The Trashy Novel Revisited: Popular Fiction in the Age of Ellen White

by John Wood

The following article discusses the context out of which Ellen White's statements about fiction arose. *The Editors*

The state of creative writing in the second half of the nineteenth century, and especially of popular fiction, is generally unknown to the contemporary reader. This discussion will have a bearing on how Adventism has related to one form of the arts—literature—since that time.[1]

In the background of popular nineteenth century fiction in the United States are eighteenth century English works such as *Pamela* now recognized as full-fledged novels in the modern sense. By the end of that century, the English novel had etched itself firmly into the colonial American culture. But the multiplying works of later writers did not maintain the high literary standards of the masters who had earlier popularized the form.

Unfortunately, a pattern of low quality and high production was firmly implanted in American reading and writing habits just as the new society's tastes were being formed. Between 1830 and 1850, five times as many works of full-length fiction were published in the U.S. as in the preceding 60 years. And after 1850, this figure increases dramatically.[2]

Publishers brought out a prodigious amount of popular fiction from 1850 onward; F. L. Moh was one of the first researchers to document this phenomenon.[3] Various causes suggested by research for the dramatic upsurge of fiction after 1850 include the influence of Dickens and Scott on the English and American reading publics, the tremendous growth of newspapers as the center of culture in the stabilizing republic (with their great need for filler prior to wire services), the growth of a public school system which created a newly literate and reading-hungry class, and the long, drawn-out process of immigration, which continued to keep first-generation readership high into the present century.

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Thematic material for popular fiction was ready at hand in expansionism, with its constant frontier, the noble savage, the black, the new American war and frontier hero, and the new American household. However, one important factor absent in the new fiction was a literary tradition and its concomitant literary sophistication. Without literary canons, unfamiliar with literature as an art form and literary criticism as a technique, the public of the new nation absorbed the new fiction at a tremendous rate.

Unsurprisingly, the fiction that was produced under these conditions was, at the least, unartistic and clumsy and positively damaging in many ways. Rather than writing as an attempt to create or expose truth or reality, popular fiction became escapist, preparing the way for the pop movies and pop television.

A few examples, some abbreviated statistical information and a taste of the criticism leveled at popular fiction, will suffice to illustrate the topic. We will follow popular fiction from the midnineteenth century to the early twentieth.

The 1850s saw the tremendous growth in popularity of the "sentimental" or "domestic" novel. This subgenre centered on the American

home; its heroines were young girls and struggling wives who bore triumphantly with the trials of life by living a pure—that is, asexual—life.

As one critic aptly comments,

> Its [the novel's] characters and their involvements were of the sort with which middle-class readers could identify themselves, and heroes and heroines who conducted themselves according to bourgeois ethics always made their way onward and upward in this world or achieved an earnest of salvation in the next.[4]

That literally millions of novels were printed by authoresses of major cultural influence, now virtually unknown, is somewhat surprising. But what is more important is the ludicrous, often vulgar, quality of this fiction. It is this generalized and constant unreality, coupled with thematic cheapness, which so distinguishes popular fiction from surviving works of that period that are designated "literature" by the modern texts.

> The domestic novel neither needed nor encouraged originality. Readers wanted no surprises, but confirmation of what they believed—that right won and wrong lost—and instruction in how to meet domestic crises such as drink, violence, improvidence, and misfortune. The novels soon developed a roster of stock characters: the Other Woman; the Loose Woman; the Handsome Seducer; the Sick Husband; the Crude Husband; the Weak Husband; the Brave Wife; the Old Sweetheart; the Dying Child; the Martyred Wife; the Woman of Finer Feelings, and so on. . . .[5]

No other type of popular fiction of the nineteenth century, not even the "wild west" stories later in the century, were so concerned with sex roles. It was perhaps no accident of coincidence that the male image and sexuality generally were treated negatively, since the authoresses who succeeded

> . . . shared curiously similar backgrounds. Almost all were women of upper-middle-class origin who began very early in life to write, frequently under pressure of sudden poverty. Several published while still in their teens (usually a temperance tale). A majority lived or visited in the South. Most important for many of these women, somewhere, sometime, someplace in her past some man—a father, a brother, a husband, a guardian—had proved unworthy of the trust and confidence she placed in him. This traumatic experience, never resolved, grew into a chronic grievance. . . .[6]

Another critic calls the typical domestic plot "a code quickly understood by the female reader, with plots built about husbands who drank and chased, or erring runaway daughters, sons who strayed, or sickness, poverty, and insecurity."[7] Perhaps it is too much to accuse these popular novelists of calculated feminism, but the acceptance of their works by the million certainly suggests a widespread cultural phenomenon was at work.

How widespread is ascertainable in cold figures. Susanna Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* sold over 500,000 copies. Maria Cummins's *The Lamplighter* sold 40,000 copies in its first eight weeks, 70,000 in its first year. Hart tells us that a work of Mary Jane Holmes sold 2,000,000 copies in a decade, that Elizabeth Oakes Smith wrote a novel that went through 12 printings in 1854, that Caroline Lee Hentz saw one of her works sell 93,000 copies in just three years.[8]

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But none of these writers compares with the master of them all—whose name once was a household word. Her works were awaited breathlessly by a loving public; she almost single-handedly made William Bonner the richest publisher in America. The name E. D. E. N. Southworth is a case study in psychological ills and social crazes:

> The most popular authoress in the annals of American publishing was Mrs. E. D. E. N. Southworth. Her two foremost novels—

Ishmael and *Self-Raised*—sold more than two million copies each, and *The Hidden Hand* must have come close to that figure. In all, Mrs. Southworth wrote over fifty novels, and nearly all of them sold in six figures.[9]

We could cite many more representative figures. It must be borne in mind that these have to be interpreted against the far lower population and literacy rates in the U.S. from 1850 to 1870 before their full significance becomes clear.[10]

As we noted, the "loveless marriage" was a favorite theme of these works. The heroine bravely endured the hated situation for the sake of a lost lover, a family secret, or some other sort of melodramatic situation. Coincidence was a favorite device in developing such themes.

Immediately beneath the heroine on the domestic's scale of purity, original sin to the contrary, was the child. Their dear little souls were as yet uncorrupted; it has been noted in other contexts (American religious history or social history, for instance) that the child was a favorite symbol in nineteenth-century America. Little Lord Fauntleroy was only one such saintly (and very republican) figure to achieve tremendous popularity.

The plots, devices and symbols of this first type of popular fiction thus suggest a growing naive naturalism at the base of popular American thought. While it would be unsafe to generalize solely on the basis of popular fiction, parallel studies in other aspects of American social history have suggested similar conclusions.

In a sense, the 1850s were a literary turning point in America. The unexpected sudden popularity of the domestic novel marked an abrupt and premature end to the development of a genuine native literature. The so-called "flowering of New England" was cut short, its authors overshadowed and its critical insights ignored. Hawthorne, in disgust and bitterness, retired to Italy. He replied to his publisher's plea for something that would sell with the famous comment:

> America is now wholly given over to a damned mob of scribbling women, and I should have no chance of success while the public taste is occupied with their trash—and should be ashamed of myself if I did.[11]

The fifties set the pattern for what followed for decades; it would be nearly 40 years before a group of American authors could capture public attention and begin again shaping American tastes to the work of serious literature. Reading as escapism had won the day.

After 1860, a new form appeared. Novels were now serialized in the "storypapers." These were first brought out by their publishers in weekly, biweekly, or monthly editions. They were often called "newspapers." They looked like newspapers; their formats and style were often the same as the newspapers, even to the inclusion of an editorial page. But they were actually vehicles for serializing new novels.

If the novels running in installment form were exciting enough, sensational enough, or sentimental enough, the storypapers sold well. The sales success of the individual issues thus became an index to the popularity of the novels being serialized. Later, after appropriate lapse, the publisher could rerun the novel (under a new title), or alternatively publish it cheaply (five to 65 cents) in a paper binding. Later, it would often be republished in this form or bound more expensively in hardcover with embossed covers and gilt-edged pages.

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If a novel was successful enough to arrive eventually in the beautifully embossed and gilt bindings of this last stage, it was considered "high class" fiction. Advertisements referred to it as such, fit for the shelf of the fine lady or gentleman. Thus popularity became an index of worth.

This brings us to an immensely important definition of "novel." The term was applied indiscriminately to *popular* fiction from 1850 to 1905. A story from 30,000 to 90,000 words was a novel whether published as a serial in a newspaperlike periodical called a storypaper, or as a

comic-book format (the so-called "dime" novel), or as a paperbound book, or as a beautifully produced hardback. These were differences of form rather than content. Many popular novels worked their way up through these stages after 1870 if they were popular.

We must recognize the frequent use of the terms "novel" and "fiction" as pejoratives by a broad spectrum of commentators on the social conditions of the period. In the mouths of newspaper writers and ministers, the terms were meant to describe *popular* fiction and be synonymous with another of their favorite appellations—*trash.*

SATURDAY NIGHT.

HE RAISED THE CHILD ALOFT AND DASHED IT INTO THE FOAMY STREAM.

talking about? Oh! I remember now. Mr.—Mr.— What did you say his name is?"
"Eglington."
"To be sure—Eglington. You say that he has returned home?"
"Yes, sir; and quite unexpectedly, too."
"I suppose he did not bring his family with him?"
"Yes, sir, he did. He brought his wife and child."
"Indeed!" returned the traveler [illegible]

[illegible] contained in glass receptacles. One corner of the apartment was occupied by a small furnace.
The principal thing that attracted visitors' attention, when they entered this "study" for the first time, was the number of stuffed animals and birds hanging from the ceiling, and scattered generally through the apartment.
The remaining portion of the study was furnished like an ordinary parlor. A handsome carpet covered the floor, a fine French paper adorned the [illegible]

But, on the other hand, I am terrified when I think of *that* man. You remember the terrible oath he took on my wedding day. I have been haunted by his face ever since, and I feel certain that he will keep it, if it be possible for him to do so.
I felt comparatively secure here in Paris; but to return home seems like rushing into the lion's den. I have told Horace my fears, but he laughs at me, and calls me a little goose, afraid of my own shadow.

Storypaper serialization is the cause of the usually terrible plotting of popular novels from the last century. The reader must remember that he is sampling a written-down soap opera in order to explain the vast stock of wooden characters and the frequent dramatic pauses. Mott characterizes the leading Mrs. Southworth as having

> . . . a strong feeling for melodramatic incident and an instinct to develop such incidents swiftly and in strong colors. There is something satisfying—to the simple mind, at least—in a villain who is thoroughly evil from his crown to his toes, incapable of a single good impulse. And how gratifying the idea of a hero who is slightly more perfect than King Arthur, St. Francis, and Daniel Webster rolled in one! . . .
>
> This typing of characters, resulting in dramatis personae all in lily white or Stygian black, was not acceptable to minds somewhat more subtle than that of Mrs. Southworth.[12]

Among the special concerns of the novelists on the storypaper staffs were the Civil War (once it had become history), the Indian wars and need to annihilate the Indian (a view which the novelists neither doubted nor felt embarrassment over), a naturalistic rags-to-riches stereotype, and the good pioneer versus the bad, bad outlaw.

Mott writes:

> A fair sampling of the serials reveals that some three-fourths of them contained anywhere from one to four abductions apiece. In the thousands of serials published, the number of frustrated abductions must have run to colossal figures. Fancy, too, the number of babies swapped in the cradle, the number of wretched working girls restored to their fortunes. As to the number of Indians killed, the total must have been many times the total Indian population of the United States. The story papers took the plots, the characters, the settings that had always proved themselves to be the people's choice.[13]

We should note that one form of pop art that the storypapers and dime novels popularized was the giant woodcut illustrations. Most of these are quite dramatic, running to such themes as war scenes, stage robberies, massacres of or by Indians.

Storypapers in England and the U.S. ended the influence of literary journals for popular consumption. Their place would be taken, before the close of the century, by the lineal descendant of the storypaper, the periodical "magazine" of fiction and miscellany.[14]

Despite its mawkish and frequently violent

subject matter, storypaper fiction was bound in by a rigid code of "morality." What the Victorian fiction writer meant by morality were the arbitrary conventions of the time. Readers will recall Ellen White's diatribes against the so-called "religious sentiments" supposedly upheld by the popular novels. Says one commentator:

> Even the villain was somewhat handicapped in his villainies. The heroine being what she was, he could not even attempt a seduction. He could only propose marriage and rape as the alternative. At this point the hero came in. True, the villain was allowed more liberty than most people. He might, for instance, shoot his wife directly in the back of the head, or he might quietly knife his older brother; but he definitely was not allowed to have a long dragged-out argument with his father—that would have had a bad effect on the younger readers of the family story paper.[15]

Once the storypaper had become popular, the next form was virtually inevitable. This was the simple but fruitful idea of Erastus Beadle in 1860. He published one whole story in a single issue, cut it down to appropriate size, and sold it for a dime. Sales soared during the Civil War. By the 1880s, the enormous competition on these salable items had cut the cost to a nickel. At the end of the century, the "dime novel" boasted the use of four-color process on its covers, becoming, as one historian puts it, "an atrocity." In this century, these "novels" develop directly into two forms, the comic book and the sex-and-detective paperback that grace today's paperback bookracks. This clearly traceable line of development accounts for the dual meaning of the term "novel" as a serious art form and as paperback trash.

The dime novel sold. In the sixties a single dime novel, *Seth Jones,* sold 600,000 copies.[16] While Mott is generally more conservative than more recent critics, he can nevertheless speak of "literally millions of boys" collecting whole "libraries" of "dimes."[17] The author has a large collection of dime novels, and can testify that they are probably the most numerous documents available to the collector of nineteenth century writing. The same types of speed-induced errors are evident that others have

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Mabel Vane; OR, THE MILL OWNER'S VILLAINY.

By DR. WM. MASON TURNER.

noted: a gun in a villain's hand in one paragraph may have turned into a knife by the next paragraph. Many of the stories were written from standard plot books at great speed. One of the most popular "dime" authors, Prentiss Ingraham, a man who wrote over 600 titles, once wrote a 40,000-word novel in 24 hours.[18] Obviously, research, editing, the serious contemplation and aesthetic intent necessary to literature, were not part of the "dime's" format.

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The "dimes" were responsible for the Popularization of such all-American heroes as Billy the Kid, the James Brothers, Wild Bill Hickock, Buffalo Bill and many more. It can be said safely that books about them were major contributors to the recognized American tradition of violence.

> Dime novels [writes one student of the phenomenon] were to be tales of dread suspense. . . . In their pages, during the next four decades, tons of gunpowder were to be burned; human blood was to flow in rivers; and the list of dead men was to mount to the sky. They delight in violent action; in sudden death and its terrors. . . .
>
> Other differences [from the "highbrow" novel], apart from the shorter length and cheaper price of the dime novel, are differences of degree. The books for the masses are more exciting, more melodramatic. There is more blood, and more thunder in them. The action is swifter; . . . Characters are more wooden and incredible; conceptions of human nature, absolutistic and crude.[19]

The peak of interest in the domestic novel had been in the late 1850s. Then the story-paper-magazine took the field, and shortly thereafter the dime novel reached its zenith. It should be emphasized that none of the forms disappeared or even ceased to be generally disseminated. Rather, other forms grew beside older types and appealed to new classes in the growing reading public.

The fiction and miscellany magazine periodical presaged by the weekly "dimes" came into full prominence in the eighties. Collation shows about 700 known journals in 1865, 1,200 in 1870, 2,400 in 1880, 3,300 in 1885, 4,400 in 1890, 5,100 in 1895, 5,500 in 1900 and 6,000 by 1905.[20] Many of these monthlies and weeklies had a quarter to a half million in circulation. They "flooded" the country, a common contemporary description that has been used ever since for the great publishing glut of the 1890s.

At this time, we began to see the glorification of the city in popular fiction. The closing frontier, increasing wealth, immigration and consequent urbanization, the destruction of the Indian by the reservation, the receding prominence of blacks, industrialization and the growth of leisure all make the turn to the city an expectable phenomenon.

The trend is visible in the titles of the period. The hero is not now an Indian tracker or settler or cowboy or even an outlaw. He is, instead, a city detective (or thief) or a young man smashing his way from poverty to the top of the financial empire (the Horatio Alger stereotype).

In the nineties, a new current appears. There is a marked return to romantic sentimentalism in the form of the long-ago-and-far-away romance. These were produced in the hardback form as it again became more popular than the various types of paper fiction. Some of the most beautiful specimens of bookbinding as an art come from this period. They produce an odd effect as one opens these fine books and is confronted by their shallow contents.

Causes for this new trend are varied. The absence of copyright and the resultant overproduction of cheap pirated editions have been documented. Certainly, compulsory public education, a larger reading class, the Carnegie library movement, literary societies such as Chautauqua, and the generally romantic mood of the period are contributing factors.[21]

> Historical romance flared up about the time of the war with Spain, and produced a

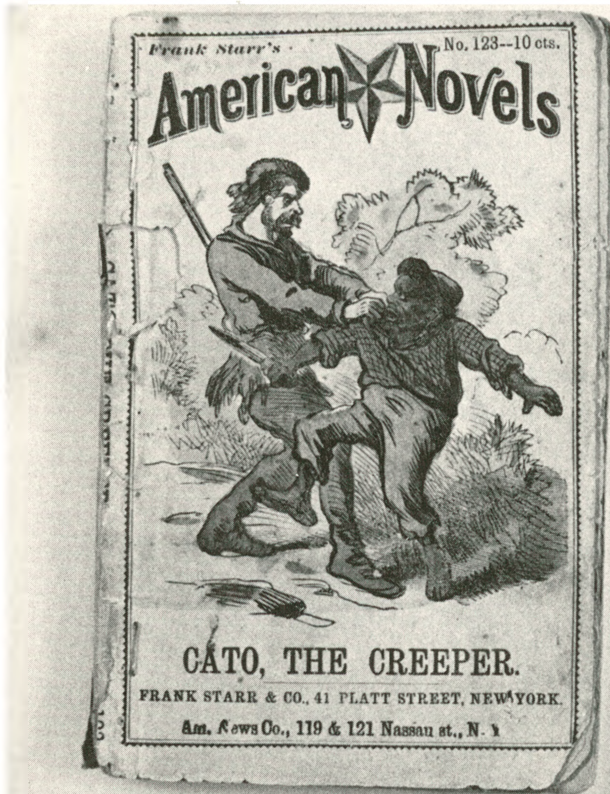
> score of immensely popular novels. . . . The years 1889-94 forecast almost all the developments of the more fecund years from 1896-1902 which was the most active school of historical romances the U.S. had yet produced. . . . Such of these narratives as dealt in any way with the present generally took their slashing, skylarking, and robustly Yankee heroes . . . off to remote or imaginary regions for deeds of haughty daring and exotic wooing.[22]

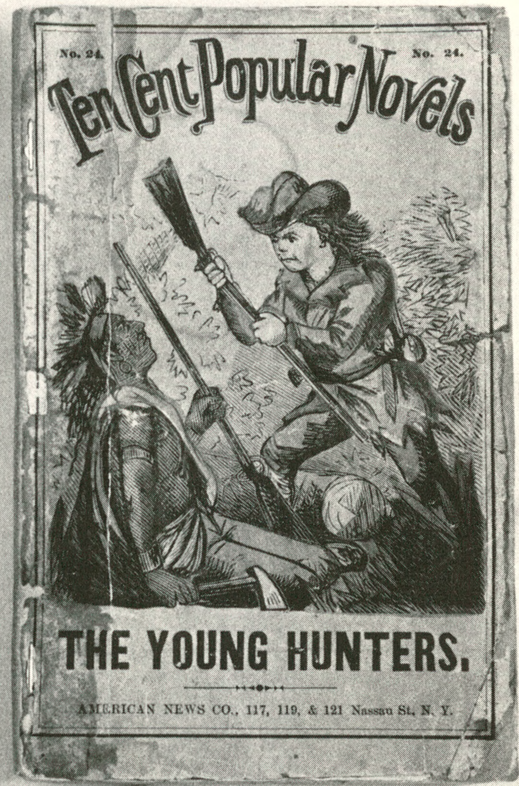
Eben Holden sold 400,000 copies during this period, and *Trilby* (which set off yet another social craze) 200,000 in its first year. *Quo Vadis,* a piece of religious romance, even outran its popular predecessor *Ben Hur,* selling 600,000 in its first 18 months, and 1,500,000 by 1915.[23] Along with this growth, circulation figures for the general interest and fiction magazine had increased dramatically. *The Ladies Home Journal* led the field with a circulation of up to 700,000 in 1893.[24] Curti describes in detail an "almost unbelievable" growth of magazines "designed to cater to average and below average tastes."[25]

The overwhelming popularity of the historical romance in this later period was helped along by the religious press and the church library movement, copied after the public library pattern. This is an important facet of the discussion, since it influenced Adventist activities and necessitated some of Mrs. White's strongest statements.

Some religious fiction was of liberal orientation, reflecting social concerns and the "new" theology of the times. While it was not quite "infidel," it was not quite orthodox in the traditional sense, either. Some well-known surviving examples include Robert Sheldon's *In His Steps* (1897) and Winston Churchill's *The Inside of the Cup* (1912). Here we can see a move toward serious literary techniques.

The more popular type of religious fiction was fostered by the Sunday School and church library. Religious novels of the *Ben Hur* type were bought for local church lending libraries and circulated from week to week. Novels were likewise serialized in the Sunday School papers to keep the young parishioners returning each week. The pages of the leading *Youth's Companion* are filled with typical religious fiction, ranging from maudlin to swashbuckling.





The *Companion* was circulated interdenominationally; its circulation rose from about 400,000 in 1897 to over 500,000 in 1898.[26] Despite the continuing popularity of the secular papers, about *half* the juveniles of the day were Sunday School papers. They "catered to youthful desires for the excitement and sensation of extravagant adventure."[27]

> Sunday-school libraries were filled with stories of dedicated girls who found and converted atheists with the same zeal that boys in the dime novels shot and skinned buffaloes. . . . All the large denominations supported similar organizations well staffed with dependable writers who could turn out material for the Sunday-school libraries, a large and important market.[28]

Not all of the so-called "religious" press's works were that religious. The Presbyterian Board even had to be threatened with suit (under the 1890 copyright law) by William Bonner's storypaper, the *New York Ledger*, to keep it from serializing a pirated edition of E. D. E. N. Southworth's useless melodrama *Ishmael!*[29] It is not particularly surprising that Adventist presses began to copy the other religious publishers in these practices. And it is to be expected that Mrs. White reserved some of her strongest denunciations for this situation. There is an almost comic quality in the picture of the great religious bodies as publishers of the fiction they had so earnestly denounced a few decades earlier.

If we can take Leisy's suggestion of 1905 as the waning date for intense interest in historical romances,[30] then we should also note that the decade 1895-1905 includes the development of realism and naturalism among a small, sophisticated readership and a move in critical circles toward new techniques in writing. The move from innocence to experience in literature in America has existed at all times, but in the nineteenth century it is particularly significant. The torrent of unrealistic escape literature in the last part of the nineteenth century eventually led to questions about what reality literature should reflect. Twentieth century writers moved away from the sentimental and superficial views of life presented in the dime novels and sought their subject material elsewhere. Their approaches have not always been ones that are compatible with the mainstream of Adventist theology, but this presents issues somewhat different from those addressed by Mrs. White.

The author's study of every statement about fiction penned by Mrs. White suggests a basis on which to proceed, but that is outside the scope

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of the present article. Here we have simply explored the literary background for Mrs. White's very strong and oft-repeated counsels against fiction in general and the novel in particular.

In an incisive comment which summarizes what was happening on the popular level at the end of the half-century we have examined, Van Doren writes:

> . . . whereas Cooper and Melville, much as they might invent, still worked upon a solid basis in a mood not too far from the mood of realism, their successors wrote romance pure and simple, even when they were most erudite. Romance was in the air. Not all the publishing enterprise which developed romances into best sellers and distributed millions of copies could have done so but for the moment of national expansiveness which attended the Spanish War. Now, with a rush of unaccustomed emotions, the national imagination sought out its own past, delighting in it, wallowing in it. Had the romancers who met the mood been more deeply grounded in reality and less sentimental, or had the national mood lasted for a longer time, some eminent masterpiece might have emerged. None did, and the gold lace and gilt [which] the narratives actually evoked began to tarnish almost as soon as the wind touched them.[31]

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