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Karen Roggenkamp

Texas A & M University - Commerce

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Seeing Inside the Mountains: Cynthia Rylant's Appalachian Literature and the "Hillbilly" Stereotype

Karen Roggenkamp

In the 1992 Newbery Award-winning novel *Missing May*, Ob, an economically disadvantaged veteran living on West Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains, designs and manufactures whirligigs, wooden knickknacks that spin in the wind and divert animal intruders. While whirligigs typically depict such figures as Garfield the cat or roadrunners "whose legs spun in the wind," Ob's are far more than quaint, "worthless kitsch" (Rylant, *Missing May* 6; Harkins 8). To him they are nothing less than an art he calls "The Mysteries," complex representations of "Thunderstorm," "Fire," "Love," "Dreams," and "Death" (Rylant, *Missing May* 6–7). But Ob's most intricate whirligig, which has "more little spinning parts than any of the rest," is named after his deceased wife, May, and the "spinning parts" are her "Spirit" (7).

Ob's whirligigs serve as a fitting symbolic portal into Cynthia Rylant's Appalachia because the art materializes Rylant's thematic focus. In *Missing May* and numerous other works, this award-winning author quietly challenges misperceptions of Appalachia and Appalachians. If Ob, as a West Virginia native, possesses the ability to see The Mysteries where others see only primitivistic whittling or, more pejoratively, tacky wooden trash cluttering the yards of mountain families, then Rylant's Appalachian works likewise depict characters who possess an ability to see beyond external markers and predictable interpretations, and who seek an emotional and spiritual interiority based on family, love, and sense of place. In such works as *When I Was Young in the Mountains* (1982), *Waiting to Waltz, A Childhood: Poems* (1984), *A Blue-Eyed Daisy* (1985), *The Relatives Came* (1985), *Appalachia: The Voices of Sleeping Birds* (1991), *Missing May* (1992), *The Blue Hill Meadows* (1997), and *Silver Packages: An*

Appalachian Christmas Story (1997), Rylant, herself a native of West Virginia, positions her vision of a nurturing, mysteriously spiritual Appalachia over some of the stereotypes non-Appalachians have used to frame the state and the region.

For well over a century, Appalachia has served as the butt of countless jokes and pejorative stereotypes. While most culturally sensitive people would today studiously avoid denigrating other American cultural groups and ethnicities, Appalachians are subject still to open prejudice from outsiders. Scholars have highlighted the tenacity of this bias in literature, media, and popular culture. Mary Jean Herzog remarks that “prejudice against Southerners, particularly those from the Appalachian mountains, is so entrenched that it goes unquestioned. . . . [R]idiculing Appalachian ‘hillbillies’ continues to be perfectly acceptable behavior in American culture” (127). Alfe Walle is more direct:

While “Amos and Andy” may have been banned from the airways, . . . “The Beverly Hillbillies” reruns continue. “Sambo” might have been outlawed, but the incestuous Moonshiner survives in the public media. Precisely because they are white and Protestant, Appalachian hillfolk have emerged as the Last Jews, the Last “Niggers,” the Last “Polocks,” the Last “Wild Indians,” the Last foreigners, and the Last scapegoats when mass media needs a debased character as in *Deliverance*, *Easy Rider*, and insipid teleplays built around cliché and prejudice. (66)

The images and assumptions I refer to here as “the hillbilly stereotype” have evolved into cliché precisely because they have appeared largely unchallenged in American print and media over the last two centuries. Since the era of Southern colonial exploration, Appalachia has evoked the “notion of a cultural backwater, an area of dark, deep, smoky woods, . . . ‘hillbillies,’ clans, unkempt children, domestic animals running amuck, and ‘moonshine’ liquor” (Kupitz 38). Exploration narratives, sensational novels, regional fiction, travelogues, films, comics, television shows—all have contributed to solidifying an image of Appalachians as a generally distasteful, sometimes romanticized, pre-modern “other” in the eyes of non-Appalachian Americans.

Children’s literature has not, historically, been free from these prejudices. But several contemporary children’s writers have built a body of works that challenge the hillbilly stereotype.¹ This article examines one of the most prolific of these authors, Cynthia Rylant, and investigates her reclamation of Appalachia as a place that one must learn to see “inside,” or more deeply than stereotype would allow. In spare, largely unadorned prose, she strips her Appalachia bare in order to present its essential humanity to her readers. She invites readers to reinterpret Appalachia, to see beyond the deceptive external image and to perceive instead the great “interiority” of

the mountains, much the way Ob sees an internal “Mystery” within the potentially misleading exterior form of the whirligig.

This invitation to see inside the mountains is most evident in Rylant’s early picture books, *When I Was Young in the Mountains* (1982) and *The Relatives Came* (1985), as well as in her 1992 Newbery Award-winning novel *Missing May*. Rylant’s prose in the picture books celebrates the love, unity, and faithfulness of Appalachian families. But a tension emerges between word and image, for the illustrations by Diane Goode and Stephen Gammell present external images that draw upon long-standing and problematic caricatures of Appalachia. The result is that while Rylant’s prose directs attention away from stereotype, the illustrations serve to reinforce stereotype. The books’ images rehearse two of the dominant modes of characterization, picturing Appalachians either as sloppy, impoverished, “rednecks” or as sentimentalized, romanticized folk. Rylant avoids this tension between word and image in *Missing May*, which ultimately emerges as a more direct reclamation of West Virginia and Appalachia. The novel circles around vision motifs, and the characters’ own journeys toward self-perception invite a secondary consideration of how external markers falsely encode the hillbilly stereotype. Even as she seems to include stereotypical “hillbilly images” in the novel (trailers, poverty, obesity, and the like), Rylant turns those elements on their head, deconstructing them in an act that forces us to reconstruct our notion of what “West Virginian” means—and what the attached external codes mean as well. Together, these three books reveal Rylant’s gentle insistence that the reader of Appalachia must travel past the rough exteriority of the hillbilly stereotype and perceive instead the deep psychological and familial interiority she identifies in her own southern mountains.

The Hillbilly Stereotype

A reading of Rylant’s subversion requires understanding how literary and media texts have characterized the region. “Appalachia” designates an enormous and diverse space, socially, economically, culturally, and geographically, a 200,000 square mile area that lies along the contour of the Appalachian Mountains, extending from southern New York to northern Mississippi and covering thirteen states, including all of Rylant’s native West Virginia. Although Appalachia encompasses several Mid-Atlantic states, most negative images of the region target the southern states, particularly those with a strong rural identity (42 percent of Appalachia’s population is rural, compared to a national average of 20 percent).

For over two centuries, rural southern Appalachia has been mocked by Americans who live outside of the region. Until recently, Appalachia

did not, in essence, “speak for itself but was spoken to and about—by missionaries, journalists, northern educators, and by professional writers with a quick eye and ear for marketable quaintness and exotica” (Miller, “Appalachian” 87). These outside voices forged a set of detrimental images that persist to this day. Early travel narratives, sociological essays, sensational and humorous fictions, films, and even comic strips molded a picture of Appalachia designed for consumption by non-Appalachian readers and viewers. Almost invariably, Appalachia and its residents were “presented to readers in terms of their ‘otherness,’” and they were marginalized from the rest of the nation in terms of morality, dignity, and intelligence (Miller, “New” 32).

Two dominant—and lingering—subtypes emerged from these popular portrayals. On a relatively benign note, the residents of Appalachia have been read as “good country folk”—the Appalachian equivalent of the “noble savage.” Within the bounds of this caricature, Appalachians are depicted as “quaint” and “kindly” people who offer “a simple folk wisdom.” They are gullible, loyal, community-oriented, and spiritual; but they are also ultimately “uneducated” and ignorant (Miller, “New” 33). This hillbilly may be “stalwart, forthright, and picturesque,” but he is also an image constructed to marginalize and exoticize the Appalachian (Harkins 4). Conversely, and more pejoratively, Appalachians are read as “poor white trash,” “hillbillies,” or “rednecks,” the Appalachian equivalent of the “ignoble savage.” This Appalachian is violent, ignorant, and racist; his home (a trailer or shack) is filthy, his yard cluttered by trash and rusted out car chassis; his religion is characterized by absolutist fundamentalism; he is “crude, violent, unstable, colorful, mentally deficient” (Freeman 266).

Although most readers today can readily identify an array of television and film images that denigrate Appalachia, the stereotyping has a much longer print tradition, and a sampling of early texts demonstrates the energy of these stereotypes in action. William Byrd observed in his 1728 survey of Virginia and North Carolina that the men of this region seemed utterly content to live in squalor and poverty. One man he met during his travels lived on “good land” and enjoyed “good health and good limbs to work it” (Byrd 87). Yet this man sought nothing more ambitious than “indolence and idleness,” which Byrd characterized as “the general character of the men in the southern parts of [Virginia] as in North Carolina” (87). The residents of Appalachia were, in Byrd’s estimation, manipulative, lascivious, and provincial, and these views laid the groundwork for later writers in their perceptions of rural white Southerners.

Americans of the antebellum urban north consumed the fictionalized antics of such characters as George Washington Harris’s Sut Lovingood

("a nat'ral born durn'd fool") and Johnson J. Hooper's Simon Suggs, a "trashy Cracker" and swindler who wanders the countryside while his family "exist(s) in true, woolhat poverty" (McIlwaine 49). Travel writing in the post-bellum period—exemplified by an 1873 travel piece by Will Wallace Harney entitled "A Strange Land and Peculiar People"—extended "the concept of Appalachia as a spatially and culturally remote remnant of a bygone day" (Billings 21). Similarly, late nineteenth-century local-color writers drew upon the popularity both of regional writing and of "poor white trash" imagery. Perhaps the most influential of these regional writers was John Fox, Jr., author of such works as *A Cumberland Vendetta* (1895) and *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine* (1908) and the novelist "who, more than anyone else, inscribed the mythic image of the Kentucky mountaineer that endures to this day" (Blee and Billings 121). His books drew favor among non-Appalachian readers by "transform[ing] his fictional mountaineers into derelicts slowly sinking into a mire of regression" and by casting Appalachia itself as "a reservation for the weak and depraved" (Walle 61). Writing in highly stylized "mountain dialect," Fox's tale of a pointless family feud (à la Hatfield and McCoy) in *A Cumberland Vendetta* pits a cast of vengeful characters against one another. Fueled by moonshine, the families strive to "start [a] little frolic" before it can be spoiled by such nuisances as preachers and the law (137).

Not all early texts focused on moonshine and feuding. Some drew instead from a bank of stereotypes that exoticized the Southern mountains into a "picturesque foreign [locale]" filled with "illiterate but moral and proud modern Americans" (Harkins 29, 30). Such authors as Mary Noailles Murfree, Will Wallace Harvey, and Charles Dudley—among numerous others whose stories of "local color" were consumed voraciously by urban magazine readers in the late nineteenth century—offered a romanticized Appalachia to serve as a complex repository of old-fashioned, communal "American values," even as, by implication, they reinforced "the benefits of modern industrial society" (Harkins 30). Authors wistfully stuck a "noble savage" of the hill country into a pre-industrial past that stood in start contrast to "the energized, fast-paced world of urban industrializing America" (Harkins 30). Paradoxically, though, the romantic image served to validate America's perpetual movement forward and to undercut readers' potential misgivings about the cost of America's increasing urbanity. These people stood in proxy for old home values—community, self-sufficiency, family, proximity to nature—that were at risk of annihilation in the face of an increasingly fractious society. Thus, readers were ironically reassured about the legitimacy of modern society, for a portion of the population still embodied a more rustic identity that Americans were not psychologically

ready to cast aside. The problem, of course, was that this stereotyping of the Appalachian as a romantic other still marginalized and ghettoized a portion of the population. In addition, it used the stereotyping to divert attention from the very real problems facing modern urban America and modern Appalachia alike.²

This kind of stereotyping painted a comparatively gracious picture of Appalachia, but as the early examples of Byrd, Harris, and Fox demonstrate, this more gentle form of stereotyping has not been normative. Negative projections onto a hillbilly “other” are pervasive, and such fictions as William Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* (1930), Erskine Caldwell’s *Tobacco Road* (1932) and *God’s Little Acre* (1933), Tom Kromer’s *Waiting for Nothing* (1935), James Dickey’s *Deliverance* in both novel and film forms (1970 and 1972), Breece Pancake’s collected stories (1983), and Robert Schenkkan’s Pulitzer Prize-winning *Kentucky Cycle* (1993) have repackaged the hillbilly image for contemporary audiences who are still eager to travel through what Cleanth Brooks called “a rubberneck tour of rural slums” (qtd. in Miller, “New” 33). Quite literally in *Deliverance*, novelist Dickey sends a group of urban men on a tour of backwater Georgia, and they leave anticipating that in the mountains they will encounter generally people who are “awfully clannish” and “set in their ways” (45). “Every family I’ve ever met up here has at least one relative in the penitentiary,” the tough-minded Lewis tells his friends. “Some of them are in for making liquor or running it, but most of them are in for murder. They don’t think a whole lot about killing people up here. They really don’t” (45). The novel’s narrator adds that the “few times” he “had ever been in the rural South,” a place he refers to as “the country of nine-fingered people,” he “had been struck by the number of missing” digits, literally and figuratively:

Offhand, I had counted around twenty [missing fingers], at least. There had also been several people with some form of crippling or twisting illness, and some blind or one-eyed. . . . You’d think that farming was a healthy life, with fresh air and fresh food and plenty of exercise, but I never saw a farmer who didn’t have something wrong with him, and most of the time obviously wrong (Dickey 56)

Like all stereotypes, the image of the physically deformed Appalachian has its root in reality—the dangerous work many Appalachians take by necessity can lead to missing fingers, crippling injury, and blindness. The narrator of *Deliverance*, however, focuses not on the harsh economic realities that have led to these deformities, but on reading the deformity as an indicator of the character flaws supposedly inherent to the resident of the mountains. The stereotyping continues as the urban men of *Deliverance* reach the back country, encountering people who seem to surpass their jaundiced expectations: “An old man with a straw hat and work shirt ap-

peared at Lewis' window. . . . He looked like a hillbilly in some badly cast movie, a character actor too much in character to be believed" (Dickey 55). Indeed, Dickey's "mountain man" is so fully in character that the reader need not linger over potential subtleties or contradictions beneath the exterior form. The travelers' preconceptions of rural Appalachians have prepared them to see missing fingers, moonshiners, potential murderers—all of central casting's most convincing accoutrements of wardrobe, derangement, and physical deformity. The men get just what they expect as *Deliverance* itself repackages and delivers the same stereotypes again for its own readers and viewers. And judging from the phenomenal commercial success of both book and film, audiences continue to consume the imagery without guilty pause.³

In the judgment of these and other cultural texts, then, Appalachians have been permanently stunted by grinding (and self-enforced) poverty, moonshine, family feuds, idleness, inbreeding, foolishness, intolerant religious beliefs, bigotry, and either moral degeneration or eternal childishness. Together, the stereotypes have come to represent "all that is essential about Appalachian peoples" in the minds of many non-Appalachians, reducing "a complex regional society that is peopled by diverse groups to a set of simplistic caricatures" (Blee and Billings 120). The result of such imaginative flight is the use of Appalachia as "a dumping ground" for the "fears" and "dreads," of non-Appalachian Americans, ultimately transforming the rural south into an "an ultimate Otherplace, and Appalachians" themselves as "ultimate Otherpeople—'creatures' existing like garbage dump rats in 'the hills of an American inferno'" (Miller, "New" 33).

In the face of these entrenched stereotypes, however, writers have endeavored to separate the reality of Appalachia from the image. Since the early 1970s Appalachian artists have conscientiously labored to overturn stereotypes, broadcast their voices, and reclaim Appalachia, its people, its diversity, and its traditions for themselves. Children's authors have added their voices to this broader cultural project, and Rylant's work offers one of the strongest calls to revise perceptions of Appalachia. Since 1982 she has lyrically urged a redefinition of Appalachia based on her own experiences, and her unsettling of hillbilly stereotypes asks us to read beyond the exterior image of Appalachia in *The Relatives Came*, *When I Was Young in the Mountains*, and *Missing May*.

*Images of Appalachia: The Relatives Came and When I Was Young
on the Mountains*

Some of Rylant's best-known reclamations of Appalachian life appear in two of her early picture books, *When I Was Young in the Mountains* (1982)

and *The Relatives Came* (1985), both of which were named Caldecott Honor books by the American Library Association. As picture books, however, these works present an unintentional tension between word and image. Read without the accompanying illustrations, Rylant's evocative prose depicts people of depth, love, and complexity, despite the seeming simplicity of the writing. But the illustrations—the more dominant, immediately accessible picture of Appalachia quite literally drawn for the reader—present characters and settings problematically drawn out of the long history of hillbilly stereotyping. In both *The Relatives Came* and *When I Was Young on the Mountains*, a gap opens between the exterior picture of Appalachia, drawn by someone other than Rylant, and the “internal” picture of Appalachia drawn in Rylant's prose. In *Missing May*, as we will see, Rylant bridges the gap between interior and exterior by developing the themes of perception and misperception. But the picture books expose a cleft between image and message, “exterior” illustration and “interior” prose. Examination of *The Relatives Came* and *When I Was Young in the Mountains* reveals the use of stereotype in illustration even while Rylant strives, textually, to undermine stereotype with an affirmative vision of Appalachia and Appalachians. Ultimately, Rylant's loving Appalachian families are undercut by the works' pictures, creating an indelible tension between text and image that underscores the power of the hillbilly stereotype, even in the face of Rylant's textual revisions.

Through Rylant's prose, both *The Relatives Came* and *When I Was Young in the Mountains* proclaim Appalachia as a rich, nurturing place. In *The Relatives Came*, a youthful narrator shares the joy and excitement of a family reunion when relatives “came up” from Virginia in “an old station wagon that smelled like a real car,” leaving “at four in the morning when it was still dark, before even the birds were awake.” When the relatives finally arrive in the narrator's “different” mountains, her family's house is filled with “laughing, and shining faces and hugging in the doorways. You'd have to go through at least four different hugs to get from the kitchen to the front room.” The days of the visit pass in a giddy stream of “hugging and eating and breathing together.” When the beloved relatives finally “[load] up their ice chest and [head] back to Virginia at four in the morning,” the narrator and her family watch the car recede into the mountains before “crawl[ing] back into our beds that felt too big and too quiet” and begin dreaming of next summer's visit.

Rylant's prose conveys the excitement, warmth, and love the narrator feels for “those relatives.” The visit is not punctuated with carefully-planned outings or exciting activities per se. Rather, the family members simply spend time together performing simple tasks that reinforce a sense

of community: tending the garden, fixing “any broken things they could find,” eating and sleeping and breathing together in one big room. The text’s thematic emphasis, then, celebrates the essential qualities of family unity and personal relationships; without the illustrations, we are presented with a warm, loving family that happens to be Appalachian, judging by the geographical note of “coming up” from the mountains of Virginia. The fact of their “Appalachianness” is simply an external, superficial point that yields before the real story: the family.

In similar fashion, *When I Was Young in the Mountains*, Rylant’s first published work, offers a reminiscence of Rylant’s early life—indeed, she wrote the book in memory of her own childhood, much of which was spent with her coal-mining grandparents in rural West Virginia. Building on the refrain “when I was young in the mountains,” the narrator of the story celebrates the stability offered by a deeply entwined family. This brief survey of childhood is punctuated by evocative memories: kisses from her grandfather at the end of day; her Grandmother’s hot cocoa heated on “the old black stove”; visits to a country store whose proprietors “always smelled of sweet milk”; church baptisms in the local swimming hole; the sounds of “frogs at dusk” and “cowbells outside our windows”; evenings spent on the porch swing with Grandfather, who “sharpened my pencils with his pocketknife,” and with Grandmother, who “braided my hair, while “dogs lay around us and the stars sparkled in the sky.” “When I was young in the mountains,” the narrator concludes, “I never wanted to go anywhere else in the world, for I was in the mountains. And that was always enough.”

Despite the kinship of the family and the sense of place pervading the text, Rylant also hints at economic struggle in her prose. Rylant’s own early life was far from easy. Her grandparents’ house lacked many of the basic comforts of modern America: indoor plumbing, television, and books—Rylant did not even enter a library until she enrolled in college. To the extent that this book is autobiographical, the family she depicts in *When I Was Young in the Mountains* experiences a similar degree of material hardship. They use an outhouse rather than an indoor toilet, and their bath water must be pumped at a well, carried up a hill, and heated on an “old black stove.” The children find their summer entertainment in a “dark and muddy” swimming hole populated with snakes. Grandfather comes home from work covered head to toe with “the black dust of a coal miner.” Despite these indicators of economic disadvantage, however, Rylant’s emphasis once more rests squarely on the “internal” facts of life, spiritual and familial wealth. She has remarked that during her childhood, what her family lacked in physical comfort was more than compensated

in emotional wealth. In her Newbery acceptance speech for *Missing May*, she described her upbringing “in an atmosphere of forgiveness, and this may be the finest gift God has given me on this earth” (416). Likewise, if *When I Was Young in the Mountains* provides brief details about the impoverished external conditions of life—the murky and snake-infested swimming hole, the “johnny-house,” coal mining—these details are overshadowed by the spiritually rich people who inhabit the pages of the book. To perceive the internalized qualities of the narrator and her family is to perceive what made young life on the mountains so valuable.

The text of *When I Was Young in the Mountains*, then, manipulates a rhetorical trick that Rylant also uses effectively in *Missing May*, discussed below. As in the novel, Rylant presents the reader with details frequently used to stereotype Appalachians negatively—outhouses, muddy swimming holes, fundamentalist religiosity, coal mining, and so on. But rather than allowing those details to dictate a prescribed response to the text, Rylant reclaims them from the realm of stereotype and shifts her attention to the interiority of the characters. She accents emotional, spiritual, and familial comfort, not material comfort. The economic status of this family is but a superficial concern, and the perceptive reader will see past such external markers to focus instead on kinship.

Textually, *The Relatives Came* and *When I Was Young in the Mountains* contribute to Rylant’s thematic messages of familial and spiritual wealth, of finding comfort in people and place rather than in things. However, the illustrations for the two works create a problematic tension with the narrative. Scholars of the picture book as a genre have pointed out that the “relationship of words and pictures are complex” and that “a text may amplify, distort, and even reverse the meanings of the pictures it accompanies”—and vice versa (Nodelman 20). *The Relatives Came* and *When I Was Young in the Mountains* deserve consideration in terms of their own complexity, with an eye to questioning how the images “distort” and “reverse” Rylant’s text. A close reading of the illustrations as narratives themselves reveals use of the very stereotyping that Rylant’s prose strives to see beyond.

The Relatives Came pairs Rylant’s warm memory of a family reunion with Stephen Gammell’s humorous colored-pencil drawings, and casual reviewers of the picture book generally respond with enthusiasm toward these illustrations. A look at some of the reader reviews posted at online bookstore websites, however, lays the groundwork for consideration of how Gammell’s illustrations may ultimately overshadow or even undermine Rylant’s message. One reviewer comments that “the strength of the book is in its illustrations, which warmly capture emotional closeness,

like being tucked into bed by your Mom after a wonderful but tiring day” (Mitchell). Gammell’s “happy, soft and fuzzy” images and “rounded faces and bodies” create a mood, for this reader, where all the characters seem “very open and comfortable in hospitable surroundings. I have rarely seen a book that sets a better illustrated tone for a friendly family gathering” (Mitchell). Several reviewers contend that Rylant’s story itself “is not as strong as the illustrations,” though, as one concedes, it is “more than adequate” (Mitchell). Another reviewer asserts that “these amazing illustrations,” infused as they are “with a vast rainbow of colors,” “bring out new meaning in Rylant’s text” (“A Reader”). This reader claims that the illustrations “almost [tell] the story without the text” and, indeed, go far beyond the text in advancing a storyline. The writer points to a particular scene in which Gammell depicts the family eating together. Rylant’s words for this scene are spare, yet evocative: “And finally after a big supper two or three times around until we all got a turn at the table, there was quiet talk and we were in twos and threes through the house.” Despite the comfortable, communal mood Rylant’s words alone seem to suggest here, the reviewer argues that the illustration tells a much more detailed—and thus better—story: “The food is falling of [sic] the serving plates, a baby accidentally knocks over a dish, and even the dog is begging for food. The illustrations are showing the typical chaos that will occur at a big family reunion”—points that Rylant glosses over, in the reviewer’s estimation (“A Reader”).

Reviewer Kristy Griffin concurs. The “smooth and cheerful illustrations,” she points out, draw upon “roundness,” infusing the book with “a warm, happy feeling” and showing “the love and enjoyment of the relatives being together as a family.” Griffin here echoes the comments of several other online reviewers, and I would agree that Rylant intends to depict “love and enjoyment of the relatives.” However, Griffin’s comments ultimately reveal an essential breakdown between word and image. Griffin accuses “the narrator” of “making fun of the relatives from Virginia,” for in her view, Rylant “talks about these relatives as if they are ‘outcasts’ by the way they dress, drive, and sleep” while Gammell’s illustrations show that *everyone*, including the narrator herself, dresses in wrinkled clothing, sleeps on the floor, and so on. In the reviewer’s eyes, in other words, Rylant’s narrator sets herself apart from the visiting relatives and mocks their way of doing things. Gammell, in contrast, “shows a happy family in his illustrations, while Rylant writes judgmental remarks about the family from Virginia” (Griffin).

Griffin’s comments point to the tension created in *The Relatives Came* in terms of the hillbilly stereotype. A careful reading of both the verbal

and illustrative elements of the book reveals that mocking, “judgmental remarks” are indeed directed toward characters in the story. However, the source of negativity is not in the language of the text—Rylant’s prose consistently presents a close, accepting family, Virginian and West Virginian alike. The author does not “pass judgment” on any of the people she depicts. Gammell’s illustrations, conversely, draw upon stereotype to stigmatize as “hillbilly” both the narrator’s immediate family and her more distant relatives. The station wagon in which the relatives travel—perhaps “jalopy” is a more accurate word—is painted in a rainbow of mismatched colors, and its wheels bounce along treacherous mountain roads lined with rickety shacks. The driver of this car is decidedly inept: along the route the car flattens mailbox posts and demolishes fences, and suitcases fall off the luggage rack with every turn on the rutted road. The narrator’s house, while not a trailer, is nevertheless surrounded by weeds, clad in deteriorating siding, and adorned with broken windows. The characters themselves—both the narrator’s family and the relatives—wear ill-fitting, mismatched clothing. Buttons and button-holes are misaligned, trouser knees are either patched or torn out completely, and rolls of body fat spill over waistbands. The characters’ smiles reveal wide gaps between the teeth, and their hair invariably appears greasy, tousled, or wrapped in pink dime-store curlers. If Rylant’s text is a serious celebration of family, Gammell’s illustrations, as humorous and comforting as the online reviewers quoted above find them, appear to contradict Rylant’s celebration of Appalachia as a place for love regardless of external appearances. Gammell, in contrast, focuses on these appearances for the sake of a humorous story line. He draws upon the most obvious stereotypes of “hillbilly” in his depictions of the relatives’ visit, not to undermine those stereotypes, but to reinscribe them in the text. Ultimately, then, the illustrations—not the prose—picture Appalachians as buffoonish, destructive, unkempt, and clumsy.

The resulting book undermines Rylant’s serious message, a reversal many Appalachian artists face, argues Denise Giardina: “The plight of the Appalachian writer is the plight of a comic actor who takes on a serious role—the audience is liable to giggle on sight and disbelieve all efforts at profundity, complexity, and intelligence” (qtd. in Freeman 266). The tension Giardina underlines here between intent and outcome is in keeping with the picture book’s complexity as a genre. Many picture books function—sometimes unintentionally—by means of a “gap” or a system of contradictions and “tension[s]” as “the viewer-reader springs back and forth” between word and icon (Bodmer 72). In the case of *The Relatives Came*, the gap widens between Rylant’s inclusive narrative and Gammell’s comic picture-story. But how do readers perceive the gap, if

they do at all? How do readers reconcile the tensions and contradictions between text and image? More fundamentally, how do they view the Appalachians depicted in the story? Which view of Appalachia do they ultimately accept—Gammell’s, based on external, physical codes that build on “humorous” stereotyping, or Rylant’s, based on relentless privileging of what happens *inside* the house and *inside* the heart, a serious message about simply “hugging and eating and breathing together?”

If *The Relatives Came* results in a tension between image and word, comedy and sincerity, *When I Was Young in the Mountains* engages in a different, albeit less pejorative, stereotyping and opens another gap between text and illustration. Again, while the most visible and pernicious Appalachian stereotype sees mountain residents as “poor white trash,” a secondary stereotype crafts the ideal of “good country people” and views Appalachians through a nostalgic, romanticized lens. If the rest of America marches forward into a complicated world of technology and modernity, the hill country and its people remain relics of America’s pristine past. Under the banner of this stereotype, non-Appalachians are able to project “a yearning for innocence onto Appalachia” and thus temporarily escape the pressures of modernity (Donesky 297).

Illustrator Diane Goode situates *When I Was Young in the Mountains* in the historical past, picturing an America of perhaps a century ago rather than an America of Rylant’s own 1960s childhood. Rendered by pen-and-ink and watercolor in a soft, sepia-toned palette, Goode clads her characters in buttoned overalls, collarless shirts, and heavy brown boots. The girls wear shapeless shift dresses, and their long hair is braided. Older women, like Grandmother, are attired in simple, full-length dresses with long white aprons. Goode’s room settings also hearken to a by-gone era. The narrator’s family gathers for the evening meal under an oil-lit lamp. The country store is stocked with raw goods stored in open barrels and crocks; the labels for boxed goods are reminiscent of those found on late nineteenth-century packaging. Extending the historical quality of the illustrations, the narrator and other children are photographed by a man with large, tripod camera and black cloth; behind the children we see the photographer’s horse-drawn cart, labeled “N. L. Ellis, Traveling Photographer.”

Certainly Goode’s imagery, suggestive as it is of late nineteenth or early twentieth-century America, creates a benign, nostalgic mood that nicely echoes the reminiscent tone of Rylant’s prose. Nevertheless, there is something unsettling and disingenuous about the depiction of century-old characters and settings within a book whose origin came out of Rylant’s own memories of the 1960s. Goode’s illustrations are not as demeaning as Gammell’s, but they do draw widely upon the “noble savage” stereotype,

something Rylant avoids herself by quietly admitting the facts of hardship into her text. In contrast, each of Goode's illustrations offers up a collection of simple-looking people with rounded, broadly-smiling faces and rosy cheeks. Several of the adult characters—most notably those in the two “church” scenes—seem to have an almost impish and elfin appearance about them, with pointed ears and chins. Kindness exudes from all the characters, but so does an aura of mental simplicity. Such pictorial elements push us to romanticize the “Appalachian Other” into an unsophisticated, premodern, and two-dimensional character type.

Moreover, Goode's placement of Rylant's Appalachia in the distant past deepens the tension between word and image, interior and exterior, in the book. Houses without plumbing, without toilets, without electricity—these homes have been safely relegated within the picture book to an Appalachia of history, rather than an Appalachia of contemporary life. The reader can look at those material deprivations from a safe distance and avoid consideration of the economic and social implications that would rise out of a depiction of contemporary Appalachia. The historicized illustrations sidestep uncomfortable questions about why some modern Americans still live without these basic comforts, how they have been disenfranchised by dominant culture, how residents of the mountain states have been victimized and colonized by King Coal, and why all West Virginia counties continue to have poverty rates over 15 percent.⁴ In other words, in reading a “historical” text, readers will not feel pressure to question how late twentieth-century Appalachians have been—and continue to be—marginalized both socially and economically because those issues are safely relegated to a soft, pastel past. While the final effect of such stereotyping may not be as detrimental as those of “poor white trash” imagery, this rendition of the hillbilly nevertheless erects a boundary between the non-Appalachian consumer of the fiction and the stereotyped object of that consumption. Imagining such living conditions as a phenomenon of the past serves to distance the reader from perceiving the reality of Southern hardship and poverty and ultimately marginalizes and falsely historicizes the modern Appalachian characters Rylant strives to humanize and animate, the characters she asks her readers to see more deeply.

Seeing Appalachia: Missing May

If the revision of hillbilly stereotype in *The Relatives Came* and *When I Was Young in the Mountains* suffers under the friction between text and illustration, Rylant's message emerges more clearly when she looks into the mountains through her prose alone. The characters in her novel

Missing May reveal their depth and interiority by virtue of developing their self-perception, and the reader likewise must see beyond the façade of two-dimensional characters and settings to uncover Rylant's Appalachia. In *Missing May*, Rylant's lyrical narrative engages the motif of perception to cast the mountains in a renewed light. Characters within the novel are exposed in moments of misperception, and as they alter their views about the world they inhabit, they find a spiritual fulfillment that Rylant suggests as definitive of Appalachia. Indeed, it is a spiritual release beautifully symbolized in the novel by the whirligig image that begins this article and that figures so powerfully in the novel itself.

Missing May is the story of a family's survival after the loss of one of its members. Twelve-year-old Summer, who narrates the story, was adopted by her Aunt May and Uncle Ob six years earlier, having been orphaned and then unenthusiastically passed between other relatives before May and Ob rescue her. In their mountain home of Deep Water, West Virginia, Summer finds unconditional love, unquestioning acceptance, and a familial warmth that she had not imagined possible. As the novel opens, May has died of a heart attack while tending her garden, and, six months later, Summer and Ob are still limping along in the emotional vacuum left by May's passing. "We have gone through two seasons without her," Summer confides, "and still I don't know what kind of life Ob and I are going to come up with for ourselves. We have not done much of anything since, except to Miss May and hurt" (10).

Crisis arises when Ob, "one of those Ichabod Cranes types in look," grows convinced that May's spirit still hovers around the mountain, unable to leave the family's hillside trailer for her new home in heaven (12). Summer worries that Ob's fixation on the spirit world signals his impending surrender to death himself. If Ob "doesn't recover and move on," she frets, "he'll die of a broken heart, and then it'll just be me and the whirligigs left. And all of us still as night, praying for wings, real wings, so we can fly away" (16).

An unlikely ally arrives in the form of Summer's schoolmate, Cletus Underwood, a self-described "Renaissance Man" in training, who tacitly resolves to help both Ob and Summer find their way past missing May. Cletus learns of a psychic medium in nearby Putnam County, and the three resolve to visit the medium and ask her to communicate with May. Pinning their hopes on this mission, they make the journey only to learn that the medium has died. All remaining optimism drains from Ob until, on the trip back to their home in Deep Water, some mystery of healing and regeneration reclaims him, and he decides to live. The ending of the novel pictures Ob carrying his whirligigs out to the empty, dead garden,

the very scene of May's death. Here, he dedicates the whirligigs to May's memory and invites them "to spin and fly and live" (89). As Cletus reads aloud from the psychic medium's brochure, which asserts that "the true mission of spirit messages" is "to bring us consolation in the sorrows of life," a "big wind . . . set[s] everything free," whirligigs, sorrow, and spirit alike (89).

Underneath this sublime meditation on grief and acceptance, Rylant sends her narrator Summer on a journey toward understanding, a quest that builds upon the motif of perception. At the novel's beginning, Summer's own perceptions are somewhat limited. She recognizes Ob and May as exceptional caregivers, but she sees Cletus, for instance, as an odd, eccentric nuisance. Cletus is a collector of pictures—actual photographs as well as illustrations cut from advertisements and boxes—which he lugs around everywhere in "a beat-up vinyl suitcase" (19). Summer is skeptical of Cletus' odd hobby, as well as his appearance. His "black hair," she tells us, is "long, straight, and from my point of view, slimy. I don't think Cletus bathes much, though he never exactly stinks. He just seems to me the type who'd layer on the Right Guard for days before he'd finally break down and take a shower" (25–26). Summer seems here to be rehearsing some of the stereotypes outsiders hold of hillbillies—Cletus is, in her judgment, sloppy, eccentric, and unclean.

Only by degrees does Summer open her eyes to the remarkable person inside the odd, slovenly exterior. Summer realizes that May, were she alive, would have liked Cletus, for she "always liked the weird ones best, the ones you couldn't peg right off" (55). Cletus is nothing if not one of these "weird ones," an undefinable, unpeggable one. Indeed, he is a Mystery. And the process of unraveling that mystery impels Summer's spiritual growth as she gradually realizes that Cletus "sure ha[s] some gifts" (55). The boy understands, for instance, that a challenging jigsaw puzzle will help Ob riddle through the hours of his first Christmas without May. He senses when to distract Ob with chatter and when to listen quietly instead. And he champions the sovereignty of imagination and artistry.

Not coincidentally, Cletus's family demonstrates a love rivaling that of Summer's own. When she and Ob visit Cletus at his house, Summer's initial perception of the homestead's exterior gives her pause: the house is "tiny and brown, not much bigger than some people's garages" (59). "In the cold of February," she notes, "it looked brittle and tight, and when I saw it I had a strange urge to throw a blanket over it and warm its insides" (59). The home's interior, however, belies its shabby façade. The front room is "neat as a pin," with "simple pieces of furniture, plain lamps, and only a few things on the wall," including a photograph of Mr. and Mrs. Underwood

cradling the baby Cletus between them (65). Summer realizes that here, with parents as apparently frail and brittle as the house's shell, Cletus is "a much-loved boy" (60). The visit with the Underwoods highlights for Summer a deep, common vein of love that she already experiences fully in her own home. And the shock of witnessing that love encourages her to re-conceptualize her classmate. "I had not been in that house for five minutes yet, and already I'd learned so much," she remarks—learned much about Cletus, about family, and about herself (61). She leaves Cletus' house "full of warm cake and coffee [a]nd something else" (66).

Summer's deepening perception pushes the reader to interrogate his or her own perceptions and find that "something else" as well. How do we read Cletus, or, more specifically, how do we read his culturally-encoded external markers? Rylant has made clear that her story occurs in an Appalachian state. And she has provided in Cletus a disheveled character who lives in a tiny, "brittle" house. Reading these external clues, do we categorize him as "Appalachian other" ourselves? Do we dwell on his "sliminess," his eccentricities, his dilapidated homestead, his naïveté? Are we surprised by his depth: his quiet trust in people, his sheer zest for life, his thirst to see beyond (after all, he collects pictures and reads into them deeply, trying to see the real story behind the image)?

Summer's shift at this point draws attention to other moments of misperception within the novel, and here Rylant gestures more forcefully toward the hillbilly stereotype lying outside the pages of her novel. She uses culturally loaded language, for instance, to depict Summer's house:

Home was, still is, a rusty old trailer stuck on the face of a mountain in Deep Water. . . . It looked to me, the first time, like a toy that God had been playing with and accidentally dropped out of heaven. Down and down and down it came and landed, thunk, on this mountain, sort of cockeyed and shaky and grateful to be all in one piece. Well, sort of one piece. Not counting that part in the back where the aluminum's peeling off, or the one missing window, or the front steps that are sinking. (5)

Inside the trailer, the kitchen cupboards are brimming with junk food, as if echoing the "junky" exterior of the property. Summer sees "Oreos and Ruffles and big bags of Snickers. Those little cardboard boxes of juice that I had always, just once, wanted to try. I saw fat bags of marshmallows and cans of SpaghettiOs and a little plastic bear full of honey. . . . And, best of all, a carton of real chocolate milk that said Hershey's" (8).

The unreflective reader could be tempted to approach both the exterior and interior settings of Summer's home with a patterned response. If setting reflects character, then a rusty trailer, cluttered yard, and junk food may add up to an unflattering character type, as it does in so many

other texts featuring Appalachians. But Rylant plays a sly rhetorical game here. She first offers a number of the images familiarly associated with the hillbilly stereotype. The house—a trailer—is tilted, rusted, cheap; it potentially identifies a shiftless and unclean family. Likewise, the kitchen cupboards are crammed with sugary foods, despite May's debilitating diabetes; the contents of the cupboard potentially imply that May is not educated, intelligent, or willful enough to manage her health. The use of a young narrator allows Rylant to present common stereotypes to potentially prejudiced readers, who may initially accept these images, uncritically, as markers of character types.

However, as in the Underwood family home, the human and spiritual qualities that Rylant depicts inside the home—the mystery of interiority—travel far deeper than surface perception allows. The walls of the trailer hold “shelves and shelves” of Ob's “Mystery” whirligigs, for instance, and when Summer first sees them as a six-year-old, she feels “like a magical little girl, a chosen little girl, like Alice who has fallen into Wonderland” (7). Her adoptive parents reinforce that feeling. May herself is “a big barrel of nothing but love” who “understood people and . . . let them be whatever they needed to be. . . . Seems people knew she saw the very best of them, and they'd turn that side to her to give her a better look” (15–16). Under the awesome umbrella of such understanding, “Ob was never embarrassed about being a disabled navy man who fiddled with whirligigs all day long,” and Summer “never was embarrassed about being a kid who'd been passed around for years” (16). Without comment, Rylant has presented in this scene a series of textual details that have historically translated into a hillbilly stereotype. But before the reader can make that incorrect translation, before the reader can view those details in a way that encodes Summer and her family as “hillbilly” and therefore somehow “inferior,” Rylant defamiliarizes the images and undermines the reader's impulse to stereotype by revealing people who embody intellectual and emotional depth. The characters in *Missing May* are anything but two-dimensional, and their richness overturns the hillbilly stereotype because the stereotype itself is essentially two-dimensional, a thing lacking emotional and intellectual depth.

Summer has been raised for six years by people with this depth, but she has also been the victim of misperception herself. She recalls a painful experience at school in which the students wrote descriptions of each other and then made a game out of guessing who was being described. Summer is shocked by one description:

[It] was of a girl who sounded to me like some sad welfare case, in the sorry way her clothes and hair were described. But everyone in the class seemed to know right away who it was. Only the girl herself was stumped.

That was about the only time in my life I didn't put two and two together. And once I realized the writer had in fact been describing me—or what she saw when she looked at me—all I wanted was to be home, safe with May and Ob. (46)

This scene underlines how exterior image fundamentally erases the true self. Summer's classmate has drawn upon her own stereotype of "poor white trash," but that stereotype of course only describes what the classmate sees externally. Summer knows the description of poverty and "sorriness" does not actually describe the essential *her*. But what does the non-Appalachian reader see when she looks on Summer? On Cletus? On all these Appalachians in their lopsided trailers and garage-sized houses?

Rylant raises the question again when Summer, Ob, and Cletus travel to Putnam County to visit the psychic medium. As they pass the state capitol building in Charleston, a place neither young person has ever seen, Summer experiences "an embarrassing sense of pride that she was ours. That we weren't just shut-down old coal mines and people on welfare like the rest of the country wanted to believe we were. We were this majestic, elegant thing sitting solid, sparkling in the light" (71). Once again, Rylant seems to be rehashing a potentially negative stereotype of the West Virginian character. In one sense, Summer seems to be a country bumpkin figure, so provincial that the sight of a state capitol building becomes a sublime moment. But following the pattern she has established earlier in the novel, Rylant provides the stereotype only to defamiliarize it and to subvert its meaning. Rylant invites her fellow travelers to feel what Summer experiences at this moment. The elegant, solid building is emblematic of Rylant's characters and setting themselves—majestic beings that sparkle in the light. And what Summer discovers in revising her view of Cletus and in viewing the capitol building is what the non-Appalachian reader must find as well while viewing Appalachia. Rylant asks her readers to locate the love and acceptance modeled within her characters; they reject the stereotype and demonstrate instead an ability to see within and beyond. It is this ability that is personified by May, Ob, Cletus, and eventually Summer, who are themselves defined by an almost mystical sense of place. Like the whirligigs that Ob creates and names "The Mysteries," Rylant's Appalachians are mysteries in the richest sense of the word. The mountains of West Virginia, and the residents who are one with those mountains, *are* love, acceptance, warmth, and dreams themselves. Beyond the dilapidated exteriority of their

lives lies a force that liberates those perceptive enough to recognize it, just as in the final image of the novel May's "wind spirit" liberates Ob's whirligigs and sets them spinning freely in the winter garden.

Voices of Appalachia

Cynthia Rylant has commented that because "Appalachia is completely personal," a place "complicated to speak about," her writings serve only as "my vision of a place and a people, and so it is a rather limited picture" (Rylant, "Appalachia" 31). Yet, despite the fact that her Appalachian books offer only a selective picture or vision of the mountains, Rylant crafts her works to amplify for her readers "the place in my words" (31).

Rylant's words in *The Relatives Came*, *When I Was Young in the Mountains*, and *Missing May* work to restore the integrity of Appalachia as a place of "interior" values, a setting that symbolizes family, personal integrity, emotion, intellectual curiosity, unconditional love, and community, in spite of the long history of the hillbilly stereotype. In her "limited picture," Rylant invites her audience to glimpse what Appalachia has meant to non-Appalachians and then to see beyond that external shell, into the depths of the homes, the families, and the locale of the mountains. She fights against cultural impulses that compel readers to objectify and view Appalachia as "a land where people have bills like ducks, screw their britches on, put their shirts on over their coats, wear skilletts for hats, and eat peas with a table knife" (Miller, "New" 33). By providing characters whose apparent simplicity belies true depth, Rylant turns the two-dimensionality of the hillbilly stereotype on its head. The reader of Appalachia—the outsider who has historically read the story of place as scripted by the non-Appalachian—can choose in these works to look inside the mountains for something with more texture. Despite the unyielding quality of the hillbilly stereotype, which makes its prejudice known even within the illustrations of some of Rylant's best-known picture books, her Appalachian works challenge readers to question their own perceptions and their complicity in reducing "a complex regional society that is peopled by diverse groups to a set of simplistic caricatures" (Blee and Billings 120). It is here, in an ironic use of "simplicity," that Rylant's purpose becomes known. Beyond the shell of the mountain, beyond the shell of the crooked houses that sit on the mountain and the disheveled people who inhabit those houses, lies an Appalachia that is, in the words of *Missing May*'s Summer, majestic, elegant, solid, and sparkling in the light.

Karen Roggenkamp is assistant professor of English at Texas A&M University, Commerce, where she teaches courses in children's and adolescent

literature. Having published numerous articles and a book on American literature and nineteenth-century print culture, she is currently at work on a study of picture book versions of Uncle Tom's Cabin.

Notes

¹See, for instance, Jane Louise Curry's *The Daybreakers* (1970), Katherine Paterson's *Bridge to Terabithia* (1977), George Ella Lyon's *A Regular Rolling Noah* (1986), Marguerite Murray's *A Peaceable Warrior* (1986), Doris Buchanan Smith's *Return to Bitter Creek* (1986), Bettie Cannon's *A Bellsong for Sarah Raines* (1987), Ann Shelby's *Homeplace* (1995), Candice Ransom's *One Christmas Dawn* (1996), Phyllis Reynolds Naylor's *Shiloh* (1991), and *Sang Spell* (1998), among others.

²A fascinating application of this romantic vision of Appalachia was evident in the media coverage surrounding the 2003 captivity and rescue of Army Private Jessica Lynch at the beginning of the Iraq War. National news media pounced on Lynch's West Virginia roots, and they drew upon a well-worn stock of stereotypes that envisioned Appalachia as a stronghold of wholesome American values, images that detracted attention away from the war's realities and onto a more patriotic, easily-digested picture of "American values" worth fighting for. Reporters painted Lynch as an innocent damsel in distress who wanted nothing more than to return to the mountains and complete her education to become a kindergarten teacher. Interviews with Lynch's family almost invariably depicted them against a backdrop of mountain glens and rustic fields—although these depictions were fictionalized outright, in the case of *New York Times* journalist Jayson Blair. The news stories served to solidify the image of old-fashioned American goodness and innocence in the face of an increasingly fractious war.

³The stereotyping of Appalachians has played prominently in some of America's most popular contemporary nonfiction, as well. Bill Bryson's best-selling *A Walk in the Woods* is a case in point: the book details the author's hiking adventure along the Appalachian Trail and gestures toward the fears of the urbane Northern traveler in the mountainous South. For Bryson, "The woods were full of peril—rattlesnakes and water moccasins and nests of copperheads; bobcats, bears, coyotes, wolves, and wild boar; loony hillbillies destabilized by gross quantities of impure corn liquor and generations of profoundly unbiblical sex" (5). Even allowing for Bryson's humorous and self-mocking tone, one cannot help but notice how easily he slips from contemplation of wild animal critters to a perception of wild human critters, all rendered in a smugly condescending prose. Comedic presentation of the hill-billy stereotype has also been pervasive in visual media, and television and film especially have reinforced the images for ever-broader audiences. *See Haw, The Andy Griffith Show*, and *The Beverly Hillbillies* found great humor—and profitable popularity—in perpetuating images of Appalachians as country bumpkins, people

cut off from the rest of a modern, progressive, and sophisticated America. More recently, comics like Jeff Foxworthy have capitalized on their own identities as “rednecks” and have marketed a series of stand-up routines, books, and television shows that serve ultimately to cast “poor white trash” in comic form.

⁴Rylant has remarked that one of the benefits of commercial success is that she now has more input in decisions about the illustrators for her picture book texts, suggesting that she was not altogether pleased with the work of some of the early artists. Rylant of course does not point a finger of displeasure at any particular illustrator, but one cannot help but wonder if she read the illustrations for such works as *When I Was Young in the Mountains* and *The Relatives Came* as subversions of her own sensibilities. See, for instance, Antonucci’s interview with Rylant.

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