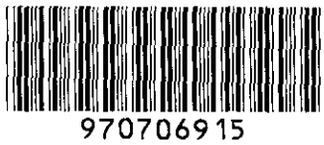

Past and Present: the Uses of History in Children's Fiction

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'When one is too curious about the practices of past centuries, one ordinarily remains very ignorant of the practices of this one.' In this criticism of the study of history, what Descartes fails to make clear is that the opposite is also true: failure to be curious about the practices of the past results in ignorance of the present. This discussion will consider how history is used in children's fiction. Historical fiction - novels set in a particular historical era that consciously aim to give an historically accurate representation of that era - offers readers an accessible way of learning about the past; it gives readers the opportunity to imagine what sort of future they might work towards; it makes the past (and, therefore, the study of history) exciting; it helps readers perceive the negative aspects of their own time and it helps readers to feel connected to their own past (see Rahn, 1991). My concern here is not with historical fiction, but rather with books that, while not set in the past, talk about the past; I will be considering how the past is both represented and used in fiction set in the present (or the future). Contrary to Descartes' dictum, a knowledge of history does not result in ignorance of the present, but in an understanding of why our present society is the way it is. History can show how a society developed and why it adopted its own particular practices, and history can also be used to defend and support ideologies — whether attractive or otherwise. History can also radically affect a person and a society's vision of both their present and their future. **Come Lucky April** by Jean Ure and **Truckers** by Terry Pratchett are two children's novels that make particular use of history in telling their stories. Both novels are fantasies set in societies that have constructed histories that are a comment upon late twentieth-century society. The society depicted in **Come Lucky April**, a post-disaster fiction set in the year 2099, has developed practices that are defended solely on the basis of the history of the pre-plague world — our present. **Truckers** is a highly satiric novel about a community of nomes living in a department store in the present day; it uses a constructed nome history to show how people write history from a subjective view point, and to show how people's idea of their history shapes their idea of the present. This paper will show how both **Come Lucky April** and **Truckers** use history to talk about the process of history writing itself, to show how history affects the present and to show how history supports and maintains the major ideologies in society. History is essentially a subjective, rather than an objective practice. 'History free of all values cannot be written,' stated the historian W.H.B. Court (cited in Marwick 1989, p.388). History is always written by individuals who hold certain values and who belong to a society that holds certain values. Those values will be written into any work of history regardless of whether the historian is aware of them or not. The use of history to justify the present ideologies and practices of the communities represented in **Come Lucky April** shows how deeply ideological history can be. The Croydon community that April lives in is a matriarchal community that has eradicated aggression and violence by castrating its men. History is continually used to justify the practice of castration. This is evident from the opening chapter of the novel where we see April writing a paper on the history of her community. This paper states that men of the past (that is, pre-plague men) were aggressive and violent, constantly attacking and raping women. It is also likely, asserts April, that the plague was 'man-made' (p.1). The aggression of men, their physical violence against women, and their abuse of power - arranging for wars, amassing weapons, polluting the earth (pp.2-3) - are the reasons for the way men are treated in April's society. 'Men would still be aggressive today

if it were not for their training,' says April (p.2). 'In those days [ie. before the plague] they were not trained and roamed the world in hordes, murdering and killing and causing havoc' (p.2). The practice of castration is justified solely on the basis of history. Men, says Meta later on in the book, giving April a history lesson, 'couldn't control themselves. That's why we have to remove the temptation'; that is also why men are brought up separately from women, 'because they're *not safe*' (pp.47-8). Men used to rape women: that is the Croydon version of history. This version of history justifies, demands in fact, the treatment of men in Croydon society in 2099 AD. Willow tells Daniel that in the past women were raped, murdered and caught up in wars they were not responsible for (pp.116-7). After the plague, this masculine aggression was seen as a 'problem which needed to be coped with ... the women of our community coped with it in the only way which presented itself' (p.117) — namely, by castration.

Written history has an authority and because of this it can be used to demand certain actions or to justify certain treatment of people. When Daniel expresses his outrage at the practice of castration, David tells him mildly that women can hardly make things worse than they were before and that it's all a matter 'of understanding the historical perspective' (p.124). Daniel is unconvinced: 'balls to the historical perspective! There's no historical perspective that can excuse this sort of thing!' (p.124). Neither community seems to believe in a God or transcendent authority, and just about the only thing that both communities agree on is that religion is superstition; this makes it difficult for either community to argue for the ultimate rightness or wrongness of a particular action, and is one reason why they have to resort to the 'historical perspective' when actions need to be justified. **Come Lucky April** is an anti-realist text not in the sense that it is a fantasy, but in the philosophical sense of denying the principle of bivalence. A realist holds that statements are true if they correspond to an external reality that is independent of us and our language; an anti-realist holds that statements are only true if they agree with other true statements in the same culture — truth to an anti-realist, in other words, is seen as relative rather than absolute. The Croydon community judge that men should be castrated. This is right for them because it corresponds with other beliefs in their society — that pre-plague men were violent and that men can not control themselves. When April is really forced to question why her community is organised the way it is, there is no external or transcendent value system she can refer to. She cannot say that her system is divinely inspired or that her system is right in some absolute sense, because she has no criterion by which to judge the rightness of her society's actions apart from history. When David asks her if the community's way of life is 'wrong', April can only say in defence of it that things have 'always been this way' (p.75). When pushed she has to conclude that the present structure of society is necessary in order to prevent people from reverting back to 'barbarism' (p.76). The Croydon community uses history to justify and to give moral sanction to actions that their ancestors deemed pragmatic and politic. April's willingness to help David work to change their society (pp.161-2) comes only after she has realised how exaggerated her history is and how wrong her idea of pre-plague men has been.

Truckers is a much more light-hearted book than **Come Lucky April** and there are no practices in it as blatantly ideologically-driven as castration. However, Pratchett does depict nome society as being very traditional - that is, as following long-established practices even when there is no reason for them.

Torrit, for instance, is the leader of Masklin's tribe because he is the oldest nome: 'the oldest was always leader ... not the oldest *woman*, of course, because everyone knew this was unthinkable' (p.24). The nomes have kept the Thing with them for centuries, even though they do not know quite why: ' "only by followin' the Thing closely in all particulars can we be sure of going to the Heavens," said Torrit, uncertainly, as if he'd been told this a long time ago and hadn't understood it even then' (p.25). Masklin gets fed up with this line of argument, but Grimma tells him that 'the Thing has been handed down from nome to nome for hundreds of years ... it's very important' (p.45). The nome-community in the Store also has practices that history supports: 'it's a well-known fact that women can't read,' explains Gurder, 'apparently their brains get too hot' (p.84). In **Come Lucky April** the Croydon community needs a very ideologically-driven history to support practices that are crucial to their society. The nomes' society is a more relaxed one, so when summarising nome practices in **Diggers** (the sequel to **Truckers**) Pratchett says that the nomes worship Arnold Bros (est. 1905), but 'in a polite, easy-going sort of way, so as not to upset him' (p.7), but, nevertheless, the nomes do call on history - on past practices and experience - to support the way they live and the practices of their society.

Both books are continually using history to show the power of the historical precedent and the force of habit. History has a certain authority, and if something has been done a certain way for any length of time, then persuading people to change can be very difficult indeed. In **Come Lucky April**, when David comes back to the community, he is upset at the distance between himself and April. 'It's just the way things are,' says April, and she reflects to herself that 'the way things were was the way things were' (p.75). David suggests that maybe things have gone wrong, that maybe things do not have to be the way they are. 'But they've always been this way,' says April (p.75). Willow tells Daniel that things have been 'this way for very nearly a hundred years' (p.119). The idea that because things have 'always been this way' they should continue, is a very common one. It is the argument Daniel uses to justify the eating of meat (p.109) and the practice of fishing (p.155). It is also one reason why he believes that his society is better than April's. That men had power in the twentieth-century and for most of history suggests to Daniel that it is because they are more suited to authority (p.178). In **Truckers**, it takes a crisis, and a lot of prompting by Masklin, for Gurder to agree to allow women and nomes from other departments to be taught to read (pp.123-4). Both books show how history is used as a justification of the status quo and make us ask what has to happen for things to change. Ultimately, in both **Truckers** and **Come Lucky April**, it takes a crisis to change the way people act and think. In fact, both books seem to say that sometimes even a crisis is not enough. The arrival of Daniel at Croydon succeeds in managing to persuade one person - April - to rethink her view of the past and, in consequence of this, to rethink the present structure and practices of her society. The arrival of Masklin and the other 'Outsiders' and the demolition of the Store, forces the Store nomes to realise that there is, in fact, an Outside, but until they actually leave the Store they do not really believe it. Even once they are outside they do not fully rethink their understanding of the world. Angalo rejects Arnold Bros (est. 1905) but Gurder clings to his belief in him (p.118). It is very difficult to change what you have always believed, especially when history supports your beliefs. April tells Daniel that she has not made up the history of male aggression: it's all in books written by men, and, she asks, 'Why would they write

things that weren't true?' (p.132). Later April admits that some women *say* they enjoyed sex, but that she herself cannot believe it. 'Why would they say it if it wasn't true?' asks Daniel (p.154). People believe not what they read, but what they want to believe, what suits their beliefs and fits their ideologies. Both **Truckers** and **Come Lucky April** show just how difficult it is to change historical practices and ideas received from the past.

The 'Book of Nome' shows how ideas about the world - received from the past - get written into history and so perpetuate themselves. The time of the 'Book of Nome's' composition changes as **Truckers** progresses. The first extract of the 'Book of Nome' seems to have been written before any of the nomes had ever heard of Masklin. Indeed, as Gurder shows the 'Book of Nome' to Masklin, part of it at least must have been written before his arrival. However, apart from the first extract, the excerpts from the 'Book of Nome' that start each chapter refer to events that are taking place in the story. What is not clear is whether the 'Book of Nome' is being written at the time the events take place, soon afterwards, or many years afterwards. The question is important because the situation of the nomes changes drastically. They go from living in a store, to living in a quarry, to being rescued from the earth by the ship they had lost contact with centuries ago. The 'Book of Nome' explains the nomes' exit from the store in relation to Arnold Bros (est. 1905): 'Woe unto you, for Arnold Bros (est. 1905) has opened the Last Sale. *Everything Must Go*' (p.62). Later it says: 'On the Lifts, let the Sign Be: This Lift to Carry Ten Persons; And Arnold Bros (est. 1905) waxed wroth, for oftimes the Lifts carried only two or three; And Arnold Bros (est. 1905) said, Truly Humans *are* Stupid, who do not understand plain language' (p.83). The 'Book of Nome' blames the destruction of the Store on Arnold Bros (est. 1905)'s displeasure with disobedient humans, and asserts that throughout the destruction of the Store, Arnold Bros (est. 1905) continued to provide for the nomes: 'for he hath sent us a Lorry, and the Humans are loading it now with all manner of things needful to nomes' (p.162). These excerpts show that even after the nomes' situation has changed so dramatically, even after they have realised that there is an Outside and that the Store is not the entire world, they still retain their old understanding (or misunderstanding) of the nature of the world and of the importance of nomes in it. The fact that the nomes are willing to believe that Arnold Bros (est. 1905) destroyed the Store for punitive reasons and that he arranged for humans to load a truck with goods for the nomes, shows not only how difficult it is to radically revise your understanding of the nature of the world, but also how history is written not to record facts but to invest facts with meaning. History makes a meaningful story out of a series of events.

Both texts show how history conditions people and affects how they see the present. The way April thinks shows that she knows, at least subconsciously, that history conditions people. Daniel, thinks April, probably does not even know he's a savage. 'If nobody had ever told him, he possibly didn't even realise. Men had had to be shown the error of their ways; they hadn't learnt it voluntarily'; some of them had even resisted, she remembers, but 'common sense' had prevailed (p.55). Daniel also realises the effect of history; no wonder April is on her guard around him, he thinks, considering she's been taught 'that all men had been thugs and sex maniacs' (p.131). The Croydon community's history has so affected the way people see things that nobody in Croydon thinks of castration as violence. April reflects that the community would not harm Daniel, although they might

castrate him, but as other men had no objection to that, how could he? (p.57, cf. p.182). History has so blinded April that what she sees is 'training', not the physical violence of castration. 'They're all so *blinkered*!' April will say later of the people in her community (p.188), when she finally realises that Daniel was right when he told her that she had 'been taught an extremely one-sided view of history' (p.153). **Truckers** shows how people can be so 'blinkered' by their history that they will ignore the most obvious things in the present. For instance, even though trucks come into the Store wet, the nomes still do not believe in rain (p.42). It's very important for the Abbot in particular that there be no Outside, as he explains it to Masklin: 'I can't go around letting people believe that I've been wrong all along, can I? The Abbots have been denying there is anything Outside for generations. I can't suddenly say they were all wrong' (p.78). The nomes' sacred book tells them that Arnold Bros (est. 1905) had put 'All Things Under One Roof' (p.10). The nomes' history (or their religion, depending on how you look at the 'Book of Nome' - perhaps 'sacred history' is the best description), and their community leaders all tell them that there is no such thing as 'Outside', so this makes things very difficult for the 'Outsiders' as no one believes in their existence. Thus when they are brought to the Abbot the Store nomes pretend that they literally cannot see them (pp.69-70). The whole scene is very comical, but it does have a serious point. As Masklin had said earlier, 'I keep thinking that if I stay here any longer *I'll* stop believing there's anything outside' (p.42). It is very hard to believe in something (even if it is true) if nobody else does. Dorcas hurries them away from the Abbot, saying 'I suspect it's only a small step between not seeing people and making sure they don't exist' (p.72). Once people do believe in something they will go to great lengths to avoid anything that might make them question that belief.

Both texts use history, that is, they talk about history (in the sense of what happened in the past) to discuss what history (in the sense of the written record of past events) is. **Come Lucky April** is the more explicitly historiographical text and characters in it often discuss history. Meta, we are told, is interested in history, whereas April is not: 'It seemed to her that the past was either a storehouse of delights which had been lost to them, in which case why dwell on it, or a place of barbarous atrocity and almost unbelievable squalor which they were well rid of. Either way, as far as April was concerned, there was more than enough living to be done in the present' (p.5). April is repudiating any claim history has to usefulness or relevance. April's problem is partly that she believes history to be a study of all the things Meta finds so fascinating - diaries and journals and personal stories. In Daniel's community, this is what history is and it is the responsibility of women. The 'official' reason for Daniel's journey is his quest to find his great-grandmother's diary. For Daniel, 'the Diary was merely the spur to adventure' (p.19), but to his sister Clemency it is something magical and previous (pp.18-19). Meta's understanding of history is much the same as Daniel's sister: she is fascinated by the idea of the diary, imagining a girl 'tenderly wrapping her most treasured possession in the hope that it would outlive her and one day, in the distant future, be discovered' (p.99). This, readers might surmise, is probably much the same sort of thing that Daniel's sister is imagining. April, however, thinks all this is 'sentimental imaginings' (p.99). When history is relegated to the domestic sphere, when it is made a purely feminine activity (in the condescending 'sentimental' sense of that word), it loses much of its power. While it is in keeping with the ideology of Daniel's society for women to keep

diaries and to want to record family histories, there seems to be duplicity inherent in Willow and Rowan's excitement at the discovery of the diary (pp.94-5). They are too intelligent and too influential in the community not to know how important history is and how much more there is to history than the discovery of diaries.

In **Come Lucky April** it is Meta who is labelled as 'the historian' (p.31). This is ironic because Meta is entirely uncritical and unquestioning of history. History is not just reading diaries, nor even just a record of past events of a wider circle than personal histories, but it is *an interpretation* of past events. The Croydon community's history is highly tendentious - it is used to show why the way society is currently structured is best. A critical history would show how exaggerated and selective the community's history is. **Come Lucky April** uses history to suggest that ignorance of the past (or a knowledge of the past that is erroneous) makes a person a victim of the ruling forces within their society. Meta is so accepting of text-book history that she cannot relate to Daniel at all (pp.105-110). The ignorance of the men in Croydon of any history except the official version is one reason why they accept their 'training' (pp.61, 127, 179); their ignorance makes them acquiescent in their own fate. One reason April is able, eventually, to question her society's history, is because she recognises that this history represents women as passive victims who let men control them and the world. April, who is neither passive nor a victim, has difficulty accepting this version of history: 'The way Meta carried on,' thinks April, 'you would think all pre-plague men had been like wild beasts, and of course it was perfectly true that a lot of them had been ... but they couldn't all have been beastlike, or women wouldn't have tolerated it' (p.50). April most vehemently rejects her text-book history when Daniel tells her that men had the power in the twentieth-century because they were active. 'And what do you think the women were?' demands April venomously. 'You think they just sat around, doing nothing!? Is that what you think?' (p.134). Not only is this what Daniel does think, but it is also what April's history presupposes. Men could not have run the world in the way that April's own history paper said that they did, unless the women had been sitting around, doing nothing. April rejects her history because she rejects the way it has positioned women as helpless victims.

When Daniel converses with Meta and April (pp.106-110), and then with Willow (pp.110-120), he gets a taste of how history and language can work together to exclude a whole half of the human race. He discovers that in Croydon society 'civilised' equals female and matriarchal society, while 'primitive' equals masculine society and values. When Willow explains to Daniel how in the early days of the community men had tried to usurp control, Daniel tries to take control of the conversation, saying to Willow that 'if the men were so outnumbered, it has to be assumed that the women allowed it to happen?' (p.115). It is this same argument that so upsets April, but Willow is more sophisticated and less emotional than April; rather than reject the idea of women as passive victims, Willow admits it, but her use of language is such that she in fact reasserts female superiority. 'Yes,' she says, 'it was the old story: we were unwilling to compete in the face of male aggression. It was not our way of working. We prefer co-operation. Compromise. Discussion' (p.115). Male values have been supplanted by female values, the assertive, active qualities that Daniel admires in men (and sees as lacking in women) have been re-named 'male aggression'. Women, in Willow's language, were not helpless victims, but intelligent persons looking for a better way

of organising society - one based not on violence, but on co-operation and discussion. Daniel is not Willow's conversational equal, in that he cannot regain control of the language, and so can only react with hostility and insult - Willow becomes a 'smug bitch' (p.121), a 'screaming virago' (p.122), a woman who deserves to be hit (p.121). The irony of Daniel's hostility is, of course, that he temporarily becomes what Willow has accused men of being - aggressive, abusive and violent towards women.

Come Lucky April asks not only what history is, but also how it is used. Readers of **Come Lucky April** are living in April's past (so to speak) and know how much of her history is hyperbole, but the book does offer us another perspective on our own time, giving us an opportunity to re-evaluate how we see the world and raising many questions. To what extent is gender inequality still part of our society? Are our strategies for coping with it successful? Readers are also invited to think of how history is used in our own society. Are we selective in what we tell of the past? What structures, beliefs and systems, do our histories support or validate? **Come Lucky April** also makes readers ask what the criterion is for including something in a work of history. How do we write history? The first person Meta mentions in her history paper is Dr Alison. April regrets that she did not mention her, but Meta is unconcerned: 'We've each got to put what seems most important to us,' she says (p.5). Meta has summed up the community's historiographical method - to record what seems important to them, namely the violence of the men - and then to exaggerate it and ignore anything that challenges or disagrees with it. How selective are our own histories? When April admits to Daniel that she does not think *all* pre-plague men were so terrible, she says '... we have read of one or two who weren't. There was a man called Ghandi who wasn't. And a man called George Bernard Shaw. They refused to eat flesh and there is no record, as far as we know, of them abusing women' (p.131). This is a particularly telling comment because it shows how what is considered worthy of being included in history books, changes depending on who is writing history. April is not interested in Ghandi's achievements or in Shaw's plays, but to her the two men are interesting because they are rare examples of enlightened men in benighted times. Carr, the famous British historian, wrote in his classic historiographical work, **What is History?** (1961), that 'Stalin is said to have behaved cruelly and callously to his second wife; but as a historian of Soviet Affairs I do not feel myself much concerned'. April and E.H. Carr take fundamentally different views as to what is proper material for inclusion in a work of history. Jean Ure is showing how what gets written in history depends not so much on what happened in the past, as on what is happening in the present.

Truckers does not work so much towards a historiographical understanding of what history is and how it is written, but rather towards an understanding of how we gain a perspective on our present lives through a correct understanding of the past. **Truckers** does this not by a self-conscious discussion of history, but by the way it is structured; it starts with a note 'Concerning Nomes and Time', explaining that although nomes do not live very long, they live very fast. After asking us to question how we view time, Pratchett begins his novel in epic form: 'In the beginning ...' a very good place to start, but entirely misleading in this instance. The Store nomes do believe, literally, that in the beginning was the Site, and that all led on from there. However, the Store nomes' history is wrong. After a note on time and an excerpt from a sacred nome text, we have a sort of prologue: 'This is the story of the Going Home. This is the

story of the Critical Path. This is the story of the lorry . . . But the story didn't end there. It didn't start there, either' (p.11). **Truckers**, as it happens, is not the story of the Going Home. It is the story of how a group of nomes left a department store and arrived at a quarry. After a prologue, telling us what the story is not about and where it does not begin or end, the story proper begins with Masklin and a group of nomes stowing away on a lorry (pp.11-16). After the nomes are on the lorry the story moves backwards in time and we hear about the life of the nomes on the motorway (pp.16-23), then the story moves forward again to the arrival of the nomes at the Store. It then takes up an almost straightforward chronological narrative, but continually looks both backward to the past, and forward to the future. The effect of this unusual beginning and of the non-linear narrative technique is to make readers think about what history does for them. The story of the nomes leaving the department store gains meaning and perspective from both the past and the future.

Once Masklin and the others come to live inside the Store, they understand their own past outside the Store differently: 'funnily, it [Masklin's life outside the Store] seemed a lot better now he looked back on it. More summers than winters, more nuts than rat ... and in memory there didn't seem to be as much drizzle and frost' (pp.79-80). When Masklin tells Grimma that he is going back outside, she responds by pointing out that he does not like it in the store because nobody needs him there. Masklin 'had a few dim recollections of Grimma in the hole, always doing laundry or organising the old women or trying to cook whatever it was he managed to drag home. Odd. Fancy missing something like that' (p.43, cf. p.88). When they were living in the hole, both Grimma and Masklin hated it so much they were willing to jump onto a lorry to get away from it. Their lives there look different once they have left.

The life of the nomes as a whole is made meaningful by reference to their far past. Masklin always knows that nomes are out of place in the human world: 'If humans are so stupid, how is it that they built this Store and all these lorries? If we're that clever, then *they* should be stealing from *us*, not the other way around. They might be big and slow, but they're quite bright, really ... at least as intelligent as rats' (p.41). At the end of the novel he thinks, '[T]his isn't really our place. This belongs to humans. . . . They'll come back here and we'll have to move on ... we'll always try to create our own little worlds inside the big world' (p.205). But the novel ends on an optimistic note because Masklin knows the past of his race, and, because of this, he has hope for a future. When Masklin found out not only that the nomes came from the stars, but that there is a ship waiting to take them back there, the effect of the knowledge was so powerful that it 'made his blood fizz and his fingers tingle' (p.118). Masklin's knowledge of history demonstrates what lack of correct history demonstrates in **Come Lucky April** - knowledge of history is a form of empowerment. History is used in **Truckers** to show how to understand the present and also to show what the way forward in the future is. History is needed in order to understand your place in the world. The Store nomes misunderstand themselves, their place in the world, the world they inhabit, everything, because they do not know their own history.

Truckers also looks forward to the future. Masklin tells the Thing that the nomes want to go home and be safe, and 'Later on, those five words became one of the most famous quotations in nome history. They got taught in schools. They got carved in stone. And it's sad, therefore, that at the time no one thought

they were particularly important' (p.50). Without the narrator to point it out to us, we might not have taken particular notice of them either. By looking forward to the future, the narrator shows us not only that history is an on-going process, but also that the present cannot be understood in isolation. To understand the present we need to know our past, but we should also remember that future ages will interpret our present differently from how we ourselves see it. Twice in **Come Lucky April** the democracy of the twentieth-century is called a 'pseudo-democracy' (pp.114 & 179). This makes the same point that reference to the future makes in **Truckers** - things look different depending on when you look at them. **Come Lucky April** is also using history to ask us to evaluate our own present : is our form of government a 'pseudo-democracy'?

Come Lucky April and **Truckers** both make use of history in telling their stories. They use history to talk about history itself - what it is and what it does. They show that history is not just a record of events about the past but an interpretation of those events, and they show how history (or lack of history) affects both how we see the present and how we plan for the future. **Come Lucky April** in particular shows how history is driven by ideology and how it is used to support the present ideologies of society. This makes readers question how their own society's history is written and used. Both these works of children's fiction could be used as a defence of history as an object of study, showing, as they do, how fundamentally our understanding of history affects our understanding of the present and our vision of the future.

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Biographical Note

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