

Off the Grid (A Joe Pickett Novel)

By C. J. Box

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An instant #1 *New York Times* bestseller.

C. J. Box returns with this suspenseful new Joe Pickett novel.

Nate Romanowski is off the grid, recuperating from wounds and trying to deal with past crimes, when he is suddenly surrounded by a small team of elite professional special operators. They're not there to threaten him, but to make a deal. They need help destroying a domestic terror cell in Wyoming's Red Desert, and in return they'll make Nate's criminal record disappear.

But they are not what they seem, as Nate's friend Joe Pickett discovers. They have a much different plan in mind, and it just may be something that takes them all down—including Nate and Joe.

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Editorial Review

Review
Praise for *Off The Grid*

“As you decide what to read next, I respectfully ask that you pick up or sample *Off The Grid* by C. J. Box. Please read the first paragraph, whether you are familiar with the Joe Pickett canon or not. I don’t care where you are or in what setting you do so; in the course of a few sentences, Box transports the beholder to a place that is far away, exotic and, yes, dangerous. This goes beyond writing; it is craftsmanship of high order....*Off The Grid* has everything: a hero to stand up and cheer for, a mystery, suspense that will keep you tightly coiled, and Box’s impeccable, picturesque prose. There’s nothing better.” -- Bookreporter.com

“An amazing shootout featuring Joe and Nate will satisfy just about everyone.” **–** *Cleveland Plain Dealer*

“Picking up a new C.J. Box thriller is like spending quality time with family you love and have missed…It's a rare thriller series that has characters grow and change without becoming stale.” — Associated Press

"Readers will race to keep up with the action.” — *Denver Post*

“[F]illed with high suspense, formidable characters and an action-packed ending more vivid than most movies....*Off the Grid* never falters as Box again delivers an exceptional thriller.” — Southflorida.com

“…this is a breakneck story that Pickett fans will want to read in one sitting.” — *Booklist*

“...you can't help turning the pages and holding your breath until you find out where this scary, all-too-plausible caravan is heading.”— *Kirkus Reviews*

“C.J. Box continues his spectacular roll with the darkly mesmerizing *Off the Grid*....Ever popular buddy teams in the thriller genre include such classic matches as Robert Parker’s Hawk and Spenser along with James Lee Burke’s Dave Robicheaux and Clete Purcell just to name a few. Pickett and Romanoski have become the gold standard, playing off each other perfectly as different sides of the same coin, which is sure to help place *Off the Grid* on everyone’s Best Thrillers of 2016 list.” -- *Providence Journal*

Praise for C.J. Box’s *Endangered*

“All the action and suspense of Box’s long string of high-country adventures. *Endangered* is one of Joe’s best.” —*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

“Is there a crime-fiction family as fully fleshed out as Joe Pickett’s? In singing the praises of Box’s series, we often praise the plotting, pacing, and the down-to-earth hero’s friendship with force-of-nature Nate Romanowski. But Pickett’s supporting cast lends a continuity and grounding to this series that sets it apart from all the lone-wolf stuff out there. A carefully constructed plot building to a breathless, thrilling end.” —*Booklist*

“Series fans will love this thriller. The nonstop action, intermingling plotlines, and the return of familiar characters all mesh into a breathless, roller-coaster ride of sheer suspense and entertainment.” —*Library Journal*

"An edge-of-the-seat thriller. A tightly coiled plot that springs from surprise to surprise."
—*South Florida Sun-Sentinel*

"Once again, Box delivers a winner. Grade: A." —Cleveland *Plain Dealer*

"A great read that is fast-paced, suspenseful, and action-packed. The best yet of the series." —*Blackfive*

About the Author
C. J. Box is the author of sixteen Joe Pickett novels, five stand-alones, and the story collection *Shots Fired*. He has won the Anthony, Macavity, Gumshoe, and Barry Awards, as well as the French Prix Calibre .38, and has been an Edgar Award and *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize finalist, all for the Pickett novels. He has also won the Edgar Award for best novel for his first stand-alone, *Blue Heaven*. A Wyoming native, Box has worked on a ranch and as a small-town newspaper reporter and editor, and lives outside Cheyenne with his family. His books have been translated into twenty-seven languages.

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Chapter One

Nate Romanowski knew trouble was on the way when he saw the falcon's wings suddenly flare in the distance. Something beyond his eyesight was coming fast.

It was cool and crisp in the desert and the light dawn breeze smelled of dust and the rotting carcasses of dead wild horses who had drunk at a poisoned spring.

The rising sun bathed the eastern sky ochre and silhouetted the rock haystacks and hoodoos into a dark snaggle-toothed horizon. It was the best time of day, he thought: the anticipatory moment before the morning light lifted the curtain on the terrain to reveal the reds, pinks, oranges and beiges of the striations in the bone-dry rock formations and revealed the rugged broken terrain. The desert was made up of canyons, arroyos, and vast sheets of hard-packed clay that had been sculpted through history first by magma, then water, now wind.

Nate had learned that in the morning the desert didn't wake up. Instead, it shut down. Herds of pronghorns moved from the sparse grassy bottoms where they'd been grazing through the night to the high desert plateaus where they could be seen for miles – and they could be on the lookout for predators. Herds of wild horses, with their cracked hooves and woolly jug-heads, trotted across openings headed for the shade of wind-formed rock oddities that looked in the right light like Doric columns that remained from ancient ruins.

It was the early morning hours when cottontails retreated to their dens and upland game birds moved from feeding on seeds and grass to structure and safety.

That was why Nate chose this time to hunt.

But he wasn't the only predator in the area.

The gyrfalcon, the largest and most formidable falcon of the species, was a horizontal hunter. Unlike the prairie falcon, which struck its prey fast and low and often in the air from a perch or promontory, or the

peregrine that screamed down from the heavens at 200 miles an hour with balled fists and intercepted its target in a mid-flight explosion of meat and feathers, the huge gyr cruised silent and white above the desert floor. When the gyrfalcon sighted its prey -- a rabbit, sage grouse, or gopher -- it maneuvered its profile into the sun, then simply dropped down on it as if from the sun itself and pinned its prey to the ground. The gyr then used its weight and the powerful grip of its talons to crush the life out of its meal. If the prey continued to struggle or wouldn't die fast enough, the gyr bent over and severed the spinal cord with its hooked, razor-sharp beak.

Nate wasn't sure how long he'd been hunting with the new gyrfalcon. There were gaps in his memory. All he knew was that the big bird was his partner and had arrived as some kind of gift from the arctic where it thrived and now he was hunting with it.

The falcon was stocky and thick the first time he lifted it up on his glove, and it weighed more than any raptor he'd ever flown. It was smaller than a golden or bald eagle but not by much, maybe a pound or two less. When it was in the air, its five-foot wingspan and mottled white coloring reminded Nate of a flying white wolf. In the dawn of the desert, when the first shafts of the sun lit up the gyrfalcon in flight, its coloring made it look twice as big as it actually was. The gyrfalcon was a formidable weapon. If a peregrine was a cruise missile, Nate thought, the gyrfalcon was a Stealth bomber.

Gyrfalcons had been reserved for royalty in ancient times. Commoners couldn't fly them. It was a miracle that the big white bird had shown up. She was a big female, almost silver in color, and females of the species were larger than males. He enjoyed simply staring at her when she was on the glove, and she seemed to enjoy – and expect – his admiration.

Because his new bird had no natural predators except the occasional golden eagle, it flew and hunted with impunity.

So when it flared sharply upwards a mile and a half away and immediately started climbing, when its long wings blurred with effort as they worked hard and fast to ascend from the threat, Nate knew the raptor had encountered something deadly and unusual.

Whatever was approaching also attracted the attention of a small herd of pronghorns to his right. He'd not seen the creatures previously in the dark, but there they were. As one, the animals froze and turned their heads to the north where the falcon had flared. After a beat, a secret signal was given and the herd came alive and took off to the south. Small puffs of dust rose in their wake from twin teardrop-shaped hooves. The pronghorns moved away like molten liquid flowing across the desert until they were gone.

Then Nate felt a vibration through the ground itself. It was remarkable in the desert how he could feel something coming before he could see or hear it.

A motley herd of twelve or thirteen shaggy horses thundered over the wide northern horizon. One by one they appeared, manes flying and nostrils flared. The rhythm of their hoof beats increased in volume and they were far enough away that the sound was disconnected from their movement.

Something was driving them, he knew. Something had spooked them into running straight at him.

The horses came toward him over the hard-pan, kicking up a spoor of dust that hung in the air behind them. They were getting close enough now – maybe a hundred and fifty yards away – that the sound of their pounding hooves started to sync with their movement.

He wondered if the herd was going to run right over the top of him.

Nate raised both of his hands in the air and waved his arms. The herd kept coming.

Not until they were twenty-five yards away did the animals part and run by him on both sides. The ground shook. Before he closed his eyes against the dust, he caught glimpses of white-tinged eyes, flared nostrils, matted manes, and scabbed-over wounds on their flanks. They were sorrels, mostly, but the lead stallion was black with a single white sock. Their smell lingered after they'd gone, a heavy musk that was part dried sweat, part caked mud.

They continued to thunder south.

When he opened his eyes, he saw a pair of headlights, like pinpricks, poke through the hanging dust where the horses had appeared on the horizon.

Nate squinted, trying to see better. The vehicle, like the horses, was coming right at him.

He turned and scanned the cloudless sky. The gyrfalcon was a tiny white speck against the powder blue. Nate knew the difference between a falcon rising in a thermal current for a better hunting lane or circling for an angle of attack, and when it was flying away.

The gyrfalcon was flying away. He knew in his heart he'd never see it again.

He'd had the experience before. Sometimes falcons that he'd spent years feeding, training, and hunting simply flew away. Each time it happened, it opened a hole inside him that could only be filled by a new raptor. But this time he didn't feel loss as much as a sense of betrayal. His thought was:

The bitch set me up.

Then he turned to the oncoming vehicle and was surprised to find it had divided into three parts. What he'd initially assumed to be a single four-wheel drive unit was now three, and he realized that what he'd first seen was the lead truck in a small convoy of pickups. The two trucks behind the lead vehicle had flared out to its flanks and they were coming at him in an arrowhead formation trailed by plumes of dust that lit up orange in the morning sun.

Three pickups coming fast.

He could now hear the sounds of their motors revving and their tires crunching volcanic silica on the desert surface.

Within a minute, he could see that in addition to the drivers there were men in the backs of the trucks. As the vehicles approached, the men in back rose warily, trying to keep their balance as they got closer. They steadied themselves on the sidewalls or roof of the pickups with one hand and held long guns in their other hands.

The lead pickup had something large, black, and bloody attached to the top of the hood. Nate caught a glimpse of long yellow teeth and blood-matted hair…

He glanced down. There were revolvers holstered under each arm, curved grips out. The weapon under his right arm was a five-shot single-action .454 Casull. The weapon under his left was a .500 Wyoming Express, also a single-action, also manufactured by Freedom Arms, also with five big rounds in the chamber.

He couldn't remember when he'd started sporting two guns, but he didn't question his decision. Just like he couldn't recall the circumstances of the gyrfalcon making itself available to him.

Or why he was in the desert.

He looked over his shoulder. He thought he'd driven out his *Yarak Inc.* white panel van, but he was surprised to find out it had turned into his ancient Jeep CJ5. The Jeep was parked a quarter of a mile away under a rock formation that resembled an umbrella: a ten-ton slab of sandstone balanced somehow on a single narrow column of rock.

He scanned the outcropping for a sign of his friend Joe Pickett. Nate wasn't sure why, but he thought Joe would be there backing him up. Not that Joe could hit anything, but he meant well and he could be surprisingly ferocious when he thought he was in the right.

But was he in the right? Were *either* of them? It was confusing.

Nate doubted he could turn and run to the Jeep and get it started before the three pickups converged on him. Plus, he refused to be run down like a dog or shot in the back.

So he turned back around and set his feet into a shooting stance and squared his shoulders. Tiny beads of volcanic silica crunched under his boots as he got ready.

He knew what he had to do. He had no choice.

Nate did the math. Three drivers, three or four armed passengers in the back of each pickup. Actually, the lead truck had four in the back and two in the cab, he now saw. So as many as fourteen armed men.

He had ten live rounds before he had to reload. And by then, they'd be on top of him.

He reached across his body with both hands and pulled his weapons. With the muzzles pointed down, he thumbed back the hammers.

They were now fifty yards away and closing fast. The morning air was filled with the sound of shouting men – Nate recognized the language and what they were yelling -- and the snapping metal-on-metal *snicks* of semi-automatic rifles being armed.

The sun lit up their olive-colored faces and electrified the barrels of their weapons. Most wore black beards. He knew the driver of the lead pickup, and he thought he shouldn't have been surprised it was *him*.

Chapter Two

Nate woke up with a start and a shout and sat bolt upright in bed. His eyes were wide and his bare skin was beaded with sweat and strands of his long blonde hair stuck to his neck and shoulders.

Olivia Brannan turned around from where she'd been packing a suitcase on an old pine dresser. She'd chosen not to turn on the light so as not to disturb him while he slept and she'd been using the ambient light from the hallway to see.

"Are you okay, babe?" she asked, arching her eyebrows.

"I had a bad dream," Nate said, his heart still racing. He realized that both of his fists were clenched around imaginary pistol grips under the covers. He stretched his fingers out and placed his hands on his knees.

"Obviously. Are you better now?"

"Dandy," he lied.

"Doesn't sound like it," she said.

Liv Brannan spoke with a soft Louisiana cadence that always seemed to wrap him in a warm blanket. Sometimes, he asked her questions to which he knew the answers. She was the only woman he'd ever been with whom he encouraged to keep speaking.

"What was it that happened in your dream?" she asked. "You really yelled there. It about scared me half to death."

"What did I yell?"

Her smile was bright in the dark room. It contrasted with her mocha-colored skin. "Something about, '*Now you're going to die!*' You know, your usual morning pleasantry."

Nate rubbed his face with both hands and grunted.

"You haven't done that for a few months," she said, concerned. "I thought you were getting past all that."

"This wasn't the usual," Nate said, shaking his head. "It wasn't about getting ambushed or anything else that happened in the past. This one was completely new and I don't know where it came from."

She turned and put her hands on her slim hips and said, "Tell me about it."

When he was through recounting the dream, she said, "Damn. That's crazy."

"I know."

"What were they shouting at you? The men in the pickups?"

"*Allah Hu Akbar*."

She paused. "'God is great.' So this dream of yours took place in the Middle East?"

"Seems like it," Nate said. They'd discussed his experiences in Afghanistan when he was a special operator and he'd been sent to a falconry hunting camp in the desert in 1999. She'd been fascinated to hear about the time he'd had a throw-away discussion with a man in the desert he later learned was Osama bin Laden. Osama was an aficionado of American western movies and television series. He'd apparently grown up watching them. Nate told her they'd talked about several specific episodes of the western television show *Gunsmoke* they'd both seen in their youth.

"What brought all that back, I wonder?" Liv asked.

Nate shook his head. "It looked and felt like Afghanistan, but it *wasn't* Afghanistan. There aren't any pronghorn antelope or wild horses running around in Afghanistan that I know of. The only wildlife I saw when I was over there were the bustards we were hunting with the royal falcons."

Bustards were large terrestrial game birds that thrived in the high desert. There was no similar species in North America. The elaborate desert camp set up with Bedouin-style tents, luxury SUV's, electrical generators, and in the distance a fleet of custom 737's that had delivered the falconers from Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries. Outside each tent were several tall perches for hooded birds. Although Osama bin Laden wasn't a falconer himself, he had business with the members of the Saudi royal family who were camped there.

"Maybe you imported a little of Wyoming," she said. "No one ever claimed dreams had to make perfect sense."

"This one sure as hell didn't," Nate said, swinging his feet out from beneath the covers. The floor was cold.

"And if Joe was there, it couldn't have been Afghanistan. Joe never goes anywhere as far as I know."

It was true. Nate's friend Joe was a Wyoming game warden. He rarely took time off, and when he did, it was to go fishing, camping, or hunting … in Wyoming. Joe had once told Nate he felt no need to visit anywhere else until he knew every square inch of the state. Since Wyoming was nearly 100,000 square miles, the statement was akin to Joe admitting he would never travel anywhere ever.

Nate stood and stretched. He still felt lingering pain from his wounds, especially in the morning. Nate was tall and broad-shouldered and his flesh was marked by two-dozen comma-shaped scars on the front of his thighs as well as across his abdomen, chest, and neck. That's where the doctors had dug out the double-ought buckshot pellets that were slightly larger than the size of a .22 round. He'd been hit in an ambush by two men with shotguns the previous spring. Nate was unarmed at the time.

While he'd been in critical condition in a hospital in Billings after the assault, Liv had been imprisoned in an underground root cellar on a compound owned by a family of savages. Rest, exercise, stretching, and reclaiming his life as a falconer had led to his recovery. Liv had recovered as well, although her injuries had been psychological. She'd healed, but not to the point that she could sleep yet without a light on.

After they'd reunited, he and Liv had gone off the grid and had stayed in a remote cabin they'd been offered by a friendly rancher in Southern Wyoming.

His peregrine and red tailed hawk -- released from his van by the family of white-trash miscreants named Cates -- had both somehow located him and returned. It was a small miracle and the reunification had astounded Liz Brannan. Nate, who had become accustomed to small miracles he couldn't explain, had simply shrugged.

"There were so many strange things in that dream," he said to Liv. "I've never flown a gyrfalcon, for one thing. I don't know where I got it. And I was wearing two guns strapped across my chest like some kind of western outlaw. I've never packed two guns."

"Maybe you should put some clothes on," she said.

Nate slept naked and he didn't mind walking around the cabin unclothed. Sometimes, he perched on the branch of a cottonwood tree overlooking the Encampment River and simply watched it flow by for hours with his legs dangling. Occasionally, a raft filled with fly-fishermen would float underneath him. They never looked up.

He retrieved a light blanket from the bed and draped it over his shoulders. "I wish I could shake that dream," he mumbled.

"Have some coffee. I made a pot while you were threatening bad guys."

"I'd rather have you."

"Nate, we don't have the time." She said it with less finality than he'd expected.

In the small kitchen, Nate poured coffee into a mug and took it to the front window and parted the curtains. It was not quite daylight.

A carpet of light fog haunted the late-fall grass and it hung low in the trees. A mule deer fawn and doe picked their way through the close-packed trees to the river.

It was October -- seven months after he'd been attacked and nearly killed -- and it was his favorite month of the year. The temperature was cool at night, even cold, but it warmed during the day. It was a *serious* month in the mountains, he thought. At seven thousand feet above sea level, it was time to get things done before winter roared in. Veins of aspens in the folds of the mountains turned brilliant yellow and red. Clouds scudded across the sky as if looking over their shoulders. Summer frivolity was over. The elk bugled at night in their mating ritual, beaver finished their lodges, and the river rose and flowed with true muscle as the upstream trees stopped drinking from it.

Because the dream had been so remarkably vivid and real, Nate reached up on top of the bookshelf to assure himself that his Freedom Arms .500 Wyoming Express was up there where he put it every night. It was, and there was no second weapon.

The house had been built of logs not long after World War Two for cowboys who worked the farthest sections of the vast ranch. It had fallen into disrepair in the 1970's, and was no longer used as a line shack but as a hunting lodge for guests. Despite an extensive remodeling five years previously that had sealed the gaps in the logs and updated the electrical and plumbing, it still seemed populated with the ghosts of post-war cowboys who, in their isolation, had carved local cattle brands and their own names – "*Wiley, Buck, Slim*" into the doorframes. Liv had tried to brighten it up with new curtains and rugs on the floor, but she'd declared defeat. There was no land-line telephone inside, no television, and no internet access. The short wave radio on the counter was the only access to the outside world.

Nate wouldn't have it any other way.

He heard Liv zip her suitcase closed in the bedroom and he turned to see her wheel it out behind her.

It had been a long time since he'd seen her wearing her professional clothes: charcoal gray slacks, a white blouse, a jacket, her pearls. She looked stunning.

"I'm going to miss you," he said.

It stopped her and she tilted her head slightly to the side. Her expression was one of bemusement, but tears filled her eyes.

"You aren't turning into goo now, are you?"

He said, "I've never spent so much time with anyone on a day-to-day basis in my life. I think I love you more now than ever."

"You *think*?"

"I know."

"Stop it," she said, although her expression belied her words. "I love you, too."

He wanted to grab her, throw her over his shoulder, and march back into the bedroom. She sensed it and said, "Be good while I'm gone, now. I don't want to hear any reports of a wild-haired naked white man running through the trees."

He grinned. "I can't promise that. But it is getting cold in the mornings now."

She let go of her suitcase handle and approached him and reached up and wrapped her hands around his neck. She rose on her toes so they could kiss. It was a warm kiss but it wasn't going anywhere, because outside they could hear the sound of an approaching ranch pickup.

"Damn him for being on time," Nate said.

"I know," she said, stepping back and smoothing her blouse.

As he wheeled the suitcase outside the cabin behind her, he said, "I know I don't need to say it again, but be careful. Never forget for a minute that they're trying to find us. Stay off the grid as much as you can, and only communicate with me the way we discussed."

"You don't need to tell me that," she said. "Believe me, I've got it."

"I know you do," he said, swinging her bag into the bed of the pickup. In the back, there were stray hay stalks, a few empty beer cans, a haunch from a mule deer, and errant coils of baling twine.

She said, "I'd be lying if I didn't look forward to vegging out in front of a television and ordering in pizza," she said. "Maybe a movie, you know? It's been a long time, and I'm amazed how you can miss those kinds of things when you don't have them."

"I understand."

The pickup was driven by a ranch hand named Rodrigo Ramirez. He was dark and short and he wore the same misshapen straw cowboy hat in the summer and winter. But the rancher, and Nate, trusted him to do his job and keep quiet about it.

"What time is your flight?" Nate asked, as he opened the passenger door for her.

"One-thirty. I'll be in New Orleans by four-thirty this evening."

Four and a half hours south to Denver, an hour and a half to check in and get through security. That was why Roberto was there at six-thirty in the morning.

"Give your mother my best," Nate said, leaning in to give her another kiss goodbye. "I hope she can get through this."

"You'd like her," Liv said. "But she won't be around much longer. She knows that, and she's prepared for it. I can't say the same about me. That's why I need to be there."

He shut the door and Rodrigo rumbled away. Before the pickup vanished into the copse of aspen on the two-track old road that led to the highway, Liv turned and smiled sadly at Nate through the back window.

Nate wrapped the blanket tightly around himself and waited until he could no longer hear Rodrigo's truck. Then he stood and listened to the hush.

In the Upper North Platte River Valley of Southern Wyoming, every day had its own personality, he'd learned. Often it was subtle; a combination of temperature, low humidity, cloud cover, the ancient ritual movement of big game animals as well as the location of cattle and ranch horses. Even the trout in the Encampment and North Platte River had their own rhythms and routines, and he was just learning them.

More often though, the days differentiated wildly. It was a land of extremes: extreme winds, heat, and cold. He'd awakened to snow flurries in July and August, and he was learning that it wasn't unusual for a fall or winter day to reach sixty degrees. Just the day before, for example, it had been so warm that mid-morning hatch of Tricos on the river had sent the trout into a feeding frenzy that sounded like cupped hands being slapped down hard on the water.

There was something different about this morning, he noticed. What it was, he couldn't yet discern. It was extremely quiet: no wildlife since the two mulies, no birds flapping from tree-to-tree, no squirrels chattering, no fish hitting the surface of the river.

He was anxious and a little paranoid. It was the feeling he used to get before a special operation. It was more intuitive than pragmatic.

And it was more than Liv departing to be with her dying mother in Louisiana or the desert dream he'd had.

Nate felt like he was on the edge of something big.

Whether it was the beginning or the end, he didn't know. But later, when he heard another vehicle coming, he knew he would find out.

This excerpt is from an advance uncorrected proof

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

Marie Michael:

In other case, little men and women like to read book Off the Grid (A Joe Pickett Novel). You can choose the best book if you love reading a book. As long as we know about how is important a new book Off the Grid (A Joe Pickett Novel). You can add information and of course you can around the world by just a book. Absolutely right, mainly because from book you can know everything! From your country till foreign or abroad you will end up known. About simple thing until wonderful thing you can know that. In this era, we are able to open a book or perhaps searching by internet device. It is called e-book. You may use it when you feel weary to go to the library. Let's study.

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Julia Hale:

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William McDowell:

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