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**Author, 17, Says It's 'Mixing,' Not Plagiarism**By [NICHOLAS KULISH](#)

BERLIN — It usually takes an author decades to win fawning reviews, march up the best-seller list and become a finalist for a major book prize. Helene Hegemann, just 17, did it with her first book, all in the space of a few weeks, and despite a savaging from critics over plagiarism.

The publication last month of her novel about a 16-year-old exploring Berlin's drug and club scene after the death of her mother, called "Axolotl Roadkill," was heralded far and wide in German newspapers and magazines as a tremendous debut, particularly for such a young author. The book shot to No. 5 this week on the magazine Spiegel's hardcover best-seller list.

For the obviously gifted Ms. Hegemann, who already had a play (written and staged) and a movie (written, directed and released in theaters) to her credit, it was an early ascension to the ranks of artistic stardom. That is, until a blogger last week uncovered material in the novel taken from the less-well-known novel "Strobo," by an author writing under the nom de plume Airen. In one case, an entire page was lifted with few changes.

As other unattributed sources came to light, outsize praise quickly turned to a torrent of outrage, reminiscent of the uproar in 2006 over a Harvard sophomore, [Kaavya Viswanathan](#), who was caught plagiarizing numerous passages in her much praised debut novel. But Ms. Hegemann's story took a very different turn.

On Thursday, Ms. Hegemann's book was announced as one of the finalists for the \$20,000 [prize](#) of the [Leipzig Book Fair](#) in the fiction category. And a member of the jury said Thursday that the panel had been aware of the plagiarism charges before they made their final selection.

Ms. Hegemann finds herself in the middle of a collision — if not road kill exactly — between the staid, literary establishment in a country that venerates writers from [Goethe](#) to Mann to Grass, and the Berlin youth culture of D.J.'s and artists that sample freely and thereby breathe creativity into old forms. Or as one character, Edmond, puts it in the book, "Berlin is here to mix everything with everything."

A powerful statement, but the line originally was [written by Airen](#), on his blog. The plot thickens, however, and shows that perhaps more than simple cribbing is at work. When another character asks Edmond if he came up with that line himself, he replies, "I help myself everywhere I find inspiration."

“Obviously, it isn’t completely clean but, for me, it doesn’t change my appraisal of the text,” said Volker Weidermann, the jury member and a book critic for the Sunday edition of the newspaper Frankfurter Allgemeine, a strong supporter. “I believe it’s part of the concept of the book.”

Although Ms. Hegemann has [apologized](#) for not being more open about her sources, she has also [defended herself](#) as the representative of a different generation, one that freely mixes and matches from the whirring flood of information across new and old media, to create something new. “There’s no such thing as originality anyway, just authenticity,” said Ms. Hegemann in a statement released by her publisher after the scandal broke.

In the beginning, her agent, Petra Eggers, said that the critics could not distinguish between the novel’s 16-year-old protagonist and the author. “It’s the other way around now, there’s nothing left,” Ms. Eggers said. “They say that none of these are her own words even.”

[Deef Pirmasens](#), the blogger who discovered the passages taken from “Strobo,” said that he could understand a few words or phrases seeping into the work through inspiration, but that he quickly noticed that there were too many for it to be a coincidence. “To take an entire page from an author, as Helene Hegemann admitted to doing, with only slight changes and without asking the author, I consider that illegitimate,” Mr. Pirmasens said.

The controversy did not appear to be hurting book sales. On Thursday afternoon “Axolotl Roadkill” was ninth over all among books on the German Amazon site, albeit with many nasty postings about the plagiarism controversy. “It’s a reissue of ‘The Emperor’s New Clothes,’ ” wrote one commenter, who gave the book one star. Under the heading “Customers who bought this item also bought” was “Strobo” by Airen.

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