Stephen Ambrose, Copycat

BY Fred Barnes

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Thomas Gilmore, Wings of Morning, p. 83:

Up, up, up, staggering through the clouds for what seemed like an eternity. . . . No amount of practice could have prepared them for what they encountered. B-44s, glittering like rays, were popping up out of the clouds all over the sky.

Stephen Ambrose, The Wild Blue, p. 164:

Up, up, up he went, until he got above the clouds. No amount of practice could have prepared the pilot and crew for what they encountered—B-44s, glittering like rays, were popping up out of the clouds over here, over there, everywhere.

Thomas Gilmore, Wings of Morning, pp. 21-23:

The bomber, navigator, and nose turret gunner were forced to squat down, almost on hands and knees, and slide up to their stations through the nose wheel well of the ship. Once inside, the three men, fully dressed in their bulky flying gear, would be squeezed into a cramped compartment. . . . The remaining members of the crew entered the plane by crawling up through the open bomb bay doors, no more than three feet off the ground. Once in the bomb bay they would stand upright, step up onto the narrow catwalk. . . . Jerry Barrett, the engineer, stood between the pilot and co-pilot at thecof, helping to monitor the engine and fuel gauges, but once in the air he slipped to his position behind the pilot and just across from the navigation. . . . It was the most physically uncomfortable, isolated, and terrifying position on the ship. The gunners climbed into the ball, pulled the hatch closed, and was then lowered into position.

Stephen Ambrose, The Wild Blue, pp. 95-96:

The bomber, navigator, and nose turret gunner were forced to squat down, almost on hands and knees, and slide up to their stations through the nose wheel well of the ship. Inside, the three men had to squeeze themselves into a cramped compartment. . . . The other crew members entered the plane by crawling up through the open bomb bay doors, about three feet off the ground. Once inside they would stand upright, step onto the narrow catwalk. . . . The engineer stood between the pilot and co-pilot at thecof, helping to monitor the engine and fuel gauges. In the air he took his position behind the pilot and just across from the navigator. . . . The ball turret was, as McGovern said, the most physically uncomfortable, isolated, and terrifying position on the plane. The gunners climbed into the ball, pulled the hatch closed, and was then lowered into position.

In 2001, Stephen Ambrose, perhaps America's most popular historian and one of its most prolific, also published a book that focuses on a B-24 crew in World War II. This crew's pilot was George McGovern, later a senator and Democratic presidential candidate. Entitled "The Wild Blue: The Men and Boys Who Flew the B-24s over Germany," the book got mixed reviews. But it nonetheless rose quickly on the best-seller list, ranking twelfth on last week's New York Times non-fiction list. The first printing was half a million copies.

The two books are similar in more than just subject. Whole passages in "The Wild Blue" are barely distinguishable from those in "Wings of Morning." Sentences in Ambrose's book are identical to sentences in Childers's. Key phrases from "Wings of Morning," such as "glittering like mica" and "up, up, up," are repeated verbatim in "The Wild Blue." None of these--the passages, sentences, phrases--is put in quotation marks and ascribed to Childers. The only attribution Childers gets in "The Wild Blue" is a mention in the bibliography and four footnotes. And the footnotes give no indication that an entire passage has been lifted with only a few alterations from "Wings of Morning" or that a Childers sentence has been copied word-for-word. So, for example, one six-paragraph passage in "The Wild Blue" is structured like the corresponding section of "Wings of Morning," with ten sentences nearly identical to sentences in Childers's book and one completely identical. All this is dealt with in a single footnote that cites pages 21 to 27 in "Wings of Morning" with no further explanation or credit.

The narrative details of the two books are obviously different. Childers's "Wings of Morning" tells the story of a B-24 crew that flew out of England with the Eighth Air Force toward the end of the war. The radio operator was Howard Goodner, a young draftee from Cleveland, Tennessee. Childers, a specialist in German history who teaches popular courses at Penn on World War II and the Third Reich, was prompted to write the book after discovering in 1992 a cache of letters and photographs sent back home by Goodner from 1943 to 1945. The letters were in the house of Childers's grandmother in Tennessee. Childers interviewed the lone living surviving crew member, obtained letters from the family of another crew member, researched military records, and finished the book three years later.

Ambrose’s "The Wild Blue" concentrates instead on McGovern, who served as a bomber pilot based in Italy with the Fifteenth Air Force. Ambrose--the author of more than twenty-five books, including a dazzling trilogy on D-Day and its aftermath--quotes McGovern extensively in "The Wild Blue," for the two men are long-time friends. "I knew something about his career in the Army Air Forces," Ambrose writes in his author's note, "which I always felt he could have used to more effect in his 1972 presidential campaign. Politics aside, I had long been an admirer of what he had done in his B-24 bomber." Ambrose says McGovern was a "good representative" of the World War II generation, "a man who had risked all not for his own benefit but to help bring about victory."

Still, compared with Ambrose's earlier, more impressive works, the book is thinly researched. Ambrose leans on Childers's "Wings of Morning" for one important aspect of the experience of the dozen crew members aboard a B-24: the unpleasantness of life on the plane. To make sure they could endure the cramped conditions, crew members were tested for claustrophobia. Some of the crew, notably the gunners, were faced with intense cold. Childers's description of all this is eye-opening and beautifully written.

Which is perhaps why Ambrose was drawn to it. Indeed, at one point, he appears to confuse what he read in Childers with what he heard from McGovern. According to Childers, "The ball turret . . . was the most physically
uncomfortable, isolated, and terrifying position on the ship." In "The Wild Blue," Ambrose writes, "The ball turret was, as McGovern said, the most physically uncomfortable, isolated, and terrifying position on the plane."

The next sentence in "The Wild Blue" is identical to that in "Wings of Morning:" "The gunner climbed into the ball, pulled the hatch closed, and was then lowered into position." And the following sentence is remarkably similar, too. Childers says the B-24 gunner "rode suspended beneath the plane, staring down between his knees at the earth five miles below." Ambrose says gunners "were suspended beneath the plane, staring down between their knees at the earth." Two sentences later, Childers writes, "Ball turret gunners had to be small, but even so very few could actually fit into the turret with a chute on, so they relied on the waist gunner to engage the hydraulic system to raise the turret and then get them out of the ball." Changing that sentence a bit, Ambrose writes, "Although all ball turret gunners were small, few of them had enough room to wear a parachute. If bailout was necessary, they relied on the waist gunner to engage the hydraulic system to raise the turret and help them out and into their parachutes."

ASKED ABOUT SIMILARITIES between "The Wild Blue" and "Wings of Morning," Simon & Schuster, Ambrose's publisher, issued this statement: "Stephen Ambrose's 'The Wild Blue' is an original and important work of World War II history. All research garnered from previously published material is appropriately footnoted." The publishing firm claimed the similarities involved only about ten sentences of description of technical matters and that the debt was adequately discharged in the four footnotes.

Childers has not mounted an effort to publicize Ambrose's use of his work; I heard about the similarities from a colleague, not from Childers, who actually assigns two of Ambrose's books, "Band of Brothers" and D-Day, in his classes. Childers said he looked up the index when he first got "The Wild Blue" and flipped to the parts where his work was footnoted. His first reaction was, "this sounds awfully familiar. It didn't make me mad. It made me disappointed." Childers said he hasn't written Ambrose. "What would I say?" he asked. "Shame on you?" He added he "doesn't want to go after Stephen Ambrose. The man has done an awful lot of good work."

Childers, whose previous books have been on German history and politics, plans to make "Wings of Morning" the first book in a World War II trilogy. He is now at work on a book about a B-17 pilot from Philadelphia who was shot down, hidden by the French, captured by the Gestapo, and sent to Buchenwald concentration camp. The final book will take up what Childers calls "the last battle"--the return home of American servicemen after the war.

Ambrose has written well-regarded biographies of Dwight D. Eisenhower and Richard Nixon, but his fame as a historian has come from his enormously admired books on World War II. "Band of Brothers," the story of an airborne company that jumps into France on D-Day and fights across Europe until the war ends, was turned into a ten-part television series on HBO last fall. What has made Ambrose's book especially appealing is his focus on the soldiers and airmen, not the generals. "He really did a lot to shift the focus away from the high commands," Childers said. "Veterans love him." FOR HIS NEXT BOOK, Ambrose is researching the Pacific war, again dealing with the troops, not the brass. On his website stephenambrose.com, he asks any Pacific veterans to send "oral history, memoirs, diary, and/or letters home." His appeal is touching. "Veterans often say
that they don't need to do an oral history because they weren't in combat or they don't feel that what they did was all that important. Well that's not true. Regardless of what you did or where you were stationed, your history is important.

Though it took a while, Childers said he was sure that "one way or another, somebody would notice" the close resemblance between his book and Ambrose's. One reviewer, Sam A. Mackie in the Orlando Sentinel, didn't make that link but noted the literary superiority of the part of "The Wild Blue" that relied on Childers to the rest of the book. "Ambrose is at his best" when writing about the harsh lifestyle on a B-24, Mackie commented. "But," he went on, "all such passages are surrounded by often banal prose."

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