

**Review of The Plot, by Jean Hanff Korelitz, 2021. New York:
Celadon Books/McMillan, cloth.**

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While most of us were hunkered down, our minds preoccupied with the fear and uncertainty of a global pandemic, author Jean Hanff Korelitz was feverishly at work on her newest, New York Times Bestselling novel, *The Plot* (2021), a page-turning brain-twister with captivating appeal for both the average reader, and, especially, for writers, students, and language arts teachers alike. Although it's usually not a good idea to generalize, it would probably be safe to say that most — if not all — language arts teachers are very keen at both detecting and determining exactly what constitutes plagiarism, an offense we exhaustively try to prevent our students (and ourselves!) from making, whether inadvertently or intentionally. And of course, anyone who has struggled with writer's block (that is, dare I say, everyone?) can relate to the moral predicament introduced in *The Plot*: Even if every character, setting detail — every word — of the story you've written was conceived of in your own mind, is it still possible to plagiarize a plot? And if not, what about the familiar “rags to riches” trope we've seen in “Cinderella,” for example, a story with roots that have been traced all the way back to ancient Greece but which has since been told in countless different settings and situations? Or what about Hamlet retold in the form of *The Lion King*? We language arts teachers could go on and on with examples . . .

Such is the dilemma Korelitz's protagonist, Jacob Finch Bonner, faces when he dares to "steal" the brainchild of his private, misanthropic student once he learns of his premature death. Certain that the inspiration of Evan Parker never came to fruition before he died, and confident that this is a story that needs to be told, via his own characters and conditions — and of course, entirely in his own words — Jacob convinces himself that his endeavor is justified, even admirable. After going on to enjoy the fame and accolades that come with having written the latest cultural phenomenon, Jacob's world is surreptitiously shaken when he starts receiving Twitter messages from @TalentedTom (an apt allusion to *The Talented Mr. Ripley*), noting that Jacob is not the author. As the messages become more threatening and arrive more frequently, Jacob begins to panic as he searches for a solution and, along with the reader, gets caught off guard by a whammy of a plot twist.

Although an interesting dilemma to consider, it's not necessarily original. After all, it was way back in 1944 when Joseph Campbell introduced his theory of the "monomyth," a term he actually borrowed from James Joyce and learned about from having studied Carl Jung's work. The monomyth suggests that certain patterns or "archetypes" — that is, core similarities found in the human experience — can be found in all stories, regardless of time or geographical location, evidenced in the various myths that have been passed down for generations and have surfaced all around the globe. Thus, if the stories we create are based on our lived experiences — that is, everything we know about how humanity and the world that sustains us works — how can it be possible to produce an entirely original fictional situation?

If we are to subscribe to Campbell's theory, then we must ask whether it's fair to suggest that Korelitz's plot is or even can be original, as certainly it's the quintessential question she herself set

out to answer (albeit vicariously, through the frame story of Jacob's novel). Unfortunately, that question was answered for me shortly after I came to understand Jacob Finch Bonner's motivations in the first few chapters. Although entertained by his self-inflicted predicament, I couldn't help recalling protagonist Clay Hammond (played by Bradley Cooper) in *The Words* (2012) as I continued reading *The Plot*. (And as a side note to add on yet another layer of irony, even *The Words* has faced allegations of plagiarism for being too similar to Martin Suter's 2004 novel, *Lila Lila*.) With cunning not lost on discerning readers, Korelitz seems to hint at the answer to her big question through her strategically-woven literary allusions: one need not even be familiar with the meat of T.S. Elliot's "The Hollow Men" to infer the implication in the poem's title. And for those readers who may not be as well-read, even the novel's epigram provides a pretty telling clue: "Good writers borrow, great writers steal. -T.S. Elliot (but possibly stolen from Oscar Wilde)."

Originality aside, this novel comes complete with both relatable and uniquely horrifying characters that remind readers of the potential that resides in the human desire to process our experiences, whether real or imagined. For the close reader — which I would hope includes all language arts teachers — the ending might not come as a surprise, but the nuances of Korelitz's story are absorbing enough to overshadow any concerns over predictability. I thoroughly enjoyed the ride, and have already recommended this *The Plot* to students, colleagues, and friends.

Aside from its entertainment value, this would be an awesome piece of contemporary fiction to add to a high school curriculum or library, as it would provide relevance, intrigue, and ample opportunity for higher-level thinking about some of the most profound issues concerning our individuality.