

PERIPHERAL PUBLISHING: THE POSSIBILITIES OF MARGINAL MODELS

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ABSTRACT

There is considerable interest in independent publishing models that operate at or on the periphery of our industry, beyond the ‘centre’ of commercial publishing—from ‘litmags’ (Edmonds 2015) to ‘prosumers’ (Stinson 2016); self-publishers, to digital-first and open access examples. There is less discussion of established ‘literary’ writers producing ‘peripheral’ works, which may be significant in the current context, when publishing faces the challenge of technological developments ‘orders of magnitude greater than the momentous evolution from monkish scriptoria to movable type’ (Epstein 2010). As an author and publisher—working in both roles across distinct categories—I am interested in creative projects that mis/use aspects of generic forms to re/make (a)new literary fiction. In this paper, I consider David Mitchell’s latest novel/la, *Slade House* (2015), in light of its first appearance as a Twitter ghost story released at midnight on All Hallows’ Eve: a tale-in-instalments that gothic readers and fanfic communities alike would be familiar with, but was and still is more novel for mainstream trade publishers. Mitchell’s avant-garde example may work to illustrate the direction and fluidity of literary fiction at a point in publishing history when traditional practices are being challenged by writers via alternative models of production, which may exhibit a capacity to move between genres that might, in earlier times, have seemed exclusive.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Currently Lecturer in Writing and Publishing at RMIT, previously commissioning editor at Hardie Grant Books, and co-founder and director of Arcade Publications, Rose Michael’s speculative fiction criticism has appeared in *The Conversation*, *Text*, *Sydney Review of Books*, *M/C Journal*

and (forthcoming) *Foundation: The International Review of Science Fiction*. Her most recent speculative fiction appears in *Going Down Swinging* #39. Her first novel, *The Asking Game*, was a runner-up for the Vogel Literary Award and received an Aurealis honourable mention (short stories from it appeared in *Island*, *Griffith Review*, and *Best Australian Stories*), and an early extract from her second, *The Art of Navigation*, was shortlisted for a Conjure award.

KEYWORDS

Speculative fiction—Digital publishing—Self-publishing

As a writer and reader, publisher and academic, I am interested in experiments that operate at or on the periphery of our industry—beyond the centre of commercial and literary publishing. I see alternative, independent, outlier publications by established literary writers producing unexpectedly—possibly even unintentionally—significant projects in their creative mis/use of generic forms. Such innovation is inspirational for my own intersected professional practice as an author and editor (doubly a producer), and is one way literary fiction is continually re/made (a)new. In this paper I consider David Mitchell's latest novella, *Slade House* (2015), in the light of its first appearance as a Twitter ghost story released at midnight on All Hallows' Eve. A digital tale-in-installments, the story ultimately appeared in a print form that had popular precedents gothic readers and fanfic communities alike would be familiar with, but was more novel for mainstream trade publishers.

Mitchell's example seems to me to illustrate the direction and fluidity of literary fiction at this point in publishing history: alternate models of production, including self-publishing, exhibit a capacity to move between genres that might, in earlier times, have seemed exclusive. Literary fiction may still be recognised first and foremost as *not* genre fiction; but 'Big L Literature', to use Ken Gelder's expression (Gelder 2014: 11) has always assimilated ideas, and forms, from wherever writers find inspiration. While the category of literary fiction may be the product of consensus, it is generally an unspoken, often unconscious, and frequently precarious consensus, which is more relevant than ever in the (r)evolving context of writers, readers and publishers—and their crossover roles—today.¹

Contemporary theorists such as John Frow convincingly argue that genres are not established according to some set of stable rules; 'they have no essence' in and of

themselves (Frow 2005: 134);² rather they are performed (and can be transformed) in the act of reading, and so regularly move between and across such distinctions. This situates them in relation to a contemporary ‘hierarchy of value’ (Frow 2005: 130) that is not fixed but established at the moment of engagement. Genre, then, is a question of identification according to current context. As that context changes so does reader recognition, and our understanding of genre works, since they exist in relation to external realities.³

Although Frow is not directly concerned with the ‘formulaic’ and ‘conventional’ (2005: 1) subgenres of the novel that interest me, his understanding of genre as a dynamic process, with ‘new genres ... constantly emerging and old ones changing their function’ (2005: 10) is relevant to my interest in creative practices that bridge the literary and speculative. If we accept the idea of literary fiction as a (sub)genre of fiction, as the book trade and general population does,⁴ then I, too, am primarily concerned with ‘an investigation of the relations between genres’ (Frow 2005: 3), with border crossings and boundary books, which are sometimes contained within the literary catchment, and sometimes spill over. According to Frow, genres ‘classify objects in ways that are sometimes precise, sometimes fuzzy, but always sharper at the core than at the edges; and they belong to a system of kinds, and are meaningful only in terms of the shifting differences between them’ (2005: 128). Genre, then, is not a stable taxonomy—only, at any given moment, as Frow argues, “‘stabilised enough” or “stabilised-for-now”” (2005: 28). It is this instability that presents opportunities for writers and the publishing industry.

Categorisation might delimit reading practices and limit writers, but I am proposing that it could also have the opposite effect: the more producers—be they authors or publishers—define a given genre, the easier and more alluring it is for writers and readers to challenge the confines of those definitions. In this way we all actively participate in the (re)construction of genres. The more distinctly the edges are drawn the more the generic core is clarified, which means more obvious opportunities for cross-genre forays.

According to Gérard Genette, literary fiction is that which is, ‘simultaneously (and intentionally) aesthetic *and technical*’ [my emphasis] (Genette 1999: 51). The key attribute is quality—of writing, of ideas, and of the author’s ability to incorporate and experiment with those—but mode may also be an aspect of the art. While literary fiction aspires to be ‘authoritative in our culture’ (Bloom 1994: 1), just who conservative critic Harold Bloom thinks ‘we’ might be when he argues this is open to question: marginal works may not only—or not even—be an authority on marginality, but might also be the perfect perspective from which to (re)view the dominant culture. Bloom also writes of a distinctive ‘strangeness’ in canonical literature, ‘a mode of originality that either cannot be assimilated, or that so assimilates us that we cease to see it as strange’ (1994: 3). He is not writing about genre fiction or publishing experimentation; he is writing in defence of the canon, but his comments about both strangeness and original modes seem relevant in a discussion of the current mobility

of fictional forms—not (only) in terms of their content but, crucially, given technological developments, their production.

Mitchell's example seems to me a clear instance where literary fiction successfully incorporates and experiments with 'strange' formations (which may not actually be that strange as far as genre reader/writers are concerned), to re-present a non-traditional, non-realist, but also ultimately non-marginal literature. This is not to overstate the novelty of his experiment, but to argue that the porousness of categories such as the popular and the avant-garde continues—and continues to be productive—today.

Paratextual (un)packaging

One way in which books signpost their allegiance to or cross between genres is through those aspects of the text that Genette terms 'paratext'. These include the 'publisher's peritext' of format and font, through the title and even the name of the author, to the 'public epitext' of interviews and reviews—in short, everything that 'enables a text to become a book and to be offered as such to its readers and, more generally, to the public' (Genette 1997: 1). A close consideration of the more obvious of these illustrates how publishing practices clearly participate in what Frow calls the 'doing' of genre (2005: 144). Electronic and print book covers, along with myriad promotions, work to position books and reading communities. While the agent's—or possibly author's—pitch and the book's blurb may emphasise its ability to appeal to more than one type of reader, traditionally the publisher's peritext must locate it within a chosen category, for bookstore or literary pages, or risk missing the anticipated market (2006: 2)⁵. This necessary, if reductive and sometimes inaccurate, activity in turn reinforces the (albeit false) stability of that type. Digital publishing—whether ebook, audio or online—which might initially have operated on the periphery of a print industry, but is now genuinely considered an alternative in many instances, challenges these practices in a number of fruitful ways: ecovers have different design constraints, and can be easily updated or replaced; ebooks can be uploaded to multiple categories. Webpages may frame works in a similar way to how traditional para- or peri-textual aspects work, but they are unlikely to be within a publisher/publicist's control. The all-important role of word-of-mouth, and independent booksellers' 'handselling', has been taken over—or taken up—by social media, v/bloggers, and communities like Goodreads (which may not be as outside the producer's purview as consumers, or 'prosumers' as Emmett Stinson has described those who occupy both roles, might think) (Stinson 2016: 23–43).

Which brings me back to Mitchell's *Slade House*; it began life as a Twitter story written from the point of view of an adolescent, boy with Asperger's on Valium who accompanies his mother to clean an old house. The initial 'manuscript' exemplifies a movement well beyond the boundaries of conventional publishing: one that challenges received wisdom about literary origins just as the story itself challenges genre boundaries. *Slade House* seems an apt example of how digital developments and the popularity of social media might facilitate literary fiction's experimentation with more marginal forms, providing not only a channel that an author may use to communicate

directly to fans⁶, but one which (genre) authors such as Mitchell may work within, as well as publish through.

The subsequent novella, published as a book in 2015, comprises discrete sections set in different time periods, nine years apart, told from diverse characters' points of view. These chapters are largely disconnected—though later, characters are aware of the history of earlier events and, indeed, investigate these—but are all located in or around a mysterious British manor house hung with spectral paintings and surrounded by an abandoned garden. In traditional gothic style, the main characters in the final chapters are members of a paranormal club convened specifically to investigate the strange house and its routine (re)appearance. So far so (para)normal. Mitchell presents readers with a natural world that conforms to gothic genre expectations but also gestures (speculatively, fantastically) to past and potential future wreckage. Characters from different time periods are summoned to Slade House, which is difficult to find: it can only be entered via a small black door in a crooked alley. Both the door and the alley are seen only sometimes and easily missed. 'It was invisible till you were right on top of it.'⁷ In the house, and garden, inexplicable events occur as sinister voices, seemingly from the past, interrupt the present. Time is suspended. It's hard not to see the originally tweeted form as reflected in the final structure and story.

What most readers of Mitchell's latest, most generic, title would know is that this house is a portal to another dimension: its mythical inhabitants are evil beings, once human, who feed off their victim's souls. Slade House is a follow-on from Mitchell's Booker Prize-listed *The Bone Clocks*, featuring the horologists who first appeared in *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet*.⁸ The grandfather clock is a key motif: 'an old, pale-as-bone clock face, saying TIME IS and under that TIME WAS and under that TIME IS NOT'. Indeed, Mitchell's latest production might almost be considered an exercise in fan fiction—a genre that frequently originates in online outlets, as in the well-known example of *Fifty Shades of Grey*⁹—albeit one written by the author of the original work himself. The denouement of *Slade House* (which owes much to science fiction, with its alien beings that need the 'clear cloud of stars' released at the point of death to maintain their suspended state), is not surprising to readers in the way cross-genre experimentation usually is. However, the use of gothic storytelling setting and serialisation is new for Mitchell—though the traditional seriousness of that genre is undercut by the author's distinct and recognisable humorous style: the shout-line from *The Times* (which the publisher clearly endorses, reprinting it on the back cover of the third edition) says Mitchell 'masterfully, humorously, combines the classic components of a scary story ... with a realism, when describing the lives of the victims, that is pacy, funny and true'. My point is that both the form and content of this release challenge the traditional form of the novel, which Mitchell himself has previously described as having to work hard to conform to (at a Melbourne Writers Festival event in 2015, he talked about being 'naturally' a novella writer, and stringing stories together to make a novel—which is particularly evident in his debut, *Ghostwritten*—however, this paper is not about the novella as a form, but how digital innovation produce novel/la print outputs).

Peripatetic genre b(l)ending

In *Slade House*, Mitchell has abandoned many ‘agreed’ aspects of contemporary literary fiction, which China Miéville’s has rather disparagingly, and—particularly recently, when there are seemingly more exemptions than examples, Mitchell himself included—unconvincingly, called ‘realist litfict’ in an article tellingly entitled ‘What the Booker really excludes’¹⁰: *Slade House* is a novella; it was originally published in an unusual, digital format; there is no attempt to connect diverse sections of the book—rather, Mitchell uses a structural device, in the systematic re-emergence of the portal, that allows him to directly access different characters at different times. This is not common in realist fiction. Mitchell repeatedly uses ellipses and line spaces within the scenes to connect paragraphs. This is unusual in realist fiction. Finally, it was published as a novella, historically a common enough gothic form but an uncommon mode for mainstream publishers today,¹¹ (although a number of small independents, here and overseas, as well as online platforms and literary magazines, have had critical success with the format and continue to experiment with it). Shorter-than-‘normal’ fictional works are more common online, as the web is less conducive to novel-length reads; perversely, much has been made of the ‘longread’ non-fiction articles enabled by the medium, which has neither the space constraints of mainstream journalism, nor the printing costs of traditional publishing. In both instances, the medium is becoming less ‘para’ and more textual.

Mitchell’s other titles similarly demonstrate strong generic affiliation, though not necessarily gothic: *Ghostwritten* introduces a spirit and the speculative idea of possession to travel between totally different people, places and times; *Cloud Atlas* uses a science fiction idea to connect diverse voices and genres. (It may be worth noting that Mitchell spent many years abroad, in Japan, where his wildly inventive second novel *Number9Dream* is based. Perhaps being an outsider, and literally outside the West—home of Bloom’s canon—has been useful in enabling Mitchell to (re)write distinct storytelling styles: *Slade House* certainly features many English caricatures.) Upon its release, *Slade House* received mixed responses, often within the same review, though *The Australian* was unequivocal, with Adrian McKinty writing that Mitchell ‘needs to be firmly guided away from the baleful influence of Neil Gaiman, JK Rowling, Terry Pratchett and Michael Moorcock and back on to the straight and narrow of sophisticated, psychologically penetrating *English* literature’ [my emphasis]. Clearly Mitchell is a writer with a vested interest in ‘de-stigmatising’ the creative amalgamation of high/low, popular and literary genres—as he hoped Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Buried Giant* would the fantasy genre (Alter 2015). As with Ishiguro, Mitchell writes across, as well as through, diverse genres, though he seems more (and more) comfortable creating works that are closer to what Frow describes as the generic ‘core’ (2005: 128), happily telling *The New York Times* that ‘fantasy plus literary fiction can achieve things that frank blank realism can’t’ (Alter 2015).

While the initial Twitter incarnation of *Slade House* may violate the norms of a conservative industry, the book trade has been required to respond to new technologies and new ways of reading or risk disintermediation. The digitisation of the

publishing industry has fundamentally and irrevocably changed the production, and at times reception, of literature. It has been described by Jason Epstein, the former editorial director at Random House and founder of *The New York Review*, as a technological shift ‘orders of magnitude greater than the momentous evolution from monkish scriptoria to movable type’ (Epstein 2010). Worldwide publishing is in a state of transition. A traditional bookstore is a horizontal market offering a broad range of services to a large group of customers with a vast range of needs, and conventional publishing has evolved to intersect commercially with these. Online suppliers—selling books in high volume with low overheads in an often vertical marketplace—undercut prices and command major influence in terms of stock and discounts. Multinational marketing and publishing promotional machines are less influential than they once were. Social media may enhance or contradict the word-of-mouth sales that have historically boosted budgets—at this point publishers are not in agreement as to how to harness social media celebrity ‘authors’ and are simply responding in an ad hoc manner to tectonic change. The point of this whirlwind overview of the current publishing context, for the purposes of this paper, is that while this level of uncertainty—which is likely to persist for some time—has, arguably, resulted in an increasing reliance on conservative titles among many mainstream publishers, the potential exists for others (likely independents, potentially with smaller overheads and greater institutional capacity for risk), to offer peripheral writers the opportunity to reach a readership or established writers the chance to experiment outside cultural conventions and the canon.

A continuing conversation

While there are many wonderful examples of marginal, trans-genre works, from the above publishers as well as the bigger, more established houses, the paradox is that writers such as Mitchell have taken advantage of new media in an industry that is having difficulty adjusting to the very changes which may stimulate (cross-genre, novel) experimentation. Critic Joanna Russ wrote decades ago of ‘genuine novelty’ arising at the coalface of genre practice, on the outer rim of generic proliferation (Russ 1971: 51). Frow agrees that this is where limits (the limit of ‘Big L Literature’) are inevitably tested—especially, we might say, in a publishing environment experiencing radical change in terms of production and readership: numbers, as well as modes of engagement. While Russ explicitly located such experimentation in bad or undistinguished work this is clearly not the case with Mitchell. Frow’s argument that genre is ‘the driving force of change in the literary field’ (2005: 68) may be more useful as a way of anticipating how such novel projects might feed back into and inform, and inspire, literary fiction today.

Slade House is inspirational to me not only because of the audacious manner in which time is (mis)managed and traditional narrative conventions of realist literary fiction dispensed with—and for the way Mitchell’s characters exist in a liminal world of scepticism and belief—but for the author’s use of new ‘publishing’ platforms to make the most of emergent technologies and techniques, refreshing reader/writer relationships. His is by no means an isolated example (I would include Ali Smith’s

quartet as a similarly different novel process—each book is written within the timespan of a season—if I had more space), but remains a pertinent case of peripheral publishing offering storytelling alternatives that (then) enter the mainstream.

Mitchell told the *Guardian* that he enjoyed making the ‘diabolical, treble-strapped textual straightjacket’ of Twitter work for him. Perhaps the constraints of the platform freed him to give the characters their head, let the story lead, and shed some of the conventions of literary fiction: he no longer had any need to work to the formal constraints of long word counts or lead times. The platform also presents political possibilities for the way in which it is not retrospectively inclusive, but genuinely accessible from the get-go. It is impossible to know how much more imaginative work will be—or already is—stimulated by social media, but certainly there is a growing body of better and lesser-known ‘Twitterature’. By its very ‘social’ nature it repositions—potentially, at least—fiction as a ‘conversation’, in violation of the established and expected boundaries between reader and writer policed paratextually. It seems appropriate to end with this radical extension of Martin Amis’s notion of the literary as a kind of conversation (Amis 2000: 224).¹² No doubt this is not what he meant when he said literature didn’t ‘just come straight at you’ in a description of popular writing that many, such as myself, would take as a great complement and no bad thing to crossover into the ‘litfic’ category.

Coda

My own perspective is no authority, but grounded in small press experience on the margins of the local publishing industry: I co-founded and ran the micro press Arcade Publications from 2007 to 2012, before moving to mainstream, commercial, but still proudly local and independent Hardie Grant Books. This was in the same decade that traditional publishing faced immense challenges in the form of globalisation, digitisation, and the advent of Amazon. When A&R/Red Group—the largest bookselling chain in Australia—collapsed, many presses responded by investing more in production and offering books at a lower price. Many publishers enacted a risk minimisation strategy that resulted in conservative choices; titles became visibly more familiar in terms of content, format and authorship. This prompted me and a colleague to enter the market, working with academics and literary authors to publish books that blurred the lines between fiction and history, and appeared in nonstandard non-fiction formats at a fraction of the then-recommended retail price.

At Arcade Publications, we produced twelve titles under the motto ‘small books, big stories’ (Caterson 2009). We sold out our print runs, developing our own relationships with non-traditional outlets that bought our titles firm-sale, as well as signing on with an established book distributor. Our content included unconventional characters from Melbourne’s history—from publisher and bookseller EW Cole and brothel-owner Madame Brussels, to chocolatier McPhearson Robertson—as well as broader histories such as *The Making of Modern Melbourne*, *Melbourne Remade*, *Hoax Nation* and a curated collection of Oslo Davis’ *Melbourne Overheard*. Our focus was on cross-genre titles that bridged the historical and fictional. We were partially inspired by reading

how other cultures not only do not distinguish between the literary and other genres, but apparently do not even necessarily distinguish between fiction and non-fiction (Lea 2016)—though ultimately we agreed with Geoff Dyer that the distinction ‘serves as a useful guide to the kind of experience the reader is wanting to have’. We para-, peri- and epi-textually packaged our titles accordingly.

Arcade’s venture was experimental (and somewhat beside the point) in many ways; it was the product of practical constraints and unique opportunities: production costs were cut by digitally printing black-and-white in an A6 format. The unconventional size meant our books could be printed on an often unused machine at Griffin Press at a time when most printing was moving offshore. In the resultant ‘practically palm-sized’ books (as our tag-line read), we consciously produced novella-length texts simply for easy creation and consumption—along with Mitchell, we saw no need to adhere to conventional book-length manuscripts. Inspired by the Penguin paperback model (itself a response to changing printing technologies as well as an emerging reading public’s desire to be better informed about the war on their doorstep), our titles were perfect for reading on public transport, but also—we discovered retrospectively—for displaying on bookstore counters at a time when commercial publishers were moving to larger Trade Paperback books and booksellers were seeking ‘non-book’ low price-point products. Arcade Publications clearly demonstrated that consumers were prepared to pay more for smaller, less-polished locally produced titles; customers proved committed to the imprint in a way that is not generally the case in publishing, but is consistent with reader’s loyalty for brandname authors.

Having experienced firsthand these transformations in the creation, production and marketing of books, I am forever appreciative of and attentive to novel experiments arising on the margins of mainstream culture. Particularly during this time of eco-crisis when publishing, of all industries—along with all industries—faces the uncertainties of climate catastrophe, which will not be sufficiently addressed by printing on sustainably forested paper stock or moving to ereader platforms, but which must also involve new aesthetic and technical literary forms.

Endnotes

¹ Yet literary fiction is a category, one which contains, among others, those books that do not belong elsewhere. As Derrida asks, ‘Can one identify a work of art, of whatever sort, but especially a work of discursive art, if it does not bear the mark of a genre, if it does not signal or mention it or make it remarkable in any way?’ (Derrida 1980: 64).

² Indeed this ‘generic’ process seems particularly in evidence when it comes to literature: many books, such as those of Kurt Vonnegut and JG Ballard, are

belatedly claimed as ‘literary’ after initially being produced, and received (according to Frow’s understanding), as popular fiction (Frow 2005: 134).

³ As Adam Roberts writes, regarding science fiction’s similar resistance to easy definition: ‘This is a strange thing because most people have a sense of what science fiction is’ (Roberts 2006: 1).

⁴ Dymocks and Collins in Melbourne’s CBD even have (or had) a ‘literary fiction’ shelf—though some speculate it is more to direct general customers away from ‘Aus. Lit.’ reading list titles than to sell them.

⁵ This is not to take up the ‘sort of circular reasoning’ that, according to Roberts, suggests ‘the whole business of definition is nothing more than a cynical marketing exercise’, but rather to adopt Genette’s approach in order to explore how contemporary publishing practices, such as marketing, define the science fiction category—to extend the discussion of genre from reader reception to publisher conception.

⁶ Davis and Purnama argue that social media has become a key means through which YA publishers and authors alike generate and cultivate reader engagement.

⁷ I didn’t originally have page numbers for *Slade House* as I read it on my Kindle; this description occurs eighteen per cent of the way in, with my chosen font and point size etc. Ebooks present some interesting questions for Genette’s conception of a publisher’s paratext, as that ‘threshold’ or liminal space that shapes the reader’s engagement with a text is less able to be controlled by the producer and more likely to be customised by the reader: others may also, like me, have bought and downloaded *Slade House* without knowing it was a novella. Without the hardcopy in their hands, readers are less likely to recognise a title as a ‘big, ambitious book’—as James Woods disparagingly describes magic realism in *The Irresponsible Self* (Woods 2004: 182).

⁸ As Liz Jensen wrote in her review for the *Guardian*, ‘each fresh product of Mitchell’s soaring imagination functions as an echo chamber for both his previous ideas and his oeuvre to come, components in the grand project he calls his “uber-novel”’ (Jensen, 2015).

⁹ *Fifty Shades of Grey* is the oft-cited extra-ordinary example, which sold myriad ebooks to *Twilight* fans before selling millions of print copies that made the author money via the traditional publishing contract that followed—and showed that despite Russ’s predictions four decades ago, vampires were not dead, and porn was ready to cycle through the stages she specified, from novelty through realism to self-conscious, but still entertaining, ‘decadence’.

¹⁰ Of course Miéville is speaking to a very specific contemporary and political context in his interview with Sarah Crown, when he says that the real schism lies between ‘the literature of recognition versus that of estrangement’; he is well aware that ‘all fiction

contains elements of both drives (to different degrees, and variably skilfully)' and 'great stuff can doubtless be written from both perspectives' (Crown 2011).

¹¹ Publishers generally believe readers don't like to pay the same price for a physically smaller product with clearly fewer words—something no amount of large font, white space and graphic chapter openers can hide—though producers arguably still need to charge the same price to recoup editorial, design, production and marketing costs. Print too, since extent rarely makes up the bulk of that fee.

¹² Actually, Amis doesn't just define literary fiction as a 'conversation' but suggests it may even present as 'an intense argument'.

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