

Playing for Keeps Short Guide

Playing for Keeps by Joan Lowery Nixon

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Overview

Rosie accompanies her grandmother, Glory, on a Caribbean cruise and becomes involved in a shipboard mystery. Irritated that Glory is trying to be a matchmaker by encouraging a romance with Neil, Rosie falls in love with Cuban exile Ricky Urbino who is a stowaway on the ship. She and Neil cooperate in an attempt to clear Ricky of a murder for which he was falsely accused. Rosie convinces Neil and their new friend Julieta to help hide Ricky from immigration authorities until they reach Miami where he can safely ask for political asylum.

About the Author

Joan Lowery Nixon is one of the most prolific young adult authors in America.

Her spine-tingling mystery, suspense, and supernatural novels have thrilled teenaged readers for several decades. Her page-turning plots and intriguing, appealing characters have won her a loyal fan base. With more than one hundred books to her credit, Nixon is truly the grand dame of children's mystery literature.

Although Nixon always knew she wanted to be a writer, her Hollywood, California, childhood hinted of her future success at creating fictional child and teenage sleuths, devious criminals, and cold-blooded murderers. She was born on February 3, 1927, in Los Angeles, to accountant Joseph Michael Lowery and kindergarten teacher Margaret (Meyer) Lowery. Nixon's parents and grandparents encouraged her interest in books, especially mysteries and art, reading to her and supplying clay, puppets, and paint for the playroom she shared with her two sisters. Her mother jotted on paper poems that the toddler Nixon created before she learned to write. Nixon also produced rhymes for greeting cards.

When she was ten years old, Nixon was ecstatic to have her first poem published in *Children's Playmate*. Seven years later, she was paid for a short story and thought, "This sure beats baby-sitting!" She admires Louisa May Alcott's heroine, Jo March, and aspired to have a writing career. In high school, English teacher Bertha Standfast praised Nixon's talent with words and suggested that she become a reporter.

Nixon majored in journalism at the University of Southern California, graduating in 1947. Unfortunately, returning World War II veterans flooded the workplace, and Nixon was unable to find employment as a reporter. Most editors discouraged Nixon from pursuing journalism and suggested that she marry and focus on domestic duties. She defended her abilities, but was unable to convince employers to hire her.

Thwarted from her original career ambitions, Nixon devoted her skills to teaching kindergarten in Los Angeles from 1947 to 1950 and earned a certificate in elementary education from California State College in 1949. She married petroleum geologist Hershell H. Nixon that summer and relocated from California first to Montana, then Texas. She stopped teaching to raise her four children. Nixon retained her writing interests and attended a writer's conference which was the catalyst for her creating stories specifically for young readers. She enthusiastically listened to people discuss children's literature and realized that her vivid recall of childhood experiences, sensations, and emotions qualified her to create stories from young protagonists' perspectives.

Nixon's daughters urged her to write a mystery for children which included them.

She published her first book, *The Mystery of Hurricane Castle*, about two girls and a haunted house in 1964. That novel was followed by *The Mystery of the Grinning Idol*



(1965), *The Mystery of the Hidden Cockatoo* (1966), *The Mystery of the Haunted Woods* (1967), and *The Mystery of the Secret Stowaway* (1968). During the 1960s and 1970s, Nixon produced a variety of books for both young and adult readers. In 1979, *The Kidnapping of Christina Lattimore* represented her debut in the teenage mystery genre.

Nixon also wrote mysteries for beginning readers which featured humans, animals, and even aliens such as the three books in the *Kleep: Space Detective* series: *Kidnapped on Astarr* (1981), *Mysterious Queen of Magic* (1981), and *Mystery Dolls from Planet Urd* (1981).

Calling Houston, Texas, home, Nixon frequently sets her books in that state and develops plots based on Texas culture, events, or history. She says her stories are inspired by intriguing ideas that she discovers in newspapers, on trips, or from conversations. Nixon brainstorms about ideas and focuses on developing her main characters and determining how each story will start and conclude. She declares that her knowing the ending is essential before she writes a story.

Nixon realizes that she understands children and their reactions to dilemmas and states, "My characters become a part of me and I feel with them." She hopes that her stories empower readers to deal with problems. Nixon's writing reflects her vast interests and versatility. Adventure is a common theme in all of her works. She has written books for readers of all ages, ranging from picture books for toddlers to adult books. Her chapter books, including mysteries published by Disney, help children to learn to read.

With her daughter Kathleen Nixon Brush, Nixon has created an adult literacy series for readers who speak English as a second language or have lower-than-average reading skills. Although the vocabulary and structure are simple, Nixon emphasized that the topics and themes should not be juvenile. Nixon writes westerns, particularly the popular *Orphan Train* series. She often uses historical settings such as in her *Colonial Williamsburg* mysteries. She also writes nonfiction, including publishing several books about geological subjects with her husband, and textbooks. Nixon created religious readers with Bible lessons for children.

A charter member of the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators, Nixon also served as president of the Mystery Writers of America in 1997. She promoted that group's annual Kids Love a Mystery Week. Her books *Writing Mysteries for Young People* (1977) and *The Making of a Writer* (2002) offer advice for aspiring writers.

Nixon is the sole four-time Edgar Allan Poe Award winner. The Mystery Writers of America presented Nixon that honor for the best juvenile novel in 1980 for *The Kidnapping of Christina Lattimore*, in 1981 for *The Seance*, in 1987 for *The Other Side of Dark* and for the best young adult novel in 1994 for *The Name of the Game was Murder*. Nixon was also nominated for the same award in 1975 for *The Mysterious Red Tape Gang* and in 1985 for *The Ghosts of Now*.

The Western Writers of America gave Nixon the prestigious Golden Spur in 1988 for *A Family Apart* and in 1989 for *In the Face of Danger*. She also has received recognition for her science books and numerous state awards. Nixon received the 2002 Kerlan Award to honor her children's literature achievements.



Setting

This novel begins in Cuba as teenage baseball sensation Enrique Urbino is waiting in a boat to flee to Haiti. Cuba is depicted as a dangerous, hostile place lacking hope. Nixon refers to it as a "mirage."

Urbino crosses a violent sea to Haiti where he trustingly follows his guide through thick jungle then hides in an abandoned fort on Bonita Beach. The chill and fear he experiences as he waits for his great uncle causes him to question if his dreams will ever become possible.

The majority of the novel is set for one week during spring break on a Norwegian-licensed cruise ship in the Caribbean. Rosie and Glory fly from west Texas to Miami, Florida. The trip is trailblazing for Rosie, who declares that she has never been out of Texas or seen the ocean—which is difficult to believe because her grandparents are wealthy. Although it is not clarified, Glory seems like a seasoned traveler who has probably been to many exotic locales.

The ports of call that the characters visit throughout the Caribbean serve to advance the plot and achieve characterization. At Bonita Beach, Rosie and Neil snorkel. Rosie realizes that Neil is more interesting than she first considered him to be. She admires his ability to not be self-conscious or care about what other people think of him. She also likes how he does things, like wearing outdated clothing, to please his grandmother. This port is crucial to the plot because it is where the real Ricky Urbino sneaks onto the cruise ship and asks Rosie to help him. He tells Rosie and Neil how he has never been permitted to play baseball in any country where he could defect.

On her shore trip to climb rocks with Glory at Dunn's River Falls near Ocho Rios, Jamaica, Rosie observes Martin Urbino and Anthony Bailey acting suspiciously. Later Major Carlos Cepeda's body is found nearby.

At Cozumel, Mexico, Rosie and Julieta watch Tommy Jansen enter a jewelry store in San Miguel. They then go to the police station to report that Jansen was trying to sell Cepeda's ring.

The ship provides varied settings. Rosie and Glory stay in stateroom 7278 where Rosie shares secrets and conversations with her friends and grandmother. Neil and his grandmother stay in a more elaborate suite.

The Urbinos also stay in a suite where Ricky is confined and guarded, but not closely enough. Anthony Bailey's extravagant royal suite is decorated with a piano and orchids and has glass walls.

Rosie rides in the elevator and explores the ship's multiple decks for clues. The scavenger hunt and bridge tournament allow them to wander without being too closely scrutinized. Rosie's daily routine involves visits to the dining room. Sometimes she



shops in ship stores selling various overpriced merchandise or writes email in the library. The teenagers enjoy dancing and karaoke at Star Struck. Their sessions in the captain's office are tense. Rosie and Ricky search the ship's hold for a shirt sent to the laundry. The hold's privacy enables them to share a lingering kiss before Ricky reminds Rosie that they must savor the present because the future is unpredictable.

The return to Miami brings safety and resolution.



Social Sensitivity

Rosie is aware of injustices which prevent some people from freely pursuing their dreams without compromising their beliefs or risking their safety. She expresses her displeasure at Captain Olson cooperating with John Wilson, the ship's security officer, and Major Cepeda to detain Ricky.

Friendship in this novel involves personal sacrifices. Rosie protests the men's declaration that Ricky is a murderer and determinedly seeks to prove his innocence. Glory, Julieta, and Neil aid Rosie in her efforts to prevent Ricky from being returned to Cuba, where they realize he probably will unjustly suffer a variety of human rights abuses.

Without being overly didactic, Nixon alerts readers that Cubans are vulnerable to being accused of false charges and punished without receiving a fair trial. Sometimes people who attempt to flee Cuba because of persecution or poverty are executed as traitors. Those who are allowed to live are publicly discredited and unable to earn a living. Ricky recognizes these risks, but yearns to live freely in the United States.

Neil bravely risks legal ramifications by pretending to be Ricky to divert immigration agents while Ricky blends into the Miami crowd. The topic of refugees and exiles emphasizes the teenagers' example of accepting each other and not ostracizing people based on their ethnicity, socioeconomic circumstances, or other labels.

The characters display social skills which reveal their maturity and thoughtfulness.

The teenage characters are models of helpfulness, politely assisting other passengers.

They respect the elderly and value family.

Neil supports his grandmother's arm as she sits in her wheelchair, and Rosie frequently thanks her grandmother and acts courteously. Frustrated that she fought with her mother about a wild party before the cruise, Rosie sends postcards and e-mails to apologize and often wishes her mother could enjoy the cruise with her. She realizes that her mother is correct that Rosie should think independently and not submit to peer pressure or engage in reckless behavior.

Rosie realizes that she must carefully write her messages to her mother and not mention Ricky to protect him.

Considering his actions courageous, Rosie admires Neil for not caring about what other people think and for acting in ways that please himself and his grandmother.

Most characters try to avoid hurting others' feelings when it comes to issues such as booking high-priced suites or descending from Spanish nobility. Some, like Anthony Bailey, flaunt their social status and riches.



This novel suggests that gambling is an inappropriate activity by having Neil tell casino developer Anthony Bailey that statistics prove odds favor the house, not gamblers. Bailey is more concerned with accruing profits from Cuban casinos than improving conditions for Cubans.



Literary Qualities

In her prologue, Nixon introduces readers to what is probably a foreign topic to many. Enrique's escape from Cuba is tension filled. Presented in the form of Enrique's thoughts and dialogue, this section prepares readers with information about Ricky's family, which is crucial to understand the teenagers' later dilemmas aboard the cruise ship. Enrique is presented as a nervous teenager who must trust strangers to assist him. He is not sure if they are allies or foes.

At this point, he is not referred to as Ricky to stress his Cuban identity. His nickname in later chapters make him seem more familiar and American to readers.

Nixon creates a desperate, foreboding sense by emphasizing how dark the sky and ocean are, describing people as shadowy, and telling that "only a thin cat's smile of a moon" provides light and comfort. Sensory details such as sounds and smells make Enrique's plight more realistic. Her use of Spanish words and slang enhances the characterization of Enrique, Raul, and Paki. Beatriz has a "voice as sharp as the click of a knife on a plastic breadboard." The small boat Enrique escapes in and the thin mat he sleeps on are the opposite of the luxury liner Ricky later hides on and emphasize his determination and desire to flee and willingness to suffer discomfort and fear to achieve freedom.

In contrast, Rosie's first person narration is much lighter and breezier. She also is escaping, but her ordeal is not life-threatening. Nixon's depiction of Rosie's perceptions is more personable and informal than the serious tone she used for Enrique's escape. The Rosie chapters convey a sense of romance and sometimes resemble a fairy tale. Some characters, including Glory, have southern accents which makes them seem quaint. The vocabulary and imagery are not as complex until Rosie realizes how dire Ricky's situation is, and dialogue is more frequently used to present information. Both Glory and Ana are depicted as fairy godmother archetypes. Ana's voice is like silver bells, and Glory provides Rosie a metaphorical carriage to meet her prince.

Nixon's good and bad characters seem to fit conveniently into their identities as hero or villain based on obvious virtues and vices. Few characters leave readers in doubt of their intentions. Clues, such as the ring marks on Raul's face and the ripped blue shirt pocket, seem to provide obvious answers to the mystery. As a result, readers lack sufficient red herrings to confuse them as the plot advances. Cliffhanger chapter endings build tension. Nixon's realistic details about cruise ship protocol, including identification cards and boarding photograph sessions, convince readers of the setting's authenticity.

Themes and Characters

Freedom, escape, and selflessness are this novel's primary themes. When readers are introduced to sixteen-year-old protagonist Rose Ann "Rosie" Marstead, she is furious at her mother, Linda, for criticizing her for attending a spring break party which became so wild that the police were summoned. Rosie is indignant with her mother because she does not empathize with Rosie about being publicly embarrassed when her date left her for another girl. Rosie's mother brings up other situations in which she believes Rosie acted immaturely and urges her to act more independently and courageously or she risks losing her freedom. During the Caribbean cruise, Rosie is transformed from being self-absorbed to acting selflessly. She realizes that freedom means much more than having the right to attend parties.

Rosie's paternal grandmother is a carefree retired attorney who is financially secure because of her husband's oil investments. Gloria "Glory" Marstead is skilled at logical reasoning. She likes to defend people. Glory's knowledge of the law empowers her and Rosie to save Ricky from immediate deportation. A persuasive speaker, she convinces Linda to permit Rosie to accompany her on a cruise when her bridge partner who planned to go had to have surgery. Glory has ulterior motives because she wants Rosie to meet her friend's grandson, Neil, whom she considers an appropriate suitor for Rosie.

From Rosie's perspective, her mother and grandmother are often antagonists.

Linda complains about Glory being controlling and liking to argue, while Glory thinks Linda is too critical of Rosie and should not punish her for having poor judgment at times. Rosie reveals that Glory provided funds to pay Linda's expenses when her husband died two years previously. Linda resents what she considers Glory's interference, which she feels undermines her parental relationship with Rosie, even calling Glory a fairy godmother and herself a wicked witch. The women's names suggest their contrasting roles in Rosie's life. Glory revels in life and expects adventure and enjoyment, while Linda seems drab in comparison. Rosie's pretty and uplifting name seems most appropriate when she is paired with Glory. As she becomes more emotionally attached to Ricky, Rosie decides she wants to be called Rose to symbolize her maturation into a woman and sophistication as a traveler.

The themes of intrigue, secrets, and deception are introduced by the arrival of a Cuban man and his great-nephew on the cruise ship. Seventeen-year-old Enrique "Ricky" Urbino is such a gifted baseball player that Fidel Castro personally declared himself Ricky's patron. Having attended Cuba's baseball academy, Ricky prepared to become a star like his great uncle Martin Urbino who defected and became an outstanding left-handed shortstop for the Cincinnati Reds. Martin also wanted Ricky to live freely and paid \$8,000 to arrange his escape when Ricky expressed his desire to acquire political asylum in the United States.



Ricky's family represents opposing sides of Cuban political life. Martin resents Fidel Castro's control of Cuba. Ricky's cigar-smoking grandmother Beatriz, Martin's sister-in-law, served with Castro's revolutionaries during his coup and supports his rule.

When Ricky's parents died in a fire, she acted as his guardian. Her sister Ana nurtured Ricky, teaching him baseball techniques and insuring he was enrolled in the baseball academy. Ana praised Martin to Ricky, encouraging him to seek freedom.

Ricky equates freedom with silver bells because that is how Tia Ana's voice sounded when she described freedom. She assists Martin to liberate Ricky from Cuba. They are aware of how unsuccessful refugees, such as baseball player Andy Morales, suffer if caught.

The mystery begins when Martin initially introduces himself as Jose Diago and states that a young man is his nephew.

Rosie observes that boy leaving the ship but becomes confused when another teenager claiming to be Ricky joins her on a craft returning to the cruise ship at a port of call then immediately requests her assistance to hide him aboard, declaring that it is a matter of life and death. Rosie impulsively agrees and enlists the help of Neil Fleming.

Her brief romance with Ricky is sweet but doomed.

The unfashionable teenage grandson of Glory's friend, Neil is extraordinarily intelligent about both academic and trivial topics. He easily recites statistics about the cruise ship. Neil's knowledge of baseball assists the teenagers in comprehending who Ricky and Martin actually are. Recognizing Martin Diago as a former Cincinnati Reds player who is a Cuban exile, Neil understands the seriousness of Ricky's situation and validates Rosie's response. When Ricky is accused of murdering the boatman Raul, Neil increases his efforts to protect Ricky even to the point of pretending to be him, thus reinforcing the theme of disguise in this mystery. Although Neil is aware of his grandmother's and Glory's romantic intentions, he is not attracted to Rosie as more than a friend. He proves to be a reliable friend. Neil is not the awkward intellectual Rosie assumed he was and often exhibits his sense of humor such as exaggerating the size of a butterfly he describes to Rosie.

Before she leaves, Rosie talks to her best friend Becca, who predicts that Rosie will have a shipboard romance and find her true love, somewhat like what Rose Calvert experienced in the movie Titanic. Rosie hopes she will meet someone but doubts that Becca's fantasy will come true. She does befriend Julieta Vargas, a Cuban American from Miami who goes on cruises annually.

Julieta is a shipboard version of Becca. She is a flirt who is interested in both Ricky and Neil but remains a dependable, albeit temporary girlfriend with whom Rosie shops and confides. Through the character of Julieta, Nixon reveals more insights about Cuban exiles. Julieta reacts negatively when Rosie calls calypso music Cuban music. She tells how her parents fled Cuba and abandoned everything. Julieta also explains how she grieves for her grandparents whom she never saw.



The cruise staff and passengers present possible villains and red herrings. Glory's fellow bridge club members, Winnie Applebee, Dora Duncastle, and Eloise Fleming, seem benign and serve mostly as sociable characters to create dialogue in which information is revealed. Captain Helmut Olson and John Wilson, the ship's security officer, try to act correctly according to international law regarding Ricky's fate.

Major Carlos Cepeda, the Cuban military officer in a khaki uniform, has a secret to hide and sinister motives to return Ricky for political rewards, but comes to an untimely end. Casino builder Anthony Bailey brags about being able to afford the royal suite and tries to convince Ricky that he could make a deal to return to Cuba safely.

Jaded and broke cruise director Tommy Jansen hopes to profit from others' mistakes. Greedily hoping to get the reward, he hands out wanted flyers describing Ricky.

These characters are disrespectful and devious, and at least two of them are guilty of murder.



Topics for Discussion

1. Should Rosie, Neil, and Glory be punished for abetting Ricky's illegal entry into the United States? Why or why not?
2. How do the relationships between Rosie, her mother, and Glory seem predictable? What interactions between any of the generations surprise you?
3. How does Rosie's disinterest in foreign locales seem contrary to the fact that she had never been out of Texas or seen the ocean before the cruise?
4. How well do you think Nixon presented the clues to solving the mystery? In what ways did any of her red herrings seem too obvious?
5. What aspects of the cruise ship experience seem essential to the plot development and characterization? What details were unnecessary?
6. In what ways does Nixon's novel perpetuate stereotypes of Cubans? How do her characterizations counter stereotypes?
7. How would this novel have differed if murders had not occurred and the mystery focused on a theft or another crime which coincided with Ricky's escape from Cuba and hiding on the cruise ship? In what ways were the violent deaths necessary, or not, to plot development?
8. How do the characters conform to archetypes such as grandmother and nerd? In what ways do they deviate from expected roles?
9. In what ways do the adults act disrespectfully to the teenage and elderly passengers? How does their behavior influence the characterization of both teenagers and adults? How are the teenagers and senior citizens impeded and motivated by such treatment?
10. How do Nixon's references to the movie Titanic and similarities, such as the name Rose for the main female character, influence the tone of this novel?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Research the history of Cuban refugees. When, and where to, have Cubans escaped? Learn about the legalities related to defection and prepare a report that explains why refugees feel compelled to flee Cuba illegally. Consult this web site: Facts About Cuban Exiles <http://www.cubaface.org>.

2. On a map, trace possible routes that Cubans might take to seek political asylum in willing countries. Which paths are most dangerous? Which route would you attempt if you were a Cuban refugee?

3. Compare the plot of the movie Titanic with this novel. In what ways are they alike? How do they differ? In what ways do you think the author relied on readers' knowledge of Titanic to create her story?

4. Describe how games such as bridge or the scavenger hunt enhance this novel.

5. Write a report about a Cuban exile, comparing their lives in Cuba and in the country where he or she received asylum: Mention how many refugees die in escape attempts or are returned to Cuba. What happens to minors or famous refugees such as Elian Gonzalez?

How has American popular culture depicted Cuban exiles such as the sitcom character Ricky Ricardo?

6. Research Cuban baseball players, profiling a team in Cuba and an exiled player in the United States. Write a sports article about an American athletic team that played a game in Cuba, such as at the Bacardi Bowl in the early twentieth century.

7. Find out where cruise ships travel in the Caribbean and trace Rosie's trip on a map. Write a journal entry telling where you would travel if you were offered a free cruise.

8. Compare Nixon's mystery with other stories set on cruise ships. What features do they have in common? How is a cruise ship essential to the storytelling or does it just serve as an interesting setting?

9. Analyze the role of friendships and romance in this novel. Who do you think Rosie will remain in contact with and why?

10. Prepare a travel account which Rosie, Julieta, or Neil might write for their student newspaper.

For Further Reference

Folios, Alison. Review of *Playing for Keeps*.

School Library Journal, vol. 47 (July 2001): 112. Folios declares, "This is not a challenging mystery," but praises Nixon for her depiction of familial relationships and respect between women of different generations.

"Joan Lowery Nixon." In *Something about the Author Autobiography Series*, vol. 9.

Detroit: Gale, 1990. Nixon describes how her childhood and college experiences shaped her writing habits and style.

Lystad, Mary. "Nixon, Joan Lowery." In *Twentieth-Century Young Adult Writers*.

Edited by Laura Standley Berger. Detroit: Gale, 1994, pp. 488-490. This is a biographical sketch with discussion of books Nixon had written by the early 1990s.

York, Sherry. Review of *Playing for Keeps*.

Voice of Youth Advocates, vol. 24 (August 2001): 205-206. York recommends this novel, noting characters could be more fully developed, and praises Nixon's skills at presenting clues and revealing Rosie's maturation as she comprehends the relationships between her mother, grandmother, and herself.

Related Titles/Adaptations

Nixon often writes about grandmothers and grandchildren, usually in the mystery genre, such as the grandmother who accused her granddaughter of faking her abduction in *The Kidnapping of Christina Lattimore* (1979). Other books for young readers have been set on cruise ships. Richard Peck's *Those Summer Girls I Never Met* (1988) depicts Drew and Steph getting to know their grandmother on a Baltic Cruise. In Cynthia Wall's *Disappearing Act* (1996), babysitters Kim and Marc use their ham radio skills to rescue a kidnapped toddler. Josh and Tank investigate a mysterious computer disk that a stranger hides in Josh's bag in Lee Roddy's *The Case of the Dangerous Cruise* (1994). In Gertrude Chandler Warren's *Boxcar Children* series, the Aldens and their grandfather observe strange events in *The Mystery Cruise* (1992). Members of the Twelve Candles Club providing child care on a Caribbean Cruise detect drug smuggling in Elaine L. Schulte's *Melanie and the Cruise Caper* (1996).

Children's literature featuring granddaughters and grandmothers include Wendelin Van Draanen's *Sammy Keyes* mysteries. The Conroy sisters go on a holiday trip with their grandmother in Hilary McKay's *The Exiles in Love* (1996). The relationship of Rhys with her grandmother is the focus of Hadley Irwin's *What About Grandma?* (1982).

Victor Andres Triay's *Fleeing Castro: Operation Pedro Pan and the Cuban Children's Program* (1998) and Yvonne M. Conde's *Operation Pedro Pan: The Untold Exodus of 14,048 Cuban Children* (1999) are nonfiction titles to supplement Nixon's focus on Cuban refugees.

Several mysteries written for adults have cruise ship settings such as Mary Higgins Clark's *You Belong to Me* (1998). Fans of Nixon's mysteries might also enjoy Carolyn Hart's *Henrie O* mystery series, which has a similar tone and style.



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