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(John) Robert McCloskey

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About this Person

Born: September 15, 1914 in Hamilton, Ohio, United States

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Nationality: American

Other Names: McCloskey, John Robert; Dangerfield, Balfour

WORKS:

WRITINGS BY THE AUTHOR:

Books

- *Lentil* (New York: Viking, 1940).
- *Make Way for Ducklings* (New York: Viking, 1941; Oxford: Blackwell, 1944).
- *Homer Price* (New York: Viking, 1943).
- *Blueberries for Sal* (New York: Viking, 1948; London: Angus & Robertson, 1967).
- *Centerburg Tales* (New York: Viking, 1951).
- *One Morning in Maine* (New York: Viking, 1952; London: Puffin, 1976).
- *Time of Wonder* (New York: Viking, 1957).
- *Burt Dow, Deep-Water Man* (New York: Viking, 1963).

Books Illustrated

- Anne Burnett Malcomson, *Yankee Doodle's Cousins* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1941).
- Claire Huchet Bishop, *The Man Who Lost His Head* (New York: Viking, 1942).
- Robert Hobart Davis, *Tree Toad: The Autobiography of a Small Boy* (New York: Stokes, 1942).
- Tom Robinson, *Trigger John's Son* (New York: Viking, 1949).
- Ruth Sawyer, *Journey Cake, Ho!* (New York: Viking, 1953).
- Anne H. White, *Junket, The Dog Who Liked Everything Just So* (New York: Viking, 1955).
- Keith Robertson, *Henry Reed, Inc.* (New York: Viking, 1955).
- Robertson, *Henry Reed's Journey* (New York: Viking, 1963).
- Robertson, *Henry Reed's Baby Sitting Service* (New York: Viking, 1966).
- Robertson, *Henry Reed's Big Show* (New York: Viking, 1970).

Periodical Publications

- "The Caldecott Medal Acceptance," *Horn Book Magazine*, 18 (July 1942): 276-282.
- "The Caldecott Award Acceptance," *Horn Book Magazine*, 34 (August 1958): 245-251.

BIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY:

Robert McCloskey, author and illustrator of children's books, was born in Hamilton, Ohio, where his first commission, a much admired bas-relief on the municipal building, still stands, where the children's section of the library is called the Robert McCloskey room, and where the citizens still turn out for a Robert McCloskey Day when he returns for a visit. And well they should, for McCloskey has become a kind of literary Pied Piper from Hamilton, instead of Hamelin, almost as fascinating as his mythical counterpart for his young audiences in America and in the many foreign countries where his books have been published in translation. The journey on which McCloskey takes children, however, is to an imaginative world that is reassuring and comfortable, usually comic if not wildly humorous, sometimes exciting but never really dangerous. Even mildly threatening situations, if such occur, are very temporary. A

first-rate illustrator, in his books McCloskey provides art that is an added attraction--always well done and sometimes exquisite. From comical cartoon line drawings to soft charcoal sketches to gentle watercolors, the pictures harmonize with the mood of the story, enriching and amplifying the text, sometimes even dominating it. He has been twice a Caldecott Medal winner and twice a runner-up. But most of all, his stories and his art alike are affirmative, even exuberant about that time of wonder called childhood.

Attending public schools in Hamilton, McCloskey (the son of Howard Hill and Mable Wismeyer McCloskey) spent a great deal of time playing music--piano, harmonica, drums, and oboe--tinkering with or inventing strange devices, and doing artwork for various high-school publications. In that period, he says, he could hardly have chosen which interest was most important, which to pursue as a career. When he received a scholarship to the school or college of his choice, he chose to study art at Vesper George Art School, Boston, from 1932 to 1936, though music and mechanical tinkering remained interests which later served as fascinating elements in several of his books. Sometime near the completion of art school, on a visit to New York City, he went to see May Massee, editor of Junior Books at the Viking Press, to show her his work. She suggested that he needed more training and that his ideas of *great* art--figures from Greek mythology, Spanish galleons and Oriental dragons--might be shelved in favor of objects and scenes from the real world. She also suggested that he write stories as well as illustrate them. Though he returned to Boston a very confused art student, he began to paint and draw a variety of subjects. After two years at the National Academy of Design in New York from 1936 to 1938 and some time spent doing whatever artwork he could get, he returned to May Massee with the idea for his first book, *Lentil*, which was published by Viking in 1940.

Lentil certainly does not involve Chinese dragons or flying horses. Instead it is, McCloskey says, created mostly from "remembered pictures" of Hamilton--the Soldiers and Sailors Monument there, the house he attributes to *Lentil's* fictional Colonel Carter, the general ambience of the small Ohio town--and his own boyhood experiences, as well as those of the boys there for whom he had been a camp counselor. Lentil, who lives in a town named Alto and whose appearance resembles Tom Sawyer's, is unable to sing or even pucker up to whistle. In lieu of doing these things, he decides to learn to play the harmonica well. (In this regard, he is similar to McCloskey, who has also delighted audiences by playing the harmonica for them.) Everyone in Alto enjoys Lentil's music except for the elderly town grouch Old Sneep. But, then, even the major event of the moment, the imminent return, after two years, of the town's leading citizen, Colonel Carter, does not please Old Sneep. When the day of the colonel's return arrives, Lentil, the town's brass band, the mayor, and most of the townspeople gather at the train station. As the colonel steps off the train, Old Sneep, sitting on top of the train station, begins to slurp loudly on a lemon in the silence, a silence which grows. The band cannot pucker to play, the mayor is too embarrassed to speak, the townspeople are paralyzed, so Lentil, who cannot pucker anyway, takes out his harmonica and begins to play "Comin' 'round the Mountain When She Comes." The colonel starts to smile, the crowd laughs and sings, too, as all march down Main Street. To his previous contributions to Alto, the colonel decides to add a new hospital, which makes everyone happy--even Old Sneep. The book closes with the narrator's statement: "So you can never tell what will happen when you learn to play the harmonica."

Lentil's world is one which contains no real threats and only minor upsets, where an energetic young boy (even if just a lentil or bean sprout or string bean, as his name suggests) can learn to use the talents he has instead of lamenting those he does not have and can rise to at least momentary fame, living out the American dream. The humor that distinguishes McCloskey's best books is here--directed at the town for its anguish at not being able to greet the colonel properly, at the grumpy people like Old Sneep who devise ingenious ways to spoil the others' fun, at awkward little boys' painful inability to sing, and at their serious though inharmonious efforts at music.

The drawings in *Lentil* are strong dark lines shaded with charcoal, cartoon-style. They give a very clear impression of the stereotypical, quaint small town of years past, with the village green and its statue at the center, typical shops, lovely Victorian houses, with children, cats, and dogs playing about and roaming the whole of it in safety. The characters in the drawings suggest the expected range of personalities--grumpy old men, a fat colonel, fussy bureaucrats, severe schoolteachers, and happy, energetic children. Through the pictures, for the most part, the character of Lentil--with his cowlick, his happy-go-lucky dress, his disappointment at his inability to sing, and his enthusiasm as he plays for the colonel--is revealed. Even the dogs and cats who flee from Lentil's singing or enjoy the music of his harmonica are given personalities.

For his next book, *Make Way for Ducklings* (1941), McCloskey was awarded the 1942 Caldecott Medal. Since then, it has been translated into Chinese, Danish, German, Italian, Japanese--an indication of its appeal. In his Caldecott acceptance speech, McCloskey explains how the work he calls the "duck book" originated. As an art student in Boston, he often sat in the Public Gardens, watching the ducks and feeding them, but he got the idea for the book a few years after his talk with May Massee. A commission to do a mural brought him back to Boston--and to the ducks. By the time he finished his work there, he had a brought draft of the book. But the work was only beginning: there were trips to the American Museum of Natural History in New York, sessions with an ornithologist, and, finally, live ducks taken home as houseguests to be studied. He also made a trip back to Boston to work on background scenes and brought home six ducklings for further study. For McCloskey, no effort is too great if it enables him to improve his drawing. He says that he thinks of himself primarily as an artist who does, among other things, children's books, though he is quite proud of them. If there is a weakness in *Make Way for Ducklings*, it is that illustrations seem to predominate and the story suffers as a result.

The story is simplistic: Mr. and Mrs. Mallard, looking for a nice place to live, fly over Boston's Public Gardens and decide to stop for the night on an island in the pond there. The next day, as they venture off the island to the friendly people who feed them peanuts, the Mallards consider staying, but a boy racing by on a bicycle nearly hits them. Dissuaded, they find nearby an island in the Charles River and nest there. Molting and unable to fly, they swim to a park on the river bank where Michael, a friendly policeman, feeds them peanuts. Later, Mr. Mallard decides to take a trip to investigate the rest of the river. Mrs. Mallard hatches the eight eggs and begins to teach the ducklings to swim and dive, walk in a straight line, come when called, and stay a safe distance from scooters and things with wheels. Satisfied with their training, she collects the eight ducklings and begins the journey to the Public Gardens to meet Mr. Mallard. As they walk through Boston streets, chaos ensues, with automobile horns honking, mother duck and babies quacking, and, finally, police whistles screeching, as Michael and his friends try to get the Mallards safely to the Gardens. Once they arrive at the island in the pond, the ducklings settle in as if at home. When they tire of following the excursion boats and eating peanuts all day

long, the ducklings swim, still in a single line, to their island and go to sleep.

The story is loosely plotted; the reason the Mallards do not simply stay on the island in the Gardens, and thus away from boys on bicycles, is not explained, nor is Mr. Mallard's departure motivated in the story. Characterization is not a strong point, since Mr. and Mrs. Mallard are rather stereotypically concerned parents; their countenances are often identical, but rarely expressive, except in the case of their danger from the bicycle or Mrs. Mallard's pride in the ducklings. The humor that enriched *Lentil* appears in *Make Way for Ducklings* only in a few comic facial expressions or in the pictures showing Mrs. Mallard's procession through Boston with her brood.

For children, the pleasure of the book lies in pictures and in theme. Executed in soft charcoal, then lithographed, the pictures of the ducks--so beautifully accurate--and the drawings of Boston from a duck's-eye view provide much of the story's attraction. By the pictures young readers see the extent of the Mallards' search over Boston, the danger from bicycles and cars, Michael's desperate rush to save them, and finally the tranquil evening on the island as the ducklings go to sleep for the night. Most interesting are the drawings of the ducklings, for each of the eight is individualized by an expression or action. They are bored, inquisitive, sleepy, or they are scratching, talking over their backs one to another, running to catch up with the line. In fact, they behave as young children do when standing or walking in line; children no doubt identify. The message is comforting: parents provide care and safety, helped when necessary by the proper authority, and ducklings who learn the proper duck behavior find security and end sleepily in a pleasant haven.

In 1942, about to be inducted into the army where he would serve as a technical sergeant of visual aids until 1945, McCloskey hurried to finish his latest book. *Homer Price* (1943), like *Lentil*, describes a young boy's adventures and misadventures in a small midwestern town several decades in the past. The book, composed of six separate stories, rests on broad humor and exaggeration. Beginning with the frontispiece and continuing through some of the stories, much of the fun comes from McCloskey's use of literary names and allusions. The initial drawing shows the decapitated bust of the Greek poet Homer with the head resting on the floor beside the bust. Homer Price, with a crew cut and a straw in his mouth, stands behind the decapitated bust, resting his own chin on it, and *Price* written under Homer's name. "The Mystery Yarn," one of the tales of this "hayseed" Homer, contains several allusions to the *Odyssey*. In the story, Homer's Uncle Telemachus and the local sheriff compete for Miss Terwilliger, an unmarried woman known for her cooking and knitting. All three have saved huge balls of string. In a contest at the county fair, the two men plan to unroll the string on the trotting track to see who has the most. Miss Terwilliger, dressed in her famous bright blue knitted dress, insists on joining the contest with her ball of yarn. Though few people except Homer and the women of the audience realize it, she wins by unraveling all of the yarn ball, and then, paralleling Penelope's cleverness when faced with choosing a suitor in *The Odyssey*, she unravels all of her bright blue dress (under which she has another very familiar outfit so that onlookers are hardly aware of the change). Winning by her devious unraveling, she insists on her right to choose her suitor--in this case, Uncle Telemachus. In "Nothing New Under the Sun," an aged man wanders into town trying to sell his famous mousetrap; the town thinks him a twentieth-century Rip Van Winkle instead of his more likely parallel, the Pied Piper of Hamelin. The Pied Piper, in this case, must be protected by Homer and the children of the town from the tight-fisted sheriff. The contrast of the stingy, inept midwestern sheriffs, the eccentric string savers, and the sturdy, sensible little boy named Homer to Greek heroes and other classical figures provides the humor.

Other stories in *Homer Price* satirize twentieth-century ideas of progress, technology, and super heroes who are allegedly "stronger than steel." In "The Case of the Cosmic Comic," Homer's friend Freddy has a severe case of hero worship for Super-Duper, a comic-strip and movie hero. Homer, however, suggests that the hero's attributes may exist only on the screen. After an appearance by the much admired actor Super-Duper, the boys find themselves rescuing the careless "hero" from a car wreck and freeing him from a barbed wire fence. Freddy is quite disenchanted. In "The Doughnuts," Homer's Uncle Ulysses' love for twentieth-century inventions leads to the purchase of a doughnut machine which goes wild and manufactures thousands of doughnuts, but Homer by skillful advertising manages to sell them. In the last story, "The Wheels of Progress," Uncle Ulysses, again praising assembly-line production, encourages the building of a subdivision with 101 houses all alike. Before any street signs are set the town of Centerburg turns out for a pageant celebrating 150 years of progress. Meanwhile, the Old Enders house, dubbed a "sore thumb" by Uncle Ulysses, is moved away from the subdivision during the pageant, and without that landmark none of the irate citizens can find his own house in the perfectly stamped-out houses of the subdivision. So much for progress.

In *Homer Price*, McCloskey's world is one that is recognizable--secure, open, and uncomplicated. At worst it contains some inept bank robbers, officious sheriffs, and overzealous promoters of so-called modern ideas. Despite the foolishness of some of the characters in their pursuits, no great harm is really done. Besides, there is always Homer, who, taking a commonsense approach, usually has some idea of what ought to be done.

The drawings, cartoon-style, clear, and never too busy, reinforce the text, adding only distinctive facial expressions (although in one story, "The Case of the Sensational Scent," a drawing adds a nonexistent fifth robber when the text specifies four). Some of the most humorous drawings are those of the madly productive doughnut machine, the zany, ingenious mousetrap, and the various scenes involving the balls of string.

McCloskey continued with his "remembered pictures" of the Midwest in *Centerburg Tales* (1951), in which Homer, his family, and his friends reappear. This time, however, Grandfather Hercules appears as the narrator of the first four stories, which have all the fun and exaggeration of the American tall tale in their accounts of the town's past and Hercules' own. The last three stories, set in the present and focused more on Homer's activities, deal with inflated, deceptive advertising schemes to make money at another's expense and the catchiness of jingles that finally have Homer and the rest of the town "jingling" uncontrollably.

In comparison to *Homer Price*, though McCloskey's drawing is still humorous and enriching, in *Centerburg Tales* the added narrative frame of Grandfather Hercules slows down the first four stories due to the interruptions of Grandfather and his interchanges with the audience; at times he simply becomes tiresome. The last three stories are somewhat longer than the *Homer Price* stories, but they seem immeasurably longer because the clarity and quickness of movement that *Homer Price* had is lacking.

Two years before he entered the army, McCloskey had married Margaret Durand on 23 November 1940, and shortly after his service

was completed, they settled in the East. There McCloskey based several of his books on his family, which included his two children, Sarah (born in 1945) and Jane (born in 1948), and on their home on an island off the coast of Maine, where the McCloskeys still spend their summers. In *Blueberries for Sal* (1948), Little Sal, based on McCloskey's daughter Sarah, and her mother go berry picking on Blueberry Hill, Mother with canning on her mind, Sal with eating. On another part of the hill, Little Bear and Little Bear's mother arrive, intent on eating and storing up food for winter. Both Little Sal and Little Bear fall behind; each hears a noise and follows it, presuming it to be made by Mother. Amusingly enough, each is following the other's mother--a fact upsetting to both mothers, for Little Bear's mother had learned to be wary of people, no matter how small, and Little Sal's mother had learned to be very shy of bears, no matter how small. However, as the drawings show, Little Bear and Little Sal are savoring the adventure of berry picking and are quite interested in and trusting of the aliens they encounter. At the end of the book, each mother departs with her own child, her work completed.

Built on a simple but humorous reversal, the book suggests that the best laid plans of adults often go awry, not always to the dismay of their offspring. It also suggests that adults often overreact when confronted by the unfamiliar even though there is no threat, whereas children trustingly accept situations until harm is evident. The book is an affirmation of the sturdy, open approach to the world that children sometimes evince.

Though this story is delightful, the art, which earned McCloskey the place of runner-up for the Caldecott Medal in 1949, is perhaps more engaging than the story. Little Sal's character is defined much more thoroughly in the pictures. Hair in disorderly tufts, clothes rumpled, straps falling off her shoulders, she trudges sturdily along, trusting and open to all her experiences. In fact, the faces and actions of all the characters amplify and enrich the story. The background scenery, from Little Sal's perspective (just as many scenes in *Make Way for Ducklings* were seen from a duck's-eye view), suggests a child's impression of the openness and magnitude of Blueberry Hill. All but four of the pictures are double-page spreads done appropriately in dark blue.

In *One Morning in Maine* (1952) Sal, now accompanied by her younger sister, Jane, wakes up one morning optimistic about a trip to Bucks Harbor with Jane and her father in their motorboat. But, finding her tooth loose, she feels sure she is ill. Although she is reassured that this is a sign of growth and that the extracted tooth can even be wished on, unhappily she loses the tooth, thus canceling the wish. Before the day is over she finds a gull's feather--lost no doubt before the gull could wish on it--and also the defective spark plug taken from the ailing motorboat. Solemnly, Sal wishes on both--one wish for her, one for Jane, who is, Sal feels, too much of a baby to know these important rituals. When all arrive at the general store, Sal's wish for ice cream for herself and Jane comes true, and she decides that growing up may be pleasant after all.

Though *One Morning in Maine* is pleasant, the pictures outrank the story, which remains more a family anecdote than a story with original plot and fast-paced action. Children may identify with Sal, but the humor of the book--Sal's taking the childhood rituals seriously and feeling superior to Jane--seems more for adults. The theme is again comforting: change can be accepted, not as loss but as an indication of increasing maturity and wisdom.

The drawings, which in 1953 won McCloskey the place of runner-up for the Caldecott Medal once more, are the more interesting feature. Charcoal double-page spreads in soft grayed blues illustrate the beauty and magnificence of the Maine coast. Characters, except for Sal, are almost totally dependent on sketches for personality development, but, as always, McCloskey reveals traits through a stroke or two of his pencil: excited, enthusiastic Sal; mischievous, alert Jane; and preoccupied, sometimes harried father (McCloskey's sketch of himself).

McCloskey's next book, *Time of Wonder* (1957), his second Caldecott Medal winner (1958), once again develops out of family experiences on their island home, but the story is entirely different from that of previous books, both in the focus and the art. The book is a long prose poem, cadenced, descriptive, with repeated phrases that make a refrain. The story no longer has a child at its center; instead, the focus is the wonder of nature, the wonder of childhood, and the wonder of words. The narrative voice speaks to "you," presumably the two young girls in the pictures, but at times the parents and the readers seem included also. It describes the subtle as well as the striking changes that occur as fall approaches, bringing with it changes of weather which bring changes of mood. As a hurricane moves in, the landscape becomes strangely dark, people rush to gather in supplies and make things secure; then a stillness settles and all living things wait. The children move indoors to the secured cottage, close to their parents, and watch the hurricane. Next morning, they observe the mystery that an obscuring fog casts and marvel at the age of the island when they discover at the base of uprooted trees the shell money once used by the Indian tribes of long ago. Later, they explore the changes that night brings in the tide and the creatures of the ocean. At last, though, the time comes to say goodbye to the island until the next summer--with many of the beauties and mysteries of nature still unclassified. Where *do* hummingbirds go in a hurricane? Childhood responses to the natural world--the eagerness, curiosity, enjoyment, and awe--enrich the narrative. The book also celebrates the richness of language, as if McCloskey is savoring each word he uses. He lists place names, describes emotional responses and sensual responses, and repeats refrains as if all were incantations.

The art is as evocative of the beauty of nature as the prose is. In *Time of Wonder*, McCloskey uses watercolor for the first time, and the muted colors of the medium seem a perfect choice. The pictures in soft, shimmery colors show McCloskey's excellent control in depicting the way light changes in the passing of the day and the passing of the season or the way it illuminates the faces of the characters. This luminous quality is present even in the darkest illustrations of the hurricane or in the night scenes. All of the twenty-nine full-page paintings are quite attractive.

Both the narrative and the art contribute to the sense of wonder at nature's fullness and complexity and to the themes of time and timelessness, change and permanence in the natural order. Though written from an adult's perspective, the book is one which children can share and is indeed worthy to be a prizewinner.

Burt Dow, Deep-Water Man (1963), subtitled *A Tale of the Sea in the Classic Tradition*, the last of McCloskey's books to date, combines elements of the tall tale of the *Homer Price* stories with a seacoast setting. Burt Dow is a retired old sailor who speaks in the vernacular. Burt decides to go fishing in his much-mended, somewhat leaky boat, the *Tidely-Idely*, with his constant companion, a

giggling gull. In a parody of the tradition of *Moby Dick* and other classic tales of the sea, he catches a whale by the tail, but he releases it and mends its tail with a peppermint-striped Band-Aid, and from this event the plot develops. Having befriended the whale, he asks it, in the face of an approaching storm, to swallow him, somewhat in the manner of Jonah. Afraid that the whale may forget to cough him up again, Burt and the gull set about making the whale ill by emptying the junk Burt has stored in the *Tidely-Idely* into the whale's stomach. Once free again, Burt finds still further complications; he cannot get home because whales for miles around encircle him, each yearning for a peppermint-striped Band-Aid for its tail. Burt obliges and then goes off home in time for breakfast after his classic adventure on the sea.

Both the story and the art are first-rate, making this book one of McCloskey's best. Burt's character, his habits, and his speech are perhaps more developed than those of any McCloskey character. The action is fast-moving, each event related well to the next, though sailing home to Burt's domineering sister and housekeeper seems a dull note to end on. Besides the humor of the exaggerated action and Burt's dialogue and the spoof of sea stories, there is also the more serious note that whales, like people, behave very well when their needs are met, and that animals and people can help each other. In showing that man can get along with the environment and its creatures by mutual cooperation, *Burt Dow* is a bit of a philosopher, a deep-water man, and he reflects a concern McCloskey himself lectured on in his second Caldecott acceptance speech.

The art in *Burt Dow* is as lively, colorful, and fantastic as the story. The pictures are all double-page spreads in intense, bright hues, showing even the whales in pink, purple, and green as well as in gray and black. The illustrations of Burt and his boat being tossed out of the whale's stomach and of the armada of whales circling Burt and spouting to show their appreciation are two of the most amusing and imaginative. In still another illustration, McCloskey, who has already been spoofing literature, seems to direct his humor at abstract art. Certainly the picture of Burt inside the whale, spreading the contents of his boat--leftover paint, sediment, grease, and assorted trash--over the belly of the whale resembles an abstract painting. That this conglomeration of materials and paint makes the whale ill enough to throw up Burt and his boat may be part of McCloskey's fun.

Since *Burt Dow*, *Deep-Water Man*, no more of McCloskey's work has been published, though he says that he has written many more books that are put away in drawers and may or may not be published. In a visit to Hamilton, Ohio, in 1979, McCloskey discussed some of his future plans. He says that he feels he has explored picture books thoroughly, and certainly the variety in his work evident in *Lentil*, *Make Way for Ducklings*, *Blueberries for Sal*, *Time of Wonder*, and *Burt Dow* supports this statement. Now, he says, he is interested in film and television puppet shows. There is no doubt that his humor, inventiveness, and art would be welcome additions to that area, but his very special talents and way of seeing would be a great loss to the area of children's books. Perhaps he will take some of those books out of the drawer to amuse and delight children again as he has for the past several decades.

Papers:

McCloskey's papers are deposited in the May Massee Memorial Collection, William Allen White Library, Emporia State University, Emporia, Kansas.

FURTHER READINGS:

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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- Margaret McCloskey, "Robert McCloskey," *Horn Book Magazine*, 34 (August 1958): 252-255.

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