Hunting Badger Short Guide

Hunting Badger by Tony Hillerman

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Contents

Characters

Hillerman's two main characters are Navajo tribal police officer Jim Chee and his former superior, retired officer Joseph Leaphorn. Chee is intuitive and spiritual; Leaphorn is logical and deductive. Chee plunges into the midst of action and gets hurt a lot. Leaphorn stands back from the fray and gathers information until it coalesces into a meaningful cause-effect pattern. Chee has studied to be a shaman and follows traditional ways as best he can; Leaphorn finds traditional belief in witches and spirits injurious to Navajo development in the modern world and has turned his back on tradition, while remaining deeply Navajo at the same time.

Jim Chee's personal conflicts are summed up in his relationships with an abandoned cat that adopts him, with Officer Bernie Manuelito, with Hosteen Nakai, and with Joseph Leaphorn. The cat had been pampered until abandoned by its white owners but now is forced by survival needs to adjust to a desert life of hunting and being hunted. It seeks companionship from Chee, who tries to educate it for survival, but ends up providing it a refuge where it can escape hungry coyotes and eventually finding it a white owner far from danger. Chee sees in the cat's behavior the difficulty of trying to change someone (like his former girlfriend) to fit Navajo ways because the mindsets involved (the built-in cultural psychologies) are as different as those of a pampered, citified cat and a survivalist wild cat.

Ironically for a traditionalist, Chee's love relationships have always looked outward, first with a white teacher with ambitions for him far from the reservation and then with a highly ambitious Navajo professional who was totally assimilated to white culture.

Now, for the first time, Hillerman suggests Chee is coming to terms with his inner demons through a budding relationship with a young Navajo tribal officer (Bernadette Manuelito), whom he has dismissed as too young and too provincial to interest him.

Yet, when she asks him to investigate a casino robbery in order to defend a private security officer shot in the hold-up and suspected of collusion, he finds his jealousy indicative of his feelings for her. Her intuitive understanding of Hosteen Nakai's need to die at home and her willingness to take immediate action to assist him win Chee's respect and admiration, as does the firm assurance with which she stands up to Leaphorn. Despite Leaphorn's authoritative personality, she refuses to give up her weapon to him, arguing that not doing so is the first lesson every rookie learns. Later, her assignment to a roadblock without any training in how to anticipate and deal with problems awakens his fears for her safety.

Her handling of Leaphorn at the close of the case and her recognition of Leaphorn's personal dilemma make Chee see both Leaphorn and Manuelito differently. Furthermore, when, at the novel's close, she reveals that her concern for the wounded officer was based on an obligation to help her sister and future brother-in-law, not on a personal love interest, Chee discovers within himself what readers have seen all along: Manuelito is a perfect match for him in a way that his past romances have never been.

Hillerman repeatedly shows the humanity of his detectives, Leaphorn's loneliness and boredom upon retirement, Chee's insecurities and blindness to his own motivations. Chee's failure to check up on Nakai marks a central failure on his part, one that he takes personal cognizance of, for the bedrock rule of Navajo culture, says Hillerman, is that family and community needs take precedence over personal needs.

Nakai's dying lesson to Chee, the last in Chee's training to be a healer and a shaman, is that to be effective, to restore health and harmony, people must believe not only in Chee's knowledge and skills but also in his own belief. Nakai's final warning that Chee must decide whether he has become too assimilated to serve a traditional role in his Navajo community frees Chee from the burden of commitment to a role as shaman and allows him to seek a middle way as a modern-traditionalist mix.

In this novel too, Chee must come to terms with the sense of inadequacy Leaphorn (called the "Sherlock Holmes" of tribal detection by his admirers) had always, unintentionally, made him feel as the great logician sent Chee on fact-finding expeditions to check out his theories. Leaphorn's strategy was to set up a map and use different colored pins to mark different types of information related to his case (travel times, locations of criminal events, placement of key witnesses, confluences, and so forth) until a pattern emerged. In this novel, Chee recognizes the significance of the lack of a pattern, and the confirmation of his own ratiocinative skills helps Chee gain confidence. So too does seeing Leaphorn as a fellow human being, in civilian attire, wining and dining a woman he would like to impress, laughing at a joke. As the two men trade information on the case, Leaphorn explains that his past insistence on every detail resulted from his access to information Chee did not have, and Chee breaks out the map Leaphorn needs to think through the miscellaneous pieces of information that could add up to answers no one else can come up with. (This information includes a computer printout of a supposed suicide note left by the man whose body Leaphorn had discovered.) Part of the progression of Chee's character in the novel is his growing self-knowledge and his realization that Leaphorn not only trusts him but truly likes him. He has always felt like the greenhorn being lectured by the legendary and contemptuous logician, but now he discovers that Leaphorn needs a sounding board for ideas and depends on their exchanges of information in order to think through his cases. Leaphorn also takes pride in Chee thinking things through for himself. This knowledge enables Chee to finally feel affection for Leaphorn rather than adolescent resentment, to respect his ability to reason and intuit, and to see behind the professional and better understand Leaphorn the man.

Leaphorn, though retired, is brought into the investigation by information received from a personal acquaintance who knows the perpetrators and does not want to be identified as a snitch and thus lose the trust of his neighbors. Always curious and ready to follow through an intellectual puzzle, he finds the opportunity to stand back from the case and pursue the fleeing felons based on his knowledge of the region, its people, and its history an irresistible challenge. His view from the sidelines allows him to concentrate on the seemingly minor details that add up to something major. His exploration of cause-effect relationships may seem like a mainstream methodology but in fact it grows out of the Navajo belief in the interlocked nature of life, the "beetle's wing" that affects

the breeze, "the larks' song" that "bends the warrior's mood," the mountains turned golden in the sunlight affecting "the mood and decision of the Navajo Tribal Council." Though now a civilian, once he has figured out who has done what, how, and why, and moves in to apprehend the felons, he joyously reverts to his behavior as Navajo Tribal Police officer in charge, and Chee and Manuelito treat him as such.

Hillerman plays an interesting reverse with his detectives' personal lives, for in past novels the traditionalist Chee pursued assimilated women while the nontraditionalist Leaphorn was married to a traditionalist who kept him tied to his community. However, Leaphorn's wife, Emma, has died in an earlier volume, and while Chee finds himself more and more enamored of someone much like himself, Leaphorn finds his soulmate in a white university professor (Louisa Bourebonette) who shares his sense of logic and interest in the outside world.

Tradition requires that he marry his dead wife's unmarried sister, but neither wish for such a union, and by the end of the novel, Leaphorn has given up his sense of obligation to his tribal tradition and his dying wife's wish and chooses love and compatibility instead. Ironically, it is the traditionalist Manuelito who, in effect, gives Leaphorn permission to break custom and make a personal choice.

The main villain, George (Badger) Ironhand, a Ute, is a direct contrast to Leaphorn and Chee. The Utes are descended from the Shoshones (as are the Comanches) and were the traditional enemy of the Navajo. Ironhand is the son of the nineteenth-century Ironhand, who stole Navajo sheep and horses, killed women and children, lived well into the twentieth century, and was reputedly a witch. (He was born late in his father's final years of life.) Where Leaphorn and Chee have found their identities in serving their community and in living a life in keeping with traditional values (though Leaphorn does not fully believe in them), the modern Ironhand has chosen the warrior's path. As a result, he has been on the edge of criminal activities for a long time, having committed assault with a deadly weapon and then having been suspected of cattle rustling, of digging up and selling Anasazi relics from federal land, and even of threatening to blow up a Forest Service office and possibly the Lake Mead darn. In the casino robbery he shot both victims at the casino. He is ruthless and driven, an outsider with no loyalties, not even tribal loyalties. His training in Vietnam has honed his fighting skills and taught him how to outwit FBI trackers, and his knowledge of local terrain and of the secrets of his notorious father give him an edge that he thinks will make his escape seem as magical as that of his ancestor. The contrast between how Chee and Leaphorn straddle the gulf between traditional and mainstream ways and how Ironhand does so lies behind the action and detection.

Social Concerns

a detective fiction novel, Hunting A sBadger builds on the genre interest in crime, guilt, punishment, and justice and, in particular, the ways in which our representative authorities conduct their investigations to determine who bears the responsibility for violence or malfeasance, to uncover supportive evidence sufficient for a court conviction, and finally to bring the accused before a jury of his or her peers. However, Tony Hillerman takes his detective novels beyond questions of law and order to examine how culture influences perception, methodology, and final sense of justice.

Throughout his canon, Tony Hillerman explores the place of the Native American on the fringes of American society, the clashes between native traditionalists and mainstream attitudes, and effects of assimilation to U.S. mainstream culture on those raised in a community-centered culture. In particular, Hunting Badger looks at conflicts over federal interference in rural life and the unique customs and concepts of natives and Westerners that set them outside mainstream life.

A lot of the rural residents Hillerman describes in Hunting Badger live a "hardscrabble" existence along the Utahborder canyon country and are fed up with federal interference that makes their lives harder. Local gossip is about the most recent outrages committed by the Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management, the Bureau of Reclamation, the Park Service, and other federal, state, and county agencies. They deplore the handling of grazing leases, timber-cutting permits, boundary disputes, and so on, and worry about the longterm effects of pollution and radiation from mining runoff and exposed uranium and from the dumping of muddy irrigation water in what used to be clear trout streams.

As a result, they are easily persuaded to join such right-wing militant groups as the Stop World Government people, the Rights Militia, the Minutemen, or any one of a variety of survivalist groups. One such militant thinks he is defying the government to amass funds for his protest group and finds instead that he is at the mercy of murderous outlaws whose only cause is their own prosperity. Others simply keep silent about what they know as a personal form of protest against big government or use the resultant confusion to misdirect authorities, as does a small aircraft owner who pretends the hunted men have stolen his plane so he can collect insurance money on it. Near the end of the novel Jim Chee takes advantage of the Environmental Protection Agency's mine-waste mapping of Reservation land to discover uranium hot-spots indicative of mines and mine shafts in the area where the felons he pursues disappeared.

Despite the difficulties of rural life, Hillerman calls attention to its social graces, and its politeness codes that convey respect and that keep people civilized.

Among the Navajo, the code includes waiting patiently outside someone's home until invited in, not staring people directly in the eyes except to shame them, and accepting

silences instead of trying to fill them with small talk. Among Westerners in general the code means cordial discussions about the weather, grazing conditions, the risks of ranching, and so forth before getting down to business. It is such differences in way of life, assumptions about people, and attitudes toward aggression that make conflicts between tribal officers and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) or other outside representatives of the federal government inevitable.

Where the mainstream idea of justice is punishment and retribution, usually by incarceration, the Navajo believe that locking robbers in prison helps no one. Instead, such people should undergo a Mountain Way ceremony to cure them of the disharmony that causes their bad behavior. Traditionalists would gather all their friends and relatives around them for support, and that companionship combined with the ceremony itself would bring those whom whites would call criminals back into the community, with the "dark wind" that drives them dissipated and harmony restored. Of course, when the offender is from another tribe, particularly one with whom there has been ongoing enmity, and a Navajo has been killed, then revenge may well become a factor.

Thus, Hillerman raises questions about environmental protection, individual rights versus federal rights, and native values in opposition to mainstream values.

Techniques

Hillerman alternates between Chee and Leaphorn to demonstrate the different ways in which they are pulled into a case, the similar ways in which they use friendships and law enforcement associates to get insider knowledge of events and people, and the skill with which they can read trails and understand events signaled only by a tire mark on the road, a drop of oil, marks left by a rifle butt, and so on. However, eventually their approaches dovetail when Leaphorn discovers his first body in the case and Chee hears about the death while at the hospital.

The two team up in the old way, with Leaphorn reasoning out the patterns that Chee's investigations confirm. However, in this novel, Leaphorn openly admits where his reasoning goes awry and praises Chee's intuitive understanding of motive, means, and misdirection.

For Leaphorn a case is like a jigsaw puzzle with pieces missing. In this case, for example, it is the central pieces that are missing, so the significance of all the little pieces is hard to discover. In extended passages Hillerman has Leaphorn and Chee hypothesizing, piecing together the disparate information they have gathered, filling in information for each other, and interpreting the parts that do not seem to fit in terms of a theory of the whole. They ask, "What if?" and then seek answers. What if the robbers intentionally broke the oil pan so they had to abandon their vehicle? What if the suicide were a murder and the dead man's supposed participation in the robbery was misdirection? Leaphorn, for example, will tell Chee, "Let me give you a whole new theory of the crime," and then enumerate the possibilities. The effect is much like that of an Agatha Christie puzzle, where characters are not quite what they seem and where the seemingly minor details turn out to be really vital clues that help the detectives figure out the truth behind the facades.

Hillerman also makes his story come full circle, so that the informant who pulls Leaphorn into the case becomes central to the conclusion. In fact, it takes the full investigative process and the pulling together of information from disparate sources to tie the informant directly to the robbery and to the deaths. Furthermore, the title of the novel, Hunting Badger, gradually assumes more and more nuances and layers of meaning as readers learn the name of the most visible robber, his family history, the characteristics of the animal with which he and his father are associated, and the ties to the stories of witchcraft. For the FBI a name is a name, but for Chee and Leaphorn, a name has a history, a power, and a significance that should be explored.

Themes

A major theme in Hunting Badger is the inadequacy of modern technology and urban law enforcement in the face of Western geography and Western social realities.

Tracking murderous casino robbers across Arizona, New Mexico, and Colorado means covering eighty-five million acres of sparsely populated, high-elevation, dry canyon land.

The FBI officials are nonplused at their own ineffectuality, even with a full force of agents assisted by Navajo and Apache tribal officers, the Border Patrol, four kinds of state police officers, county sheriffs, and twenty other kinds of law enforcement officers.

Leaphorn, however, notes that there are enough canyons in that territory to swallow up ten thousand policemen. Tribal officers joke that FBI does not stand for "full-blooded Indian" and that FBI urbanites cannot tell the difference between a gully, an arroyo, a wash, a cut, or a creek, so tracking men who can just will not work. If the face of nature and their ignorance of it were not enough to defeat them, the machinery brought in to assist simply complicates the tracking problems. For example, images of FBI helicopters literally blowing away the tracks that could at least have provided hunters a direction to take punctuate the story. The body armor, an electronic satellite location finder, and an infrared bodyheat-detecting device weigh the searchers down, slowing them unnecessarily. Furthermore, FBI competitiveness with other branches of law enforcement and their penchant for secrecy, for supplying information on a need-to-know basis directly related to internal Washington politics, doom effective interaction with other agents. Even when the FBI are told where to look, they do not know how to look closely and dismiss the information as indicative of local incompetence. When Chee first calls attention to a mining shaft as the probable hiding place of the casino robbers, the FBI agents scoff at his reasoning, but when Leaphorn and Chee do indeed find the felons in that very same mining shaft, the FBI, with their official bulletproof costumes, automatic weapons, and tracking dogs, are all dressed up with nowhere to go, for the locals have already tied up the loose ends.

Skeptical FBI agents are left thunderstruck that a civilian (the retired Leaphorn) has done what they could not do and found the missing money as well, and there is no way to discredit the police work of Leaphorn and Chee nor for the FBI to take credit for it.

Solid police work involving close observation, informed but casual interrogation of witnesses, and intuitive leaps based on knowledge of the land, the history, the culture, and the people win out against statistical surveys, computer-generated profiles, and high-tech surveillance. Ultimately, Hillerman's argument is that tribal officers are far more competent than they receive credit for. They know their territory, its past, and its residents; they have a long tradition of scouting and tracking through hostile territory, and all the technology the FBI can bring to bear cannot compete with such knowledge combined with common sense.

Furthermore, when locals might travel over a hundred miles to try out a sandwich or meet a friend, a very different psychology is at work. With only a handful of people in a seventy-mile radius, everybody knows everybody and is curious about what is going on; they pay attention to the details of community life and know when a stranger has passed through or a pattern of doing things has been altered. Besides, Westerners are closed-mouth and tend not to volunteer information to strangers. Thus, people the FBI would never think of consulting are the heart and soul of a Southwestern investigation, though sometimes dealing with them means taking into account the eccentricities produced by the loneliness, silence, and dramatic skyscapes and terrain of the rural west. Chee observes that Leaphorn definitely knows everyone over sixty in the Four Corners area, and probably everyone else as well.

Another theme is the conflict between the traditional native way and the mainstream ways of the assimilated Native Americans. Tribal officer Jim Chee, for example, works hard to retain a traditional perspective, despite his college education and his police officer training. In fact, he has for many years studied to be a hataalii, a Navajo healer. He has learned to sing the chants, reproduce the myths of the Holy People in sand paintings, and take the steps required to restore harmony to the sick and troubled. In contrast, Joe Leaphorn distances himself from the old ways of his people. He still treasures his heritage and takes a philosopher's interest in its mythologies, but he no longer personally believes in chindi spirits of the dead, healing ceremonies, or sand-painting rituals. Where Chee offers a pinch of pollen to the rising sun, Leaphorn does not. This theme of diverse levels of assimilation is developed in the hospital scenes with Chee's shaman teacher, Hosteen Frank Nakai. Nakai has incurable lung cancer and wishes to die at home, where he can impart to Chee his final lessons about the Night Way ceremony and where he feels the Holy Wind within him will bless the Dawn Boy, the sunrise. However, he has no understanding of the procedures he must follow to end his hospital stay. For Nakai the hospital is a place of malevolence, and he fears the evil spirits of the dead who are trapped within the hospital walls. He knows that the setting is wrong for teaching Chee, but he wants to pass on this secret part of his Navajo and shaman heritage. At first Chee tries to convince the doctors to release Nakai, but when they refuse, Chee signs Nakai out against medical advice and takes him home. Thus, Nakai dies at peace, passing on his significant lesson to Chee in a traditional place and then greeting the dawn for the final time among friends, with the Navajo rituals that smooth his passage.

Still another theme is that of the intersection of past and present events. Kirk Mitchell in Cry Dance (1999) asserts that for Native Americans present actions always have their roots in past events, and this assertion proves true in Hunting Badger.

Where the FBI simply looks at a present action and its present ramifications, and therefore lacks information that would help determine motive and anticipate responses, Leaphorn, in contrast, looks back to historical conflicts between Navajos and Utes. Hosteen Nakai tells Chee the history of the nineteenth-century Ute Ironhand, a killer of Navajos who was chased into and down Gothic Creek Canyon toward San Juan under the rim of Casa Del Eco Mesa and who seemed to vanish. Ironhand was reputed to be a witch who could shift his shape into that of a hawk or eagle because there seemed to

be no other explanation of his disappearance from the cliffs where he was trapped. Other stories suggested Ironhand would sometimes disappear from the foot of the cliff as well. Professor Bourebonette ties these stories to another piece of oral history about a Paiute in the 1890s who could make his men invisible in the same area, and later one of her oral history interviews connects the Paiute through marriage with the nineteenth-century Ironhand and a modern Ironhand, a Vietnam veteran noted as a sniper with fifty-three enemy kills. Chee and Leaphorn realize that the older Ironhand probably passed on his secret passage to his descendants and that the modern Ironhand is probably hidden somewhere in the coal mines where his father must have hidden.

This intuitive leap between past and present allows them to discover what the FBI cannot: the secret hiding place of the perpetrators. In other words, the conflicts and battles carried out a century before are repeated in the same canyons between Utes and Navajos from the same bloodlines as the earlier opponents.

Although Chee clearly has a close relationship with an Apache tribal officer (a fellow Athabascan), Professor Bourebonette's interviews of elderly Utes anger Leaphorn, as the Utes repeatedly refer to the Navajo as the Bloody Knives and make uncomplimentary remarks in their recitation of Ute fighting skills and cleverness versus Navajo clumsiness, stupidity, and cowardice. Hillerman notes that the Hopi likewise call Navajos "head breakers" and that the modern concept of Pan-Indian universals is erroneous in the light of history. Native Americans from different tribes differ widely in their religious beliefs, social customs, history, and ways of life, and the differences are often far more significant than the fact that they are all Indians. Leaphorn, who is very much the logician normally, envisions the elderly Ute, whom Bourebonette has been interviewing, torturing tied-up Navajo prisoners surrounded by teepees, painted ponies, drum thumpers, and other signs of a Plains Indian culture (as opposed to the sheep herding Navajos). At the same time he recalls the Utes and Pueblo tribes scouting for the U.S. Army and participating in their attacks on Navajos in 1863. Such tribal memories live on in oral histories and in the memories of the elders and, argues Hillerman, are much more significant than outsiders might imagine. Leaphorn has good reasons for distrusting Utes—reasons that have been in place for hundreds of years.

Adaptations

An unabridged edition of Hunting Badger, narrated by George Guidall, was published on audiocassette and on audio CD by Harper Audio, 1999.

Key Questions

Any discussion of Hillerman must take into consideration his significant contribution to the genre, his placement of the detective story in a setting that would initially seem alien to its premises, and his informed portrayal of how different cultures are not like mainstream ones and yet have a validity and a vitality of their own.

1. Hillerman's stories are always closely tied to the realities of Southwestern life, for instance, the devastating health effects of everything from chemical pollution to fleas on the native population or the psychological-spiritual impact of the desecration of native sites. What real events inspired the story? Check the accounts in the national news magazines for 1998 to get the facts. What special features of these events does Hillerman bring to his fictionalized account?

2. Critics have argued that in the Native American detective story the region itself is as important as any character in affecting the nature of the crime, the methodology of the detectives and the eventual outcome. Attack or defend this statement on the basis of Hunting Badger.

3. The relationship between Jim Chee and Joseph Leaphorn is one that Hillerman carefully develops by means of contrasts. How do their personalities, personal characteristics, and methods of detection differ?

4. Despite such differences, what do they have in common that makes them trust in and depend on each other?

5. In part, Hillerman is interested in teaching readers about Navajo tradition and culture. What are some of the lessons that he communicates about ties to the land? age-old antagonisms? gossip?

manners?

6. Critics have argued that in Native American stories the past always impinges on the present. How is this statement true in Hunting Badger?

7. What is the significance of the title, Hunting Badger? What features of the badger do the hunted felons share?

8. How does the book come full circle?

What particulars complete the circle?

How does the idea of a circle fit with the Native American world view?

Literary Precedents

The late nineteenth century saw the rise of the Indian-scout detective in such stories as those of Judson Taylor (Phil Scott, the Indian Detective, 1882), Buffalo Bill Cody (Red Reynard, the Indian Detective, 1886), T. C. Harbaugh (Velvet Foot, the Indian Detective, 1884), The Old Sleuth (Pawnee Tom, 1896), and others. The native heroes of these stories grew out of the real-life tradition of the native scout assisting military expeditions and campaigns in the west. In 1946 Manly Wade Wellman's native detective David Return appeared in an Ellery Queen Monthly Magazine short story entitled "A Star for a Warrior." However, it was not until the 1970s that the modern Native American detective became a featured figure, thanks to the works of Tony Hillerman (the Chee and Leaphorn Navajo series), Brian Garfield (the Sam Watchman Navajo novels), and Richard Martin Stern (the Joe Ortiz Apache series).

Hillerman's Chee-Leaphorn series is a western answer to the urban detective story, with the canyons of the Southwest replacing the mean streets of Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, Ross Macdonald, Ed McBain, and other such authors of hardboiled American detective stories. However, oddly enough, it has ties to the British cozy mystery tradition in that the reservation is like a small village, full of eccentrics, where gossip reigns and where everybody local knows everybody else's business, though they close the information door on outsiders.

Related Titles

The subgenre of the Native American detective story has blossomed in the past twenty-five years, with Andrew and Gina Macdonald and Mary Ann Sheridan reporting over seventy native detectives in their critical study Shaman or Sherlock: The Native American Detective (2001). In the Southwest alone these include writers as diverse as Kirk Mitchell (Cry Dance, 1999), Aimee and David Thurlo (the Ella Clah series), Lauren Maddison (Deception, 1999), Sinclair Browning (Trade Ellis series), Cecil Dawkins (Clay Dancers, 1994), David Cole (Butterfly Lost, 1999), Micah Hackler (Sheriff Lansing series), and Martin Cruz Smith (Nightwing, 1977). The detectives are Hopi, Pueblo, Apache, Navajo, Tewa, Papago, Comanche, and Modoc.

Successful practitioners of the genre range from writers like Naomi Stokes, Muriel Gray, and James Doss who focus on the shamanistic as a means to knowledge to those like Margaret Cole, Peter Bowen, Marcia Simpson, Dana Stabenow, and Jean Hager who focus on more mainstream approaches to detection, though Margaret Cole and Peter Bowen both effectively provide other ways of perceiving reality. Native American practitioners include Louis Owens, Linda Hogan, Sherman Alexie, and Robert Conley, among others.

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