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Capitalize This.

Another day, another lazy assumption. This time it's someone on Twitter, describing himself as a reviewer and would-be author, making a passing comment about THE GOSPEL OF LOKI.

I'm not going to point anyone in the direction of the tweeter. He isn't the first to say something crass, and I'm sure he didn't mean his remark to be as insulting and dismissive as it sounded. However, the tweet (which was also posted on Goodreads) went as follows:

“Reading The Gospel of Loki. Capitalizing on the fandom of Tom Hiddleston I imagine.”

Seriously?

Meh.

Perhaps it got me on a bad day. Writers sometimes have them too. Perhaps it was just one too many reader assumptions. Either way, it pissed me off more than such comments usually do.

Last week I came across a long, highly inaccurate (and rather badly-spelt) Twitter conversation, in which two young women accused me of “plagiarizing” and “copying” the Norse myths, or rather the version written down in the Prose Edda by the 12th-century scholar Snorri Sturlusson - rather an inaccurate use of the term, but plagiarism is an accusation that authors should (and do) take very seriously. It *cannot* refer to the use of a myth or folk-tale (if it did, then Disney would be in deep trouble with Perrault and the Brothers Grimm), but even with no foundation, it's an accusation designed to put an author's back up.

Not long before that, I got a rabid, rambling e-mail from someone who then posted the same text on Amazon as a review, accusing me of “capitalizing” (that word again), this time on the popularity of Johnny Depp, without whom (the writer said) THE LOLLIPOP SHOES and PEACHES FOR MONSIEUR LE CURE would never have been written.

There are, of course, several things wrong with this line of argument. One, CHOCOLAT was already a best-seller before the movie was made, which means that my readers - that is, the readers who have been with me from the start, and who follow me, not Hollywood - had already voted with their feet, and needed no further persuasion to read about Vianne Rocher, Roux and Anouk. In the same way, my first LOKI book (RUNEMARKS) had already been published four years before Marvel's THOR came out, which means, barring covert timey-wimey activity, that Tom Hiddleston's Loki fandom wasn't around for me to capitalize on.

So, why am I dwelling on this? Well, I think it's the tip of an iceberg - an iceberg we glimpse so often

that we tend to forget it's even there; a great big iceberg of sexism within the whole book industry, which stealthily perpetuates the belief that *no woman writer can ever really be successful without having somehow copied from, used or otherwise capitalized upon the popularity of a man.*

Don't buy it? Try this:

Imagine someone accusing Salman Rushdie of "capitalizing" on the folk tales of the Middle East.

Imagine someone accusing Neil Gaiman of "capitalizing" on the popularity of: Norse myths; DR WHO; Claire Danes; milk.

Imagine someone accusing Lee Child of "capitalizing" on the popularity of Tom Cruise.

No? Didn't think so.

As for myself, I can't even remember all the crazy, sexist assumptions that have been made (and voiced) about me during my career as a writer. Here are just a few of them:

My husband supported me financially while I was starting out. (He didn't. We both had jobs.)

My husband secretly writes my books. (Oh, for fuck's sake.)

My media, university or Hollywood connections helped me start off. (They didn't. I don't have any.)

I'm sleeping with my agent/editor. (One is gay, the other female. And no, I'm really not.)

I'm desperate to make more movies, to boost my writing career. (Nope. Much as I like movies, I've never needed a leg-up from Hollywood. That's why I keep turning down offers.)

I only write for women. Because, you know - vagina. (Nope. I write for anyone with a pulse.)

We know that the book industry is largely unfair to women. Women writers are in the majority, but generally get smaller advances; fewer reviews; fewer prizes; less respect.

It doesn't help when Peter Stothard, latterly a Booker judge and editor of the Times Literary Supplement, excuses the fact that books reviewed in the TLS are almost all by male writers by saying that women don't read, (or, presumably write) the kind of books reviewed in the TLS.

It doesn't help when Nobel Prize winner V. S. Naipaul opines (as he does, with monotonous frequency) that women are simply *not intellectually up to writing great literature* (being way too full of *feelings* and general messy thinking).

It doesn't help when women themselves perpetuate the use of insulting terms like "chick-lit", which belittle and marginalize women's writing.

It doesn't help when "women's fiction" is still considered a sub-category. (Amazon; Goodreads; Wikipedia; take note.)

It doesn't help when some (male) academics teaching English Literature teach male-dominated courses, and where (female) academics have to compensate by creating "women's fiction" courses, as if women

were a minority group, and not half the population.

Recently, at a function at my local university, I was told - with some pride - by an academic that *he never read books by women*. It doesn't help that morons like this are still in charge where it matters.

Given how many influential people (most of them male) are still disseminating the myth that women can't get there on their own; that women are okay writing for women, but that men need something more durable; that women read (and write) commercial fiction, but that men write *literature*, we're going to keep getting people making the same assumptions. The trickle-down effect of sexism in the book business will continue to apply, on Goodreads, on Twitter, in bookshops, on blogs.

How can we stop it?

Don't let it go. Don't assume that your voice isn't worth listening to. Call people out when they talk crap instead of slinking sadly away.

And please, everyone, say after me:

Women's fiction is not a "genre".

Women writers do not need the permission of men to write what they do.

Women writers do not need to ride on the coat-tails of men to achieve success.

Women writers are capable of thinking, writing, and acting for themselves, without a man to motivate them, to give them ideas or to lend them an air of authority.

Women writers don't need to take male pseudonyms in order to gain more readers.

Women writers don't need to scorn and belittle other women writers in order to get the approval of men.

Women writers can stand alone. But it helps if we stand together.