Challenging teenage and Young Adult reading in the UK: the novels of Philip Reeve.

Professor Jean Webb,
Director of the International Forum for Research in Children's Literature,
Institute of Humanities & Creative Arts,
University of Worcester,
UK.

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The UK and American market in young adult and teen fiction is very buoyant with a considerable number of new books each year, not to mention those which are published in the American market and are available in the UK. I have therefore decided to focus on the work of Philip Reeve who is a particularly outstanding author who has won or been nominated for a number of major awards, including winning the Carnegie Medal and the Guardian Children's Fiction Prize for *No Such Thing As Dragons* (2009). Reeve's novels are wide ranging and challenge the thinking of teenage and young adult readers. His work includes science fiction in his *Mortals Engines* series (2001-2006) to heroic legend in *Here Lies Arthur* (2007) and touching on the essential components of fairy tale in *No Such Thing As Dragons* (2009). Reeve is a brilliant storyteller who challenges his readers to think whilst engaging them in a complex and evocative adventure. To date there has been very little academic consideration of his work. The extant book reviews do little other than re-tell the story to attract readers, yet Reeve makes his readers think about the contemporary world through imaginative and unusual situations raising practical questions about responsibility for the environment in his *Mortal Engines* series and philosophical and moral questions in *Here Lies Arthur* and *No Such Thing As Dragons*.

Reeve's *Mortal Engines* series *Mortal Engines* (2001)**,** *Predator's Gold* (2003)*, Infernal Devices* (2005) and *A Darkling Plain* (2006) is science fiction projecting into a post-apocalyptic world where cities themselves are animated forms of vehicles. Natural resources have almost been destroyed and the remaining mode of life functions upon 'Municipal Darwinism' where cities are predatory and consume each other for the natural resources. The rural has been obliterated and urban dominance is the only recognised normality. Reeve's apocalyptic vision is the antithesis of that of Romanticism.

Philip Reeve's *Mortal Engines* series which, to quote Reeve,

> 'covers nearly twenty years in the history of the Traction Era, a far-future age when cities move about hunting smaller mobile towns and dismantling those they catch for their raw materials. Airships ply the skies, amphibious limpet-submarines lurk in the oceans, and dangerous bits of technology left over from a long-ago war lie waiting to be discovered and put to use in the looming conflict between the cities and their anti-tractionist enemies.' [i]

Reeve's employs a satirical form of Darwin's concept of the survival of the fittest, which he names 'Municipal Darwinism'. Reeve's restructured society has a history which can be read on-line at the address given below. It begins with 'A Brief History Of Municipal Darwinism'. This history is written by the Deputy Head Historian Chudleigh Pomeroy and 'validated' by 'The

Guild of Historians', creating a sense of reality for this fantasy world by the creation of quasi-official documentation.

Pomeroy writes:

> After the Ancients destroyed themselves in the Sixty Minute War, there were several thousand years when Nothing Much Happened. These were the Black Centuries. Mankind was reduced to a few thousand individuals; scattered bands of savages who hid in cellars and caverns to escape the plague-winds and the poisoned rain, and survived on the canned goods they managed to dig up from the ruins of their ancestors' great cities. It was a savage age, when life was cheap, and most people would happily have sold their own children for a tin of rice pudding.
>
> Even when the ash-clouds thinned and the sun returned, bringing new growth to the scorched earth, humanity was still beset by famines, pestilence and other types of unpleasantness. Vast upheavals and rearrangements of the Earth's surface were underway. Whether these were due to the lingering effects of the mighty weapons which the Ancients had used in their war, or were merely a natural process, we cannot know.
>
> At around this time, among other great changes, some violent storm or convulsion in the planet's crust caused the western edges of the island called 'Britain' or 'UK' to sink beneath the Atlantic, while the North Sea drained away entirely, leaving Britain attached by a land-bridge to the rest of Europe. (This was one day to have great consequences for a miserable, ruinous city called London, which clung on, barely inhabited, to a place beside the muddy river Thames.)[ii]

Reeve therefore creates a world which could potentially happen. The centres of power of western civilization are destroyed. Interestingly Reeve's places the regeneration of civilization in Africa, changing the current power balance currently experienced with western civilisation versus the so-called Third World. Technology is abhorred in these new centres of civilization. Nonetheless as the societies of the northern hemisphere begin to re-group over a period of several hundred years, technology again reigns supreme, re-discovered by the equivalent of archaeology dedicated to the retrieval and development of old technology. The great societal change comes with the new Traction Era. London becomes a mobilised city, that is, a city which can travel and thus conquer other cities. Other towns and cities follow suit. London devours other cities to:

> 'use their raw materials to make itself larger, stronger and faster-moving! Over the following few years the city was torn down and rebuilt in the form of a gigantic vehicle, based on the linked and extended chassis of the Movement's Traction Fortresses.' ' in the hundred years that followed it was to eat most of the richer settlements in Uk, and the raw materials it took from them were used to expand the base-plate, construct the first tracks and add a further four tiers were added to the city, bringing the total to the seven on which Londoners live today.[iii]

London society is highly stratified, with the higher echelons living in the upper levels and those condemned to the arduous, dangerous and low grade work of dealing with recycling the materials on the bottom levels. Outside the city is a vast no-man's land, with agriculture destroyed, and those who have either elected to leave the cities and towns, or have been outcaste, surviving in a clan based aggressive, self-protecting world. The future is seen as that of the expansion, dominance and continuation of the moving cities, with the city dwellers believing that it is 'is barbarous and even unhealthy to set foot upon the bare earth.'[iv]

In his alternative world Reeve depicts the corruption of admirable ethical approaches to the protection of the environment. Re-cycling becomes a predatory activity resultant of the escalation of the draining of natural resources and humanity is so distanced from the natural world that it becomes in itself, abhorrent.

As the series of four books progresses sanity and the rejuvenation of nature does finally occur, however, this is only after the intervention of young protagonists who represent the future generations and engage in great battles to conquer the insane forces of technological dominance. They take responsibility for their environment and the future spiritual and physical well-being of their society.

In his paper 'Toxic Discourse', Lawrence Buell, the environmental theorist, suggests:

> that the sheer eloquence, the affect-of testimony of ordinary citizens' anxiety about environmental degradation can have substantial influence on public policy, especially when the media are watching. (Buell,1998, p. 665)[v]

Philip Reeve is voicing anxiety in an eloquent and literary manner, employing satire combined with an overarching adventure story which exposes the dangers he perceives in western society as being increasingly dependent upon and consumed by technology. Literary satire is a weapon to bring to the fore that which others would wish to ignore. His work is very popular both in the UK and the USA. Reeve may not have direct influence upon policy, however, the power of his work will, no doubt, influence those young readers now who will make future policy and determine the extent to which the urban, i.e. the hungry cities, consume the rural.

Policy making and voicing opinion and influencing future approaches to life are underpinned by skills which have to be learned and approaches considered. In the years leading to adult responsibilities individuals have to learn how to think through matters, to consider and reconsider their values and philosophical and moral approaches to life. Reading the best of fiction is part of this developmental process, since the reader can engage in problems and can think through and around matters without there being an impact in the actual world. The best of fiction enables such engaging reading for there are puzzles and open ended situations both moral and practical for which there is no absolute right answer. *Here Lies Arthur* and *No Such Thing As Dragons* confront questions associated with heroism and truth telling.

Heroism and 'the hero' are words readily bandied in the UK popular press. One would not wish to suggest at all any negative associations with those who have performed acts of outstanding bravery in the defence of country and of the innocent and the weak, however, with the rise of celebrity culture and the adulation given to sportsmen (women are rarely given heroic status) there is a devaluation of the term. The desire for the hero is one which goes way back beyond contemporary times to Ancient Greece and Rome and was a subject of particular focus in nineteenth century Britain. In 1819 Lord Byron began his satirical epic poem 'Don Juan' with the following lines:

> I want a hero: an uncommon want,
> When every year and month sends forth a new one,
> Till, after cloying the gazettes with cant,
> The age discovers he is not the true one;
>
> Lord Byron, 'Don Juan' Canto The First.[vi]

Why is it, I wonder, that human groups require heroes or heroines, those people who supposedly display attributes and characteristics which are above, and for most of us, beyond the powers of the normal? Is it to make us feel safer, believing that there will be a saviour against all odds; or to give us, perhaps, an image with which to aspire and identify as demonstrating that which we would want to associate with the group, or nation; in other words, for the hero to be a standard of excellence. Another way of thinking about this matter is that rather than being the heroic iconic super-being created and selected by the individual citizen that, in truth, national heroes are the products of political desire designed to solve problems, distract the populace and create a feel-good atmosphere where otherwise there would be disenchantment and potential revolution.

Whereas 'revolution' is a word unsurprisingly associated with eighteenth century France it is not naturally applied to the political state of the United Kingdom, rather the opposite. Yet the period surrounding the Acts of Union in 1801, which formed the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, was one of latent unrest since disparate groups with their individual national identities were forced together. Potential revolution is a threat which affects all and enters the national consciousness, including that of historians, writers and artists who are the intellectual observers and commentators on society, and can participate in re-constructing and constructing the national consciousness either in accord with or against the dominant order. Around the period of the political creation of the United Kingdom a strategy emerged through literature and the reclamation of history to avert revolution by diverting diversity into singularity by employing the past. As Barczewski observes:

> The Middle Ages could, if manipulated carefully, provide a portrait of a single nation with all its inhabitants marching together towards glory and greatness, rather than one of a hostile group of geographically proximate countries who were constantly warring against one another. Given this cultural context, it is not surprising that the years between 1790 and 1820 saw a literary apotheosis of King Arthur and Robin Hood, two of the nation's greatest medieval heroes.
>
> (Barczewski,2000 p.7)

Whereas in the nineteenth century emergent nations such as Germany, in their amalgamation of disparate states constructed a uniting, yet mythical 'past' through fairytale for example, as Barczewski states:

> All British historians had to do,' 'was to admire that longevity, rather than create it'.
> (Barczewski, p.3)

Such admiration was clearly evident in the literary creations of Alfred Noyes Tennyson, who became poet laureate in 1850 and produced patriotic works such as 'The Charge of the Light Brigade'. Tennyson utilised the actual and mythical history of Britain in his Arthurian poems. When he wrote his first Arthurian poem "Morte d'Arthur" in 1833, Tennyson called the Arthurian legend "the greatest of all poetical subjects," whereas Samuel Taylor Coleridge was more sceptical when in the same year he claimed:

> "as to Arthur, you could not by any means make a poem national to Englishmen. What have we to do with him?"[vii]
> (Zanzucchi, 1995)

Well, Tennyson made sure that the British, or more correctly the English did have great deal to do with Arthur for 'Tennyson's fascination with Arthurian legend continued throughout his lifetime' 'as from his early twenties until a few months before his death, with varying degrees of intensity, Tennyson drafted and revised his Arthurian epic – 'Idylls of the King'-- popularizing what became an avid Victorian interest in Arthuriana'. (ibid)

Whilst Tennyson drew on legend, current military historians such as Terry Gore trace the historical origins of King Arthur back to the early post-Roman period, circa 490 AD. Ambrosius, a captain of the Britons, had been born of Roman parents and fought against the invading German Saxons. In legend he became Uther, father of Arthur, whilst the legendary Arthur was based on the figure of Lucius Artorius Castus. In the following historical section I am drawing directly from Gore's work.

> The legendary Artorius most probably was the Comes Britanniarum, or its equivalent, under the overlordship of the Dux, Ambrosius. Located in the northern part of Britain, which remained relatively German-free until the Angles arrived in the mid-6th century, the Comes' primary task remained defending the north against Picts, Scots and rebellious British chieftains. (Gore, 2000. P.46)

Nowhere is a Dark Ages generalship more personified than in the legendary Arthur. Yet his very existence is open to speculation. Only fragments of poems and references, as in the Mabinogion, a collection of 11 Welsh epic tales made by the kings of Dal Riada and Dyfed, who named their sons Arthur in the early 7th century, lend evidence to substantiate his impact on British history. Recent scholarship, Celtic oral tradition as well as records of place names along the Anglo-Celtic frontier make reference to both Ambrosius and Arthur. Whether called Arthur, Arturus or the Latin Lucius Artorius Castus, the commander from the north of Britain was equal to the task of challenging the German invasion. (see Gore, Terry L. 2000)

Under the influence of Tennyson's pen the Arthur of legend was certainly equal to contributing to the task of nation building. A flawed hero he was, yet Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table inhabited an imagined space of chivalry, heroism and splendour centred on the court at Camelot. Writers have kept Arthurian legend alive in literature for children. This stuff of legend lends itself to different interpretation depending on the intentions and inclinations of the author. For example, T.H. White's re-telling, *The Sword in the Stone,* (1939) is of a somewhat comic tone, perhaps wanting to lift spirits during war time. Six decades later Michael Morpurgo's *Arthur, High King of Britain* (2002) situates a contemporary boy facing death when marooned on a sandbank,

> With the sea closing in and the current about to drag him to a watery grave, his final wish is to see heaven. Waking in a strange bed, the boy meets an old man. It is Arthur, the warrior king of legend, and from his lips the boy hears of Camelot, chivalry, magic, evil and betrayal. (Morpurgo, 2002. Back Cover)

Morpurgo is demonstrating how legend can bridge the centuries and how the heroes, stories and values of old are useful and relevant to the contemporary child. A contemporary of Morpurgo, Kevin Crossley-Holland, a medieval scholar, has set his re-told Arthurian trilogy (2000-2003) in medieval times. The first of the trilogy, *The Seeing Stone*, introduces Arthur, a boy who has a piece of obsidian given him by Merlin. In this magical stone Arthur can see Arthurian legend enacted, yet is this foretelling his present, his future or another parallel world of Arthur? Crossley-Holland situates the story within medieval social and political history, as when in the second book, *At the Crossing Places,* Arthur travels to the Holy Land to fight in the Crusades, yet Crossley-Holland makes the 21st century reader think about present day attitudes and mores through introducing problems associated with the social and moral complexities of the medieval period. For example, Arthur as a young child has a friend Gatty, a girl with whom he plays freely and on an equal basis, yet Gatty is a surf, and female. As he grows older the boundaries of class and gender expectations come between them: in his position Arthur could potentially change these inequalities. Crossley-Holland thereby plays with the gap between legend and historical truth, whilst keeping the magnificence and pomp of legend. Published at the fin-de-siècle of the 20th and 21st centuries Crossley-Holland poses the question of how the modern child standing astride two centuries will think about past and the future they will make.

In contrast Philip Reeves in *Here Lies Arthur* (2007) rejects the mythic qualities of Arthur and deconstructs the legend replacing mysticism and magic with rationality which is determined toward political ends during a period of war and revolution in medieval England. The opening scene is narrated by Gwyna, a young girl as she describes herself, 'scurrying across the corners of their war' (p.1). She is escaping from a raid made on the village where she lives. She sees:

> Their leader out in front on a white horse. Big he is. Shiny as a fish in his coat of silver scales … You've heard of him. Everyone's heard of Arthur; Artorius Magnus, the Bear, the Dux Bellorum; the King that Was and Will Be. But you have not heard the Truth, not till now. I knew him, see. Saw him, smelled him, heard him talk. When I was a boy I rode

> with Arthur's bands all up and down the world, and I was there at the roots and beginnings of all the stories. (Reeves, 2007 p.4)

Set in the West of England on the borderlands with Wales, this is the story of Arthur told by Gwyna as a first person narrative; she therefore speaks directly to the reader with no intervening figure. Running to escape capture or murder Gwyna falls into the stream and swims under water for a long way, a talent she has developed since she had to set underwater fish traps for her master. Gwyna is found by a man who turns out to be Myrddin, which readily transfers to the Anglicised 'Merlin' in the mind of the reader. Here is no magnificent druid or wizard in white hooded cloak, but an older man dressed in:

> A shabby black travelling cloak fastened with a flashy complicated brooch. A jangle of harms and amulets hung round his neck. Horse charms, moon charms, a paw of a hare. Magic things. In the shadow of his hood his face gave away no secrets. (p. 11)

Myrddin creates the image of himself as one who carries power, the power to activate the magic held captive in his charms and symbols and control the minds of superstitious ignorant peasants. He offers Gwyna bread, and plays with the frightened child, pretending that the bread has disappeared. She thinks it to be magic, which she knew to fear, as Myrddin laughs,

> "Scared it'll make you sleep a thousand years? Or witch you away to my kingdom under the hill?" (p.11)

This medieval world is ruled by fear, drawing on superstition, the power of magic and the church: fear and power conjured and created through words. The very intention of Myrddin is to use his command of language to create power and control.

Myrddin is a bard, telling stories, recounting and creating legends, singing heroic ballads in the manor halls and villages: a wizard with words. Beneath the image of a songster and storyteller is a shrewd politician whose belief is in Arthur to save the Britons from the Saxon onslaught by uniting the tribes, including bringing in Irish mercenaries against the German invaders. Song and story create the legendary Arthur, who in reality is a flawed, yet potentially all powerful baron king. A brutal marauder, a womaniser, a drunkard, boorish, courageous and merciless, certainly but Arthur can lead men rallied by Myrddin's bardic call. Yet the stories to create this legendary figure have to be beyond belief and to ignore the unacceptable traits of the living Arthur. Legendary Arthur has to be connected to the power of other worlds, the magical and the mysterious to prove that he is a man beyond all men, an icon. Here a story, a child and the imagination are fused, for Myrddin turns Gwyna into the Lady of the Lake, who in legend hands Arthur his sword. The logic and a politically creative and devious mind are employed by Myrddin who gives Gwyna a sword. On cue she swims a way out into the Lake and from the depths 'magically' holds aloft the powerful sword, Excalibur. Merely an ordinary sword, below the water-line a small thin girl, however, in the eyes of the astonished superstitious peasants this is a magical sign of the supreme power of Arthur, which Myrddin perpetuates and expands upon in his bardic performances. All they see is a towering king, and a magnificent sword in the hand of a fair maiden mysteriously hidden beneath the waters.

Throughout the novel Reeve variously deconstructs Arthurian legend, there being a rational plot in order to create each event of magic. Thus Arthur is created and preserved as a bardic hero

despite the atrocities of his actions in reality as Myrddin writes and performs ballads, stories and songs about Arthur's adventures: the stuff of legend.

The main question for me which arises from Reeve's clever, witty and engaging novel is why bother to do this? Why not leave legends and heroes alone to be created and re-created in splendour? Is this not a time when heroes are needed? When politicians take ordinary people into war for reasons which are spun words, far from reality? Why exhume Arthur and put the unclad bones on display? Around the time Reeve was writing the climate of British politics had, I think, rather a lot in common with the undertones of this novel.

In 2004 Gordon Brown, the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, had defined a version of Britishness which defended an historical set of values 'summarized in his British Council annual lecture of 2004 as "a passion for liberty anchored in a sense of duty and an intrinsic commitment to tolerance and fair play" [viii]

Here lie the qualities of a heroic nation. In 2005 Tony Blair was re-elected for his third term as Prime Minister, but with a reduced majority due to the unpopularity of his decision to send British troops to invade Iraq in 2003. The story of weapons of mass destruction had been spun and was to become 'legendary'. Some 11 months before war began, and with the fallout from 9/11 still dominating the political agenda, Mr Blair told the House of Commons:

> "Saddam Hussein's regime is despicable, he is developing weapons of mass destruction, and we cannot leave him doing so unchecked.
>
> "He is a threat to his own people and to the region and, if allowed to develop these weapons, a threat to us also."[ix]

Blair was the heroic leader standing against all odds. Alastair Campbell was Blair 's advisor and spin-doctor who 'in 2003 fiercely denied a BBC report that he "sexed up" a dossier claiming Iraq could launch a chemical or biological attack within 45 minutes to help justify the war.' After Campbell's 'cloying the gazettes with cant' perhaps the British were to discover that their 'hero' Tony Blair was 'not the true one'. Alastair Campbell and Myrddin have much in common for afterall, Myrddin is but a medieval media man, a spin-doctor who doctors the tales he spins. Both understand the power and influence of narrative.

Reeve's narrator Gwyna is a young girl whom the reader follows through to maturity, a trustworthy voice. To survive she switches gender roles, playing the part of a boy. Even Gwyna operates her own illusions. At the heart of *Here Lies Arthur* is some sort of truth beneath the lies, a pity to strip away illusion to exhume the skeleton, to dig up the past. Perhaps that 'truth' is to advise the child reader to read, as it were 'between the words.' However, Reeve does not leave the world of Arthurian legend exposed in raw reality. There is attraction in the fabric-ation of legend, there is romance. Gwyna has found the love of her life and they sail away together, and in Gwyna's words:

> So I'll end my story the way of stories of Arthur always end. A little ship is setting out on the evening tide….out to where the sun lies silver on the western sea. And

> the ship gets smaller and smaller as she goes away, until at least the faint square if her sail fades altogether into the mist of light where the waters meet the sky.
> And the name of that is called *Hope.* (Reeve, 2009 p.289)

And afterall, one might ponder, what is wrong with a little legendary romance……

Interestingly this could have been a question which Reeve asked of himself when in the thinking about *No Such Thing As Dragons*. The story is set in medieval times in northern Europe, a land which is probably in an imaginary part of Germany as the boy protagonist is named Ansel, which is of Germanic origin. Struck dumb after the death of his mother, Ansel is sold by his father to an adventurer named Brock, a knight in somewhat rusty armour. Brock makes his living by travelling to remote peasant regions purporting to be a dragon-slayer, the saviour of the common people. His reputation is supported by the superstitious nature of these uneducated peasants, his ability to spin marvellous tales of his travels and exploits in the slaying of dragons (all of which are fictitious lies) and the display of a 'dragon's skull' to accompany his yarn telling sessions. The skull is not that of a mighty dragon, but of a crocodile, a reptile which would have been unknown to these Northern European mountain dwellers.

Brock's attitude is that he recognises himself as a charlatan, however, he justifies his deceptions by convincing himself that he does being comfort to the villagers in 'slaying' an albeit imaginary dragon which would then longer threaten the world of their imagination and bring them comfort and confidence in believing their village and animals to be safe. Brock is a hollow hero. The one time when he went to battle, clad in his mighty armour, he turned away sickened by the slaughter and bloodshed unable to confront his fears. He creates himself to be a hero through his tales and tells the truth only to his mute serving boy Ansel, because he is unable to speak of what he has heard. Ansel is caught in a moral quandary. Here is Brock, his master, a handsome ostensibly stereotypically heroic figure, seemingly possessing admirable qualities, except for the fact that his heroic deeds are but words. Ansel is unable to inform those who are being duped unless he overcomes his own traumatic block and speaks, for he is illiterate and can only communicate through basic signs. Should he leave his master then he would then be putting himself in a situation where he has betrayed a contract and trust and also opens up the question of how he would fend and feed himself as a boy alone.

Brock in confidence to Ansel, asserts that there are no such thing as dragons. Reeve is thereby challenging the basis of fairy tale romance: a knight in tarnished armour with a tarnished morality and denouncing the mythic figure of the dragon so long deeply an essential component of medieval adventure and fairy tale. The sophistication in Reeve's story is that there are dragons and not only physical manifestations, for both Brock and Ansel have to fight their psychological dragons. Brock would want to be a hero, brave and stalwart: Ansel would want to return to the carefree child with a melodious singing voice. They each have to stand their tests. Again, as in

Here Lies Arthur, Reeve is challenging and deconstructing the building blocks of western fantasy and challenging the reader to question concepts such as heroism which have become despoiled in the contemporary world of instant news and instant fame.

However, Reeve does not abandon the need for romance. There is a dragon. There is a fair maiden who has been put on the mountainside by the deeply superstitious villagers as a sacrifice to the dragon and thereby protect their livelihood. Brock does stand up to the dragon after some periods of doubting his valour. Ansel and the fair maid fall in love and she is saved by him, her genuinely heroic lad. Yet she is not an ineffectual fainting female, for she can fend for herself and be as brave as any man. Reeve creates strong females throughout his work with skills, courage and tenacity equal to any man. What Reeve is asking his reader to do is to look deeply into the human psyche and to realise that life is a series of challenges both physical and moral. Ansel finally saves the dragon which has been captured thanks to the trio's considerable efforts. In recognising that the dragon is but an animal and not a mythical beast set only to destroy humans Ansel faces his own fears and his tongue is freed. In the conclusion all is restored to balance and each has faced and overcome the tests laid before them by others and themselves. As with *Here Lies Arthur* there is the affirmation of hope and a positive future which has been shaped by the protagonists.

In conclusion, the work of Philip Reeve is of the highest quality in terms of literary style and of the intellectual engagement required by the reader all that one would ask of a writer for the young of today who will be the decision makers of tomorrow. He is also an encouragement to those of us who have lived rather more years in that it is always possible to defeat your dragons and to enjoy a little romance in life.

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