

The Evolution of Modern Fantasy

**From Antiquarianism to the
Ballantine Adult Fantasy Series**

Jamie Williamson

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THE EVOLUTION OF MODERN FANTASY
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I

Introduction

Charting the Terrain

The coalescence of fantasy—that contemporary literary category whose name most readily evokes notions of “epic trilogies” with “mythic” settings and characters—into a discrete genre occurred quite recently and abruptly, a direct result of the crossing of a resurgence of interest in American popular “Sword and Sorcery” in the early 1960s with the massive commercial success of J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, the paperback editions of which had been motivated by the former, in the mid-1960s.

Previously, there had been no identifiable genre resembling contemporary fantasy, and the work that is now identified as laying the groundwork for it (“pregenre” fantasy) appeared largely undifferentiated in widely dispersed areas of the publishing market. In the pulps between the wars, and in American genre book publishing between World War Two and the early 1960s, fantasy by writers like Robert E. Howard, Clark Ashton Smith, Fletcher Pratt, Fritz Leiber, and Jack Vance hovered between science fiction, horror, and action adventure fiction. On the other hand, work by Lord Dunsany, E. R. Eddison, James Branch Cabell, and Tolkien, who found “reputable” literary publishers, was not, in presentation, readily distinguishable from the work of Edith Wharton, D. H. Lawrence, E. M. Forster, and Ernest Hemingway, and it was apt to seem anomalous. Other work was absorbed by that modern catchall “Children’s Literature,” whether it reflected the authors’ intentions (as with C. S. Lewis’s Narnia series) or not (as with Kenneth Morris’s *Book of the Three Dragons*). It was a common perception that stories with the elements of content now associated with fantasy were, by their nature, suited especially to children.

A differentiated genre did emerge quite rapidly on the heels of the Sword and Sorcery revival and Tolkien’s great commercial success, however—its form and contours most strongly shaped by Ballantine Books and its

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crucially influential “Adult Fantasy Series” (1969–74). By the early 1980s, fantasy had grown to a full-fledged sibling, rather than an offshoot, of science fiction and horror. By now, it has been around in more or less its present form long enough to be taken for granted. A brief account of the construction of fantasy as a genre, then, is an appropriate place to begin the present discussion.

Assembling a Genre

In 1960, there was no commercial fantasy genre, and when the term was used to designate a literary type, it did not usually connote the kind of material that came to typify the genre when it coalesced, particularly in the Ballantine Adult Fantasy Series (hereafter BAFS).

But in the early 1960s, there was a swell of interest in what then became identified as “Sword and Sorcery” or, somewhat less pervasively, “Heroic Fantasy.” At the heart of this was reprinted material that had originally appeared in pulp magazines between the 1920s and the early 1940s,¹ and occasionally later, or in hardcover book editions from genre publishers.² Published as, functionally, a subcategory of science fiction, Sword and Sorcery rapidly became very popular. Newly identified and designated, there was not a huge amount of back material for competing publishers³ to draw on, and given the general unmarketability of such work during the preceding decade and before, it is not surprising that few writers were actively producing Sword and Sorcery.⁴ Demand soon overtook supply.

In this context, Ace Books science fiction editor Donald Wollheim became interested in Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, which had generated something of a cult following among science fiction fans, though it had been released in hardcover in 1954–56 as a sort of prestige item by literary publishers (Unwin in the United Kingdom, Houghton Mifflin in the United States). The elements it had in common with the Sword and Sorcery that had been appearing were sufficient for Wollheim to suppose it would be popular with aficionados of the new subgenre. Duly described as “a book of sword-and-sorcery that anyone can read with delight and pleasure” on its first-page blurb, Ace Books published their unauthorized paperback edition in early 1965.

The minor scandal attending the unauthorized status of the Ace Books edition, and its replacement later that year by the revised and authorized Ballantine Books edition, no doubt drew some crucial initial attention to the book, but that can scarcely account for the commercial explosion of the following year or two, which has now sustained itself for five decades. *The Lord of the Rings* sold quite well to Sword and Sorcery fans, but it also

sold quite well to a substantial cross section of the remainder of the reading public, and it became a bona fide bestseller. The Tolkien craze in fact ballooned into something quite close to the literary equivalent of the then-contemporary Beatlemania.

The result of this was something of a split phenomenon. There can be little doubt that the Tolkien explosion bolstered Sword and Sorcery to some degree and drew new readers to the subgenre who may otherwise have remained unaware of it. But Sword and Sorcery never became something that “everyone” was reading, as was the case with *The Lord of the Rings*, and its core readership remained centered in the audience that had grown up prior to the Tolkien paperbacks. In presentation, there was little to distinguish those Sword and Sorcery releases that followed the Tolkien explosion, through the second half of the 1960s and into the 1970s, and those that had preceded it. So there was Sword and Sorcery, and there was Tolkien.

Ballantine Books clearly recognized this dichotomy. Not a major player in the Sword and Sorcery market, the firm was eager to strike out in a more Tolkien-specific direction. The initial results over the next few years were a bit halting and haphazard. *The Hobbit* followed *The Lord of the Rings* in 1965, and the remaining work by Tolkien then accessible was gathered in *The Tolkien Reader* (1966) and *Smith of Wootton Major and Farmer Giles of Ham* (1969). The works of E. R. Eddison, a writer Tolkien had read and enthused on, appeared from 1967 to 1969. The year 1968 saw the less Tolkienian Gormenghast trilogy of Mervyn Peake, as well as *A Voyage to Arcturus* by David Lindsay. Like *The Lord of the Rings*, these works were originally released by “reputable” literary publishers. *The Last Unicorn*, a newer work by young writer Peter S. Beagle published in hardcover by Viking the previous year, appeared in 1969. The more impressionistic cover artwork of these releases served to distinguish them from the Sword and Sorcery releases of Lancer, Pyramid, and Ace: no doubt Ballantine wished to attract Sword and Sorcery readers, but they were also attempting to attract that uniquely Tolkien audience that Sword and Sorcery did not necessarily draw.

Enter Lin Carter. A younger writer who had begun to publish Sword and Sorcery, including Conan spin-offs in collaboration with de Camp, during the mid-1960s, Carter approached Betty and Ian Ballantine in 1967 with a proposed book on Tolkien. This was accepted and published as *Tolkien: A Look behind the Lord of the Rings* in early 1969. One of the chapters, “The Men Who Invented Fantasy,” gave a brief account of the nonpulp fantasy tradition preceding Tolkien, which dovetailed with what Ballantine had been attempting with their editions of Eddison, Peake, Lindsay, and Beagle. Sensing a good source for editorial direction, Ballantine contracted

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Carter as “Editorial Consultant” for their subsequent Ballantine Adult Fantasy Series, which commenced in spring 1969 (see 1Carter 269).

The importance of the BAFS in the shaping of the fantasy genre cannot be overestimated. It was the first time that fantasy was presented on its own terms as a genre in its own right. Though the volumes were inevitably destined for the science fiction sections in bookstores, the “SF” tag was gone, replaced by the “Adult Fantasy” Unicorn’s Head colophon;⁵ the garish, often lurid cover art became softer colored, drifting toward the impressionistic and the surreal; the muscle-bound swordsmen battling ferocious monsters (with the free arm around a scantily clad wench) were replaced by Faerie-ish landscapes. It was also the first time the peculiar cross section of work now considered seminal in the genre was drawn together under a unified rubric; to this day, it stands as the most substantial publishing project devoted to (mainly) pre-Tolkien fantasy.

Sheer quantity also lent the BAFS indelible impact. With 66 titles in 68 volumes published between 1969 and 1974 (regularly one and sometimes two a month before a slowdown in late 1972), the BAFS rapidly became the dominant force in fantasy publishing (whether tagged “SF” or not). There was no real competition. The bully pulpit engendered by this dominance gave the BAFS far-reaching influence in two crucial respects.

First, it gave the BAFS the power of defining the terrain. In *Tolkien: A Look behind the Lord of the Rings, Imaginary Worlds* (a study of the newly demarcated fantasy genre published in tandem with the BAFS in 1973), and in dozens of introductions to Series titles, Lin Carter repeated an operative definition of what was now simply termed “fantasy”: “A fantasy is a book or story . . . in which magic really works” and, in its purest form, is “laid in settings completely made up by the author” (1Carter 6–7). Carter further stipulates that fantasy circles around the themes of “quest, adventure, or war” (2Carter ix). Some four decades later, a wildly prolific body of work unambiguously reflects the terms of this template, then newly formulated under the aegis of the BAFS.⁶

Second, the quantity of titles, with primary emphasis on reprints,⁷ gave to the BAFS the power of determining a general historical canvas and implicitly shaping a “canon” of fantasy. Carter’s introduction to the 1969 BAFS edition of William Morris’s *The Wood beyond the World* begins with the portentous declaration: “The book you hold in your hands is the first great fantasy novel ever written: the first of them all; all the others, Dunsany, Eddison, Pratt, Tolkien, Peake, Howard, et al., are successors to this great original” (2Carter ix). This basic contention, like the aforementioned definition, was repeated over and over again in Carter’s commentaries and books, with Cabell, Clark Ashton Smith, de Camp, Leiber, Vance, and a few others rotating into the list of Morris’s followers, depending on

which recitation you encountered. The dispersal by author of the BAFS titles suggests how the canon-shaping nature of Carter's declarations were given body. The "major authors" were William Morris (four titles in five volumes), Lord Dunsany (six volumes), James Branch Cabell (six volumes), E. R. Eddison (four volumes), Clark Ashton Smith (four volumes), and Tolkien (six volumes).⁸ That the relevant work by Howard, Pratt and de Camp, Leiber, and Vance included in the BAFS was minimal in quantity⁹ reflects the fact that it was already available in editions by Ace, Lancer, and so on at the time, and Ballantine was not interested in issuing competing editions. On the basis of Carter's oft reiterated "list," however, those authors' work should rightly be considered part of the BAFS canon, though little of it actually appeared in Series releases.

Like the BAFS template, this informal canon has held through the succeeding decades. Despite its massive proportions and the breadth of the permutations of fantasy covered, John Clute and John Grant would declare in the introduction to *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (1997) that the late nineteenth- and twentieth-century authors representing "the heart of this enterprise" were "George MacDonald, William Morris, Lewis Carroll, Abraham Merrit, E.R. Eddison, Robert E. Howard, J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, L. Sprague de Camp and Fletcher Pratt, Fritz Leiber . . . and so on" (Clute and Grant viii). This is, more or less, the Carter/BAFS canon.¹⁰ Since the millennium, no doubt partly spurred by the renewed Tolkien boom following the Peter Jackson films, small publisher Wildside Press has mined the BAFS for titles for its classic fantasy series—even reprinting some Lin Carter introductions. It doesn't always seem to be remembered that this "canon" was functionally constructed by Carter and Ballantine Books three to four decades ago, cobbled together from work of widely disparate publishing backgrounds.

By 1974, then, a discrete genre, with a definition and a canon, had demonstrably emerged. Such a thing had not existed at all in 1960, and even in early 1969 it had consisted of a cross section of work appearing as a subbranch of science fiction (Sword and Sorcery) or as books for young readers,¹¹ with a few titles presented as loosely "Tolkienian." But while the discrete genre that emerged was predominantly shaped by Lin Carter and the BAFS, the series itself was not to last.

BAFS releases decreased markedly through the latter part of 1972 and 1973, and in 1974 they ceased entirely.¹² The degree of Ballantine's dominance in the field can be seen in the partial vacuum left in its wake.¹³ No new BAFS appeared in the commercial market, though a small press, the Newcastle Publishing Company, followed Ballantine with its Forgotten Fantasy Library, augmenting but not repeating BAFS titles with 24 trade-sized volumes between 1973 and 1979. Elsewhere, Bantam Books and Avon

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Books released a few newer books in BAFS style.¹⁴ But when a refurbished Ballantine reentered fantasy publishing in 1976, with a new look marked by the “fantasy realism” of the Brothers Hildebrandt and Darrell Sweet, and now edited by Judy Lynn and Lester del Rey, initial reprints were as often culled from work previously revived by the now defunct Lancer and Pyramid¹⁵ as from the former BAFS, and the latter usually appeared in garb reflecting the new aesthetic, with the Carter introductions eliminated.¹⁶ These works, and particularly the pre-Tolkien titles, were clearly no longer the core focus of Ballantine’s fantasy-publishing agenda.

The major shift in focus from the mid-1970s on was an increasing emphasis on new rather than “classic” titles. As noted, few writers had been actively producing such work in the 1960s. But by the mid-1970s, this had begun to change fairly rapidly. While newer work and first publications had been in the minority in the BAFS, the frequency of reprints suggests that they were among the bestselling titles. Unlike the bulk of the “classic” reprints, Peter S. Beagle’s *The Last Unicorn*, Katherine Kurtz’s initial three Deryni books, H. Warner Munn’s *Merlin’s Ring*, Joy Chant’s *Red Moon and Black Mountain*, and Evangeline Walton’s tetralogy based on *The Mabinogion*¹⁷ all continued to be reprinted frequently through the del Rey period, with Kurtz’s series spawning uncounted sequels. In a reversal of previous proportions, five of the final seven BAFS titles in 1973–74 had been new titles. With an established genre, new writers began more frequently to write to its specifications, and when the distillation of a more formulaic, Tolkien-derivative approach produced two major bestsellers a couple years later,¹⁸ the “classic” BAFS authors and titles were overshadowed. The BAFS volumes were less frequently reprinted and became progressively more difficult to find.

Since the focus of this study is the “canon” that was assembled by the BAFS—augmented by the relevant work available at the time through Ace Books, Lancer Books, and so on and hence not included in the series—I will break off the chronology here. Suffice to say, the bestseller genre that mushroomed in the late 1970s and early 1980s was an outgrowth of (and dependent on) developments in publishing that stretched back to the early 1960s. At a point in time when this bestseller genre has been around long enough to be taken for granted, it is important to note that it is not simply a timeless, unchanging entity, but was constructed, quite deliberately, to meet a new demand. The basic stages of the genre’s construction can be summarized thus: (1) the revival of interest in American Sword and Sorcery and the sudden commercial explosion of Tolkien’s work in the 1960s; (2) the isolation, naming, definition, and canonization of fantasy as a discrete genre between the late 1960s and mid-1970s, accomplished largely through the BAFS; and (3) the distilling of a bestseller formula for fantasy

in the late 1970s, which completed what Ballantine had initiated in turning fantasy into a sibling rather than a subcategory of science fiction. The BAFS serves as the crucial and necessary hinge between the first and third, consolidating the former into a fully articulated genre and laying the necessary conceptual groundwork for the latter.

Criticism: Fantasy and Fantasy

With the distillation of the genre, of course, came criticism. That fantasy was indeed constructed is borne out by the notable dearth of critical discussion of it in any capacity prior to the 1970s.¹⁹ Tolkien's essay, "On Fairy-Stories," given as a lecture in 1939 and first published in *Essays Presented to Charles Williams* (1947), edited by C. S. Lewis, is probably the most often cited essay from the pregenre period for critics laying out their conceptual groundwork. Tolkien's discussion—unsurprisingly, given the role of *The Lord of the Rings* in shaping the genre—floats ideas that cross fairly well with the contours of the genre. However, the modern works he cites tend to be Victorian and Edwardian works published for young readers.²⁰ And of course, the literary form that Tolkien discusses is the "Fairy-Story": "Fantasy" vacillates between a power of the human mind often evident in fairy-stories and a literary quality discernable in work in various forms. It is not treated as a literary form or genre. (I will return to this.) C. S. Lewis begins to chart something akin to the contemporary genre in his essay "On Science Fiction," given as a lecture in 1955 and published in *Of Other Worlds* (1966), edited by Walter Hooper. But here fantasy is presented as a subbranch of science fiction. L. Sprague de Camp's aforementioned introductions (see note 6) to his Pyramid Books anthologies, *Swords and Sorcery* (1963) and *The Spell of Seven* (1965), sketch the subsequent BAFS ground fairly precisely, though de Camp more specifically terms his focus "heroic fantasy," and his approach is brief and highly summary. The first full-length studies focusing on the genre as it emerged through the 1960s date to the 1970s.

The first of these was the aforementioned *Imaginary Worlds* (1973) by Lin Carter. Penned by its editor, and included as a title in the BAFS, the focus is, quite naturally, the canon constituted by the Series and related releases by Ace, Lancer, and so on. The core genre definition, the BAFS template, is the center of gravity, and Carter outlines in detail his historical framework, beginning with William Morris (with a nod back to traditional epic and romance) and proceeding through Dunsany, Eddison, Howard, and so on. The closing chapters form a kind of "how to" for aspiring "fantasy writers"—presumably for those writers whose work now proliferates on bookstore shelves.

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Another work of popular criticism was, not surprisingly, by L. Sprague de Camp, whose *Literary Swordsmen and Sorcerers: The Makers of Heroic Fantasy* was published by Arkham House in 1976. Apart from continuing to designate the form “heroic fantasy” and his rather arbitrary terminal date of 1950, de Camp’s ground is virtually identical to that of Carter (who provided the introduction to the study). His characterization of his subject as “tales of swordplay and sorcery in imaginary settings, where magic works” (de Camp 4) is functionally identical to Carter’s. At the same time, de Camp takes a bit more of a “major authors” approach,²¹ includes more detailed (and often more reliable) biographical information, and demonstrates rather more critical acumen.

A more academic study, C. N. Manlove’s *Modern Fantasy: Five Studies*, was published by Cambridge University Press in 1975. Unlike de Camp and Carter, Manlove was not an active player in the shaping of the genre, but his focus is, on the whole, amenable to the BAFS template. Manlove’s operative definition of fantasy, while couched in distinct terms, foregrounds similar concerns: “[A] fantasy is: A fiction evoking wonder and containing a substantial and irreducible element of supernatural or impossible worlds, beings or objects with which the mortal characters in the story or the readers become on at least partly familiar terms” (Manlove 1; italics are Manlove’s). Of Manlove’s five authors (Charles Kingsley, MacDonald, Lewis, Tolkien, and Peake), only Kingsley was an addition to the core BAFS canon, and while some of the works discussed hover on the borderline of the BAFS template,²² they do not dramatically depart from it.

Over the subsequent years, other studies followed the essential parameters of these: Manlove’s *The Impulse of Fantasy Literature* appeared in 1983; the first version of another popular study, Michael Moorcock’s *Wizardry and Wild Romance: A Study of Epic Fantasy*, appeared in 1987 and has been revised several times since;²³ Richard Mathews’s *Fantasy: The Liberation of Imagination* was published in 1997. And again, the “heart” of John Clute and John Grant’s massive *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (1997) situates itself in the BAFS canon.

However, some other studies of “fantasy” that appeared close on the heels of the genre’s emergence were apt to seem confusing to readers whose idea of it had largely been shaped by Tolkien, Sword and Sorcery, and the BAFS.

W. R. Irwin’s *The Game of the Impossible: A Rhetoric of Fantasy* appeared in 1976. While many of the names associated with the BAFS canon are liberally sprinkled throughout its pages (Tolkien, Morris, Dunsany, Eddison, Lewis, MacDonald), most are simply passing references, and sustained discussions of their work or ideas are few. Conversely, works by Anthony Burgess, G. K. Chesterton, William Golding, David Garnett, and others not

generally associated with the popular genre are discussed frequently and at length. It is quite clear that Irwin's focus is not that of Carter, de Camp, and so on. Not surprisingly, Irwin's delineation of fantasy as "that kind of extended narrative which establishes and develops an artifact, that is, plays the game of the impossible" (Irwin ix) carries a range of suggestion that is not particularly keyed to Morris or Eddison or Tolkien. Ironically, Irwin states that after 1957 the "spate [of fantasy] has all but run dry" (Irwin x)—implicit evidence that his focus is not what Ballantine dubbed fantasy.

Rosemary Jackson's *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* appeared in 1981 and moves more explicitly further from the BAFS canon and template: "The best-selling fantasies of Kingsley, Lewis, Tolkien, LeGuin, or Richard Adams are not discussed at great length . . . because they belong to that realm of fantasy which is more properly defined as faery, or romance literature" (Jackson 9). Closer to Jackson's concerns are Maturin, Hawthorne, Kafka, and Pynchon. Jackson's definition of fantasy reflects her key texts: "[F]antastic literature points to or suggests the basis upon which cultural order rests, for it opens up, for a brief moment, on to disorder, on to illegality, on to that which lies outside the law, that which is outside dominant value systems. The fantastic traces the unsaid and the unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made 'absent'" (Jackson 4). This is clearly afield from the territory staked by Carter, de Camp, and so on; though developed in more overtly psycho-cultural terms than Irwin's "game," phenomenally it points in a quite similar direction.

Again, these studies were apt to seem confusing to readers whose ideas about fantasy literature were shaped by the genre constructed in the wake of *Sword and Sorcery* and the Tolkien explosion.²⁴

It is tempting to ascribe this discrepancy to the conventional popular-versus-academic rift, with the former flawed for sloppy and imprecise terminology, while the latter, ensconced in the Ivory Tower, stubbornly ignores the fact of common usage. And there may be some substance to this: both Jackson's and Irwin's books are emphatically academic works of literary theory and criticism; all three of the nonacademic studies (Carter, de Camp, Moorcock) reflect the popular genre. In the introduction to his *The Oxford Book of Fantasy Stories* (1994), Tom Shippey remarks that "current academic definitions [of fantasy] . . . leave one wondering whether those who produce them ever stray into an ordinary bookshop at all" (Shippey xi).²⁵

However, to simply ascribe the confusion, such as it is, to academic pique centers attention on who is disagreeing with who rather than on the actual substance of the disagreement. The essence of the issue circles on the

use of the signifier *fantasy*: when Carter uses the term, he means one thing; when Jackson uses it, she means something quite different. Aptly, Shippey muses, “It is possible these arguments over definition are caused simply by reference to different things” (Shippey xii).

The academic definitions of Irwin and Jackson in fact represent a continuation of the term’s usage prior to the 1960s. While the peripheral status of “fantasy” of any kind in the literary world prior to the 1960s meant that it bred little criticism, and there are no book-length studies, there are anthologies, the contents of which suggest what types of stories “fantasy” connoted at the time. Probably the two most widely circulated anthologies of “fantasy” stories between the latter years of World War Two and 1960 are Philip van Doren Stern’s *The Moonlight Traveler: Great Stories of Fantasy and Imagination* (1943) and Ray Bradbury’s *Timeless Stories for Today and Tomorrow* (1953).²⁶ Both present their stories as, without any qualification, “fantasy.” Neither contains any stories in keeping with the BAFS template; nearly all the stories would respond well to the theoretical frameworks of Irwin or Jackson.²⁷

In the BAFS sense, the term was appropriated. Note that during the initial push during the earlier 1960s, the protogenre material was dubbed “Sword and Sorcery” and, secondarily, “Heroic Fantasy.” The qualifier *Heroic* suggests that some qualification was needed, that just *Fantasy* was not enough.²⁸ When Carter dubbed this work simply “fantasy” (with “Adult” qualifying audience, not form or content) in the late 1960s, it was the first time it had been collectively so designated. However, coming with an association with as widely read a book as *The Lord of the Rings*, while the earlier usage came attached to a fringe literary entity, common usage was bound to be affected considerably. *Fantasy*, later abetted by such extraliterary phenomena as Dungeons and Dragons, came to predominantly connote stories set in preindustrial invented worlds where magic works.

The two are essentially different things. Sometimes they jockey for claim to the term; sometimes attempts are made to define the term so as to be inclusive of both. In the latter case, the bonding consideration is that both contain elements that are contradictory to our post-Enlightenment consensus reality. But this runs dangerously close to simply dividing literature in half, with one half adhering, in content and presentation, to the “real” (or, perhaps more appropriately, the demonstrable) and the other half not. “Fantasy,” in this case, becomes so broad as to be virtually useless as a term indicating anything about narrative form. This bonding consideration, however, is also the point of distinction. In the case of Irwin and Jackson, the most representative work focuses on a character who shares our post-Enlightenment consensus reality, and the narrative tension tends to emerge from that character being confronted with some phenomenon that

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