

April 22, 2007

The Amis Inheritance

By [CHARLES McGRATH](#)

Ben Jonson wrote: “Greatness of name in the father oft-times helps not forth, but overwhelms the son; they stand too near one another. The shadow kills the growth.” This Oedipal principle applies to all sorts of professions, but few more so than the literary one. It’s not unheard of for the child of an author to try his hand at writing. [Stephen King](#)’s two sons are writers, and so is one of [John Updike](#)’s. Hilma Wolitzer’s daughter Meg is a novelist, as is Anita Desai’s daughter Kiran, whose second book just won the Booker Prize — an award that has so far eluded her mother. But writers’ offspring tend to go into the family business with far less regularity than, say, the children of doctors or lawyers, and it seldom happens that over the long haul, and in the deepening shade, the younger equals or outstrips the elder — the way that Anthony Trollope, to take a famous example, bested his mother, Fanny.

The exception these days is the curious writerly firm of Amis & Amis, founded by Kingsley, who died in 1995, and now run by his son Martin. Kingsley Amis, an indelible figure in British letters, is the subject of an immense and sympathetic new biography by Zachary Leader (published this month in the United States) that has already caused a stir in England both by reminding readers of how funny Kingsley could be and because of its frankness about his personal life. (Leader is a friend of Martin’s, who encouraged him to write the book and put no restrictions on him.) Martin, meanwhile, who published his first novel when he was just 24, has recently brought out his 10th, “House of Meetings,” and at 57 is arguably writing better than Kingsley was at the same age. He is a more daring and inventive novelist than his father — unafraid in “London Fields,” for example, to wheel out the whole tool chest of postmodern tricks — and in books like “Money,” about a would-be filmmaker spiraling out of control on both sides of the Atlantic, nearly as funny but on a much bigger canvas.

Martin likes to say that he is of an age now when looking at himself in the mirror in the morning is like watching a low-budget horror movie with particularly lurid special effects. In fact, he has maintained most of the brooding good looks that were his trademark as a young man, though the “rug,” as Amis characters tend to call not a toupee but their own head of hair, is going a little thin on top. He wears black a lot and goes in for that dandified Brit touch of French cuffs without cufflinks. “I really do think I was blessed by Kingsley in that I really don’t get worked up or upset the way many of my contemporaries do,” he said over lunch a couple of months ago in New York, speaking in a slow, mid-Atlantic drawl in which the vowels are sometimes elongated for emphasis. “I never thought it was anything out of the way being a writer, but for them it’s been a struggle for legitimacy. It doesn’t astound me that I’m a writer, because what your dad does is banal by definition. It never seemed a big deal.”

In this country, Martin may in fact be a bigger deal than his father was, and Leader’s biography begins with an assertion that may strike American readers as extreme: “Kingsley Amis was not only the finest comic novelist of the second half of the 20th century but a dominant force in the writing of the age.” We know

Kingsley mostly by his two best books, which happen to bracket his career: “Lucky Jim” (1954), one of the funniest novels ever written, and “The Old Devils” (1986), a late masterpiece about the indignities of old age. In England, though, his 23 other novels are more highly regarded than they are here, where some of his later books were championed by right-wing critics but denounced elsewhere for being reactionary and misogynistic. He was also a public personality who appeared often on TV, in the gossip columns and even in a series of advertisements for upscale fabrics (“Very Kingsley Amis, Very Sanderson”) that were the British equivalent of those ads Lillian Hellman used to do for Blackglama.

That Kingsley was an enthusiastic drinker and philanderer (someone who “lived for adultery,” his son says) was well known to most of his British readers, who watched with amusement or dismay as he turned himself over the years from a handsome young socialist into a monstrous caricature of an old buffer: fat, reactionary, alcoholic, rude and intolerant. He grew so devoted to the queen (who knighted him in 1990) that he had erotic dreams about her. They usually began, Martin says, with Sir Kingsley attempting to paw the royal chest and Her Majesty protesting: “No, no, Kingsley. We mustn’t.”

In England, Martin is a public figure in his own right, with a reputation so large that the press is always trying to whack him down. “Smarty Anus,” the magazine *Private Eye* used to call him. He has the kind of sexual glamour more often associated with movie stars than with novelists, and in restaurants young men sometimes pretend to know him just to impress their girlfriends. But Kingsley’s shadow is still so broad and long-lived that Martin is often damned for being too much like his father or else not enough. His 1991 novel, “Time’s Arrow,” for example, which rewinds time backward to tell the story of the Holocaust, was criticized in some quarters for being much too serious. “House of Meetings,” which is about two brothers in the Gulag and which the novelist and critic John Banville has called “a version of the great Russian novel done in miniature,” has generally been greeted as a return to form after Martin’s previous novel, “Yellow Dog,” which was energetically slammed. But some critics have complained that it, too, is overly serious and moralistic — not sufficiently Kingsley-like, in other words.

Since returning to London after two and a half years in Uruguay (his second wife, Isabel Fonseca, is half-Uruguayan and they built a house there), Martin has lately set about filling what one observer called a “Martin-sized” hole in English life. He has been visible everywhere, and both on TV and in a 12,000-word article in *The Observer*, he has been an outspoken critic of Islamism. He has also laid into British liberals for general anti-Semitism and for being too ready to criticize Israel’s invasion of Lebanon. To his critics on the left, all this is evidence that Martin is turning into Kingsley — another preachy old right-wing curmudgeon. And when it was announced in February that he had accepted a job teaching writing at the University of Manchester, that was also interpreted as following in the footsteps of the old man, who taught for years before his writing career took off.

None of these criticisms are entirely fair. Kingsley’s politics were all over the place and were never particularly well thought out. He was a knee-jerk liberal for a while, and then he became a knee-jerk reactionary. Martin’s politics are, if anything, naïvely earnest (one of the criticisms of his nonfiction book “Koba the Dread,” about Stalinism, was that it sometimes read as if the author thought it was news that [Stalin](#) was a murderer), but they are also the considered product of a lot of reading and discussion. His old friend Christopher Hitchens, who has not always agreed with Martin’s positions, says: “Once he gets seized on a topic, he’s got a bulldog grip. He’s like a lawyer getting on top of the case — he can give himself

completely to a subject.”

Aside from publishing books that are mostly comic, moreover, Kingsley and Martin aren't much alike as writers. Kingsley's comedy stems from precise social observation. Martin's characters tend to be caricatures and exaggerations, as their names suggest — Keith Talent, John Self, Guy Clinch, Clint Smoker — and he is more of a satirist and a moralist than his father was, with a vision of the world that is gloomy and scabrous. The shadow of nuclear annihilation hovers over “London Fields,” and “Yellow Dog” evokes a world run by thugs and pornographers. Father and son also used to disagree all the time about conspicuous literary style, or what Kingsley called “a high idiosyncratic noise level in the writing.” Martin recalled not long ago: “He was always saying, ‘I think you need more sentences like “He put down his drink, got up and left the room,” ’ and I thought you needed rather fewer of them.” A more typical Martin sentence tends to be maximalist and attention-grabbing, a riff with all the speakers turned up high, as in this “Augie March”-like streetscape from the beginning of “Money”:

I strode through the meat-eating genies of subway breath. I heard the ragged hoot of sirens, the whistles of two wheelers and skateboarders, pogoists, gocarters, windsurfers. I saw the barrelling cars and cabs, shoved on by the power of their horns. I felt all the contention, the democracy, all the italics, in the air. These are people determined to be themselves, whatever, little shame attending. Urged out from the line of shufflers and idlers, watchers, pavement men, a big blond screamer flailed at the kerb, denouncing all traffic. His hair was that special mad yellow, like an omelette, a rug omelette.

If Martin has a true literary father, in fact, it's not Kingsley but Saul Bellow, to whom he became quite close in the mid-80s and whose leather jacket and down coat he now owns, as if literally inheriting the mantle.

Oddly, or perhaps not so oddly, where the two Amises most overlap is in their history with women. By all accounts, Kingsley, who in early photographs sometimes resembles a 1940s matinee idol, seldom met one who turned him down, and Martin for a while was the literary equivalent of a rock star. Before his first marriage, to Antonia Phillips, he was romantically involved with Claire Tomalin, [Tina Brown](#), Emma Soames, Gully Wells, Julie Kavanagh, Victoria Rothschild and the model Angela Gorgas, among a great many others. “Everything fell before his scythe,” Hitchens told me recently. “I used to go with him to parties, and I felt I was just holding his coat.” He added that he knew of at least one instance in which father and son both slept with the same woman, though not at the same time, and that Kingsley, when he heard about it, said proudly, “Like father, like son.”

Martin said last winter: “I think most of my contemporaries had much more difficult relationships with their fathers than I did, because those fathers were very much against the generation that was emerging in the '60s — free love, long hair, pacifism, drugs. I think there was a great deal of sexual envy masquerading as high principle. But my father never laid an obstacle in front of my brother and me on that front. The idea of promiscuity excited him. When my brother and I were about 14 or 15, he took us out and bought us a gross of condoms.”

Born in 1922, Kingsley grew up in Norbury, an unfashionable suburb of London, as the pampered, overprotected only child of a couple just barely clinging to the middle class. His father was a clerk at the Colman mustard company and the sort of Monty Python Englishman who thought it was droll to pretend to be deaf or foreign when in a pub or a train. His mother spoon-fed the young Kingsley until he was 12 or 13,

and Leader suggests that all his life he remained in some ways a kind of overgrown infant, so greedy and avid for pleasure that as an adult he once announced, “I want more than my share before anyone else has had any.” From childhood on, Kingsley also suffered from claustrophobia and panic attacks. He never learned to drive and was afraid to fly or even to be alone at night. When Martin’s younger sister, Sally, was about to be born, Kingsley was afraid to go to the phone booth to call the midwife unless Martin, who was then 4, accompanied him.

That their father did not call upon Martin’s brother, Philip, then 5, is telling. Of the three Amis children, Martin enjoyed the easiest, most trusting relationship with his father. Philip, a graphic designer, had a far rockier time growing up, and Sally died of alcoholism at 46. Martin’s mother, Hilly, once said that he was “born under a lucky star.” Hitchens says that “Martin is a pretty good instance of birth order being a good protection” and adds that “a lot of Martin’s ruthless commitment to hard work is because both his siblings flaked out.”

Kingsley met Hilly Bardwell — or Hilary, to use her full name — in 1946, when she was a 17-year-old art student and he, six years older, had just returned to Oxford, which he was attending on a scholarship after a stint in the army. They had a memorable early date at a coffee shop where Hilly, who came from a prosperous family (it became the model, in fact, for the twittish, slightly preposterous Welch family in “Lucky Jim”) and had been brought up to think well of everyone, found herself in the company of a man muttering things like “Look at those fools, look at that idiot of a man.”

A year or so later, Hilly was pregnant, and after urging her to have an [abortion](#), Kingsley got cold feet and instead they married. Philip, named for Kingsley’s best friend, the poet Philip Larkin, was born in August 1948, and Martin followed 375 days later. Soon after, the Amises moved to Swansea, in Wales, where Kingsley taught English at University College and embarked upon his career of epic promiscuity. In time, hurt and perhaps a little vengeful, Hilly began having affairs, too, and in many respects Leader’s account of the Amises’ Swansea begins to sound a lot like John Updike’s Tarbox, the setting for “Couples.” The wife of a local rugby fan sent him the team schedule, for example, so they could arrange assignations on game days, and the poet Al Alvarez, a weekend guest, remembered a Saturday-night party when Kingsley disappeared with each of the women there in turn, while everyone else sat around pretending not to notice. Though hardly in her husband’s league, Hilly fooled around sufficiently that when Sally was born in 1954, it was far from certain she was Kingsley’s daughter.

In 1958, the Amises spent the year at Princeton (or Budweiser College, as Kingsley calls it in his novel “One Fat Englishman,” where all American colleges are named after beer), and the partying, drinking and wife-swapping took on the properties of Cheever’s Shady Hill, with Kingsley making passes at every woman he saw and succeeding more often than not. “There was no scandal left in who had slept with Kingsley,” Betty Fussell writes in her memoir “My Kitchen Wars.” “Who hadn’t?”

All the while, however, Kingsley was steadily writing. Compared with Martin, he was a late bloomer. “Lucky Jim,” Kingsley’s first novel, came out when he was 31, after he had abandoned three efforts and had finished but failed to publish a fourth, which was rejected more than a dozen times. Leader demonstrates that in revising “Lucky Jim,” Kingsley was helped substantially by Philip Larkin, who advised him to “sod up the romantic business actively” — meaning make it more of a love story — and went through the manuscript line by line, writing comments like “This speech might come from a stage play TOO BAD to be produced” and

“GRUESOME AROMA OF B” (“bum,” presumably). This is how Amis and Larkin always talked and wrote to each other — in language that was vulgar, sarcastic, typographically ingenious and often hilarious. Martin says he now believes that Larkin secretly hated Kingsley out of sexual envy, but their friendship, though complicated, was nevertheless a sustaining one for both writers, whose correspondence may be the most entertaining in all of English literature.

“Lucky Jim,” a novel about a lazy, angry, hangover-ridden lecturer at a provincial college, almost instantly became a best seller — perhaps another secret point of friction with Larkin — and introduced something new in English letters, a voice that was defiantly at odds with the snobbery and artiness of the Bloomsbury generation, and even with Evelyn Waugh’s kind of comedy, set among the Bright Young Things. For a while Kingsley was considered one of the original Angry Young Men.

“Lucky Jim” also loosed in Kingsley an almost unceasing flood of productivity — poems, essays and journalism, as well as novels. At the end of his life, when he was suffering the effects of a lifetime of hard drinking and possibly of early Alzheimer’s, he was unable to give up the habit of hours at the typewriter, even if it was just to type the word “seagulls” over and over.

In 1963, Kingsley shattered his family by running off with and eventually marrying the novelist Elizabeth Jane Howard, whom he had met at a literary conference. The children were devastated, and Hilly plunged into depression and pill-taking. Essentially left to fend for themselves, Martin and Philip skipped school, smoked a lot of dope and hung around coffee shops and Wimpy bars in flared velvet trousers and big-collared shirts while trying to pick up girls — until Jane, as she was called, determined they would be better off living not with their mother but with her and Kingsley. Philip never got along with his stepmother and finally left home when a box boldly labeled “PHIL’S DRUGS” was discovered in his dresser, not very carefully hidden. But for Martin, who had bounced from school to school and was at best an indifferent pupil, the new arrangement was a godsend. Jane took responsibility for his education, encouraged him to go to a crammer, or tutoring school, and urged him to apply to Oxford. He not only got in but studied so diligently that he graduated with a first in English.

In Martin’s memoir, “Experience,” there is a passage describing what seems to be a series of idyllic weekend visits to Lemmons, a large house Kingsley and Jane had bought on Hadley Common, outside London. There was always a barrel of whiskey on hand, he writes, along with a walk-in pantry stocked with food, and “with Kingsley the hub of all humour and high spirits, like an engine of comedy . . . I felt so secure in that house — and, clearly, so insecure elsewhere — that I always experienced a caress of apprehension as I climbed into the car on Sunday night.”

Martin says now of Kingsley in that period: “It was his zenith, but emotionally he was already shutting down” — meaning in part that the marriage had started to go bad. The relationship between Kingsley and Jane was based largely on sexual attraction, and by the mid-70s he had lost interest in sex or become unable to perform, or both. He was also drinking so heavily that an evening often ended with him crawling up the stairs on all fours. During the day, Kingsley was a fixture at the Garrick, a club in the West End, where he enjoyed afternoonlong lunches. According to Leader, his bar bill ran to more than 1,000 pounds a month.

In 1980, after Kingsley spurned her ultimatum that he quit drinking, Jane walked out. His father was “heartsick and romantically mortified” over the breakup, Martin says in “Experience,” and eventually he

became bitter and misogynistic as well. The novels of this period, “Jake’s Thing” and “Stanley and the Women,” are filled with loathing and world-weariness. And this was also the period when what had partly been a put-on — the persona of the reactionary philistine — began to rigidify into something real and permanent. Kingsley became the very sort of person he used to make fun of, declaring, for example, that England’s best living writer was Dick Francis and that henceforth he wanted only to read books that began, “A shot rang out.”

Christopher Hitchens says he thinks that the process of self-ossification was pretty much complete by 1984. “I remember that Martin, Kingsley and I all had dinner, and then we went to see ‘Beverly Hills Cop,’ ” he said a few weeks ago. “Naturally, you couldn’t go to anything French or Japanese or Polish. All through the movie Kingsley was laughing with what we assumed was pretend mirth, and afterward he announced, ‘Yes, an absolutely flawless masterpiece.’ Suddenly it became clear he wasn’t joking and that he meant to defend the virtues of the film with absolute fidelity. It was a very striking moment — the sense that the face had grown to fit the mask and that the pose had become himself.”

When his marriage broke up, it was apparent that Kingsley was incapable of living by himself, and after a few weeks of what they called “Dadsitting,” Philip and Martin devised a scheme of the sort that only the British could dream up: they invited Hilly and her third husband, the impoverished Lord Kilmarnock, to come live with their father. From the outside, the arrangement looked like a ménage, but in fact Hilly and her husband, so broke that she had been selling hot dogs from a van next to a highway, were hired caretakers, and it amused Kingsley no end to be waited on by a peer of the realm. “We expected it to last about six months,” Martin said recently over dinner in London. “You kept saying to yourself, ‘It’s an odd arrangement, but then we’re odd people.’ ” In fact, the arrangement lasted 15 years, or until the end of Kingsley’s life, and it made possible “The Old Devils,” which won the Booker Prize in 1986.

Most of the burden of caring for Kingsley fell upon Hilly, who complained little and in fact emerges as the true heroine of Leader’s biography. “My mother had to suffer a very outrageous, childish set of demands,” Martin added. “But it gave her somewhere to live, and it gave him a great second lease. He would have died in his mid-60s without her.” He paused and then said: “‘The Old Devils’ is a great thawing, and it all came about through my mother really — her coming back into his life and reminding him of why he loved women. He valued her and all that, but he didn’t see that she was extraordinary, which she was.” He went on to say how tolerant and nonjudgmental his mother had always been and said: “I get as least as much from her as I ever got from him. I’m certain of that.”

Martin is remarkably tolerant and forgiving of the failings in his father, about whom he writes fondly in the pages of “Experience,” and his childhood and adolescence — a nightmare by most standards — he recalls as idyllic. Hitchens, who got to know both Amises when he was in his 20s and who delivered an affectionate eulogy at Kingsley’s funeral, says, “I never knew a father and grown-up son who got along more comfortably.” The novelist Ian McEwan, another old friend of Martin’s, said: “I’m not sure Kingsley was a great father, but Martin was a wonderful son. He has a fantastic degree of psychological resilience — it’s not a virtue, just a fact. Many of us would have wilted under Kingsley, but some quirk enabled Martin to flourish and to be entirely himself. I don’t know any other friends of mine who had that ease with their fathers, which is especially remarkable when you consider that Kingsley didn’t even like Martin’s books.”

Actually, he did like the first one, “The Rachel Papers,” which is a coming-of-age story, and even left Martin a

note saying so. But he was unable to finish the second, “Dead Babies,” a dark, twisted country-house comedy that is in certain ways the most Kingsley-like of all Martin’s books. “He just couldn’t get on with it — he said this with an apologetic look,” Martin said. “He was unable to lie about it — I would have just lied.” He went on, mentally ticking off his books: “ ‘Success’ — he said the beginning and end worked but not the middle. He was quite scornful about ‘Other People.’ He read the first chapter of ‘Money’ ” — the novel many critics consider Martin’s best — “but then the minute a character named Martin Amis came in, he threw it across the room. He wasn’t having any of that. No bugging around with the reader.” (Curiously, Leader has discovered that a character named Kingsley Amis figures in an unpublished novel, and the same device turns up again in “The Green Man,” one of Kingsley’s better books.) “But the ‘Dead Babies’ moment was stunning,” Martin said. “It was stunning. Eventually it became of special interest to me what he thought, but not, I didn’t think, of special authority. He thought, really, that I was the best of a bad lot.”

In another conversation, Martin said: “I’m beginning to understand just what a dreadful curse it can be, the novelistic ego. And I think whatever complications being the son of Kingsley involved me in, that’s been a help. This curse, the way it works is that any praise you get is instantly assimilated, and it just brings you up to where you should have been already. But any criticism just jangles around in your head and makes you stay up at night. Kingsley says somewhere in his letters that nothing quite lays you open so much as a novel, and so for a lot of my friends, a lot of the time, their thoughts are almost poisoned by criticism.”

For Martin to suggest that he is immune may be a little disingenuous. Some of his friends say that he moved to Uruguay in part because he was so wounded by the unusually harsh reviews of “Yellow Dog.” Michiko Kakutani, writing in *The New York Times*, said it “bears as much relation to Mr. Amis’s best fiction as a bad karaoke singer does to [Frank Sinatra](#).” In *The London Telegraph*, Tibor Fischer said it was “not-knowing-where-to-look bad” and like “your favourite uncle being caught in a school playground, masturbating.”

For years now, Martin has had a contentious relationship with British journalists, whom he likens to mullahs. “They whip up hysteria,” he explained. “Journalists are more powerful now than they’ve ever been, and we all know what power does. Anyone who disses the media is really asking for it. But it is the case that the journalists are what they are — world famous for vulgarity, alcoholism, spite.”

The onset of hostility on both sides probably dates from 1994, an annus horribilis in which Martin’s separation from his first wife and their two children became tabloid fodder. Then, to make things worse, he left his longtime agent, Pat Kavanagh, who happened to be the wife of his friend Julian Barnes, for the American agent Andrew Wylie, whom the British press promptly christened “the Jackal” — a nickname that has stuck ever since. (Barnes, who has since reconciled with Martin, didn’t speak to him for years.) Wylie succeeded in negotiating a \$800,000 advance — a sum that was denounced as excessive — for Martin’s novel “The Information,” a book, as it happens, about the rivalry between two novelists who pretend to be friends, one popular and successful, the other arty and impoverished. What stirred up even more frenzy — an “Eisteddfod of hostility,” according to Martin — was the revelation that Martin intended to spend part of it getting his teeth fixed. To read some accounts from the time, it was as if he had decided he wanted to look like Liberace. (In fact, truly rotten dentition is a curious subtheme in Martin’s writing — there is a character in “Dead Babies” who can think of nothing but the poor state of his teeth — and “Experience” contains more accounts of excruciating dental surgery than many readers will have tolerance for.)

“It’s nothing rational — it’s love gone wrong,” Ian McEwan said of Martin’s relationship with the press. “A lot of young journalists are dazzled by Martin, his style, his success. They want to be him. And so what you have is a fever of covert parricide, a frantic, unexamined jealousy that is actually akin to longing.”

In New York a couple of months ago, Martin said, laughingly, of some of his critics: “How have I attached myself to these people who have spent hundreds of hours with me — who know my stuff better than I do — and all they can think to say is competitive, vitriolic stuff? Who are these ingrates?”

Martin is not a health nut these days but fit enough to play serious tennis and is even thinking about giving up cigarettes, which he hand-rolls from tobacco as black as coal. (Smoking is another vice Kingsley encouraged. Starting at age 5, Martin and Philip were each allowed to smoke a cigarette on Christmas Day; when they were 9, they got a whole pack.) For the time being, he is living in Bayswater with Isabel and their two young daughters, Fernanda and Clio, while a house he owns in Regent’s Park is still being let to tenants. He is a far more attentive father than Kingsley ever was and recently, while Isabel was away, plunged into the morning drill of getting the girls up and dressed and off to school — a routine that would surely have been beyond his father. (“I think Kingsley always admired me as a sort of operative in the field,” Martin told me once. “I could go on airplanes, drive a car, be in a house by myself — remarkable things like that.”) Martin is also very close to Louis and Jacob, his sons by his first marriage, now at college in England, and to Delilah Seale, a 30-year-old daughter he didn’t meet until 12 years ago. (Her mother was Lamorna Seale, with whom Martin had a brief affair and who later killed herself.)

A topic that comes up sometimes in conversation with Martin is where Kingsley went wrong, and Martin says he thinks it’s that with age he became a dogmatist of pessimism. “You have to distinguish between what is universal for your age group — that feeling that everything is going to hell, *ubi sunt*, and the rest — and what is reality,” he said last winter. “Kingsley never even tried to distinguish between that feeling in himself and how things really were. I try to test myself on that score because I believe that a writer has a solemn duty to be cheerful and to guard against the failures of tolerance which characterize age. Kingsley was an absolutist in that how he saw it was how it was. I’m very on guard against that. I don’t want it.”

He added: “I don’t want this to get out of control or I’ll be drowning in schmaltz, but it all starts to look very beautiful now that I know I’m not going to be around indefinitely. You know, the way that to a prisoner condemned to death, water tastes delicious, the air tastes sweet, a bread-and-butter sandwich makes tears spring to the eye.”

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