

O B S E S S E D W I T H R E A D I N G !



High Plains Library District

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FEBRUARY 2025

Beyond the Books

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Erika Krouse

ReadCon Interview

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READCON

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ReadCon Interview with **Erika Krouse**

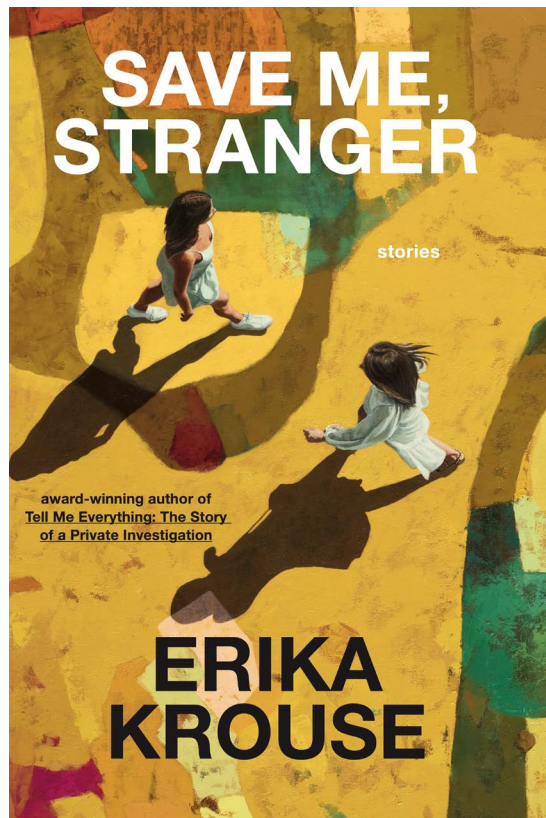
Last month we ran [our interview with Dan Jorgensen](#), honored ReadCon guest and author of [And the Wind Whispered](#) among others.

This month we bring you an interview with our second ReadCon 2025 guest, local author Erika Krouse.

From Erika's bio:

Erika Krouse is a writer of fiction and nonfiction. Her newest short story collection, *Save Me, Stranger*, was published by Flatiron Books in January 2025. *Save Me, Stranger* has been hailed as “a dozen little masterpieces,” by Adam Johnson, “remarkable” by Ann Beattie, and Louise Erdrich said, “Read these stories with a buddy, because someone will have to scrape you off the floor.”

Erika is also the author of *Tell Me Everything: The Story of a Private Investigation* (March 2022, Flatiron Books): winner of the 2023 Edgar Award for Best Fact Crime, the Colorado Book Award for Creative Nonfiction, and the Housatonic Book Award for Nonfiction. *Tell Me Everything* is also a *New York Times* Editors' Choice, a Book of the Month Club pick, a *People Magazine* People Pick, named “Best Nonfiction of 2022” by *BookPage* and *Kirkus Reviews*, and “Best 10 Books of 2022” by both *Slate* and *Jezebel*.



Erika went to middle school and high school in Japan, and earned her B.A. from Grinnell College. She earned her M.A. in English Literature & Creative Writing from the University of Colorado at Boulder, where she also taught creative writing classes. She teaches and mentors for the Lighthouse Book Project at the Lighthouse Writers Workshop in Denver, and is a winner of the Lighthouse Beacon Award for Teaching Excellence. Erika has won fellowships and scholarships to the Longleaf Writers Conference, Bread Loaf Writers Workshop, Sewanee Writers Workshop, and the inaugural Amtrak Residency.

And now, our interview!

High Plains Library District:
Thanks for emailing with me!

For your book, *Tell Me Everything*, you spent five years learning everything you could about being a private investigator. I think a lot of us have the occasional daydream of being a P.I., but what about those daydreams do you think we're romanticizing the most?

Erika Krouse: I was also guilty of romanticizing! The PI job is really about noticing people, listening to them, trying to hear what they're trying to say, or trying not to say... It's simple yet incredibly complex. There's a lot riding on each conversation because it might be your last one. Also, I was lucky enough to snag cases that were dramatic and

important, but I understand that most other P.I. work is kind of boring—skip-trace this deadbeat dad, get evidence for this one fact. You're often dealing with some of the worst human behavior possible, so it's not a good job for Pollyanna-ish/innocent people. I guess that fits the Humphrey Bogart stereotype, though.

HPLD: *Tell Me Everything* is a piece of investigative journalism while also being a little bit about you learning the PI business, and it delves into your personal life as well. Sometimes non-fiction features the writer/investigator during portions of the book, and sometimes the writer isn't very present in the story. What about this book or this story helped you decide how present you would be in the story?

EK: *Tell Me Everything: The Story of a Private Investigation* is about my work as a rookie private investigator on the first-ever Title IX sexual assault lawsuit in history. It was a dramatic and often ludicrous case that was getting lost to history, so I knew the main plot would be the case itself. However, if I had been writing the story as a novel, I'd wonder why it was being told from my perspective, since I was just a P.I. and not a plaintiff or attorney or one of the major players. I had to show why this was a personal and important story for me, given my own history with sexual violence, so I decided to use my own story as a subplot to serve the main plot of the case. Once I knew the hierarchy, it made all those decisions of balance relatively easy. But it was still hard to write about myself.

HPLD: *Tell Me Everything* involves Title IX and university

settings. I think a lot of folks know Title IX as the law that means men's and women's sports in college have to be equal in terms of the dollars that go into them, but I understand there's a lot more to it and that it may be quite a bit more complex?

EK: It is! At its heart, Title IX is a civil rights initiative. For a school to receive federal funding, it can't discriminate and must provide equal support for students of all genders. Our case changed the definition of Title IX so that support included safety as a civil right, for the first time. If a school used its female students as sexual bait for athletes, they were endangering women, discriminating against them, hindering their education, and treating them unequally. Our case showed that sexual assault isn't "just" a crime—it's also systemic, and a violation of our basic human right to safety and an equal education. I'm very proud to have played a (small) role in that change, even if it was just as a P.I.

HPLD: It seems like a lot of writers come to writing novels, short stories, and books through an education or experience in journalism, and it looks like you might've come to journalism through other forms of writing. Tell us a little bit about the difference in perspective this might have given you.

EK: I teach many "recovering journalists" working on their memoirs; they have an eye for story, they know what's interesting, and they're acute observers. You usually have to train them to turn that astute eye on themselves, but once they do that, they're total naturals. For *Tell*

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Erika Krouse **Paloma Barraza & Jane Thompson** **Dan Jorgensen**

Me Everything, I had to quickly learn the things that journalists pick up on automatically: what the angle of the story was, how to locate and follow the heat source, what I needed to build the arguments, what information was pertinent or extraneous, and how to organize it all. My final outline included court records, newspaper articles, timelines, etc., and it was over 100,000 words...basically the same length as the written memoir. All that research and inquiry made me appreciate real journalists, who might have 40,000 words of notes that they distill down into a single 5,000 word story.

HPLD: As of this interview, we're on the eve of the release of [a book of your short stories, *Save Me, Stranger*](#). Pre-congratulations! Tell us a bit about short stories. What is it about the short story that sets it apart from novels or longer works of non-fiction? Other than the length, that is :-)

EK: Thank you for the pre-congratulations! I think short stories are magical. Novels and memoirs have to carry the weight of hundreds of pages, so there are structural requirements to keep the story from sagging. But short stories have much more freedom to break the rules and experiment with form and subject. Without all that weight, they can really fly. And some of the short stories in *Save Me, Stranger* took over a decade to write and research, so they felt as ambitious as books to me. Short stories are my favorite genre to write in, but the minute I finish one, I have no idea how I did it, and it feels like I'll never pull it off again. Each time is a surprise.

HPLD: *Tell Me Everything* is a work of non-fiction that's very personal and revealing, and at the same time, some writers have said in interviews that they feel their fiction can feel more dangerous to release, almost like they feel more fully exposed by their fiction. Can you tell us a little bit about why a made-up story might feel more close-to-home for some writers?

EK: I get that. It's weird to say this, but some of the short stories in my upcoming collection, *Save Me, Stranger*, are more revealing than my memoir was (and that's really saying something). With fiction, you have plausible deniability; the story can hide behind the label of "fiction." You can reveal more of yourself than you might without that label and still feel safe...until the story is in print, for anyone to read! Fiction can also sometimes come closer to the emotional truth than the facts can.

HPLD: I see on your website that you submit short stories to literary magazines quite a bit, and you set a yearly goal for the number of rejections. That probably strikes non-writers as unusual, but tell us a little bit about why that goal is a helpful benchmark for you or perhaps a useful

re-framing of those rejection letters.

EK: Sylvia Plath said, "I love my rejection slips. They show me I try." This business is made of rejections, and there's a certain kind of bravado to having a rejection goal every year. Like, they can reject me but they can't shut me up! Paper the world! At this point in my career, my yearly acceptance rate is about 20%, which still means a lot of rejections. But when I get fifty or seventy rejections in a year, I usually get a lot of acceptances.

HPLD: You've got [a HUGE, in-depth ranking of literary magazines](#) that writers can submit to on your website. For the folks out there unfamiliar, tell us a little bit about why lit mags are so important to writers.

EK: If you sell a book, a respectable readership is 5,000 readers; I know that sounds like very little, but it's well above average. A literary magazine might already have 5,000 subscribers who read the magazine because they like it. So if you sell 12 stories to litmags, you can increase your readership by a factor of 12, or even more! It's also a way to feel like you're part of the larger literary conversation, between those spread-out book publications. And who doesn't want to see their work next to that of a writer they admire?

READCON

HPLD: You also do a lot of coaching and mentorship with writers. Certainly every writer is different, but can you give us

a super common issue that you see facing a lot of newer writers?

EK: The biggest issue I see in every manuscript, whether the writer is new or established, is a lack of agency for their protagonist, which usually makes the plot collapse. There's a kind of triangular math to it: a weak conflict means a weak antagonist means a passive protagonist, and it all adds up to a mushy plot. Balance and momentum are really hard to navigate in stories. It's why I have a job as a consulting editor. We all struggle with these issues.

HPLD: It seems like you spend a good amount of time helping other writers achieve their writing goals, mentoring, teaching, and providing resources on your website. It seems like you're part of a writing community that's very generous with time and experience as opposed to having "trade secrets" or something. What is it about the writing community that makes you want to do these sorts of things?

EK: Writers are my favorite people—they're intelligent, funny, curious about life, sensitive, ambitious, willing to grow, and idealistic enough to practice a very difficult art with very little encouragement. Writing is a community art; without readers, literature is just little black marks

on paper. We need each other. And even if you know all the “secrets” (do they even exist?), there’s a big difference between knowing and doing. This is hard stuff! We should help each other however we can.

HPLD: You do quite a bit of teaching at Lighthouse Writers in Denver. It feels to me like Lighthouse is kind of an outpost for writers outside of the university system and outside of New York City. What’s the importance of having something like this close to home?

EK: I adore Lighthouse Writers Workshop. Universities are wonderful, too, but they’re (understandably) focused on the academic system they’re part of, and not always as product- and process-minded as independent literary centers have to be. A nonprofit center like Lighthouse provides a physical and virtual space where writers can find their people, gather encouragement to write every day, and get a world-class writing education from writers they like to read. I think the Lighthouse Book Project is as good or better than any MFA program anywhere. I don’t think these amazing centers and programs need to be close to home, though. Now that we’re all Zoomtastic, I’ve had Lighthouse students all over Asia and Europe and South America. It’s wonderful to have such a global community.

HPLD: You meet with book clubs via Zoom when you’re available. Tell us a little bit about the experience of coming into a group of strangers who just finished reading your book. It sounds a bit terrifying in some ways, but also a lot of fun?

EK: I’m shy, so Zoom visits are an easier way to talk to a group of strangers. It’s also complicated when the book club has read my memoir, because everyone in the room knows a lot about me and I don’t know anything about them. In my regular life, usually I’m the one asking the questions! So it’s a stretch for me, but also a privilege to share my work with such dedicated and intelligent readers. I always feel honored to do it.

HPLD: You’re a martial artist, and you have a description of your strategy that goes: “the nail hammers the hammer with tiny, relentless strokes.” Do you feel like this idea is also reflected in your writing style or work strategy?

EK: That’s an interesting question; I think it does! I’m definitely the grizzled tortoise rather than the sprinting hare. I spend 90% of my writing time on revision and editing. I’ll spend hours searching on the word “the” to see if I used it too much, and I put work through a large number of quality control tests before sending it out to survive in the elements. I’ve heard writers talk about how brilliance simply bursts from their fingers in a gifted surge, but I think they’re lying. In fact, I know some of those writers and have read their early drafts, so I know they’re lying! I think intrepidity is part of the writing job.

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ReadCon is coming soon, Friday, April 11th, and we want to see all of you there! Head to <https://www.mylibrary.us/readcon> for more details and to save your seat!



READ All Year Long

Challenge yourself to read 12 books in a year with the Adults Read On program and earn prizes along the way! Adults (16+) can participate by picking up a paper log at any branch, by downloading the Beanstack Tracker App and following the instructions, or by visiting highplains.beanstack.org/reader365. For more details, check out www.MyLibrary.us/aro.

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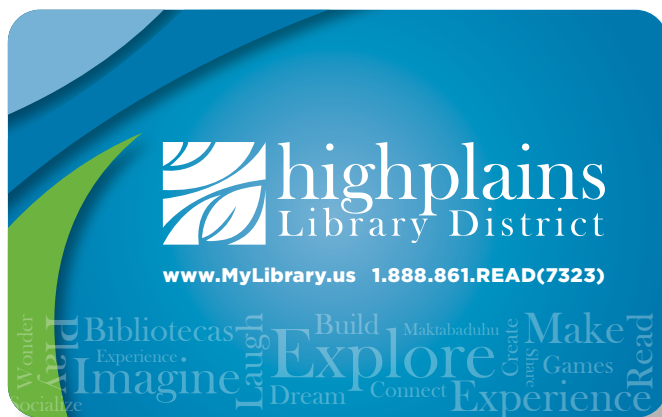
Beyond the **BOOKS:** *Part 1*

By David Sharp
Librarian
LINC Library Innovation
Center

My colleague and I had been shipped off to a small city in Texas where we attended a two-day seminar on becoming municipal leaders of the future. At each break, the presenter would make the rounds among the attendees, asking what city they were from, what department they worked for, and he would offer them some encouraging words.

He didn't make his way to us until near the end of day two, so we weren't surprised when he approached. The questions were just the same as we'd heard him ask other groups. "What city are you from?" he asked us. We told him. "What do you do there?" We told him we worked for the library and waited to hear what platitudes he had in store for us. His response was not forthcoming. His grin grew wider, and he nodded his head a few times. "Libraries. Yes," he said. "Those are important. Because..." I could hear the gears clicking during the pregnant pause. Eventually, he landed on, "Because someday, you know, the lights are going to go out. And we're really going to need you all then." He beat a hasty retreat, leaving us to process perhaps the most backhanded compliment—if it was a compliment—I had ever heard.

It seemed the presenter did not believe libraries were a



fertile ground for municipal leaders of the future. At his estimate, we were dusty bookkeepers huddled in our information warehouses desperately hoping for a zombie apocalypse to arrive so we could prove our worth. I wish I could say his opinion was an anomaly, but I fear it is not. When I meet new

people, they frequently ask what I do for a living. It's not that I expect applause when I tell them I'm a librarian, but it's not, NOT that either. Sadly, I am often met with confusion. Why would I be so proud of what they see as an outdated profession? Why do I seem to value libraries so much? And was I wearing that cape before I started talking about my job?

Unfortunately, many people hold outdated opinions of libraries because they haven't been in a library for so long. They picture librarians in beige cardigans, hair worn in tight buns, shushing anyone who speaks above a whisper and looking over their spectacles with condescending eyes. Your perception of libraries is likely more accurate because—let's face it—you're reading a library newsletter. That's a weird choice if you're a stranger to library services. But even amongst avid library users, I've found many people who don't realize the extent of our offerings, available to you for the low, low cost of just being you. To remedy that, I've decided we need a series of articles to take you beyond the books. I'd like to take you on a tour of the amazing, under-rated services we have available.

It's going to take more than one little article to cover them all—there's a lot, trust me—so, we'll get started with a few of my favorites. Ready? Then, buckle up!

Tech Check-Out: Books are a large part of the library's identity, but they're hardly the only thing you can check out with a library card.

When public libraries began, books were an expensive technology, expensive to produce and import, that were not often within the means of the average person. Libraries made them accessible to people. Books are not as expensive as they were, but what about laptops and wifi hotspots? Telescopes? GoPro cameras? Our specialty checkout service allows you to borrow all those out as well as park passes, projectors, and other expensive technologies. You can learn more about Specialty Checkout or [put something on reserve yourself here: https://www.mylibrary.us/specialtycheckouts/](https://www.mylibrary.us/specialtycheckouts/)

Book-a-Librarian: Did you know you can schedule your own personal session with a member of our knowledgeable library staff to help you with technology assistance, resume writing, online job hunting, research, genealogy, reading suggestions, or just general questions? We have many knowledgeable staff members covering a wide range of topics.

Send in your request, and we'll match you up to one of our staff members with the knowledge and experience to help. And, sure, there are some restrictions. We can't do your taxes for you or type out your will for example. But I know my colleagues across the district, and I can tell you a half-hour-or more with any of them is a bargain at any price. That they are available for free is unbelievable. Want to check it out? [Find out more about Book-a-Librarian here: https://www.mylibrary.us/bal/](https://www.mylibrary.us/bal/).

Personalized Reading Lists: Every January, one of the most common New Year's Resolutions is the desire to read more books. Obviously, a library card can go a long way to making that happen. But many people struggle to find a title that excites them. Is that a familiar problem for you? Whether it is or not, our library district offers a stunning personalized reading list service. You tell us what you like, we'll compile a whole list of books we think will blow your mind. It was one of the first things I tried when I started with High Plains ten years ago, and some of the books on my first list are personal favorites to this day.

Now, I realize this is a very book-centric service in an article called *Beyond the Books*, but it's too awesome to skip over. If you haven't applied for your personal reading list, what are you waiting for? You can find [the quick and easy \(and fun\) Personalized Reading List form right here: http://www.mylibrary.us/readinglist](http://www.mylibrary.us/readinglist)

Free Printing: Do you know you have \$2.00 worth of free prints on your library card every month? Furthermore, did you realize that amounts to 200 standard black-and-white pages, 40 standard color pages, or any combination between? You can even print larger paper sizes for the cost

of a quarter.

Many of you are familiar with the library's printing services, but we still encounter people daily who have no idea we offer such a thing.

Are you tired of wrestling with your own ink-jet printer or paying expensive costs to have someone print things for you? Dig that library card out and come to the library. In addition to printing, you can photocopy, fax, and scan physical documents to an email.

Online Subscriptions: Have you ever wanted to get started with Ancestry.com and start building your family tree? Or maybe it's time to make a major purchase, and you'd like to confer with Consumer Reports. Subscription-based services can be really useful, but subscription costs can stack up quickly.

That's where we come in.

We already have subscriptions to Ancestry, *Consumer Reports*, numerous magazines both online and in print, Alldata (a database of car repair manuals), local and national newspapers via Newsbank, and tons of other resources.

And that means [YOU have subscriptions to all those things too if you have a library card: https://www.mylibrary.us/learn/](https://www.mylibrary.us/learn/)

Many of these are available online without requiring you to even come to the library.

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There you have it: five amazing services your library offers, and that's just a taste. I'm not even going to tackle all the maker services, gaming events, streaming content, and community spaces because they'll need articles of their own to do them any justice. But, these alone are enough to demonstrate two things.

1. Libraries are valuable NOW. They're not a contingency plan for the end of the world. They are the public Research and Development department, an entertainment conglomerate, and a community space all rolled into one. Are you getting the most out of your library card? You don't have to wait for a zombie uprising to start. And that brings me to the second thing:

2. Libraries would be AMAZING in a zombie uprising! You WANT us on your side. Librarians are some of the most versatile people imaginable with such an eclectic menu of skillsets, an inhuman capacity for information and research, and an incredible aptitude for organization. Trust me, I've seen a full-length presentation on the subject (Hats off to you, Jeremy and Layne!). Two weeks, we will not only have established a bastion of civilization, we'll have trained the zombies to reshelve books in a Dewey Decimal arrangement.

Did you see any services you didn't know about? Give them a try! And get the most out of your library in 2025.

Defying Gravity



(With Books)

by Case Rasek
Library Associate and Library Page
Farr Regional Library

Are we born booklovers? Or do we become booklovers?

Aside from being the main theme of *Wicked* (well, alright, maybe not the main theme, but there was a pretty awesome scene with a rotating library), this is, without a

doubt, a question we all ask ourselves at some point.

Was the first time you felt the—dare I say—*scandalocious* joy of checking out honest-to-Oz books with a real, honest-to-Oz library card when you knew? Or was it less black-and-white, less...pink-and-green? Maybe you were someone who came to the bookish side more slowly, possibly after a broad character arc accompanied by lots of singing and timed choreography.

I remember when I first knew. It happened, unsurprisingly, at school. Third grade, to be exact. I'd already come to see myself as different. I wasn't green or anything, but I did tend to get a little more ahead in my studies than other students, particularly in literature.

Sitting in a loft in my school's library, reading books of my choice, waiting for my teacher to come up with a lesson plan that could successfully challenge me, I felt the exhilaration of being an outcast. For hours at a time, I would sit and gobble up books greedily, and they came to be a part of my identity. I knew then what I was in for.

Reading has always been an experience for me, a brief submersion into another state of being. And it's simple. It doesn't require a hot air balloon or a tornado or even a magic spell. The act of reading itself, of opening a book and seeing words on the pages but also images in the mind, is magic. Once you get a taste of that altered state of consciousness, you're hooked! You (almost) never go back.

The question so many of us wrestle with, I think, is what these kinds of experiences mean for our own identities. In other words: when bookloving ceases to be a simple, pleasant hobby and instead becomes a full-blown character trait. *[insert shocked Munchkin squeals here]* What kind of person does that make you? And what other parts of you grow or change because of it? Obviously, it's impossible to be popular and nerdy, right? Good and evil? These kinds of things beg to be clean-cut. *Galinda-fied*, I might even say.

And yet.

A lot of people have strong ideas about libraries and library workers. Someone once told me, "You're all just a bunch of book nerds there." And while that hurt at the time, I can definitely laugh about it now, mostly because they were absolutely right!

We know we're wicked—wickedly obsessed with reading, that is. And the best part? We're okay with it, too.

Call us book nerds, literature geeks, whatever you like! It's all true, and we love it. Some of us might also be accurately referred to as computer wizards, videogame connoisseurs, thespians, musicians, weightlifters, bakers, and artists, to give just a few examples. Maybe that's not what people have in mind when they think of bookish library folk, but then again, most books don't have all their content written on the cover.

When I crossed over into the mysterious realm of libraries, with shelving carts and personalized reading lists swirling around me like swarms of flying monkeys, I realized that bookloving can be a journey and a state of existence. We might fall into it slowly, spellbindingly, or it might come fast—a sort of race into the sunset, hurdling through page after page of our life-books with wanton exuberance, leaving snippets of stories in well-worn pieces close to our hearts. And if that makes us booklovers through and

through, well, we wouldn't have it any other way.

Perhaps asking if one is born or made a booklover is asking the wrong question. What if it's enough to simply love reading? And whether it's because your Dulcibear read bedtime stories to you as a child or because you recently found out that BookTok is a real thing and you just couldn't resist reading that dark fantasy novel you heard about, we library workers think that's pretty cool. And we wouldn't dream of trying to label you as anything but yourself.

So, if you care to find us, look to the Weld County skies! We'll be here, reveling in our bookloverishness, exulting in the thrill of stories, words, and language. You know, diabolical stuff like that. Are you coming?

See, the thing is, here at HPLD, we know what we're up against. There are plenty of Fiyeros and G(a)lindas out there who will tell you that reading is a waste of time. And, especially in today's hustle-and-bustle, they might be right.

But maybe there are a few Elphabas out there, too, who know that the right book (and it doesn't even have to be the Grimmerie) can transport you, change you.

Maybe, just maybe, for good.

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