Edited by Ruskin Bond
Snake Trouble
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Snake Trouble

Ruskin Bond  Illustrated by Atanu Roy

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For Ravi, mentor and favourite editor
Introduction

An introduction to an anthology of stories for children, broadly between the ages of eight and twelve, is perhaps dispensable as it is unlikely to be read by them. Nevertheless, some explanation for the selection in this volume seems necessary. Unlike literature for children in many countries, in India there is very little material specifically designed for them which has delighted successive generations and is also enjoyed by children today. Here, stories that have gone down from grandparent to parent to child are mostly from the Epics, myths, legends and folktales, the *Panchatantra*, *Jatakas*, *Kathasaritsagara* and the *Hitopadesha*. So instead of taking excerpts, most of the stories in this volume stand on their own: only a few have been extracted from novels of well-known writers like R.K. Narayan’s *Swami and Friends*, Salman Rushdie’s *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, and Dhan Gopal Mukerji’s *Gay-Neck: The Story of a Pigeon*.

The main aim of *The Puffin Treasury of Modern Indian Stories* is to offer some of the best Indian children’s fiction available in English. All the authors included are renowned storytellers whose imagination, skill, elegant prose and wit have won them acclaim and awards. They have also given us stories for children which will endure for times to come.

A few translations are included. Very little children’s fiction from the Indian languages has been rendered into English. Of the published material, good translations are hard to come by.

I have also done my best to include as wide a range of themes as I could. So we have a ghost story, fantasies, humour, historical fiction, real-life incidents, those that sensitively explore the inner world of the child, the serious, the light-hearted and the whimsical.
The book is profusely illustrated by some of India’s most talented artists, who have complemented and enlivened the twenty-one selected works. As the stories showcase the best of English fiction for children in India, the illustrations showcase the skill and versatility of Indian illustrators.

Poverty, inequality, communal tension, degradation of the environment confront today’s children. This collection also reflects these concerns, deftly and subtly. Faced with a complex environment, the Indian child cannot be a passive observer but is constantly questioning. I conclude this Introduction with one of my favourite pieces written by Mahasweta Devi when she was sitting across the table in my room: ‘The Why-Why Girl’. Even if children are reluctant readers of introductions, I am sure that those who have got thus far will relish our why-why girl.

Mala Dayal
'But why?'
The girl was small, about ten years old. She was chasing a large snake. I ran after her, dragged her back by her pigtails and shouted, ‘No, Moina, no!’
‘Why?’ she asked.
‘It’s not a grass snake nor a rat snake. It’s a cobra.’
‘Why shouldn’t I catch a cobra?’
‘Why should you?’
‘We eat snakes, you know. The head you chop off, the skin you sell, the meat you cook.’
‘Not this time.’
‘I will. I will.’
‘No child!’
‘But why?’
I dragged her back to the Samiti office where Moina’s mother, Khiri, was weaving a basket. ‘Come, rest a little,’ I said.
‘Why?’
‘Why not? Aren’t you tired?’
Moina shook her head. ‘Who will bring the Babu’s goats home? And collect firewood and fetch water and lay the trap for the birds?’
Khiri said, ‘Don’t forget to thank the Babu for the rice he sent.’
‘Why? Didn’t I have to sweep the cowshed and do a thousand jobs for him? Did he thank me? Why should I thank him?’
Moina ran off. Khiri shook her head. ‘Never saw a child like this. All she keeps saying is “why”. The village postmaster calls her the “Why-why girl”.’
‘I like her.’
‘She’s so obstinate and unyielding.’
Moina was a Sabar, and the Sabars were poor and landless. But the other Sabars never complained. Only Moina’s questions were endless.
‘Why do I have to walk miles to the river for water? Why do we live in a leaf hut? Why can’t we eat rice twice a day?’
Moina was the goatherd of the village Babus, but she was neither humble nor grateful to her employers. She did her work and came home, muttering, ‘Why should I eat their leftovers? I will cook a delicious meal with green leaves and rice and crabs and chilli powder in the evening and eat with the family.’

The Sabars do not usually send their daughters to work. But Moina’s mother was lame, her father had gone to faraway Jamshedpur in search of work and her brother, Goro, went to the forest to collect firewood. So Moina had to work.

That October I stayed at the Samiti for a month. One morning Moina declared that she would move into the Samiti hut with me.

Khiri said, ‘You won’t.’
‘Why not? It’s a big hut. How much space does one old woman need?’
‘What about your work?’
‘I’ll come after work.’

And she came with one change of clothes and a baby mongoose. ‘It eats very little and chases away the bad snakes,’ she said. ‘The good snakes I catch and give to mother.

She makes lovely snake curry. I’ll bring some for you.’
Malati Bonal, our Samiti teacher, told me, ‘She’ll exhaust you with her “whys”.’ What a time I had that October! ‘Why do I have to graze the Babu’s goats? His boys can do it themselves. Why can’t the fish speak? Why do the stars look so small if many of them are bigger than the sun?’
And every night, ‘Why do you read books before you go to sleep?’
‘Because books have the answers to your whys!’

For once Moina was silent. She tidied the room, watered the flowering rangan tree and gave fish to the mongoose. Then she said, ‘I’ll learn to read and get to know the answers to my questions.’

She would graze the goats and tell other children all she had learnt from me. ‘Many stars are bigger than the sun. They live far away, so they look small. The sun is nearer, so it looks bigger... The fish do not speak like us. They have a fish language, which is silent... The earth is round, did you know that?’

When I went to the village a year later, the first thing I heard was Moina’s voice. ‘Why is the school closed?’ she challenged Malati as she entered the Samiti school, dragging a bleating goat.
‘What do you mean, “why”?’
‘Why shouldn’t I study too?’
‘Who’s stopping you?’
‘But there’s no class!’
‘School is over.’
‘Why?’
‘You know, Moina, I take classes from 9 to 11 in the morning.’

Moina stamped her feet and said, ‘Why can’t you change the hours? I have to graze the Babu’s goats in the morning. I can only come after eleven. If you don’t teach, how will I learn? I will tell the old lady that none of us, goatherds and cowherds, can come if the hours are not changed.’

Then she saw me and fled with her goat.

I went to Moina’s hut in the evening. Nestling close to the kitchen fire, Moina was telling her little sister and elder brother, ‘You cut one tree and plant another two. You wash your hands before you eat, do you know why? You’ll get stomach pain if you don’t. You know nothing’
‘do you know why? Because you don’t attend Samiti classes.’

Who do you think was the first girl to be admitted to the village primary school? Moina.

Moina is eighteen now. She teaches at the Samiti school. If you pass the school you’re sure to hear her impatient, demanding voice, ‘Don’t be lazy. Ask me questions. Ask me why mosquitoes should be destroyed... Why the Pole Star is always in the north sky.’

And the other children, too, are learning to ask ‘why’.
Moina doesn’t know I’m writing her story. If told, she’d say, ‘Why? Writing about me? Why?’

*Illustrated by Ajanta Guhathakurta*
Ruskin Bond

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Snake Trouble

After retiring from the Indian Railways and settling in Dehra, Grandfather often enlivened his days (and ours) by keeping unusual pets. He paid a snake-charmer in the bazaar twenty rupees for a young python. Then, to the delight of a curious group of boys and girls, he slung the python over his shoulder and brought it home.

I was with Grandfather at the time and felt very proud walking beside him. He was popular in Dehra, especially among the more humble people, and everyone greeted him respectfully without seeming to notice the python. They were, in fact, quite used to seeing him in the company of strange creatures.

The first to see us arrive was Toto the monkey, who was swinging from a branch of the jackfruit tree. One look at the python, ancient enemy of his race, and he fled into the house squealing with fright. Then our parrot, Popeye, who had his perch in the veranda, set up the most awful shrieking and whistling. His whistle was like that of a steam engine. He had learnt to do this in earlier days, when we had lived near railway stations.

The noise brought Grandmother to the veranda, where she nearly fainted at the sight of the python curled round Grandfather’s neck.

Grandmother was tolerant of most of his pets, but she drew the line at reptiles. Even a sweet-tempered lizard made her blood run cold. There was little chance that she would allow a python in the house.

‘It will strangle you to death!’ she cried.

‘Nonsense,’ said Grandfather. ‘He’s only a young fellow.’

‘He’ll soon get used to us,’ I added, by way of support.

‘He might, indeed,’ said Grandmother, ‘but I have no intention of getting used to him. And your Aunt Ruby is coming to stay with us tomorrow. She’ll leave the minute she knows there’s a snake in the house.’

‘Well, perhaps we should show it to her first thing,’ said Grandfather, who found Aunt Ruby rather tiresome.
‘Get rid of it right away,’ said Grandmother.
‘I can’t let it loose in the garden. It might find its way into the chicken shed, and
then where will we be!’

‘Minus a few chickens,’ I said reasonably, but this only made Grandmother more
determined to banish the python.

‘Lock that awful thing in the bathroom,’ she said. ‘Go and find the man you bought
it from, give him twenty rupees or twice as much, and get him to come here and
collect it! He can keep the money you gave him.’

Grandfather and I took the snake into the bathroom and placed it in an empty tub.
Looking a bit crestfallen, he said, ‘Perhaps your Grandmother is right. I’m not
worried about Aunt Ruby, but we don’t want the python to get hold of Toto or
Popeye.’

We hurried off to the bazaar in search of the snake-charmer but hadn’t gone far
when we found several snake-charmers looking for us. They had heard that
Grandfather was buying snakes, and they had brought with them snakes of various
sizes and descriptions.

‘No, no!’ protested Grandfather. ‘We don’t want more snakes. We want to return
the one we bought.’

But the man who had sold it to us had, apparently, returned to his village in the
jungle, looking for another python for Grandfather; and the other snake-charmers
were not interested in buying, only in selling. In order to shake them off, we had to
return home by a roundabout route, climbing a wall and cutting through an orchard.
We found Grandmother pacing up and down the veranda. One look at our faces and
she knew we had failed in our mission.

‘All right,’ said Grandmother. ‘Just take it away yourselves, and see that it doesn’t
come back.’

‘We’ll get rid of it, Granny,’ I said confidently. ‘Don’t you worry.’

Grandfather opened the bathroom door and stepped into the room. I was close
behind him. We couldn’t see the python anywhere.

‘He’s gone,’ announced Grandfather. ‘We left the window open,’ I said.
‘Deliberately, no doubt,’ said Grandmother. ‘But it couldn’t have gone far. You’ll have
to search the grounds.’

A careful search was made of the house, the roof, the kitchen, the garden and the
chicken shed, but there was no sign of the python.
'He must have gone over the garden wall,' Grandfather said cheerfully. ‘He’ll be well away by now!’

The python did not reappear, and when Aunt Ruby arrived with enough luggage to indicate that she had come for a long visit, there was only the parrot to greet her with a series of long, ear-splitting whistles.

For a couple of days Grandfather and I were a little worried that the python might make a sudden reappearance, but when he didn’t show up again we felt he had gone for good. Aunt Ruby had to put up with Toto the monkey making faces at her, something I did only when she wasn’t looking; and she complained that Popeye shrieked loudest when she was in the room; but she was used to them, and knew she would have to put up with them if she was going to stay with us.

And then, one evening, we were startled by a scream from the garden. Seconds later Aunt Ruby came flying up the veranda steps, gasping, ‘In the guava tree. I was reaching for a guava when I saw it staring at me. The look in its eyes! As though it would eat me alive—’

‘Calm down, dear,’ urged Grandmother, sprinkling rose water over my aunt. ‘Tell us, what did you see?’

‘A snake!’ sobbed Aunt Ruby. ‘A great boa constrictor in the guava tree. Its eyes were terrible, and it looked at me in such a queer way.’

‘Trying to tempt you with a guava, no doubt!’ said Grandfather turning away to hide his smile. He gave me a meaningful look, and I hurried out into the garden. But
when I got to the guava tree, the python (if it had been the python) had gone.
‘Aunt Ruby must have frightened it off,’ I told Grandfather.
‘I’m not surprised,’ he said. ‘But it will be back. I think it’s taken a fancy to your aunt.’
Sure enough, the python began to make brief but frequent appearances, usually turning up in the most unexpected places.
One morning I found him curled up on a dressing-table, gazing at his own reflection in the mirror. I went for Grandfather, but by the time we returned the python had moved on.

He was seen again in the garden, and one day I spotted him climbing the iron ladder to the roof. I set off after him, and was soon up the ladder, which I had ascended many times. I stood up on the flat roof just in time to see the snake disappearing down a drainpipe. The end of his tail was visible for a few moments and then that too disappeared.
‘I think he lives in the drainpipe,’ I told Grandfather.
‘Where does he get his food?’ asked Grandmother.
‘Probably lives on those field rats that used to be such a nuisance. Remember, they used to live in the drainpipe too.’
‘Hmm...’ Grandmother looked thoughtful. ‘A snake has its uses. Well, as long as he keeps to the roof and prefers rats to chickens...’
But the python did not confine himself to the roof. Piercing shrieks from Aunt Ruby had us all rushing to her room. There was the python on her dressing-table, apparently admiring himself in the mirror.
‘All the attention he’s been getting has probably made him conceited,’ said Grandfather picking up the python to the accompaniment of further shrieks from Aunt
Ruby. ‘Would you like to hold him for a minute, Ruby? He seems to have taken a fancy to you.’

Aunt Ruby ran from the room and on to the veranda, where she was greeted with whistles of derision from Popeye the parrot. Poor Aunt Ruby, she cut short her stay by a week and returned to Lucknow, where she was a schoolteacher. She said she felt safer in her school than she did in our house.

Having seen Grandfather handle the python with such ease and confidence, I decided I would do likewise. So the next time I saw the snake climbing the ladder to the roof, I climbed up alongside him. He stopped in his ascent, and I stopped too. I put out my hand, and he slid over my arm and up to my shoulder. As I did not want him coiling round my neck, I gripped him with both hands and carried him down to the garden. He didn’t seem to mind.

The snake felt rather cold and slippery and at first he gave me goose pimples. But I soon got used to him, and he must have liked the way I handled him, because when I set him down he wanted to climb up my leg. As I had other things to do, I dropped him in a large, empty basket that had been left out in the garden. He stared out at me with unblinking, expressionless eyes. There was no way of knowing what he was thinking, if indeed he thought at all.

Just when all of us, including Grandmother, were getting used to having the python about the house and grounds, it was decided that we would be going to Lucknow for a few months.

Aunt Ruby lived and worked there. We would be staying with her, and so of course we couldn’t take any pythons, monkeys or other unusual pets with us.
‘What about Popeye?’ I asked.
‘Popeye isn’t a pet,’ said Grandmother. ‘He’s one of us. He comes too.’

And so the Dehra railway platform was thrown into confusion by the shrieks and whistles of our parrot, who could imitate both the guard’s whistle and the whistle of a train. People dashed into their compartments, thinking the train was about to leave, only to realize that the guard hadn’t blown his whistle after all. When they got down, Popeye would let out another shrill whistle, which sent everyone rushing for the train again. This happened several times until the guard actually blew his whistle. Nobody bothered to get on, and several passengers were left behind.

‘Can’t you gag that parrot?’ asked Grandfather, as the train moved out of the station and picked up speed.
‘I’ll do nothing of the sort,’ said Grandmother. ‘I’ve bought a ticket for him, and he’s entitled to enjoy the journey as much as anyone.’

It was to be a night journey, and presently Grandmother covered herself with a blanket and stretched herself out on the berth. ‘It’s been a tiring day. I think I’ll go to sleep,’ she said.

‘Aren’t we going to eat anything?’ I asked.

‘I’m not hungry—I had something before we left the house. You two help yourselves from the picnic hamper.’

Grandmother dozed off, and even Popeye started nodding, lulled to sleep by the clackety-clack of the wheels and the steady puffing of the steam engine.

‘Well, I’m hungry,’ I said. ‘What did Granny make for us?’

‘Stuffed parathas, omelettes and a tandoori chicken. It’s all in the hamper under the berth.’

I tugged at the cane box and dragged it into the middle of the compartment. The straps were loosely tied. No sooner had I undone them than the lid flew open, and I let out a gasp of surprise.

In the hamper was our python, curled up contentedly. There was no sign of our dinner.

‘It’s the python,’ I said. ‘And it’s finished all our dinner.’

‘Nonsense,’ said Grandfather, joining me near the hamper. ‘Pythons won’t eat omelettes and parathas. They like their food alive! Why, this is an old hamper, which was stored in the box room. The one with our food in it must have been left behind!’

Grandfather snapped the hamper shut and pushed it back beneath the berth.

‘Don’t let Grandmother see him,’ he said. ‘She might think we brought him along on purpose.’

‘Well, I’m hungry,’ I complained.

‘Wait till we get to the next station, then we can buy some pakoras. Meanwhile, try some of Popeye’s green chillies.’

‘No thanks,’ I said. ‘You have them, Grandad.’

And Grandfather, who could eat chillies plain, popped a couple into his mouth and munched away contentedly.
A little after midnight there was a great clamour at the end of the corridor. Popeye made complaining squawks, and Grandfather and I got up to see what was wrong. Suddenly there were cries of ‘Snake, snake!’

I looked under the berth. The hamper was open.

‘The python’s out,’ I said, and Grandfather dashed out of the compartment in his pyjamas. I was close behind.

About a dozen passengers were bunched together outside the washroom door.

‘Anything wrong?’ asked Grandfather casually. ‘We can’t get into the toilet,’ said someone. ‘There’s a huge snake inside.’

‘Let me take a look,’ said Grandfather. ‘I know all about snakes.’

The passengers made way and Grandfather and I entered the washroom together, but there was no sign of the python.

‘He must have got out through the ventilator,’ said Grandfather. ‘By now he’ll be in another compartment!’ Emerging from the washroom, he told the assembled passengers, ‘It’s gone! Nothing to worry about. Just a harmless young python.’

When we got back to our compartment, Grandmother was sitting up on her berth.

‘I knew you’d do something foolish behind my back,’ she scolded. ‘You told me you’d left that creature behind, and all the time it was with us on the train.’

Grandfather tried to explain that we had nothing to do with it, that the python had
smuggled itself into the hamper, but Grandmother was unconvinced.

‘Anyway, it’s gone,’ said Grandfather. ‘It must have fallen out of the washroom window. We’re over a hundred miles from Dehra, so you’ll never see it again.’

Even as he spoke, the train slowed down and lurched to a grinding halt. ‘No station here,’ said Grandfather, putting his head out of the window.

Someone came rushing along the embankment, waving his arms and shouting.

‘I do believe it’s the stoker,’ said Grandfather. ‘I’d better go and see what’s wrong.’

‘I’m coming too,’ I said, and together we hurried along the length of the stationary train until we reached the engine.

‘What’s up?’ called Grandfather. ‘Anything I can do to help? I know all about engines.’

But the engine-driver was speechless. And who could blame him? The python had curled itself about his legs, and the driver was too petrified to move.

‘Just leave it to us,’ said Grandfather, and dragging the python off the driver, he dumped the snake in my arms. The engine-driver sank down on the floor, pale and trembling.

‘I think I’d better drive the engine,’ said Grandfather, ‘we don’t want to be late getting into Lucknow. Your aunt will be expecting us!’ And before the astonished driver could protest, Grandfather had released the brakes and set the engine in motion.
‘We’ve left the stoker behind,’ I said. ‘Never mind. You can shovel the coal.’ Only too glad to help Grandfather drive an engine, I dropped the python in the driver’s lap, and started shovelling coal. The engine picked up speed and we were soon rushing through the darkness, sparks flying skywards and the steam whistle shrieking almost without pause.

‘You’re going too fast!’ cried the driver.
‘Making up for lost time,’ said Grandfather. ‘Why did the stoker run away?’ ‘He went for the guard. You’ve left them both behind!’
Early next morning the train steamed safely into Lucknow. Explanations were in order, but as the Lucknow stationmaster was an old friend of Grandfather’s all was well. We had arrived twenty minutes early, and while Grandfather went off to have a cup of tea with the engine-driver and the stationmaster, I returned the python to the hamper and helped Grandmother with the luggage. Popeye stayed perched on Grandmother’s shoulder, eyeing the busy platform with deep distrust. He was the first to see Aunt Ruby striding down the platform, and let out a warning whistle.

Aunt Ruby, a lover of good food, immediately spotted the picnic hamper, picked it up and said, ‘It’s quite heavy. You must have kept something for me! I’ll carry it out to the taxi.’

‘We hardly ate anything,’ I said.

‘It seems ages since I tasted something cooked by your Granny.’ And after that there was no getting the hamper away from Aunt Ruby.

Glancing at it, I thought I saw the lid bulging, but I had tied it down quite firmly this time and there was little likelihood of its suddenly bursting open.

Grandfather joined us outside the station and we were soon settled inside the taxi. Aunt Ruby gave instructions to the driver and we shot off in a cloud of dust.

‘I’m dying to see what’s in the hamper,’ said Aunt Ruby. ‘Can’t I take just a little peek?’

‘Not now,’ said Grandfather, ‘first let’s enjoy the breakfast you’ve got waiting for us.’

Popeye, perched proudly on Grandmother’s shoulder, kept one suspicious eye on the quivering hamper.

When we got to Aunt Ruby’s house, we found breakfast laid out on the dining-table.

‘It isn’t much,’ said Aunt Ruby. ‘But we’ll supplement it with what you’ve brought in the hamper.’

Placing the hamper on the table, she lifted the lid and peered inside...and promptly fainted.

Grandfather picked up the python, took it into the garden and draped it over a branch of a pomegranate tree.

When Aunt Ruby recovered, she insisted that she had seen a huge snake in the picnic hamper. We showed her the empty basket.

‘You’re seeing things,’ said Grandfather. ‘You’ve been working too hard.’

‘Teaching is a taxing profession,’ I said solemnly.
Grandmother said nothing. But Popeye broke into loud squawks and whistles, and soon everyone, including a slightly hysterical Aunt Ruby, was doubled up with laughter.

_Illustrated by Atanu Roy_
Notes on Writers and Translators

**Ruskin Bond** 1934- Bond, probably India’s best-known writer in English for children, grew up in Jamnagar, Dehradun, New Delhi and Simla. As a young man, he spent four years in the Channel Islands and London. He returned to India in 1955, and has never left the country since then. His first novel, *The Room on the Roof*, received the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize, awarded to a Commonwealth writer under thirty, for ‘a work of outstanding literary merit’. He received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1993, and the Padma Shri in 1999. He lives in Landour, Mussoorie, with his extended family. He has written over thirty stories for children, besides a novel, *The Adventures of Rusty* which has been translated into many Indian languages.

**Mahasweta Devi** 1926- A prolific and best-selling author in Bengali, Mahasweta Devi has written novels, short stories, children’s stories and plays. A deeply committed social activist she has been working with and for tribals and marginalized communities. Her work includes *Mother of 1084: A Novel; Breast Stories: Draupadi; Breast-Giver; Behind the Bodice* and *Our Non-Veg Cow and Other Stories.*


**Meenakshi Mukherjee** has translated two children’s books: Mahasweta Devi’s *Etoa Munda Won the Battle* published by the National Book Trust and the classic from Bengali, *Kheerer Putul*, by Abanindranath Tagore, titled *The Cheese Doll* in English. Mukherjee has taught English in several universities in India, Australia and the United States. Her books of literary criticism include *The Twice-Born Fiction* (1971); *Realism and Reality: The Novel and Society in India* (1985) and *The Perishable Empire. Another India*, co-edited by her and Nissim Ezekiel was published by Penguin India in 1990.

Waist-Chain (1990), besides editing a collection of regional fiction, *Imaging the Other*. She has also translated two novels for children: Pankaj Bisht’s *Bholu and Golu* and Shrilal Shukla’s *Babbarsingh and his Friends*. She has received several awards for translation.

**Khushwant Singh** 1915- Singh is one of India’s best-known columnists. Among his books are a two-volume *History of the Sikhs*, several works of fiction—including the novels *Train to Pakistan, Delhi* and *The Company of Women*—an autobiography, *Truth, Love and a Little Malice*, and a number of translated works.
Note on Illustrator

Atanu Roy 1950- Illustrator, artist, cartoonist and designer, Roy has illustrated more than 100 books for children and was the Children’s Choice Award for book illustrations in 1989. He has won awards at the 1983, 1984, and 1986 Yomiuri Shimbun International Cartoon Contests and contributed to Bob Geldof’s Cartoonaid, released at the Seoul Olympics. He has worked as an independent art designer in Tokyo and subsequently as a freelance designer and artist. He has his own design studio, ArtGym.
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—Editor

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