

# Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Newsletter

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Editor: John J. Murphy  
Editorial Associate: Patricia K. Phillips

RED CLOUD, NEBRASKA

## "Awash with Success": 1991 Spring Conference

Herb Hyde, *Lincoln Journal*

Pat Phillips, WCPM director, had promised a different format for the 36th annual Willa Cather Spring Conference, May 4, and boy, did she deliver! Thunder. Lightning. Cold rain. Cold wind. We got it all intermittently throughout the day and into the night, but since Webster County farmers needed moisture so badly, we couldn't really complain that much about the weather. Besides, hot coffee and kolaches were available at the Cather Pioneer Memorial.

There was no official country tour this year, but there was horse-drawn hack service for those wishing to attend Mass at Grace Episcopal (Willa Cather's church) and St. Juliana Catholic (Annie Pavelka's). At noon, buses were available for visitors who wanted to take their box lunches out to Cather Prairie south of Red Cloud on the Kansas line. I visited the prairie twice, in the morning and in late afternoon, and neither time was I able to conjure up even a ghost of a Western meadowlark. It was just too miserable for them to be out, I guess.

I wonder whether there was a dry eye in Lincoln Elementary School when we finished viewing Joel Geyer's *Singing Cather's Song*, a Nebraska Educational Television Network tribute to the late Mildred Bennett. It is a powerful video that stirs the soul much as Cather's writings must  
(Continued on Page 8)

## Marian Forrester's "Fine Play-Acting"<sup>1</sup>

Patricia Sell, South Bend, Indiana

From my first reading of *A Lost Lady*, I felt that Marian Forrester was one of the most fascinating characters in American fiction. Many readings later I see her as a triumphant figure, surpassed in stature only by Hester Prynne. Marian Forrester stands solidly against the novel's downward movement, offering hope that worthy values from the past can be transmitted to the new order, hope that it is possible to survive change with integrity. Throughout the novel, Marian Forrester functions as an artist. Her art is acting and she performs brilliantly, both on a personal and universal level, to survive change and exert a humanizing influence upon others. Though Niel Herbert doesn't fully understand her, he always feels the need of her vitality. As an adult, he wishes he could "summon her and demand the secret of that ardor; ask her whether she had really found some ever-blooming, ever-burning, ever-piercing joy, or whether it was all fine play-acting" (171). It is, indeed, fine play acting. Marian Forrester's "fine play-acting" underlies her heroic stature.

Marian Forrester knows precisely who she is, what she is, and she is absolutely unyielding of her integrity of self. In fact, all of her behavior grows out of a fierce, blind guarding of self. Her physical gifts — her body, her eyes, her memorable voice — give her the capacity to use her art to heighten and uplift, to fight time. But only Captain Forrester understands the full significance of his wife's gift. Throughout their life together he provided the setting and props for his wife's performances, cherishing her gift with incredible generosity. After his death, Mrs. Forrester must find a new stage, a new audience, though she knows it will be a cruder stage and a duller audience.

Mrs. Forrester's artistry is sounded in the first sentences of the novel.

The Burlington men found "no house was pleasanter than that of Captain Daniel Forrester," not because of the house itself but because "the people who lived there made it seem larger and finer than it was" (10). Mrs. Forrester ignites a spark of life and warmth in even the "hardest and coldest" people (12) and her power against time is apparent when we see old men "leap nimbly to the ground and run up the front steps" to greet her (12). Long after the Captain's death, Niel encounters an old mine-owner whose only recollection of the past is not of the Captain but of the Captain's beautiful young wife (120). Mrs. Forrester's power against time is implied in the lament at the close of the first chapter: "And even she alas! grew older" (13). Even she! Her diminishment seems inconceivable.

(Continued on Next Page)



Irene Rich as Marian Forrester.  
A Warner Bros. Screen Classic.  
*A Lost Lady*.

## "FINE PLAY-ACTING"

(Continued)

Clearly Marian Forrester is aware of her effect upon her audience. She knows the impact of the sight of the Captain's spirited young wife with hair loosened, waving a buttery spoon; for years her guests tell of her rushing out of the house in her dressing gown to greet the President of the Colorado and Utah. Apparently her attention to costume, make-up, gesture, and facial expression add up to a memorable performance. The artist-actress motif surfaces again in the reference to an engraving on the wall of the Forrester sitting room, titled "The House of the Poet on the Last Day of Pompeii" (38). In addition to the obvious parallel between the decline of Captain Forrester's era and the fall of Pompeii, the engraving title suggests that the Forrester home is a refuge of art and beauty, a holdout against the crasser materialism of the ascending order. Though both husband and wife are protectors of art and beauty, Mrs. Forrester is the artist of the two, the more active in creating beauty.

That Marian Forrester is fully aware of her art is apparent when she describes for Niel her audience at the Dalzell party in Glenwood Springs. She tells Niel that she always knows how she is looking; she knows, on that evening, that she looks happier than any woman there; indeed, she attended the party for the purpose of determining whether or not her artistry had diminished: "I wanted to see whether I had anything worth saving. And I have, I tell you! You would hardly believe it, I could hardly believe it, but I still have! . . . So that's what I'm struggling for" (126). This proclamation of faith in her gift, to the point of holding out against time itself, underlies Marian Forrester's heroic stature. Her need to function as an artist — to heighten, to enliven — drives all of her actions.

Mrs. Forrester's voice, described again and again, is the instrument of a great actress. This least tangible of physical traits is the repository of Marian's vitality. Described as soft, musical, inviting, rising and descending like a suave scale, her voice, more than what she says, conveys her life force (34). In the Captain's last days, he would call "Maidy, Maidy," not to summon her, but to hear the life vibrating in her voice, as if her voice

had the power to keep him alive a little longer (142). "Her many colored laugh" flashes into Niel's head long after he knew whether she was living or dead, suggesting again that her vitality outlasts physical life. "When he was dull, dull and tired of everything, he used to think that if he could hear that long-lost lady laugh again, he could be gay" (71).

Marian Forrester's ingenious acting allows her to dominate Ivy Peters. From the moment she dismisses the bold, aggressive Peters from her bedroom with a shrug of the shoulders, she asserts a control that continues throughout the novel. In the second chapter after the other boys withdrew, Ivy remained, "taking in his surroundings with bold, unblinking eyes . . . . He had intended to sit down in the biggest leather chair and cross his legs and make himself at home; but he found himself on the front porch, put out by that delicately modulated voice as effectually as if he had been kicked out by the brawniest tough in town" (27). Her dominance over Ivy never changes, not even when she is poor. She never falls into his clutches; instead, she turns to him in painful compromise, as a conscious decision, in time of need. Captain Forrester is "hurt and offended" (120) when Ivy strides through the Forrester place as if he owns it, but Mrs. Forrester's art salvages their dignity. When Ivy rudely informs her that he is going to put his horses in the Forrester stable, Marian replies, "Why, certainly. The horses can go in our barn. I'm sure Mr. Forrester would have no objection" (122). Niel notes, "She spoke as if he had asked her permission." The incident is such a clear-cut example of Marian Forrester's romantic temperament, of her imaginative power, of her creation of her own reality.

One of the fascinating contradictions of Marian Forrester's character is that her romantic temperament resides in someone so practical. She combines imaginative power with the pragmatism of a survivor. Highlighting this contradiction is the fact that Captain Forrester and his friends are so impractical, so incapable of changing. Loyalty to ideals is admirable, but what if such loyalty becomes rigidity and stagnation and death? In spite of their good intentions, courtly gestures and gallant words, not one of the Captain's friends actually helped Marian Forrester save the Forrester place. They were more interested in

preserving the past than in adjusting to the future.<sup>2</sup> So Marian Forrester encourages Ivy Peters' presence on her property; she laughs at his jokes and allows the appearance of intimacy, though she has to numb herself to his touch (170). Her decision to rely on Ivy Peters is made with full awareness of the price of survival.

Marian Forrester's desperation to live, "to climb out of this hole . . . this deep well," forces her to strain against great odds for a convincing performance (126). An actress's performance may seem effortless when the audience loves her and the set is artistically right, such as it was at the Forrester parties in the past, but when Marian Forrester crosses the flooded creek to call Frank Ellinger, she is battling for survival. She is exhausted and smelling of liquor, yet her natural acting gift preserves her control. Expecting "wild reproaches," Niel hears instead "her most charming voice; playful, affectionate, intimate . . . . The voice, it seemed to Niel, was that of a woman, young, beautiful, happy, — warm and at ease, sitting in her own drawing room and talking on a stormy night to a dear friend far away" (133). Such is Marian Forrester's illusion-creating power! Every vocal modulation belies the reality of the situation, which is that Marian is aging, alone, desperate, cold, out in a wild storm instead of sitting in a warm drawing room. Her performance is a last-ditch effort to maintain a lifeline, a possibility. When the effort fails, Marian's performance collapses. Her voice "darkens" (133). She screams at Frank's cowardice and collapses in "heavy, groaning sobs" after Niel cuts the wire. The swift severance of all possibility crushes her at that moment. Adding to her devastation may be a subconscious confrontation with her own future. When she screams "coward" at Frank Ellinger (134), it is as if she is screaming a protest against the thought of her turning to Ivy Peters as Frank turned to Connie Ogden.

Marian Forrester's lowest point comes after the loss of Frank, in the final days of her husband's life. She goes about her duties in a mechanical, emotionally deadened way while Molly Beasley and the townswomen invade the Forrester house "like ants," prying into cupboards and closets, scavenging among the dishes and crystal and linens (138). At first Mrs. Forrester maintains her reserve, an

"easy, cordial, impersonal demeanor" (137). But as the townswomen become bolder, she seems to lose her "power of resistance . . . She had ceased to care about anything" (138-39). Still, there is something unyielding within her. The townswomen are chagrined to find that Mrs. Forrester hasn't sold her silver or her chest of double damask or the nine dozen wine glasses (139). Ed Elliott's mother tells the other women how she found Mrs. Forrester, glassy-eyed and smelling of alcohol, washing the same area of the kitchen floor over and over. But just at this point when the women ask, "Was she confused?", Mrs. Elliott replies decisively, "Not a particle! She laughed and said she was often absent-minded" (140). Her wit and spirit are unaltered, and her words as well as her laugh project a fierce determination to hold on to who she is.

The culmination of Marian's career as artist-actress is the dinner party she directs for the townboys. In this scene before the coda which closes the novel, Marian strains to integrate past and present. It is appropriate that, as the synthesis of ideal beauty and baser human qualities, she should work such a blending. The message of this scene, perhaps the message of the novel, is that some integration of past and present is possible and that accommodation is preferable to inflexibility.

Prior to the party, Marian tells Niel why she associates with the young men of the town: "I hate to see them growing up like savages, when all they need is a civilized house to come to, and a woman to give them a few hints. They've never had a chance" (155). The words "civilized house" here echo the title of the engraving "The House of the Poet." Clearly Marian Forrester's aim is the civilizing aim of art.

Niel's invitation to this party, delivered one warm May morning when Marian comes smiling into Judge Pommeroy's office, immediately evokes a feeling of renewal, a cyclical feeling, as one recalls the winter of suffering Marian has been through since the third chapter scene when she interrupted Niel's boring work with an invitation to a party at the Forrester home. A significant difference between the two invitation scenes is that her later mission is less personal. Instead of using Niel to plot her meeting with Frank Ellinger,

Marian is sincerely interested in the townboys and in helping Niel adjust to the new order. She gently scolds Niel for being "stiff" and "superior" and urges him to give the townboys a chance (157).

The background downward movement is strongly felt in the dinner party scene. Instead of the Captain and his friends, we have new-order people, Annie Peters and Ivy Peters, helping Marian at this party. Marian's creation of a festive mood seemed effortless at the earlier party, while here she is straining body and spirit to carry off her performance. She wears the long garnet earrings, but they hang beside thin, rouged cheeks. Niel has never seen her looking so "pinched and worn" (161). Nevertheless, her imaginative energy and her gifts as an actress take over; she never gives up.<sup>3</sup>

The party has its complex moments. The ducks are not carved as Captain Forrester carved them — Marian doesn't ask that, for "nobody can carve now as men used to" (160) — but Niel manages to get them apart. Marian creates a moment of beauty when the silver dishes and candlesticks gleam on the dinner table, but Niel feels that the townboys are incapable of appreciating the beauty of the table service, although one wonders if the Captain's guests were any more appreciative. It is clear that the townboys respond to Marian's artistic effort when they rise at her entrance, as they did when she came to serve them cookies at their picnic on the marsh. The link between the marsh picnic and the dinner party is Marian Forrester. Even Niel cannot deny Marian's civilizing impact when the boys rise to their feet at her entrance. "That much, at any rate, she succeeded in teaching them" (159).

Marian exerts a civilizing, humanizing influence upon Niel as well. Though Niel doesn't need "refining," he is deficient in something deeper than manners. Throughout the novel, he has been unable to bend; he had held himself apart from the townboys, and when Marian fails to meet his impossible standards, when she is "not willing to immolate herself . . . and die with the pioneer period to which she belonged," he feels betrayed (169). In the dinner party scene, however, Niel makes a move toward connection. In an effort to help Marian keep the conversation going, he addresses the guests, "one

after another with energy and determination" (152). In sympathy with her effort, he suggests that the boys would like to hear her tell how she first met Captain Forrester, finally acknowledging in them certain possibilities. The sharing of the Captain Forrester story within this new-order gathering is a key moment in the novel's resolution of the problem of change. It is, moreover, a moment of triumph for Mrs. Forrester, the artist, the storyteller who brought them together and created, against great odds, an environment for connection. Through her art, she transmits something valuable from the past into the present. "The boys are genuinely moved," Niel notes as he recalls the first time he ever heard Mrs. Forrester tell the story to the Captain's friends. Even Niel can see at the close of the dinner party that "she was still her indomitable self, going through her old part, but only the stage-hands were left to listen to her" (166-167). While Niel may feel that beauty is wasted on "stage-hands," the artist's primary concern is with creating beauty, and Marian Forrester's nature is such that she *must* perform.

The coda simply reinforces the idea of Marian's unwavering integrity. She was basically the same person at the end that she was at the beginning, though her physical surroundings had changed. To deal with those changes, she had to do some things she did not like to do, but she never sold out on the artistic gift which defined her. Once again, her voice is designated as the repository of her strength, of her self; as Ed Elliott tells Niel, her laugh, that voice "hadn't changed a particle" (173). The voice and the art it serves make Marian Forrester, perhaps alone among Cather heroines, the equal of Thea Kronborg.



## NOTES

1. Susan Rosowski suggested this title after reading an earlier draft of this paper.
2. I am referring here to Mr. Ogden who did not persist in efforts to help Marian Forrester because, in Niel's words, he feared "losing a pleasant memory" (152).

3. One is reminded in this scene of the worn actress who succeeds making Camille live for Jim and Lena in *My Antonia*.



#### WORK CITED

Cather, Willa. *A Lost Lady*. New York, Vintage, 1972.

#### "AWASH WITH SUCCESS"

(Continued)

have stirred Mildred, and it is satisfying to presume, as Geyer does, that Mildred found the spiritual peace she had sought throughout her life.

The highlight of the day was the premiere of the video version of playwright Darrah Cloud's adaptation of Cather's *O Pioneers!* for theatre. I doubt Cather would approve of it (she did not want any of her works put on film after *A Lost Lady* was ruined by Hollywood in 1934 [an earlier 1923 film starring Irene Rich was less provoking], and she forbade adaptations in her will). American Playhouse produced the performance, and Mary McDonnell, who plays Stands-With-A-Fist in Kevin Costner's *Dances With Wolves*, proves magnificent as Alexandra Bergson. Those tears you see her shed are real (in fact, one scene required five retakes).

On display at the depot this year were David E. Scherman's original photographs for *The World of Willa Cather* which appeared in *Life* magazine in 1951. Scherman himself was present at the exhibit and recalled his trips to Nebraska in all four seasons to capture Cather's world under the guidance of Mildred Bennett. She not only took him to the places mentioned in Cather's works but also supplied relevant quotations from the works themselves.

Entertainment at this year's banquet consisted of a panel discussion of the *O Pioneers!* TV

production by playwright Cloud; Lindsay Law, vice president and executive producer of American Playhouse, and Cather scholar Susan J. Rosowski of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Serving as moderator and master of ceremonies for the evening was Ron Hull of NETV.

The one thing that occupied my mind was the ethics of defying Cather's wishes about converting her works to film, the stage, television, or whatever else might be invented. Rosowski's response was just what I hoped it would be. Yes, she said, there are ethical considerations but there is also the hard truth that Cather's works are coming into public domain and it is essential that we work toward adaptations of them as true as possible to the spirit with which Cather infused them. We're talking about quality control here, trying to prevent the junk Hollywood made *A Lost Lady* into by setting it in Chicago and changing the story line.

Discussion of the process of adaptation proved fascinating: how the stage presentation was revised again and again to capture the right audience response, the technical difficulties of suggesting the wide-open-spaces setting of *O Pioneers!* on a limited stage, etc. These and other facets were explored through questions from Hull and the audience.

Also noteworthy at the banquet was the presentation of the fifth Norma Ross Walter Scholarship to Kara Martin of Lincoln East High School. Kara is a student of English teacher Anne Cognard, whose Walter Scholarship batting average is now .600, since Kara is her third student to win it.

In sum, then, Cather Day 1991 was awash (sorry, Pat, I couldn't resist it) with success. Still, it just wasn't the same without the larks.

## Cather Papers in Hartford, Washington, Paris

The U. of Connecticut hosted the 1991 Northeast MLA Convention in Hartford, April 5-7. Featured was "Cather and Other Cultures," a session well attended by Cather faithfuls as well as new scholars.

David A. Faulkner, Princeton University, argued that *A Lost Lady* contained fundamental contradictions regarding class, race, and structures in "Claim Jumpers: Class, Nostalgia and Native Americans in *A Lost Lady*." He exposed the ambiguity of the exclusion of Native American claims to the land heroically settled by Captain Forrester, the rigid aristocracy of Niel's and Ivy's democratic upward mobility, and the suppression of democratic fluidity through the nostalgic framework.

In "The Country of Telling Tales: Willa Cather and the Culture of Narrative," Sean McCann of Queens College, CUNY, discussed the development of Sarah Orne Jewett's and Cather's narrative methods and how those methods opened up a culture distinctly "other" to the values and practices that dominated their contexts.

Karen Nulton, Rutgers University, examined women's culture in "Cather and War," a reading of *One of Ours*. Nulton focused on characterizations of women in occupied France who had to continue the socializing agency of home and family in the midst of physical assaults by Germans and the cultural *blitzkrieg* waged by the Americans. Read through a French woman's eyes, *One of Ours* becomes an anti-romance.

"Cather and the French Impressionists," presented by Kevin Synnott, Russell Sage College, explored Cather's eclectic visual arts knowledge within the context of her well-defined aesthetic in *Lucy Gayheart*. Read with an

...understanding of the Impressionists, the novel's visual impact increases in intensity and complexity, enhancing the theme.

Next year's NEMLA Convention will be held April 3-5, 1992 in Buffalo, New York. The Cather section, "Willa Cather in Context," will be chaired by Margaret O'Connor, University of North Carolina.

— Constance Mierendorf, Minneapolis Community College



The Mayflower Hotel, Washington, D.C., was the setting on May 24-26 of the American Literature Association's first east-coast conference. The program featured a Cather session and a joint Cather-Wharton session. Each session attracted an audience of over forty.

Bruce P. Baker, UNO, chaired the Cather session, which included "Reading Marian Forrester" by Ann Fisher-Wirth of U. of Mississippi; UNL's Susan Rosowski's "Writing the City: Willa Cather as Urban Novelist," and a joint paper by David Stouck and Janet Giltrow, both of Simon Fraser U., "Willa Cather and a Grammar for Things Not Named," read by Stouck.

Immediately following this session, Blanche H. Gelfant of Dartmouth Coll. chaired a session of comparative papers on Cather and her contemporary Edith Wharton. BYU's John J. Murphy compared the novels *The Age of Innocence* and *A Lost Lady* in "Niel and Newland: Filters for Historical Ambivalence," and Annette Zilver-smit of LIU (Long Island U.) and the Edith Wharton Society compared short stories in "The Lesbian Subtext: Wharton's 'All Souls' and Cather's 'The Old Beauty'."



John Murphy compared the two novelists at the "Edith Wharton in Paris" conference, June 30.

His *"The Marne and One of Ours: Simplifying War for Character"* was one of ten papers on Wharton's First World War writing activities.

— Bruce P. Baker, U. of Nebraska at Omaha

#### CALL FOR PAPERS:

Next year ALA will return to San Diego for its third annual conference, May 28-31. Two Cather sessions are being planned, one on the short fiction. Submissions of seven to ten page papers must be postmarked by December 1 to be considered for the May meeting. Address: WCPM, 326 North Webster, Red Cloud, Nebraska 68970. Attention: ALA.

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### Keillor Plans Dec. 7 Broadcast from Red Cloud

From David Hendee,  
*Omaha World-Herald*

Pat Phillips, WCPM director, hopes Americans will be glued to their radios this Pearl Harbor Day as they were fifty years ago. Rather than reports of the Japanese attack on Hawaii, however, listeners will hear the news from Lake Wobegon broadcast from Red Cloud. Humorist and storyteller Garrison Keillor's "American Radio Company" will originate from Red Cloud High gym before an audience of 1,000 to 1,200.

Mail-order tickets will be available to the public, but details haven't been worked out, said Steve Robinson of Lincoln, manager of the Nebraska Public Radio Network. However, the network plans to offer tickets during its annual membership drive, October 26-November 3, and a block of tickets will be made available in Red Cloud for local people to buy, he said.

According to Chris Tschida, program producer, Keillor enjoys

Miss Cather's books and suggested the possibility of broadcasting a program from Red Cloud after doing a successful program this spring from Mark Twain's house in Hartford, Connecticut.

Although Cather's childhood home in Red Cloud is too small to accommodate the radio broadcast, Keillor is expected to open the program from a room in the house and then go to the gymnasium about four blocks away, where the audience and other entertainers will be waiting.

Keillor is expected to read from the works of Miss Cather and other prairie authors. Prairie humor and music are expected to be elements of the program, but the guest performers haven't been selected yet.

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### Kara Martin Wins 1991 NRWS

Kara Martin of Lincoln East High School won the competition for this year's Norma Ross Walter Scholarship, and was awarded the scholarship at the Cather Spring Conference Banquet on May 4. Besides her academic distinction



as a member of the National Honor Society, Martin has been active in student government, serving as her class president and a student council representative. She is also a singer and an athlete. She holds



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a varsity letter for diving and is a veteran of the Swing Choir.

Ms. Martin will continue her studies at the University of Minnesota Twin Cities, pursuing a major in English and Public Relations. She explains her interest in language communication in her winning essay "Shine Down": "The essence of words allows one to escape beyond external realities, venturing to new, borderless worlds that enrich the imagination. When one can piece a happening or view an experience with words, something undiscovered is discovered."

The Norma Ross Walter Scholarship is awarded annually at the Cather Banquet to a Nebraska female high school graduate who intends to pursue an English major in college.

## Cather at UNO Festival

A workshop conducted by Susan Rosowski on teaching *My Antonia*, an exhibit of Lucia Woods photographs of Cather's world, and a performance of "Willa Cather Speaks" by Betty Jean Steinshouer will be among the many events and activities of the first Nebraska Literature Festival on September 28 at the Omaha campus of the University of Nebraska.

The Saturday celebration of Nebraska authors (besides Cather: Aldrich, Eiseley, Morris, Niehardt, and Sandoz), sponsored by the Nebraska Center for the Book, will also feature slide shows, videos, readings, a book fair, autograph sessions, etc. Panel discussions at the event are being funded by the Nebraska Humanities Council.

For more information, write to WCPM or to Nebraska Center for the Book, c/o Lincoln City Libraries, 136 South 14th Street, Lincoln, Nebraska 68508.

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#### AIMS OF THE WCPM

- To promote and assist in the development and preservation of the art, literary, and historical collection relating to the life, time, and work of Willa Cather, in association with the Nebraska State Historical Society.
- To cooperate with the Nebraska State Historical Society in continuing to identify, restore to their original condition, and preserve places made famous by the writing of Willa Cather.
- To provide for Willa Cather a living memorial, through the Foundation, by encouraging and assisting scholarship in the field of the humanities.
- To perpetuate an interest throughout the world in the work of Willa Cather.

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