

# Giving A(nother) Murdered Woman a Voice

## Lars Gustafsson's *The American Girl's Sundays*

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**Abstract.** Lars Gustafsson's *The American Girl's Sundays* (2006) is a welcome change to tales based in true crime, which often focus on the predominantly male murderer or serial killer instead of on the predominantly female victim. The verse novel is also part of a larger countertrend resisting the hype accompanying killers, meanwhile paying little to no attention to the victim and what her life was and could have been. Gustafsson's narrative, inspired by the murder of Colleen Reed in 1999, is narrated by the fictionalised victim herself. This article explores how the interweaving of Gustafssonian elements affects the narrative voice.

**Keywords:** Narrative voice, authenticity, Colleen Reed, Lars Gustafsson, female representations, true crime

Lars Gustafsson, novelist, poet, and scholar lived and worked in Austin, Texas for about 20 years before returning to his native Sweden in 2006, which is also the year that *The American Girl's Sundays* was published in Swedish as *Den amerikanska flickans söndagar*. The book regrettably remains untranslated into English. Gustafsson has written numerous novels and collections of poetry and worked as a Professor of Philosophy and as a teacher of Creative Writing at The University of Austin. During this expatriate period, he began writing *The American Girl's Sundays*, a prose poem largely inspired by a true crime: the abduction, violation, and murder of Colleen Reed, on December 29, 1991. Colleen was a certified public accountant. She was not yet 30 years old.

This article focuses on two aspects of the narrative: its formation of the voice of Colleen and how the inclusion of Gustafssonian elements affects that voice, and how *The American Girl's Sundays* forms part of an important countertrend in writing about true crime by focusing on the victim rather than the murderer. In the postscript to *The American Girl's Sundays*, Gustafsson writes:

*The American Girl's Sundays* was commenced in Austin, Texas, during the winter of 1999, and long remained a brief fragment.

Its basis is a real criminal event—a young girl, living alone, who whilst washing her car on a Sunday morning, was abducted, raped, and murdered by two men. One of the murderers was found a few years later and executed in accordance with the law, but to little comfort. So brutally and so without resonance did this girl disappear from the world that I, the very day that I read about her in the paper, felt that I in some way had to give her a voice. This voice is, as everything else in my story, free verse. (p. 55)

The postscript posits two important aspects: that Gustafsson's narrative was largely motivated by the conviction that Colleen deserves a voice, and secondly,

that he is aware that he is constructing it, and the voice she is given is in itself a fiction in the form of free verse.

Not once in *The American Girl's Sundays* does Gustafsson name the killers, though they are known and convicted. This is, of course, part of his larger testament to Colleen Reed. But the book does not bear her name. Arguably, because Colleen comes to symbolise so many dead women without a voice, and perhaps also, as Gustafsson states, because it is about a fictionalised Colleen. It does not claim to be a biography, and largely, the life it could have described was cut too short for the genre, nor does it claim to be a non-fictional account.

Gustafsson's text fits many genres: prose poetry, elegy, true crime, creative non-fiction, and makes a highly relevant contribution to the countertrend. In stark contrast to a book about the murderer of Colleen Reed, *The Bad Boy from Rosebud* written by Gary Lavergne and published in 1999, Gustafsson focuses on the victim and the victim alone. Lavergne stated in an interview that "I did feel a responsibility as an author to bring this story to the public, to alert people to the reality that these guys exist;" (Stockwell 2016) Gustafsson does the opposite: "I [...] had to give *her* a voice" (2006, p. 55, my emphasis). In *The American Girl's Sundays*, the purpose is to alert the world that Colleen Reed existed. In the same way that the victim is often the catalyst for the narrative about the murderer, in Gustafsson's text, the murderer is the parenthesis: the story is about Colleen.

Gustafsson's is a welcome change to narratives about crime, be they based on true events or not, which often focus on the killer, his motives, the gruesome details, his capture or non-capture, his sentencing or lack thereof, or his remorse or lack thereof. Before discussing the specifics of *The American Girl's Sundays*, it is relevant first to discuss the countertrend to which the verse novel contributes and how it goes against the norm.

The standard pattern for TV-series, true- or fictional crime novels, documentaries, interviews drawing confessions out of murderers or perpetrators of other violent crime, is to focus on the murderer. These narratives are plentiful, and readily available to viewers or readers through a range of media. In our voyeuristic urge to try to understand that which cannot be understood: the workings of an evil mind, the victim is soon forgotten. The victim becomes merely the catalyst for the *real* story: that of the hunt, capture, and punishment of the killer, that of his motive, and if there is none other than evil, the attempts to make sense of the senseless. Through this, the victim's role is often reduced to that of a catalyst for narrative action: a bare necessity, a narrative tool. In filmatisations, in the true-crime genre, and in documentaries, the focus often lies on the (serial) killer. The more gruesome his crimes—the more focus on his deeds. For example, an option for a search for "serial killer" on Wikipedia—one of the two men involved in the murder of Colleen Reed was a serial killer—is to list serial killers by "numbers of victims" (Wikipedia), further reducing the victim to a number among numbers, at the same time adding to the infamy of murderers with large victim counts. There was, for example, the American 15- and 18-year-old boys who collected knives and bought guns with the sole purpose of "want[ing] to kill so many people that they would become more famous than the Columbine High School shooters" (Wagner 2015). As a necessity, they had to kill their family first, and were caught after that: their aim to set a record and achieving infamy a failure. The fame and notoriety awarded serial killers can thus become another

driver for these (by and large) male perpetrators. Likewise, the surge in documentaries like *Conversations with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes* (2019a) (a docuseries based on interviews with Bundy) and *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile* (2019b) (a fictionalised account in which Bundy is played by Zac Efron) attempt to get to the core of the serial murder psyche. All the while, viewers can participate scot-free in the voyeuristic gaze, under the pretense of wanting to understand, rather as participants in a society-wide obsession with evil, and part of creating a cult around killers that become household names. There is a plethora of cheap dramatisations and a large range of other, often American, series on YouTube and on other online viewing platforms. The victims are generally women, their murderers generally men.

There exist, across artforms and media platforms, interesting and significant countertrends to the obsession with the murderers and the details of their violence in the form of a resistance to the hype around the killer and a focus instead on the life lost. On Twitter, Billy Jensen posted a feed when *The Bundy Tapes* was just released. Jensen's first tweet showed a collage of the faces of the murdered women, with a reminder not to let the victims be forgotten in the frenzy of engaging in true crime stories like the Bundy one. "These women all had hopes and dreams," Jensen reminds us, "they should all have movies made about them."



(@Billyjensen 2019a)

Jensen subsequently posted the photographs from the collage of each of the victims, with some biographical information about her life. This is a

contemporary example of how social media may contribute not just to the hype, but to the immortalisation of the victim.



(@Billyjensen 2019b)

The biographies of these women varied in length and mentioned more or less personal information. Of some women, so little was known that Jensen requested information from his Twitter followers, should someone have further knowledge about her short life. The act of attempting to memorialise women about whom very little is known carries further sadness: to the public, they will remain a story told only by the fact that their lives were taken. They will be another photo, another name, of a victim amongst victims, soon forgotten.

Jensen's act is a poignant reminder that no matter how much narratives about murders and serial killers are fictionalised, the victims are not just characters in a story, but real women with real lives, hopes, and dreams, all having been violently stolen from them. What Jensen does here is manifold: he gives these women a face, a name, and shows the gap they left in the world; yet, he acknowledges that we are all, himself included, participants in the voyeurism and thus co-creators of the hype.

In other media, too, there has been a conscious drive not to give the perpetrator attention, actively to take away the focus from the "hall of infamy" that the two American school boys, and many other evildoers, strived for. For example, in the feature "Holiday to Hell: Survivors of the Nice attack reveal their terrifying experience," (2016) a young Australian woman, Adelaide Stratton, who was seriously injured when the truck plowed into the masses celebrating Bastille Day in 2016 tells her story. Adelaide was found by a French man, Patrick, who never left her side. The two developed a deep friendship and he visited her regularly in hospital, and then later, visited Adelaide and her family together with his fiancée. When interviewed about the terrorist driver, Adelaide denies the power of the attacker, and reclaims the story:

*Interviewer:* What do you think of the man in the truck?

*Adelaide Stratton:* I'm gonna be honest with you: I don't really think of him. I've got too much to deal with. Too much to think about. Too many more important things to think about than... I couldn't even tell you his name. And my story isn't about him. My story isn't about what he did. My story is about Patrick and how people helped me.

*Interviewer:* So your story is about love?

*Adelaide Stratton:* Yeah. My story is about love. My story is about helping others. My story is about the beautiful things that can come from the terrible, you know. My story isn't about him. Not at all. (min. 25:53–26:36)

Adelaide is a survivor with a voice, and she is using it to its full capacity. She refuses to let the terrorist into the limelight by declaring that the story does not belong to him. An interesting aspect here is that the interviewer does not name him. He is “the man in the truck” a someone given a general description, which strips him of some of the association of his atrocious act. He is thus less likely to gain a cult following.

Similarly, when the Christchurch mosque shootings took place on March 19, 2019, New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern made a speech that was shared worldwide. Ardern stated that she would never speak his name and would not contribute to the notoriety the killer sought, and she encouraged the world to follow her example:

There is one person at the centre of this terror attack against our Muslim community in New Zealand. A 28-year-old man, an Australian citizen, has been charged with one count of murder; other charges will follow. He will face the full force of the law in New Zealand. The families of the fallen will have justice. He sought many things from his act of terror, but one was notoriety, and that is why you will never hear me mention his name. He is a terrorist, he is a criminal, he is an extremist, but he will, when I speak, be nameless, and to others I implore you: speak the names of those who were lost rather than the name of the man who took them. He may have sought notoriety but we in New Zealand will give him nothing—not even his name. (Ardern, New Zealand Parliament, *Pāremata Aotearoa 2019*).

Speaking the names of the victims, foregoing, forgetting the names of the evildoers is, as shown, a larger trend. Gustafsson's verse novel precedes the public forms of denial discussed above, and his book has received much less consideration. *The American Girl's Sundays* predates the era of rapid sharing made possible by social media, and the book not yet having been translated into English adds to its lack of attention. Yet, it taps into this stream of resistance, of telling the story of the human life lost, and not rewarding the killers by giving them the fame, or the infamy, they are after—by not even giving them their names.

Though one of Gustafsson's aims with *The American Girls Sundays* is to give Colleen a voice, and to memorialise her, the book does more than that. It commingles Gustafsson's childhood images with Colleen's memories, blurring the line between author and subject. Instead of adopting the voyeuristic gaze, Gustafsson turns inwards, into the thoughts and memories of a fictionalised Colleen, and into himself.

It is not the first time that Gustafsson takes on the voice of others. His collection *Four Poets*, first published in 1998, is an “experiment in dividing the

own voice in four different Swedish writer profiles from different periods” (Gustafsson 1994a, p. 7). The four poets are all fictive and their voices invented. They are all Gustafsson, yet not. Each fictive poet—Gustaf Adolf Fredenlund, Bernard Foy, Ehrmine Wikström, and Jan Bohman—is also given a brief fictive biography (some with fictive references), which further creates a sense of realism. Gustafsson, in his discussion of “fictive poetry,” (p. 7) leaves it up to “ontologically interested students of philosophy to try to sort out how an only imagined (but written) poem relates to a normal poem” (p. 8). This article is perhaps such an attempt. The story of Colleen, though she was a real person, must be fictionalised, as must her voice.

Since the shift in Gustafsson’s book is from offender to victim, it is not strange that the narrative about her murder is almost entirely missing from Gustafsson’s text. Instead, we get to follow the (imagined) life and thoughts of Colleen, who, in the book, works in a library, in a wing filled with books in languages she does not speak:

The Japanese, Koreans, and Hindus  
populate the Large Asian Catalogue  
and diligently fill the files with signs.  
It is their place. In the world.  
In the pauses, it can get a bit lonely.  
Those who speak to each other  
do so in a language I do not understand.  
They could of course talk to me  
in my own, but they do not.  
It was really that way my whole life.  
And it does not bother me.  
(In reality, I am never lonely.)  
Hundreds of thousands of books  
and up until this summer  
not one of them in a comprehensible alphabet. (2006, pp. 11-12)

This sort of internal monologue, references to Colleen’s childhood, descriptions of her working life, and her inner life, constitute most of the narrative. The extract above bears clear traits of Gustafsson’s voice: the incomprehensible alphabet echoes Gustafsson’s poem “Where the Alphabet has Two-hundred Letters” in which he likens American freight trains to “large philosophical systems, wander[ing] / through a continent that is itself a poem / where the alphabet has two hundred letters” (1994b, p. 27). Gustafsson returns to signs, alphabets, languages and their incomprehensibility, and it is no coincidence that Colleen also wanders in an incomprehensible world and that she likes it there. Largely, the narrative is composed by these sorts of internal monologues, descriptions of Colleen’s day-to-day life, the boredom of mundanity and its beauty, and her dreams and thoughts.

There is one important exception. The below description of her abduction and murder is the place in which her dark fate is first evoked. It occurs about two thirds into the book:

Just next to here is a car wash  
where on a Sunday in the middle of the nineties

a girl who was giving her car its Sunday wash  
was abducted by two men and later  
was found violated and dead in a ditch  
far out southwest. On her body  
were burn marks; glowing cigarettes  
had been put out on her breasts.  
The murderers made a mistake:  
they drove a whole long suburban street  
against the direction of traffic and were seen.  
They were captured in another state  
and brought here to die. The jury needed  
twenty minutes to reach the verdict.  
Oh, these shallow, uninteresting punishments!  
Soon, the dead will forget  
that they ever existed! The saint,  
if it exists, and the demon  
share the same fate. (p. 33-34)

Notably, the text still does not acknowledge that the narrator is the victim in question. The subject is merely “a girl” and “the murderers” just that. Some descriptions are also fictionalised. Colleen Reed’s body was not found and identified until seven years after her death—in Gustafsson’s poem only described as “later”—which further makes it unlikely that there would be any evidence of burn marks from cigarettes on her remains; this information must come from research made by Gustafsson, for example from news reports. Whether he ever read *The Bad Boy from Rosebud*, in which this information is contained, is unknown. There are several other disturbing and highly visual descriptions of the torture to which Colleen was subjected, which Gustafsson has decided to leave out. Colleen’s body was not found, as Gustafsson describes, in “a ditch,” but in a poorly dug grave, which was the murderer’s modus operandi, close to a river, according to Lavergne (1999; see also UPI Archives 1998), whose book about the murderer is based on numerous court records, interviews with family members, police, and CIs. Gustafsson’s fictionalisation of Colleen’s death is in line with the fictionalisation of the narrative of her life, which has never been about telling the “true” story of Colleen. Lavergne’s book, though primarily interested in the murderers and the investigation to find them guilty, gives a surprisingly thorough description of Colleen and her life, if largely objective and sometimes detached. Instead, Gustafsson gives us slivers of Colleen’s (and his own) childhood, of its emotions and thoughts. The verse novel is structured over ten Sundays. The first nine are numbered, and the tenth is simply titled “The Last Sunday”. An early example in the narrative is this:

From light to light. And they weaken  
and shift more and more to green,  
a soft, but lively green. Which was  
a childhood colour. (p. 4)

This excerpt brings the importance of the colour green as intimately connected to childhood, and connects to images of spring, to youth, and, importantly, to images recurrent in Gustafsson’s own work. This second quote highlights that connection further:

All these hidden things, forgotten objects  
that remember where they are but that do not  
want to tell me, that keep it secret  
maybe because they do not want to be found by me  
as were they scared of something that could happen  
were I there together with them, and hesitate,  
hidden to me, green bottle glass dug from earth.  
But I remember them, each and every one of those  
rocks and pearls of glass and the strings  
I carefully hid, each and every one  
in its place. To be found, one day. (pp. 7-8)

This extract, also from “The first Sunday,” demands the investigation of voice and how Colleen’s and Lars’ voices intermingle: these lines echo the first stanza of Gustafsson’s poem “Seven Very Small Events,” published in 2000, interestingly in a collection called *Elegies and Other Poems*:

Early memories, fume from childhood,  
green bits of bottleglass  
dug from earth. (Lines 1-3, p. 38-39)

Here, Gustafsson explores the metaphorical excavation of the mind, and it is one of the occasions on which his and Colleen’s voices become one and the same. The voice here is distinctly Gustafssonian but is given to Colleen. These personal, *Heimlich*, and clearly, to Gustafsson, highly important images, add a layer of authenticity: the specificity of the images give specificity to Colleen’s inner life, of which little information can be found. The introduction of images that have appeared in other of Gustafsson’s works add to the veracity of the voice in the sense that they may be regarded as diminishing the distance between the Self and the Other—between the author and the subject narrator. It is worth noting here that the book in its entirety is not an exercise in Gustafssonian imagery, but the occasions on which the blending of voices occur are poignant. Giving Colleen of his own voice, well-intentioned thought it may be, is problematic. It is a contradictory balancing act, and a risk-taking on Gustafsson’s behalf. Gustafsson already has a voice, owns his imagery, and though he shares it with Colleen, there is a risk that his memories overtake her fictional ones—that he, in a sense, hijacks the voice of the weaker participant. Whether the poem becomes Lars Gustafsson’s rather than Colleen Reed’s is difficult to answer, though, again, Gustafsson’s intentions are sincere: he is answering his call to tell the admittedly fictionalised story of Colleen, and perhaps the ends must necessarily justify the means. Though the project is not without its flaws, on neither a philosophical nor a narratological level, Gustafsson’s choice to attempt to give a voice to a woman deprived of hers is a worthy cause, and its execution, not without its challenges, is in many ways a beautiful testament to the inner worlds lost when a human life is taken.

Gustafsson thus, as noted, not without complication, attempts to know the Other through the Self, to know Colleen through Lars, her voice through his. This creates an intimacy, a relationship, also between the narrator and the reader. Gustafsson fictionalises within a non-fiction framework, and he is honest about that in the postscript. He further makes a comment on the obsession with narratives, his and ours. Instead of Colleen becoming just another female body,



and as a corpse, literally only a female body, she is, through this narrative, promoted from object to subject – an “I”, fictionalised though this “I” may be. As the book is a speculation in terms of giving Colleen a voice, as Gustafsson had no personal knowledge of her or about her life, let alone her inner thoughts and dreams, arguably, giving Colleen some of his own childhood memories and ways of seeing the world could be regarded as a sort of bridge-building or as a sharing. The introduction of his own imagery and giving it to her can be regarded as a gift—when giving her a voice, which was Gustafsson’s explicit aim—it makes sense also to give her some of his own. In blurring the line between Lars’ and Colleen’s memories as characters, there is also a blending of their voices. This adds a layer of complexity in how to dissect the co-mingling of these voices when Colleen does not technically have one. To argue that her voice automatically becomes Gustafsson’s is ineffective; surely, few would argue that an author’s and his protagonist’s voices are (necessarily) one and the same. Colleen is a fiction—what could have been learned about her can no longer be learned, and she could thus, arguably, be seen as any other fictional character. The difference is that she is not, nor does Gustafsson treat her as such. Colleen was a real person, and Gustafsson speaks explicitly of giving her the voice of which she was robbed so violently.

Gustafsson has seldom written female characters, which adds another level to the question of authenticity to Colleen’s voice. Clearly, intention matters here—to give a voice to a voiceless victim, otherwise easily forgotten among the thousands of other voiceless victims, matters, and the introduction of Gustafssonian elements adds to the authenticity through the bridging of the gap, the narrowing of the distance between author and subject. Though those familiar with Gustafsson’s poetry will identify recognisable images from an established male author, it is not necessarily the case that these images make for a skewed or predominately male voice for a female character. Rather, the sharing of images with a subject whose own images are gone, could be consider a sacrifice: a surrendering of the Self for the Other. It further tells us that we are not so different—our childhoods carry hidden treasures like the pieces of glass and the rocks in the excerpt above, but also the wounds refusing to heal, as in this example:

And what to do with the memories  
these wounds that never heal? (p. 7)

An author’s only responsibility may be to tell a good story, but in the land of non-fiction, there are other moral aspects to consider. A certain loyalty not to take lightly. Adjusting the genre to creative non-fiction does not necessarily mitigate this moral duty. It seems, though, that Gustafsson is well aware of this responsibility and does aim truly to do Colleen and her voice justice. Arguably, thus, the Gustafssonian elements function as a means to get closer to Colleen and to offer genuine memories through this prose poem. Gustafsson has thus by giving of himself given to Colleen a history, memories, and potential futures. Colleen’s narrative is written from the first-person point of view, giving her a certain ownership rather than her (fictional) life story simply being in the hands of an external author.

What further establishes the voice as gendered female is the distinct lack of a male gaze, such as Gustafsson’s leaving out of the sexual violence, the descriptions

of torture, and the viewing of Colleen as a body. In contrast to TV-series etc., there is very little reveling in the crime itself, but it is worth revisiting a few lines from the longer passage quoted above:

a girl who was going to wash her car one Sunday  
was abducted by two men and later  
was found violated and dead in a ditch  
far out southwest. On her body  
was burn marks, glowing cigarettes  
had been put out on her breasts. (p. 33)

Gustafsson does not dwell upon the crime, nor the murderers, nor their names, despite the relative infamy of one of them. This, too, is a statement and a strong rejection of a worn narrative, of the male perspective and its voyeuristic tendencies of seeing the woman as a body, and, once deceased, as literally a body to be viewed, poked, and probed, to be sensationalised, objectified, and, should the murder have sexual undertones, for this sexualisation to be brought to the surface, as if the female body has been stripped of all right to privacy. Gustafsson uses the word “violated” rather than “raped” and does not go into detail of what this violation consisted of. The burn marks, one of the few details included, can be seen as an attack on her femininity, and also hints at the torture she was subjected to without making further comment on it. Her being thrown into a (fictional) ditch, is another comment on her being disposed of like were she nothing, as were she garbage. Gustafsson subtly makes these comments but does not dwell upon any of these aspects—he is concerned with this young woman’s soul, her life and story as it could have been, had her narrative not been cut short. An approach like Gustafsson’s immortalises the ‘American Girl’ through the narrative choices made—a shift in focus from a woman’s death to a focus on her life de-objectifies, de-fetishises, and de-mythologises her; shifting the gaze by de-objectifying the female victim, so often a seen merely as a body in life as in death, literally and literarily promotes her from object to subject.

Such a lack of concern with the corporeal lends itself to a voice gendered in alignment with its subject—Colleen—promoting her thus from object to subject, and not merely the subject of the book, but its true protagonist.

Like Adelaide Stratton refusing to make the story that of her attackers, like Prime Minister Ardern, Gustafsson refuses to let the evildoers own the narrative of the victim and promotes Colleen from object to subject.

Like Colleen works in a library surrounded by stories that are incomprehensible, her story is incomprehensible. The violence, her death, her being erased – it is all incomprehensible. This book is testament to the incomprehensible, and testament to Colleen and to her life: her death is a parenthesis. Not until the very last lines is the murder revisited:

One day would start like all the others  
with the health-tea and the radio on the shelf  
and end in a great confusion.  
I was that girl who was taken  
from that place and who was killed  
when I wanted to wash the car on a Sunday.  
And of that, I have no more to say. (p. 52)

There is nothing more to say. This is the end of Collen's narrative, the end of the line. Her voice, as it were, now has to be constructed as it is not hers anymore.

Who can speak for the dead? Who can know their dreams and wants and wishes, their weaknesses, their faults, their fears? We can only know the Other through the Self, by daring to bridge the gap between us.

In Gustafsson's "Ten Elegies," the last lines of the first elegy "In the Surface," read:

To go into the only hesitantly welcoming shadow,  
to in the shadow of a forest go to the others,  
those already invisible; you, others, who live also  
other lives and other years, tell me,  
who merely live only one, if you wanted the same!  
In this night, no stars can be seen.  
The stars have no names  
We gave them of our own (1994c, lines 40-47, pp. 235)

In this vein, Gustafsson expresses how the unfathomable requires our intimate connection, through naming, through bridging, to bringing it into our own consciousness and life to enable some sort of sense-making. The final lines may as well read:

(The) Colleen(s) have no voice  
We give them of our own.



Colleen Reed 1962–1991 (Stockwell 2016)

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@Billyjensen. "As we all binge The Bundy Tapes on @Netflix and share the trailer for the Zac Efron movie, please remember the victims. These women all had hopes and dreams. They should all have movies made about them. I always try to remember what these monsters took away. #TedBundyTapes." *Twitter*, 27 Jan. 2019a, 20:38 p.m., <https://twitter.com/Billyjensen/status/108974457554408449>.

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