

THE NEIGHBORHOOD STORYTELLER

A film by HOME Storytellers

JOURNEYS IN FILM™
educating for global understanding



THE BIG HEART FOUNDATION PRESENTS THE NEIGHBORHOOD STORYTELLER A PRODUCTION BY HOME STORYTELLERS
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WE LOVE READING MARIAM AL HAMMADI ABOULLA MOHAMMED

THE NEIGHBORHOOD STORYTELLER

*(with literary connection to Muzoon: A Syrian Refugee Speaks Out
by Muzoon Almellean with Wendy Pearlman)*

Discussion Guide

For community screenings, panels, and workshops, and for college courses and seminars



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Facilitation Guidelines

Filmmakers use immersive storytelling to produce intense thoughts and emotions in the viewer. **Journeys in Film** uses this powerful medium as a springboard for meaningful dialogue around humanity's most pressing issues. In this guide, you will find suggestions for leading productive conversations that broaden perspectives, increase global competency, encourage empathy, and build new paradigms for education.

- When watching a film or having a powerful discussion, normalize taking breaks and exercising bodily autonomy. Acknowledge that conversations around complex topics can be vulnerable, complicated, and challenging. Encourage members to voice and do what is right for them without needing to explain or apologize.
- People do their best when they know what to expect. Start and end your meetings on time.
- Share or co-create your intentions for the meeting.
- Create your space. If possible, share snacks or find other ways to create an inviting, comfortable atmosphere.
- Create a trustworthy space. Maintain confidentiality and only speak to your own experience.
- Minimize distractions while you are together. Silence cell phones and devices so you can give your full attention to the conversation.
- Practice whole-body listening. Listen to words, tone, body language, and the feeling in the atmosphere.
- Acknowledge voices that may be absent. Is there a lived experience that isn't represented in your group? Who are the bridge people who might be able to connect you with other people in your community who might bring new perspectives to the table?
- Adopt an attitude of positive intent. If someone says something that bothers you, assume positive intent and ask for more information.
- Ignite your curiosity around other people's views and opinions. Listen to understand, not to respond. You don't need to agree with others in your group or make it known that you are "right" to have a worthwhile conversation.
- Words matter. Be open to learning and practicing new ways to communicate with others.
- Be clear, direct, and kind in your communication. Nobody benefits when you bottle your opinions.
- Everyone has blind spots and biases; cultivate a space of grace as you enter into new territory together.
- If a conversation gets heated, practice acknowledging the tension, pausing as a group, and taking a collective breath together before diving back in or taking a longer break to reset.
- Privilege your relationships with others over the content or agenda of the meeting. Show each other kindness.
- Create a closing ritual that celebrates the time you've spent together and either gives closure or gives members something to think about before your next meeting.

About the Film



After its establishment in Jordan in 2012, the Za’atari refugee camp quickly grew to 120,000 occupants. It has since stabilized at a population of 80,000 residents, many of them children who have never known life outside the camp. Recent data from the UN High Commissioner on Refugees suggests that 47 percent are under 18 years old. Many of the adults have active work permits. Za’atari is a robust community with schools, health services, community centers, and a commercial district containing over 1,800 shops and small businesses, all run by entrepreneurial Syrians.

The Neighborhood Storyteller suggests that despite the relative safety and peace of the camps, it could be better for girls’ development. Many residents come from families where early marriage is customary and advisable to ensure stable futures for daughters. Families planning to have their young teenagers become wives and mothers before the age of 18 do not always see a need for formal education in secondary schools. The film explores the range of attitudes surrounding education for girls, from apathy to grief for the loss of opportunities.

Living in the camp is Asmaa Jamal Rashed, a 28-year-old mother of four. After participating in We Love Reading, a literacy and empowerment program, Asmaa decided to rebuild her adult identity as a neighborhood storyteller and began using reading aloud to children for fun to tackle critical issues in her community. Seven years later, with her daughter Tamara reaching adolescence, Asmaa decides to embark on a new read-aloud project to empower teenage girls to build a future of opportunities she never had. She gathers her group, and together they explore stories, discuss their fears and hopes, and grow in happiness and courage.

Viewers learn Asmaa’s story of early marriage and her educational drive, hear heartbreaking recollections from *her* mother, and attend Asmaa’s living room reading sessions with the girls in the Za’atari camp. The film invites viewers to explore changing roles for women and the importance of reading and sharing stories to find one’s voice.



About We Love Reading and Professor Rana Dajani



Professor Rana Dajani grew up reading all the time. After she had her own children, she realized that children don't read for fun in her community. She decided to change that.

Professor Dajani founded We Love Reading in 2006 in Jordan as a grassroots community-based program that has trained over 8,603 ambassadors in 69 countries.¹ We Love Reading not only aims to create a generation of youth and children who enjoy and respect books, but also to foster social responsibility, civic engagement, and enhanced psycho-social well-being through the establishment of a library in every neighborhood in the world. The We Love Reading mission is "Changing mindsets through reading to nurture changemakers."

¹ <https://weloveread.org/periodicals/> (Numbers are updated here as they shift and grow)

Syria



Syria is located in the Middle East, surrounded by Iraq, Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon, and Israel. Syria's geography is varied and includes mountain ranges, deserts, the Euphrates River valley, and access to the Mediterranean Sea.

The pre-2011 civil war population was nearly 22 million. Eighty-seven percent of citizens were Muslim, 10 percent Christian, and three percent Druze. Arabic is the official language. There was a “tenuous peace” in Syria before the war and a repressive government, but now the country faces extreme precarity due to destroyed infrastructure and mass displacement from years of war.² Bashar al-Assad inherited the presidency after his father died in 2000 and is considered a totalitarian dictator and summarily criticized for human rights violations.³

In the early 2010s, anti-government uprisings across the Arab world deposed leaders in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and Yemen. This multi-country movement was called the “Arab Spring.” Many of the demonstrators faced violent retribution, and as the local protests died down, other major conflicts were initiated, including the civil war in Syria.

In Syria, peaceful demonstrations were met with deadly force by the Assad government, which claimed that foreign governments funded the protesters. The conflict gained international support for both sides, bringing various governments and religious groups to the fray.

The death toll during the war has been significant, with estimates of up to half a million people killed, including hundreds of thousands of civilians, tens of thousands who were tortured in state-controlled prisons, and tens of thousands of children. More than half of Syria's population has been displaced, either within the country or to refugee camps, including the Za'atari camp in Jordan.

(Note to instructor: Above is a basic overview of the situation the protagonists in The Neighborhood Storyteller and Muzoon find themselves in. You may wish to expand this lesson to include a more robust history of the Middle East, Syria, Arab Spring, and international politics.)

² <https://www.theatlantic.com/membership/archive/2018/04/remembering-syria-before-the-war/558716/>

³ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35806229>



Discussion Questions

1. What do you already know about Syria? Have you heard about the conflict and war there? What do you wonder about Syria, the Middle East, and the conflict? Consider breaking into groups to discuss and then reporting back for a class-wide discussion.
2. Define and discuss the idea of a displaced person or refugee. In what other contexts have you heard those terms? Consider who in your state, community, or even family has experienced being forced to leave their home because of conflict or unsafe living conditions.
3. Describe the Za'atari Camp in Jordan where this story takes place. List the positive and negative aspects of living in the camp. What surprised you about the camp and the homes people lived in?
4. Tamara, Asmaa and Fadi's 12-year-old daughter, says, "My parents try to convince us to like this place, but I really hate it...There is nothing to enjoy here at the camp." Why do you think the parents have a different perspective than their daughter?
5. How do the girls in the reading group remember Syria? Most of them left when they were young, and some even say they don't remember. How do you think being displaced and an uncertain future shapes your memories?

Extension Activities

1. Look at a [map](#) and study the area. Note where Syria is in relation to Jordan and other countries. Research the environment and culture of Syria. (Links are listed in the Additional Resources page).
2. Have students research Syrian food and music. Host a cultural meal. Invite a local Syrian resident if possible.
3. Consider reading or assigning parts of the book *We Crossed a Bridge and It Trembled: Voices from Syria* by Wendy Pearlman. In it, the stories of ordinary citizens are shared. Assign students chapters to share with the class.

Education for Women and Girls Worldwide



Globally, girls' educational opportunities are precarious. Nearly 129 million girls are out of school, and the effects of the gender disparity impact the entire community. Research shows that when girls receive education, they often use that education to uplift not only themselves but also their families and others in their community. Educated girls make more money, are less likely to marry early, and have better health and maternity outcomes.

Barriers to education are multifaceted. Some of the primary barriers include early marriage, gender-based discrimination and violence, and limited resources. In addition, in areas of conflict and war, girls' education is often swiftly disrupted or ended.⁴

Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think education is routinely denied to girls around the world?
2. What role does the father, Fadi, play in the film? How do you think parents' attitudes affect girls' education?
3. After Asmaa leaves her mother's house, we see her looking in the mirror reflecting. She says to herself, "I will try to be strong. I will draw my strength from my children and the generations that are being destroyed." Discuss Asmaa's enduring motivation as impacted by each of the three generations of women: Asmaa's life experiences, those of her mother, and what she wishes for her daughter.
4. Near the end of the film, Asmaa asks the girls to imagine where they will be in ten years. What did you notice about

the range of responses? Before this reading program, how many of these girls might have been asked this question? Do you think just asking a question can change or reinvent a person? How so?

Extension Activities

1. Explore the site [We Love Reading](#), whose programming inspired Asmaa to start her neighborhood reading program. Are there ways your group can support their work?
2. Watch [Dr. Rana Dajani's TEDx talk](#) about the beginnings of the We Love Reading program. There is this recent talk from TEDInArabic by Dr Rana Dajani <https://tedinarabic.ted.com/en/talk/the-importance-of-reading-for-fun>
3. Research literacy programs in your own community. Whom do they serve? What programming do they offer? Are there ways your group can support their work?

⁴ <https://www.unicef.org/education/girls-education>



Reading, Literacy, and Storytelling



UNESCO defines literacy broadly to include reading texts and as “a means of identification, understanding, interpretation, creation, and communication in an increasingly digital, text-mediated, information-rich and fast-changing world.” Simply put, “Literacy empowers and liberates people.”⁵

War and civil unrest undermine students’ education by disrupting schooling. Sometimes schools close or parents may keep their children at home in the name of safety. Despite humanitarian laws against targeting schools, direct attacks on schools globally in the last few years have risen dramatically. We know the longer children are out of school, the less likely they are to return. In addition, lower education levels lead to generational poverty with long-lasting effects.⁶

Literacy programs, while not a replacement for the robust education a school can offer, may stanch the loss of skills and prepare students to return to academic study when able, or at least retain and develop reading and learning skills.

⁵ <https://www.unesco.org/en/literacy/need-know>

⁶ <https://concernusa.org/news/how-does-war-affect-education/>

Discussion Questions

1. Asmaa shares her life story with her children through oral storytelling, during which she encourages them to illustrate the scenes she is describing. How are the stories of your family passed on? Are they told as a story, or are hints dropped in daily life?
2. In the moving scene of Asmaa talking to her mother, we hear a personal confession that the older woman sees herself in her daughter's pursuits. She reveals:

“Learning was not a choice; girls were not allowed to learn. I liked learning and was a good student. I felt like I wanted these things and lost it. It was so hard for me. Women could do nothing. **You are doing all I've ever wanted to do. That's why I am supporting you! Keep going! Don't listen to anyone!**”

How important is it for each generation to share their story to effect change and progress? Have you experienced anything similar in your family?

3. The program's goal, according to Asmaa, is for the girls to gain a love of reading. In the process of sharing stories, what other life skills do the girls learn?
4. What examples stood out to you of the girls sharing their voices and opinions with the group? Do you think they have had this opportunity much in their lives? Why is it important for people to be able to speak for themselves? Use examples from the film.

Extension Activities

1. Rewrite a story that is well known in your family. Illustrate it and share it with your family. Consider how the story takes on a deeper or more complex meaning when you are the transcriber.
2. Host a storytelling night with family or friends. Participants do not have to prepare beforehand; just gather and respond to open-ended prompts about food, games, happy memories, hard times, or childhood shenanigans.

Grassroots Work, Life Skills, and Visions for the Future



Grassroots work is community-based work where ordinary people become agents of change. The power of the initiative comes from the bottom up (the people), as opposed to a top-down organizational structure (like a government or corporate-sponsored program). Because grassroots work is often initiated and sustained by ordinary people, there is usually a significantly lower working budget, but also less inefficient bureaucracy. In *The Neighborhood Storyteller*, viewers see how simple and effective a grassroots program can be. Asmaa simply gathers girls in her home to read and share stories. Frequently, community-led programs focus on stabilizing basic needs like food, clean water, health care, and safety. They can also prepare people for better futures by providing job training and life skills.

Discussion Questions

1. The film opens with Asmaa knocking on doors to sign up girls for her reading enrichment program. Watch this section again and note how she builds her argument. What are the benefits for the girls? What are the parents' objections? How does she reassure the parents?
2. How do the girls seem to feel as they enter Asmaa's house for the first time? How does she make them comfortable on their first and subsequent visits?
3. When Asmaa asks the girls to remember a time they were very happy, Waed replies she is happy when she comes to Asmaa's house to read. She says she can be herself and is not defined in relation to any other family member or role. "I (feel) like I exist as Waed." What power lies in the ability to feel oneself as an independent entity? Is that something you feel? Or something you take for granted?
4. Summarize what the girls express to be the benefits and effects of the reading program.
5. In the closing credits, the text reads in part, "Everyone can become a force of positive change." Do you believe this to be true? How did the film showcase the power of one person with limited means? What were the strengths that Asmaa used to sustain her program?

Extension Activities

1. Individually list your talents and strengths. Then, brainstorm ways you might use those to help others. Can you help a group or even just one person?
2. As a group, consider how you might pool your various talents. How might your group become "a force for positive change"? Plan a project that puts your idea into practice. Maybe it is to improve some aspect of your school or community center. Or maybe you can help another group who would benefit from your skills. Invite community activists to speak to your group. Ask for their advice in becoming a changemaker.



Literary Connection —

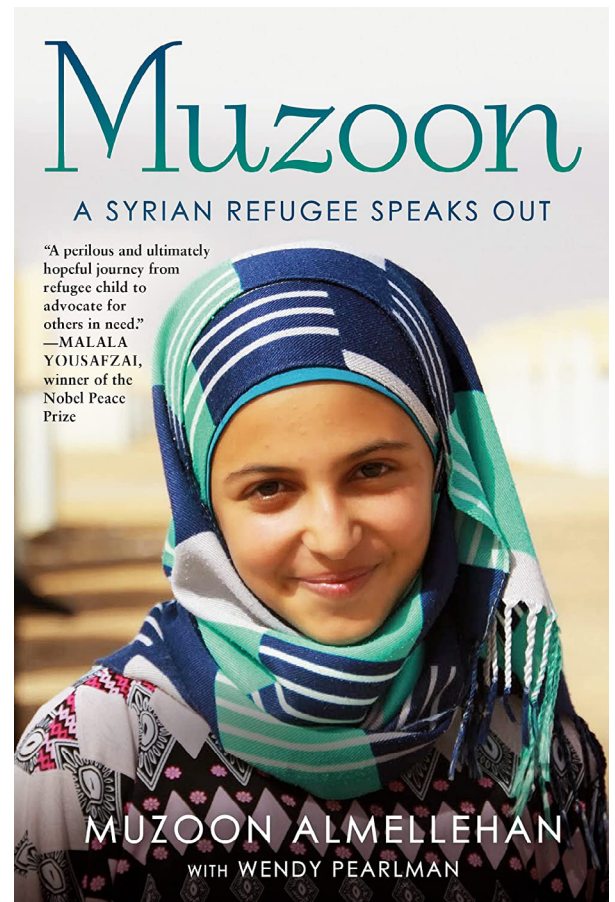
Muzoon: A Syrian Refugee Speaks Out by Muzoon Almellehan with Wendy Pearlman

“Education is hope, and I want people to have hope.” — Muzoon

The memoir *Muzoon: A Syrian Refugee Speaks Out* by Muzoon Almellehan with Wendy Pearlman recounts the story of Muzoon, a teenage girl whose carefree days playing soccer in the streets with her brothers and cousins are cut short when their family flees the violent civil unrest in Syria and ends up living in the Za’atari Camp in Jordan. Muzoon finds meaning and resilience in her consistent pursuit of education, first for herself and then for the other kids in the camp. Her outspoken enthusiasm for the power of education, even in dark times, catches the attention of the camp staff, and she becomes a spokesperson and activist advocating for young people on the world’s stage.

Discussion Questions

1. According to the book, what are some of the main reasons girls do not want to attend school in the refugee camp?
2. Discuss the tension between feelings of optimism and hope compared to feeling stuck and hopeless in the camp. How do these emotional mindsets motivate the characters differently in the story?
3. Discuss the evolution of Muzoon’s view of education from the beginning of the book, where she is passionately concerned about getting into high school and college, to later, in the camp, where she becomes invested in all young people’s education. She writes, “People say that these kids [2.5 million Syrian children not in school] risk becoming a ‘lost generation.’ I say that we are not lost. We are the greatest hope for the future of a strong and free Syria. We only need the world to invest in that hope by helping us get access to education.”



4. Muzoon finds inspiration and strength in poetry. Study the poem that she memorized in school, “If the People Wanted Life One Day” by Tunisian poet Abu al-Qassim al-Sabbi.

You can read several translations here:

<https://arablit.org/2011/01/16/two-translations-of-abu-al-gasim-al-shabis-if-the-people-wanted-life-one-day/>

Later in the memoir, she recalls verses from the Surah al-Baqarah in the Quran to uplift her during a challenging time.

“We will certainly test you with some fear and hunger, and some loss of possessions and lives and crops. But give good news to the steadfast.”

You can see this verse (in a slightly different translation) performed here:

<https://youtu.be/pBe78DwPx9Q?si=I090jZiJhStoENz8>

How do you think the lines from the poem and the Quran reflect Muzoon’s life experiences? How might they give her strength to carry on?

Are there similar poems or verses you have used in times of hardship and despair? Consider collecting student submissions and compiling a “Reader for Hard Times.” Note that while our religions or beliefs might differ, we can still appreciate messages of hope from various voices worldwide.

Extension Activities

1. Have students create a lexicon of unfamiliar words from the memoir. An engaging method is to have students create a Google Slides presentation. Students can work alone or in small groups to create a slide for each term. Slides can contain the word, definition, etymology/history, text, and image examples. Students can present their terms to the class.

Potential words to study for context are: souk, mosque, minaret, Bedouin, regime, Quran, activist, optimistic, bittersweet, displaced, refugee, Ramadan, White Helmets, UN, UNICEF, Malala Yousafzai, Nobel Peace Prize, harissa, education advocacy. See an example slide [here](#).

2. Like Muzoon, watch popular YouTube cook Manal Al-Alem Kitchen make harissa cake. (Note: The YouTube video is in Arabic; the recipe ingredients she uses are: 2 cups flour, 1/4 teaspoon salt, 2 teaspoons baking powder, 1 teaspoon cinnamon, 1/2 teaspoon cardamom, 1 cup boiling water, 1 cup minced dates, 1 teaspoon baking soda, 1/2 cup of Qamar (cream), 1/4 cup corn oil, 1/2 cup sugar, 3 large eggs, 1 teaspoon vanilla extract. Tahini sauce: 1 pack of 400g of sweetened milk, 1/4 cup tahini, 2 tablespoons Qamar, 1/4 teaspoon saffron.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KnCBTNUwNqE>

An alternate video with English subtitles can be found here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gVME_H5n-94M&t=13s

3. Watch Muzoon’s TEDx talk, “Why I Carried my School Books Out of Syria.”

https://www.ted.com/talks/muzoon_almellehan_why_i_carried_my_school_books_out_of_syria

4. Watch Malala Yousafzai’s Nobel Peace Prize speech.

https://youtu.be/8hx0ajieM3M?si=JJD_9rcUNr5G-KtK

5. Explore the UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador program in which Muzoon Almellehen and other notable people from the worlds of music, sports, film, and activism support the “needs and aspirations of the world’s children.”

<https://www.unicef.org/goodwill-ambassadors>

⁸ P 165

Connections Between the Book and Film



(Note to instructors: Many of these questions could form the basis of group discussion and presentation or be easily turned into essay prompts).

1. Compare how each protagonist (Muzoon and Asmaa) convinced parents to let children participate in educational programs.
2. Compare the power of story and storytelling in *The Neighborhood Storyteller* and *Muzzon*.
3. In each story, the younger generation has a different perspective on the camp experience than the older generation. What do the younger residents experience? What are the older generations' concerns?
4. What role did the parents in each story play in their daughter's educational pursuits? What differences did you notice between mothers' and fathers' roles in education in the stories? How do your parents support your education?
5. What are some ways that refugee or migrant children support their parents when they move to a camp or another country? How do these moves change family dynamics?
6. Muzzon writes, "There were times when I felt like the only things I had were my voice and my refusal to give up." Discuss the difference between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. Write a reflective essay about your intrinsic motivation. What are the things that are most important to you? What will you use your voice for and refuse to give up on?

Additional Resources and More to Explore

Syrian Map

<https://www.worldatlas.com/maps/syrian-arab-republic>

Use Live Universal Awareness Map to see updated details about the conflict in Syria. Inform students they can click on each incident to see the source of the reported incident.

<https://syria.liveuamap.com/>

Arab Spring history and commentary

<https://www.history.com/topics/middle-east/arab-spring>

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/12/17/what-is-the-arab-spring-and-how-did-it-start>

<https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2021/02/ten-years-later-was-the-arab-spring-a-failure/>

Photo Essay of the Za’atari Camp in 2013

<https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/interactive/2013/05/09/world/middleeast/zaatari.html>

More about the history and current situation in the Za’atari refugee camp

<https://www.unhcr.org/news/stories/jordans-zaatari-refugee-camp-10-facts-10-years>

We Love Reading free training program portal in 10 languages. This program is based on research done in partnership with institutions like Harvard University, Cambridge University, Yale University and other renowned institutions. The link provided here can be used for students and others to set up their own training programs.

<https://we-love-reading-program-the-online-training.teachable.com/p/home>

Syrian food

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Syrian_cuisine

<https://youtube.com/@manalalalem?si=MHz1A31rOCS8T7vj>

Syrian language — Explore Arabic

[Learn to say “thank you” and “you’re welcome”](#)

[A 13-minute video on the history and development of the Arabic language](#)

The Oscar-nominated short film about Connecticut-based Syrian architect and artist Mohamad Hafez’s “A Broken House” features Hafez’s re-creations of “the Syria of His Memories, Through Miniatures,” produced by *The New Yorker*.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gyDEcXlbOZs>

Visit his website: <https://www.mohamadhafez.com>

He Named Me Malala Journeys in Film Curriculum Guide and Discussion Guide. Curriculum Guide includes a lesson on Malala’s Nobel Peace Prize Speech.

<https://journeysinfilm.org/product/he-named-me-malala/>



Film Credits

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Film Crew photo by Francisco J Alcalá @homestorytellers

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Professor Rana Dajani <https://weloveread.org/>

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Camp Zaatari photo by Francisco J Alcalá @homestorytellers

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Asma's group photo by Francisco J Alcalá @homestorytellers

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Asma's family photo by Francisco J Alcalá @homestorytellers

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Camp Zaatari photo by Francisco J Alcalá @homestorytellers

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Muzoon photo by Francisco J Alcalá @homestorytellers

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Asma's family photo by Francisco J Alcalá @homestorytellers

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