

# Retelling the Stories, Rewriting the *Bildungsroman*: Cecilia Manguerra Brainard's *When the Rainbow Goddess Wept*

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## ABSTRACT

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*The traditional Bildungsroman has been criticized for its androcentrism and its upholding of bourgeois values. This paper presents a reading of Cecilia Manguerra Brainard's novel When the Rainbow Goddess Wept as a reworking of the traditional (white European male) Bildungsroman. The novel combines elements of both the female Bildungsroman and the ethnic American Bildungsroman to create a narrative of development that centers on its narrator Yvonne's "becoming Filipina." Intermingling talk stories, Filipino myths and legends, women's personal histories, and women's "alternative" narratives of war, the novel parallels Yvonne's personal development with the development of a collective Filipino "self." Yvonne's ongoing journey towards self-discovery through the recovery of both her personal and racial pasts thus functions as a metaphor for the Filipino nation's own process of rediscovery.*

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In an essay written with N.V.M. Gonzalez on Filipino American literature, Oscar Campomanes observes: "U.S. Filipinos have not produced enough best-selling or retrievable bildungsromans and narratives of 'becoming American,' with all the troubled quests that such essentially developmentalist emplotments represent.... It is as though Filipino writing needed to exhibit U.S.-specific geographical coordinates or recognizably 'American' (immigrant or intergenerational) perspectives in order to be considered properly *Asian American* or to belong to the order of texts that this now conventional category secures" (Gonzalez 77). In a related essay,

Campomanes suggests that this underrepresentation of Filipino American writers in the Asian American or ethnic American literary canons is due to what he describes as a literary tradition of Filipino exilic writing, or an “exilic sensibility” (161), among Filipino American writers and Filipino writers in the U.S. In these writings, the Philippines, rather than the United States, is “always either the original or terminal reference point” (161), and this orientation towards the homeland is what prevents the reduction of Filipino writing in the U.S. to merely another variant of the immigrant epic (165).

U.S.-based Filipino literary critic Rocio Davis raises a similar point in her analysis of two novels by Filipino women immigrants to the U.S.—Ninotchka Rosca’s *State of War* (1988) and Jessica Hagedorn’s *Dogeaters* (1990). Davis maintains that these two writers, who recreate Philippine culture in their novels by looking back at both Philippine colonial history and at more recent Philippine political upheavals (most notably during the Marcos dictatorial regime), are ultimately engaged in a “revisiting of the Philippines”—an attempt to construct a novel about one’s homeland on the basis of one’s memories, perhaps in an attempt to reconcile oneself to both past and present (116). This project proves particularly challenging to Filipino writers, for the homeland they revision is one that has been shaped by the experience of U.S. colonization; as Epifanio San Juan points out, “long before the Filipino immigrant, tourist or visitor sets foot on the U.S. continent, she—her body and sensibility—has been prepared by the thoroughly Americanized culture of the homeland” (qtd. in Gonzalez 80).

Another novel by a U.S.-based Filipina writer that attempts to revision the Philippines through the use of history, myth, and personal memory is Cecilia Manguerra Brainard’s *When the Rainbow Goddess Wept*<sup>1</sup> (*RG*) (1994). Unlike Rosca’s and Hagedorn’s novels, which recreate several aspects and angles of Philippine history and society and employ a variety of viewpoints, time-frames, and narrative techniques, Brainard’s novel is limited in scope and more conventional in structure. Set in the Philippines during the Japanese occupation, the novel’s central character and first-person narrator is a nine-year-old Filipina girl, Yvonne Macaraig, who is forced to give up her peaceful existence in the city of Ubec—Brainard’s reimagined version of the city of Cebu—and to flee with her family to the jungle, where her father joins the resistance movement. Although Yvonne is exposed

to the horrors of war, she derives strength and courage primarily from the ancient Filipino myths and legends that are retold to her by the family cook, Laydan, who is also an epic singer. By the time the war ends, Yvonne has achieved a realization of what she sees as her particular role in the collective future of the Filipino people.

I have chosen to read Brainard's novel as a *Bildungsroman* that, unlike other ethnic American versions of the genre, does not grapple with problems of assimilation into the dominant society or of, to borrow Campomanes' term, "*becoming American*." Instead, the novel is concerned with its heroine's "*becoming Filipina*," and Brainard reworks the traditional male *Bildungsroman* by combining aspects of both the female *Bildungsroman* and a relatively more recent development in contemporary literary studies, the ethnic American *Bildungsroman*, to construct a *Bildungsroman* that points toward the distinct possibility of achieving a Filipino sense of self.

The *Bildungsroman* has traditionally been regarded as "the novel of the development of a young, white, European man" (Caton 126). The English *Bildungsroman* connects moral, spiritual, and psychological maturation with the individual's economic and social advancement, and imparts the lesson that finding a proper vocation is the path to upward mobility (Feng 4). Jerome Buckley's *Season of Youth* provides a "broad outline" of "a typical [Victorian] *Bildungsroman* plot":

A child of some sensibility grows up in the country or in a provincial town, where he finds constraints, social and intellectual, placed upon the free imagination. His family, especially his father, proves doggedly hostile to his creative instincts . . . ambitions . . . and new ideas . . . . He therefore, sometimes at a quite early age, leaves the repressive atmosphere of home (and also the relative innocence) to make his way independently in the city. There his real "education" begins, not only his preparation for a career but also—and often more importantly—his direct experience of urban life. The latter involves at least two love affairs or sexual encounters, one debasing, one exalting, and demands that in this respect and others the hero reappraise his values. By the time he has decided, after painful soul-searching, the sort of accommodation to the modern world he can honestly make, he has left his adolescence behind and entered upon his maturity.

His initiation complete, he may then visit his old home, to demonstrate by his presence the degree of his success or the wisdom of his choice. (17-8)

The traditional definitions and thematic patterns of the *Bildungsroman* have been severely criticized for their androcentrism and their upholding of the bourgeois status quo. In the 1970s, feminist critics began to identify and discuss a revised genre: the female *Bildungsroman*, or the novel of development of a female protagonist. The emergence of this revised genre was closely connected to the rise of the novel among middle-class women readers in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Bonnie Hoover Braendlin states that “the feminist *Bildungsroman* delineates woman’s self-development toward a viable present and future existence, free from pre-determined, male-dominated societal roles, which in the past have yielded a fragmented rather than a satisfactorily integrated personality” (qtd. in Fuderer 2) and adds that “the emphasis of a *Bildungsroman* on repressive environmental factors, on the process of disillusionment necessary for personality change and maturity, and on the possibilities for transformation offered by individual choices makes it an attractive genre to modern women intent on expressing female awakening and consciousness-raising and on proclaiming new, self-defined identities” (qtd. in Feng 9).

The editors of *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development* (1983) contend that the distinctive female “I” implies a distinctive value system and developmental goals “defined in terms of community and empathy rather than achievement and autonomy” (Abel, Hirsch, and Langland 10) and that “women’s developmental tasks and goals, which must be realized in a culture pervaded by male norms, generate distinctive narrative tensions—between autonomy and relationship, separation and community, loyalty to women and attraction to men” (Abel, Hirsch, and Langland 12). They admit, however, that their definition, although emphasizing gender differences, shares some of the assumptions of the traditional male *Bildungsroman*: “the belief in a coherent (although not necessarily autonomous) self; faith in the possibility of development (although this development may not necessarily be linear but may occur at different stages and rates); insistence on a time span in which development occurs; and emphasis on social context (even as an adversary)” (Abel, Hirsch, and Langland 14).

In *When the Rainbow Goddess Wept*, Yvonne's own narrative affirms this notion of the female defining herself in relation to others rather than through separation and autonomy. Unlike the hero of the traditional *Bildungsroman* (as Buckley defines him), Yvonne does not regard her family circle or her community as repressive, but as enriching—as the very sources of the stories that will facilitate her development. Shirley Geok-lin Lim looks at Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* as an example of “a model of women's autobiography . . . that does not place the self centrally as a hero, but starts with stories of other family members, other women” (“Growing with Stories” 279). Although Yvonne is the novel's central narrator, she is rarely, if at all, an actor in her own narrative; her role is primarily that of an observer and a storyteller, a teller of other people's stories: her parents', her grandparents', and those of the people whom she encounters during the war. Brainard's novel shares with Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* the use of “talk stories” and traditional myths and legends as major narrative devices. Unlike Kingston, however, who radically reworks the Chinese myths in order to make them more relevant to her narrator's dilemmas as a Chinese-American girl, Brainard retains the Filipino myths and legends in their original form and draws parallels between these tales and the events in Yvonne's war-time experiences. Thus, when Yvonne's mother adamantly refuses to give one of the family's chickens to a bullying Japanese soldier, Yvonne is reminded of Bongkatolan, the fearless woman warrior in Filipino legend; and she sees her mother's friend Nida, burdened with an unwanted pregnancy resulting from an encounter with another Japanese soldier, as the Maiden of Monawon threatened by the evil Deathless Man, both characters in another Filipino myth.

Ping-chia Feng defines “any writing by an ethnic woman about the identity formation of an ethnic woman, whether fictional or autobiographical in form, chronologically or retrospectively in plot, as a *Bildungsroman*” (15) and adds that the narrative patterns in many *Bildungsromane* by ethnic women are composed of multiple dialogues among personal stories, ethnic culture, and dominant culture (23). Feng also points out that an important feature of *Bildungsromane* by ethnic women is their use of “rememory,” or their uncovering and retelling of narratives that had previously been repressed due to the forces of racism, sexism, and/or classism (21). Brainard likewise participates in this “politics of rememory” to a certain extent, not merely by weaving myths and legends into the main narrative of the

war but also by focusing on uniquely “female” experiences. Although the novel’s male characters—Yvonne’s father, Doc Meñez, Gil Alvarez, Max—are not thoroughly marginalized in Yvonne’s narrative, the personal experiences and stories that she recounts are generally those of the women who surround her, and these women’s stories function as counter-narratives to dominant discourses of war in which men play a central role. The archetype of the woman warrior, for instance, figures not only in the mythical story of Bongkatolan but also in the story of Gil Alvarez’s grandmother, Nay Isay—the experienced horsewoman and sharpshooter who fought during the Philippine-American war.

Yvonne also recounts alternative stories of women’s experiences that do not take place on the battlefield but are nonetheless proof of women’s courage, strength, and resilience. One such story is that of Nida, who seduces the Japanese soldier on the boat in order to divert his attention from Yvonne, who is carrying gold bullion for the guerilla movement. Despite deep misgivings later on, Nida decides not to kill but to give birth to the child that results from this unwanted affair, thereby choosing life over death. Another narrative Yvonne recounts revolves around her Lola Beatriz, who not only single-handedly managed her good-for-nothing first husband’s farm but also took advantage of every opportunity that came her way—e.g., a reported sighting of the Virgin Mary, her own husband’s funeral—to make extra money and to keep herself alive. Lola Beatriz’s own daughter, Yvonne’s Aunt Lourdes, becomes a success in the catering business that she had been forced into after her husband abandoned her and their baby.

These narratives of women who triumph over otherwise debilitating circumstances are retold alongside women’s narratives of suffering and loss: Yvonne’s mother gives birth to a stillborn child in the jungle and is forced to bury him there; Yvonne’s cousin falls in love with an American soldier but resigns herself to the unlikelihood of his return: “. . . he probably won’t, you know. Men are like that” (*RG* 214); and the women of Ubec who attend Gil Alvarez’s funeral all mourn his death, regarding it as the end of their own youth, “the end of the days when they had laughed and rhumbaed and jitter-bugged. . . they mourned for the death that happened in their souls” (*RG* 196-7).

The existence of both accepted and alternative interpretations of reality in the novel is representative of two opposing frameworks—the “rational,” associated with the (Western) colonizer, and the “irrational” or “superstitious,” associated with pre-colonial Philippines—that exist alongside one another in Philippine society. These two seemingly contradictory constructions of reality are reconciled in the character of Doc Meñez, the supposedly “rational” man of science who nonetheless possesses the ability to read auras and who reenacts the whole process of Christ’s crucifixion—a well-known practice during the Lenten season in the Philippines—in the belief that doing so will assuage his guilt over failing to defend his family who had been massacred by the Japanese. Doc moreover agrees to send Bitong, the family handyman, to the town’s faith healer, Mang Viray, after his own scientific method of treating Bitong’s toe fails. Mang Viray, on the other hand, uses folk remedies to attempt to cure Bitong’s wound, but his spirit guide is the Child Jesus. The novel thus recreates the juxtaposition of Western science, Western religion, and Filipino folk beliefs and practices in Philippine society. Yvonne herself sometimes has difficulty reconciling these different versions of reality: when her father and his friends disappear, she prays to Jesus and the Virgin Mary but simultaneously turns to and derives sustenance from a Filipino legend, that of Bolak Sondag. On another occasion, after recalling how the food left as offerings before the graves of dead loved ones would often disappear the next day, she “wondered if the spirits did eat the food. Or did the poor people who lived near the cemetery—the same ones who reportedly pried open coffins to steal the gold from corpses—creep into the cemetery and eat the food?” (RG 193)

Yvonne is moreover aware that what she defines as real may not be interpreted the same way by other people. She does not tell her mother about her dreams or visions of Laydan, “fearing she would divine all sorts of meanings—that the devil was involved, or that I was losing my sanity . . . . In the end I kept my dream, like my imaginings, a secret” (RG 150). And when she tells her cousin Esperanza that she feels Laydan is watching her from one of the clouds she sees, Esperanza tells her, “You’re as strange as ever” (RG 215). Earlier in the story, only Yvonne and Laydan see the goddess Meybuyan, who appears by the riverbank to warn Laydan of her impending death. Yvonne does not question these supposedly “supernatural” encounters with the dead Laydan or with the mythical figures in her stories because for her, they

are as real as the war itself. Feng states that the physical appearance of ghosts in many writings, including *Bildungsromane*, by women of color embodies the significant role of the return of the inescapable past in their stories of development (23). Ruth Jenkins likewise points out that “the use of the supernatural in fiction can reveal alternative experiences that formal realism can neither portray nor contain sufficiently, and when used by women writers, it may also serve as a specific rhetorical strategy that both exposes and counters the androcentric social and literary scripts that circumscribe ‘acceptable’ behavior” (61). By including these alternative versions of reality in her novel, Brainard not only rewrites the traditional *Bildungsroman* but also presents an image of a society in which the supernatural is largely believed to exist.

Laydan is perhaps the most significant figure in Yvonne’s adolescent life, and although she dies halfway through the novel, Yvonne continues to feel her presence throughout the story. Feng indicates that “in contrast to the quest for patrilineage in the male tradition of the *Bildungsroman*, minority women writers are in search of mothers and artistic inspiration from their gardens” (20). The mother figure in whose footsteps Yvonne is to follow is not her own mother, but Laydan, an epic singer who was herself the apprentice of the most famous epic singer of her time, Inuk. At Laydan’s funeral, Yvonne publicly assumes the role of the epic singer for the first time and tells the story of the epic hero Tuwaang and the Maiden of the Buhong Sky, the Rainbow Goddess, and afterwards recounts:

Before I started telling the story, the people around me had been weeping. It was not just Laydan’s death that they cried about; there were many reasons for us to shed tears. But when I finished, I could feel that some peace or hope had settled in them. Perhaps they were thinking that one day soon our sun would shine over us. (RG 97)

The role of the epic singer or the (tribal) storyteller is a potentially empowering one for Yvonne. Marjorie Evasco reveals that in Philippine literary history, many of the tribal epics were sung by women, and in the Ifugao tribes, it was believed that “folk epics may be sung only by women because legend says that ascended folk heroes appear only to women as intermediaries” (10). Evasco connects the figure of the epic singer in Philippine tribal communities to another



pre-colonial female figure, the priestess-poet, also known as the *babaylan* of the Bisayans and the *catalonan* of the Tagalogs. Drawing on Philippine anthropological data, Evasco notes:

The *babaylanes* occupied a position of power in pre-colonial *barangays*. They were the holders of wisdom, being the spiritual leader, counsel, and healer of the community. Their psycho-spiritual functions were directly related to the survival and growth of the community. Theirs was the burden of memory in the continuum of life. They were the ones who kept the values and beliefs alive in the ways of the people. From the planting season to the harvest, from the rituals of birth to the burial wake, these women gave voice to the ancient truths of the human condition in their prayers, spells, lullabies, stories and poetry. (10)

Trinh T. Minh-ha likewise regards the storyteller as “a personage of power” (126), “an oracle and a bringer of joy . . . the living memory of her time, her people” (125), and adds that she, “besides being a great mother, a teacher, a poetess, a warrior, a musician, a historian, a fairy, and a witch, is a healer and a protectress. Her chanting or telling of stories . . . has the power of bringing us together, especially when there is sickness, fear, and grief” (140). Yvonne realizes that she possesses this potential for power after discovering the healing effect of the epic she retells at Laydan’s funeral.

The liberation of Ubec City and the end of the war coincide with a physical sign of Yvonne’s development into womanhood—her first menstrual period—and her subsequent awareness of having evolved into a different individual after the war. “I, my mother had just said, was now a woman . . . . A knowledge filtered into my brain that I was different, that I had changed, that I would never again be the Yvonne of yesterday, of last year, of the past. I stood on some threshold, and where it led, I did not know” (RG 202-3). Abel, Hirsch, and Langland state that in the female version of the *Bildungsroman*, two narrative patterns predominate: “The first, the ‘apprenticeship’ pattern, is essentially chronological and adapts the linear structure of the male *Bildungsroman* by showing a continuous development from childhood to maturity; this development is traced from childhood conflicts to (frequently imperfect) adult resolutions that provide some closure to the heroine’s apprenticeship” (11). In the second pattern, that of ‘awakening,’ the time frame for development is unconventional:

development does not proceed gradually from stage to stage and may be compressed into brief, epiphanic moments (12). Yvonne's *Bildung* does not involve some of the more significant conflicts in both typical male and female *Bildungsromane*—e.g., a break with parental authority or the community in which one grew up; conflicts between societal expectations and individual goals; sexual initiation—and may thus appear to be an incomplete or merely partial *Bildung*. However, she apparently comes to an epiphany of sorts at the very end of the novel, one that concerns her role as storyteller:

I remembered the time after Laydan's death when I felt compelled to relate the tale about Tuwaang and the Maiden of the Buhong Sky. I could feel a similar stirring inside me. I knew someday I would have to tell still another story, and this time in my own words—not Laydan's nor Inuk's but all mine. We had all experienced a story that needed to be told, that needed never to be forgotten. (RG 216)

Yvonne's *Bildung* can thus be read as a variation of the 'awakening' pattern as Abel et al. describe it: her development occurs in brief flashes of insight and is, moreover, continuous. Feng contends that the protagonists of Toni Morrison's and Maxine Hong Kingston's ethnic female *Bildungsromane* (Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* and Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men*) "undergo an endless process of negotiating different personal, cultural, and social experiences" (41) and that, unlike the linear form of the traditional *Bildungsroman*, the process of *Bildung* in both Morrison's and Kingston's works is represented fragmentarily—through constant insertions of flashbacks in *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*, and through mosaics of stories pieced together by the associative power of the first-person narrator in *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men*.

In her construction of Yvonne's own *Bildung*, Brainard employs a technique similar to Kingston's but goes a step further by creating for her protagonist a self that, at the novel's conclusion, is still in the process of developing. At the end of the novel, the city of Ubec is being rebuilt and Yvonne's mother is to give birth to another child, and these motifs of rebirth parallel Yvonne's epiphany regarding her role as a storyteller: she herself will have to tell a new story, and in the process, will become her story and will participate in something larger than herself, for her story will no longer be hers alone but her people's

as well. Trinh T. Minh-ha, assuming the persona of the storyteller, says: “The story is me, neither me nor mine. It does not really belong to me . . . my story carries with it their stories, their history, and our story repeats itself endlessly . . .” (122). Laydan’s advice to Yvonne, in fact, is the same advice Inuk had passed on to her: not to simply become the epic singer but to “become the epic.” As Yvonne recounts how her mother had stood up against the Japanese soldier and how she had been like Bongkatolan, the woman warrior, she suddenly feels that “for a fraction of a lifetime, I *was* Mama, I *was* Bongkatolan” (RG 89). This brief epiphany foreshadows Laydan’s words to her towards the end of the novel, “You are the epic” (RG 215), which Yvonne later understands to mean: “All of you are the epic” (RG 216). Thus, the self that Yvonne realizes through her chosen role as the storyteller is a self that is subsumed into the larger, collective self of the Filipino people, for the stories that Yvonne relates are those of her people. As Rocio Davis maintains: “Like most writers of the Third World, Filipino writers have a well-developed sense of the national self, of national life, and of the contradictions that make it problematical even to have a ‘self’ in this context at all” (118); and in an essay entitled “Myth, Identity and the Colonial Experience,” Filipina writer Ninotchka Rosca says:

This is then what one finds in Filipino fiction: a self that shares in all of the contradictions of the national self. It is difficult for a Filipino writer to conceive of judging events solely from a personal, individual point of view . . . what he or she attempts to do, consistently throughout the years, is to locate himself or herself within the collective self and to look at the world with the eyes of his or her people and his or her history. . . . By representing this self in fiction, the writer assumes part of the responsibility for defining it even as he or she reflects it—as he or she defines it, so it becomes more his or her definition. . . . We do not have objective manifestations of the self that have been evolving since prehistory . . . . Our materials are perishable: language and memory—uncertain, imperfect. But they fit well the volatile nature of this, our self, for they can change as fast as we can, as we flicker through myths and identities, unravel the impact of colonialism on our selves, and go through our metamorphosis. (qtd. in Davis 118)

Feng indicates that one way in which Toni Morrison and Maxine Hong Kingston rewrite the traditionally personal and privatized genre of the *Bildungsroman* is by “transforming it into a political one, making the personal experiences of their protagonists serve as an index to the larger cultural, socio-historical condition and thus rendering their protagonists’ personal *Bildung* inseparable from the political agenda of their ethnic groups” (42). Brainard participates in a similar undertaking by using Yvonne’s *Bildung* to reimagine the Philippines through its pre-colonial myths and its histories, both personal (the individual stories of Yvonne’s family members and friends) and public (Yvonne’s narrative of the war itself). In her analysis of the work of another Filipino writer in English, F. Sionil Jose, Shirley Geok-lin Lim contends that the author’s Rosales quintology “functions as a nationalist *Bildungsroman*, tracing the growth of a hero from self-interest to national interest” (*Nationalism* 59). The scope of Brainard’s novel is undoubtedly limited compared to that of Jose’s narrative cycle, which encompasses events in Philippine social and political history from the Revolutionary period of the 1890s to the Martial Law regime; and while Jose’s heroes are active participants in Philippine socio-economic and political struggles, Brainard’s heroine, despite the temporary dislocation caused by the war, more or less remains in the family circle and in that of the immediate community.

Nevertheless, Yvonne’s process of development can be seen as leading her to essentially the same discovery of self that Jose’s heroes make: “the individual self entering the city, absorbing and affecting the multitudes he meets, *identifies himself with his society, finds a larger strength in that identification, and composes his destiny and personal significance through that identification of self with society*” (Lim, *Nationalism* 45; italics mine).

Helen Lopez points out that while “self-definition has become particularly demanding as well as difficult” for the Filipino due to his/her colonial heritage of Spanish and American domination, “cultural determinism within the context of contemporary Philippine reality need not betray an impervious aloofness, let alone a total disengagement from anything American or Western . . . we must uphold the potentially liberating influence of cross-cultural literary concerns, including and especially with the American which has shaped our cultural becoming” (107). Although Cecilia Manguerra

Brainard uses a Western-introduced literary genre, she reworks its traditional framework and uses it to recreate a particular image of the Philippines and a particular concept of the Filipino self. Through her portrayal of a protagonist who begins her journey of self-discovery by recovering the stories of both her personal and racial pasts—stories that enable her to withstand the otherwise oppressive effects of the war—Brainard simultaneously presents a parallel depiction of a nation that, after centuries of oppressive colonial domination, has finally begun its own collective process of rediscovery and self-definition.

## ENDNOTE

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<sup>1</sup>Brainard's book was published earlier in the Philippines by New Day Publishers under the title *Song of Yvonne. When the Rainbow Goddess Wept*, the book's U.S. edition, has been slightly modified to suit the U.S. reading public.

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