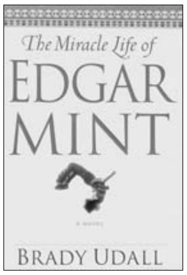
BOOK REVIEW

EVERYMAN

THE MIRACLE LIFE OF EDGAR MINT

by Brady Udall
W. W. Norton & Company, 2001
423 pages, $24.95

Reviewed by Bradley D. Woodworth


The Miracle Life of
EDGAR
MINT
a novel
BRADY UDALL

In an incredible story of triumph over adversity, Brady Udall has created a world of heroes and villains, saviors and demons in the life of an insignificant half-Apache boy.

THE FRIEZE OF a building on the campus of a well-known east-coast university where I once studied bears an inscription from the book of Psalms: "What is man, that thou art mindful of him?" This maxim runs like a theme throughout Brady Udall's astounding first novel, *The Miracle Life of Edgar Mint*. At first glance, the life of the title character, a half-Apache boy, seems directly to contradict the wonder and esteem with which the Psalmist views mankind. Edgar is insignificant and ignored, and so many dreadful things happen to him that one wonders whether God has ever paid him any mind whatsoever. And yet Udall movingly leads us to see by the end of the novel not only that God and Edgar have always been mindful of each other, but also that Edgar's life is indeed a miracle.

In the novel's opening lines, Edgar endures a disaster no reader will likely ever forget. In describing it, Udall lays out the novel's themes—Edgar's suffering, his seemingly rudderless life, and his relationship with God:

> If I could tell you only one thing about my life it would be this: when I was seven years old the mailman ran over my head. As formative events go, nothing else comes close; my careening, zigzag existence, my wounded brain and faith in God, my collisions with joy and affliction, all of it has come, in one way or another, out of that moment on a summer morning when the left rear tire of a United States postal jeep ground my tiny head into the hot gravel of the San Carlos Apache Indian Reservation (13).

The Miracle Life of Edgar Mint traces the life of its title character from age seven to about sixteen, jumping forward in the conclusion to show Edgar in his late twenties. The story is told primarily in first person, although snippets in third person at the beginning of chapters tip us off that Edgar is telling his life story from the vantage point of the adult Edgar with whom the book concludes.

After his disastrous accident, Edgar is taken to a ramshackle hospital, St. Divine's, in Globe, Arizona, where a young doctor, Barry Pinkley, operates on his skull and miraculously saves his life. During his long convalescence at the hospital, Edgar is befriended by a middle-aged man recovering from a catastrophic auto accident which killed his wife and two daughters. These three characters, Edgar, Barry, and the car-wreck survivor, Art Crozier, form a triad around whom the entire novel is constructed. Art becomes closely attached to Edgar from the first moments he sees the boy after his operation. Though Art is actively involved in Edgar's life only at the beginning and toward the end of the novel, the older man is actually the greatest source of continuity for Edgar, and he is the one person whom Edgar feels he can fully trust and with whom he feels completely comfortable.

Once recovered from the worst of his injuries, Edgar is sent from the hospital to an all-Indian boarding school, where a great uncle works as a janitor. Thus Edgar enters the world anew (he remembers nothing from before his accident), armed only with several talismanic possessions, most notably an old manual typewriter (a "Hermes Jubilee" model) which Art had given him after it was discovered that the accident had mysteriously left Edgar unable to write by hand.

The world turns out to be a cruel place. At the boarding school, Edgar manages to survive four years of brutality that several times becomes so intense he broods on suicide. (Once, he throws himself over a cliff but is saved by the high waters of a flash flood. Another time he heaves a brick in the air, intending it to land on his head, but at the last moment, he dodges, escaping serious injury.) Eventually Edgar meets two young men in white shirts—Mormon missionaries—and is soon baptized. When he is offered the chance to participate in the LDS Indian Placement Program, the choice is easy.

With his host family in Utah, the Madsens, Edgar discovers that even people with previously unimagined luxuries such as thick carpeting on the floors can have problems, too. In Utah (the family lives in the town of "Richland," a thinly-disguised Richfield), Edgar becomes aware of the complexities of human feeling, and during his some three years with the Madsens, he grows up, in an emotional sense. He sees and experiences acts of kindness and comes to understand the intimacy and treasure of family ties, even when those ties are strained by pain and loss.

Edgar's own family ties are jerry-rigged, at best. His father, a Connecticut drifter, had left the scene before Edgar had even been born. His alcoholic mother died while he was in boarding school. When his grandmother then passes, Edgar is left only with his emotionally distant uncle and with Art, to whom Edgar sends letters (never answered) composed on Art's gift, the typewriter.

During the years in the boarding school and Utah, Barry (now the ex-Dr. Pinkley) keeps turning up, looking for Edgar, in

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hopes Edgar will accept him as an adoptive father. Barry, however, is the falsest of fathers. After Edgar's near-death early in the novel, Barry had quarreled with hospital administration over procedures he used in the operation and is angered that he was not commended for his efforts. He was soon fired, and his license to practice medicine, revoked. Throughout the novel, Barry bedevils Edgar, obsessively following the boy, trying to convince him that he is Edgar's best source of protection. It is clear that Barry can have no beneficial influence in Edgar's life; the one-time doctor resorts to dealing drugs, peddles to Edgar a dubious sense of his commitment, and tries to get him to forget about Art. When Edgar realizes that Barry is prepared to destroy the Madsens' marriage in his efforts to maintain contact with the boy, Edgar decides that the fate of his foster family will turn on how he decides to act.

In the penultimate, and perhaps most moving, section of the novel, Udall reunites his three primary protagonists—Edgar, Barry, and Art. Essentially, Edgar finds that his tormentor's own weakness leaves him vulnerable, and with assistance from both Art and from what can only be described as a Third Nephite, Edgar manages finally to destroy Barry.

While reestablishing contact with Art is, for Edgar, a type of return home, Edgar now is prepared to pursue a lifelong wish: to find the mailman who ran over his head and tell him that he survived and that everything is OK. This final quest is only partially successful, but it does enable Udall to show that everything with Edgar has indeed turned out well. As an adult he is compassionate, loving, and responsible, and he is fully aware of the miracle his life has been.

THE dark vision that pervades much of *Edgar Mint* will be familiar to readers of Udall's first book, the short story collection *Letting Loose the Hounds* (Norton, 1997). This book is full of characters on the margins of society, people who have a hard time fitting in even in the live-and-let-live world of rural eastern Arizona. Still, many readers will be struck with the suffering, some of which seems almost sadistic, to which Udall subjects Edgar.

Though his work is in many places broadly comic, readers never doubt Udall sees the world as a place of deep moral significance. Life and human experience matter, enormously so. Because the stakes are so high, the world in Udall's depiction is indeed a dangerous place. Udall does not protect his characters from disappointment nor heartbreak, but he never leads us to believe that life is fundamentally only about suffering. Instead, life is (in a very LDS way) about gaining experience and helping each other through it, even if in only the most marginal of ways. Before Edgar is discharged from the hospital, he and Art steal to the roof at night. A drunken Art turns to Edgar: "Now that you're going off, seems like I should give you some advice, words to live by, you know, but I ain't got nothing. Be polite, that's about as far as I'll go. Anything more and it's likely to backfire on you." After a few more slurred bits of counsel from Art, they both pause:

> From somewhere far away came the sound of voices, a man and woman arguing in Spanish, the woman suddenly screeching as if in pain. We listened for a moment and Art sighed like he was trying to get every bit of air out of his lungs. "Lord help us this world is a horrible place" (86–87).

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By the end of the novel, however, it is clear that just as Edgar's emergence through his own trial by fire is a miracle, man's presence in the world is likewise miraculous.

And yet, Udall's novel is all the more remarkable in that it does not read like a novel of ideas or theological tract, but rather, as an adventure story. Edgar's endurance and eventual victory over the indigent circumstances of his birth, his dreadful accident, the dehumanization of the boarding school, and his perseverance to find the mailman who ran over his head, make for a compelling and moving drama. Undoubtedly it is this straightforward part of Edgar's story that has made so many readers love the book. When in New York City for a book reading by Udall this summer, I spoke with a group of young New York women professionals who had read *Edgar Mint* in their book group and had come to hear Udall talk about, and read from, the novel. They told me what made them like the book so much was how Edgar never gave up, no matter what his circumstances. (Perhaps this surface level of Edgar's story is influenced by the LDS notion of "enduring to the end"?)

In addition, Udall knows how to write funny. The book is full of humor, though often dark. When interviewing in the dank boarding school basement with one of the missionaries for baptism, Edgar is asked to confess his sins:

> "You mean all my sins?" I said. He nodded, "At least the big ones." I fidgeted on my bucket for awhile, then let it fly.

Edgar launches into a litany of offenses he engaged in at the school, many of which he was put up to by other students, under circumstances the young missionary could not possibly fathom. At the end, Edgar admits to attempted suicide.

> Throughout it all, Elder Doyle did not blink. When I was done, he held up his finger as if to say something, then changed his mind. He scratched his head and pretended to write something on his wet notepad. "Hmmm," he said finally. "What about self-abuse?" "I hit myself on the head with a brick," I confessed (232–33).

Udall's ease in describing his native eastern Arizona and life on the reservation, as well as Utah and LDS culture, also contributes to the book's vividness. The reader soon realizes that Udall knows what he is talking about. Countless details convince readers to trust Udall and bear out a sensitivity for the places and people he writes about. Reading the portions of the novel set on the reservation, one feels the white-hot heat of the cloudless day and clearly sees the poverty and deprivation to which its residents are subject. One image of Edgar's pre-accident home, a shack with no siding, is particulary striking:

> There was an old lightning-struck cottonwood in the front yard, a charred skeleton of a tree that offered no shade at all until my mother got into the habit of hanging beer cans from its charred branches with fishing line. The beer cans—there were hundreds of them, and more than a dozen new ones being added each day—would make a peaceful clanking when a breeze came up, but they never did much to keep the house cool (13).

The section of the book that takes place in Utah is similarly filled with sharp detail. In what is perhaps the funniest section of the book, titled "For Young Men Only," Edgar sits in a Sunday School class, trying to cope with the riveting sight of a bra strap on a girl's shoulder (even humming a hymn doesn't help Edgar calm his body's reaction), while at the same time fighting off his additional embarrassment at the pronouncements on Lamanites by the teacher, a weepy, sentimental ward member:

> "Edgar here, in his own way, is a relic of those Book of Mormon times," Brother Hughes said, gripping my elbow, holding me in place. My face felt hot enough to ignite paper. "Out in the world they might call him an American Indian, but we know better. In truth he is as much a Lamanite as the prophet Samuel or King Lamoni."
>
> There I stood, a Lamanite with a hard-on (276).

Udall refrains from explaining LDS terms and language usage; he lets Edgar describe his experiences in Richland in natural, Mormon inflections. Edgar mentions sacrament meetings, scripture-chase champions, and an annoying do-gooder who "organized service projects, had been the president of both the deacons and teachers quorums [and] became an Eagle scout before he turned fourteen" (337). Some of Udall's LDS cultural references are even more finely woven into the story. When the marriage of his foster parents, Lana and Clay, begins to sour, Edgar sees that the spouses begin sleeping in separate rooms, but he also notices other changes:

> Lana came down the stairs with a box full of clothes. She wore an old sweatshirt and shorts. Her legs, which I had never seen out in the open like this before, were smooth and so pale that a complex road map of thin blue veins showed through the skin (353).

Attentive LDS readers will realize, of course, that Lana has taken off her temple garments.

THE book's allegorical aspects are all the more effective as they too are deployed subtly. Many readers will not notice the depth of the religious allusions. (I have spoken about the book informally with non-LDS readers in both Connecticut and New York, and none of them said they noticed the unannounced Christian, let alone Mormon, aspects to the story.) The last thing Udall wants is to be didactic. He has told one LDS-related publication, "I don't want to teach the reader a lesson of any kind. I simply want them to have a hair-raising, heart-thumping, mind-numbing, soul-tearing experience." Udall is highly skittish of the term "Mormon writer." "This is not because I am embarrassed by my faith and culture," the *Salt Lake Tribune* quotes him as saying, "but because I am working hard to create the kind of art my culture seems set on rejecting."

Udall admits to being skittish of the term "Mormon writer." "This is not because I am embarrassed by my faith and culture, but because I am working hard to create the kind of art my culture seems set on rejecting."

While the novel stands on its own as a wonderful story of triumph over adversity, the full depth of Udall's achievement is revealed when one understands the allegorical meaning in its characters and action. On one level, the novel is a *Pilgrim's Progress* tale, with Edgar as Everyman. But the allegory goes much deeper. While all readers will see that Art is a father-like figure for Edgar, Art is actually far more than this. His surname—Crozier—hints at his more significant pastoral role in Edgar's life. (A "crosier" is a staff resembling a shepherd's crook carried by high-level officials in several Christian denominations.) The name of the typewriter Art gives Edgar also alludes to communication with those in heavenly worlds. (Hermes is the messenger of the gods in Greek mythology.) Art, who we know from clues is almost certainly himself a baptized member of the LDS Church, wants to shepherd Edgar from the Edenic, or premortal life of the hospital (named "St. Divine's") to the lone and dreary world. In one of the most beautiful passages in the book, Art helps Edgar get loose from the restraints on his hospital bed, while at the same time providing him a safe passage from bed to ground:

> [Art] unbuckled the restraints—it took him awhile to figure them out with only one good hand—then stole every extra pillow and blanket he could find in the room and placed them around my bed, creating a landing pad. That night I threw myself off the bed twice, and both times Art was there to help me back up, make sure I didn't have any lasting injuries, and to argue with the nurses when they came in wanting to know why the restraints had been taken off (34).

Art, like the Mormon God, takes off restraints, even at the risk of injury.

Udall hints that not only does Edgar need the succor, though limited, that Art can offer him, but that Art in turn needs Edgar. Later in the novel, we find out that the letters Edgar sent to Art were of great importance to the aging man:

> "Got something I want to say to you," [Art] said. He rested his cane against the recliner and carefully took the sheaf of papers down. "After that one time, I never wrote back to you because I figured you'd come to forget about me and that hospital and everybody in it and that it would be the best thing for you. But you never stopped writing, you never did.
>
> Something caught in his voice and he swallowed, his hands shaking. . . . He turned so that he was talking to the wall. "These letters . . ." he sniffed and hawked, rubbed his hand roughly against the scruff of his face. "You can't know how much they helped me. They were all I had, is what I'm saying. They kept me going when I didn't have nothing left. You can't know" (387).

The idea that God needs our prayers to keep him going is the kind of theological nugget that makes this novel so deeply satisfying.

What Art wants most of all is to protect Edgar from the controlling Barry. Though he did save Edgar's life, Barry's interest in Edgar is entirely selfish. Essentially, he wants the boy's soul. Barry is described as a "fallen angel" (340), and much of his character and fate is reminiscent of passages in Isaiah 14. Lucifer-like, Barry has "fallen from heaven" (Isaiah 14:12). Once a trusted, competent surgeon at St. Divine's, he ends up dealing drugs and the dependency on him they induce.

It is reflective of Udall's artistic vision that Art is there for Edgar at the beginning of Edgar's journey into the world outside of St. Divine's, while after that, their contact is sporadic at best, and Edgar's letters/prayers to Art/God are not answered. Barry is much more of an on-going presence for Edgar, an evil that keeps reappearing. However, at the end of the novel, in a scene straight out of Isaiah, Art is crucial in helping Edgar finally rid his life of Barry for good.

Edgar's experiences convince him of the existence of a divine realm, despite the pointless suffering and cruelty he sees around him.

At the boarding school, he agrees to let the missionaries give him a blessing. Above "the noise of the snickering children and the wind in the grass," Edgar listens to the brief words of the blessing:

> Inexplicably, my eyes were spilling tears. The Elders lifted their hands off my head and I desperately ground a fistful of shirt into my face to wipe away the evidence. Before they rode away on their bikes, they each smiled and shook my hand. In a daze, I headed out across the parade grounds toward the dormitory, feeling like the top of my head had been shot off. I started to climb the steps and it hit me right there, there was no doubt: Edgar had been touched by God (225).

At the end of the novel, Edgar openly contemplates his relationship with this God, one who seems to do so little to remedy the world's evils:

> I can see no divine purpose behind the tangle of existence, no ordering hand. It is all a mystery, or more accurately, a mess. There are no heroes or villains, no saviors or demons or angels. Only those who have died and those of us who, for whatever reason, have survived. None of this will keep me from believing in God. I believe in Him, I just don't know that I will ever have faith in Him.
>
> So you might say God and I are at something of a standstill. I haven't forgiven Him and I have no reason to expect that He will do the same for me. We are both accountable for our own abominations and that, I have come to believe, is the way it should be. . . . I won't say there isn't the minor daily heartbreak of memory and what-might-have-been. The bad dreams and the late night regrets. . . . But I am not too jaded or proud to thank God for small favors, to count my blessings" (418–19).

Here, Udall's own views may diverge from those of his protagonist, someone Udall clearly sympathizes with, even loves. Udall has created for us a world of heroes and villains, saviors and demons in the life of an insignificant half-Apache boy. His creation spurs us to think deeply about our faith in God, our relationship with him, and how to hold onto that relationship and our faith in the face of forces that might weaken them.

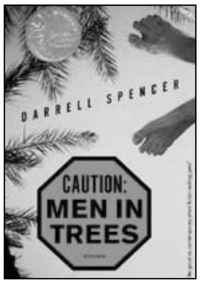
B O O K   R E V I E W

"DID YOU SAY KRYPTONITE?"

CAUTION: MEN IN TREES

by Darrell Spencer
W. W. Norton & Company, 2002
193 pages, paperback, $13.00

Reviewed by Eric Freeze



The nine stories in Darrell Spencer's Caution: Men in Trees, *winner of the 2000 Flannery O'Connor award for short fiction, reveal a complex assortment of characters whose lives converge on the page through a rich texture of words and wordplay.*

SUPERMAN ASKS, "Did you say Kryptonite?" If you figure out the collection's epigraph, you have the key to *Caution: Men in Trees*, the fourth book of short stories from Darrell Spencer. Give it a try. Kryptonite—an invented word describing a substance that represents a threat to Superman, who himself is a fictional character, whom Spencer then quotes from a movie. The words have to have some connection, don't they?

Like the epigram, Spencer's fiction resides in the ambiguity and the play between words. His stories reveal the limitations of language and its nuances, the arbitrary, sometimes fleeting and threatening way that words mean.

The stories in this collection explore the lives of different men who are all facing challenges that threaten their survival. Most of the stories are set in Utah or Nevada, with characters who are often on the periphery of Mormon culture. But neither the setting nor issues of culture and identity are Spencer's main focus. His themes are alienation and survival, but he arrives at them only though style and language.

Language thrives in Spencer's writing. At times you feel like you're being squib-kicked through a field of syntax and wordplay. Words define, but only momentarily. Sometimes words are lethal. In *Caution*'s final story, Tommy, an undefeated ex-boxer wrestles with the prospect of fighting again. Hurting people has kept Tommy out of the ring—more particularly, the word harm.

> Harm.
>
> You know how they say to say a word until it's not a word.
>
> Try it. Say harm one thousand times.
>
> Harm. Harm. Harm. Harm.

To his manager and others who want to see him fight, harm has become meaningless, and it's that meaninglessness that confounds and ensnares him. At the end of the story, the boxer suggests a multiple-choice exam:

> It's the third round, and the fight's scheduled for twelve. You've cut your opponent's eye and it's closing up. You shredded it. His blood coats your gloves. It mats the hair on your arms. There is blood splattered on the rich folks, the celebrities in the front-row seats, the tuxedoed men and the women in gowns. This guy

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Spencer's fiction makes no bones about right or wrong, about politics or opinions.

> can't see, and he keeps coming at you. He's swinging blind.
> What do you do?
> Circle the correct answer.
> (a) Pick at the eye. Jab. Jab. Jab.
> (b) Tie him up and turn him so the referee can't ignore the damage you've done. Embarrass the referee into stopping the fight.
> (c) Chew your gloves off and walk out of the ring.
> (d) Take a dive.

It's no mistake that Spencer chooses to end the collection with this story. There is no good choice, but there has to be one, and it's the one that you select: "There's only one correct answer," he says, "Go ahead."

SPENCER'S language ensnares other characters in similar ways. In the title story, Bobby "BB" Book, a sign painter, is embarrassed by one of his employee's misspelling a sign, "INtertainment" instead of "Entertainment." Bobby takes this mistake very personally. He's the owner of the company; the misspelling reflects on him, even if he isn't the one who misspelled it. At the end of the story, Bobby climbs the sign, makes it halfway, and hangs onto a girder for his life: "Here he is, the INtertainment—I-N-T-E-R-T-A-I-N-M-E-N-T. Bobby 'BB' Book, he's the guy who put the I back in entertainment."

Other words trap Bobby as well. In a humorous section depicting Bobby's fiftieth birthday party, he looks in the mirror and sizes himself up:

> He felt like one of Polly's sad-sack Americans listening to an old song he loved, but some New Age star was singing it differently, more slowly, and Bobby was for the first time actually hearing the words, and they were dumb words, real dumb.

The words of the song shape Bobby's image of himself; they gouge him the same way his association with the misspelled sign does. He survives, exists, is damned by words.

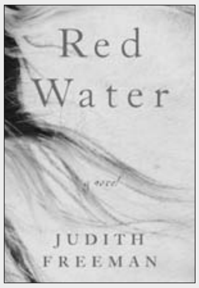
Other stories reveal Spencer's craft and his background with Mormon culture, as well as his love for words and sentences. Behind the words are stories of real anguish, lives of people who are complex and not always easy to live with. Red Cogsby in "Park Host" manages a campground and chickens out of helping his friend, an Alzheimer's victim, commit suicide. In "Blood Work," J.J. Cribb tries to be neighborly with the Mormon lady next door who tells him she's going to put his ailing hamstring in the temple—a woman his father counsels him to not talk to unless he has a lawyer by his side. In "Too Much News," the protagonist observes a beating across the street, then is approached by the perpetrator Billy Fix in a restaurant. In "Late-Night TV," a husband and wife awaiting their first child try to help out their Mormon neighbors who have just lost one, but they are only met with violence and hostility. In "It's a Lot Scarier if you Take Jesus Out," a man learns that an old girlfriend has committed suicide. His coming to terms with her death without the crutch of religion leaves him wandering, drunk, and trying to accost two women in a parking lot.

Spencer's stories get at these characters through language. And this is what makes his fiction so endearing to me: it makes no bones about right or wrong, about politics or opinions. It's character, language, and especially the words that count. Stamped to the page like they belong there.

BOOK NOTE

RED WATER
by Judith Freeman
Pantheon Books, 2002
124 pages, cloth, $24.00.

Reviewed by Linda Sillitoe



RED WATER, instructs its author, Judith Freeman, "should be read as a work of fiction, not as a version of history." This instruction is needed since Freeman's research on the Mountain Meadows Massacre and its aftermath is deep and meticulous and her rendering so powerful that even a reader experienced in Utah history will understand a place, a time, a horror, and a people in new ways.

> A wind was blowing that day, old and wintry and mean. . . . When he sat on his coffin, the wind ruffled his hair and lifted the flaps of his jacket and they fluttered like the wings of some small black bird clinging to his breast.

This depiction of John D. Lee's execution for leading the massacre grabs the reader by the throat. But the ensuing voices of three of Lee's wives—British Emma; devoted Rachel; and wild Ann, "the last thirteen-year-old" Lee married—weave their sparse environment and evocative tones into the reader's heart.

One could say this book is about marriage—or about plural marriage. Yet the predominant marriage is between desperate poverty and overwhelming religiosity, a union that allows for anything and justifies everything.

It allows Saints to swear in holy rites to avenge their prophet's blood. It justifies a bishop's storehouse stocked with blood-stained clothes and shoes, needed by the ragged settlers. The hysteria of a small survivor of the massacre, who recognizes Emma's best dress as the one her mother had been wearing when she was murdered, marks a scene Emma lives with and this reader won't forget.

By researching the facts and then moving inside the truth, Freeman illuminates how usually civilized people could commit mass murder, then carry on with their lives. Emma, Rachel, and Ann take us within the guilty silence that erodes a community, as if red water running through a red land soaks the consciousness like spilled blood.

I HAD finished reading Red Water before I heard Judith Freeman speak at the University of Utah. Behind her, a glass wall framed the valley lights of Salt Lake City. To conclude her remarks, Freeman named her own ancestors, who helped settle the dry lands of Southern Utah and Northern Arizona. As she spoke their names, a continuum formed; and Red Water became not a work of exposure but of healing and contrition.

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