemed less impressive once he purchased a fancy new dressing gown.

Postrel says she told Twitchell to change the passage, but he never did. Twitchell says it was too late to make the change, adding that the Diderot Effect has become such common parlance in his area of study that he wasn't even sure who coined it.

Twitchell not only used McCracken's idea without attribution, however, he used McCracken's exact words.

When contacted about Twitchell's use of the Diderot Effect in his work, McCracken assured he was responsible for coining the phrase. Furthermore, McCracken said he was disappointed to see a "straight lift" Twitchell had made from a 2005 blog post on McCracken's Web site.

"I think it's wrong," he said. "I think there's a very clear academic convention here, and more exactly every university holds its students to a very clear standard ...

"The academic world has a very clear position, and it states that position to every student who comes through the academy. And there's just no shades of gray here that I can tell."

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