



# **Bones: Brothers, Horses, Cartels, and the Borderland Dream**

*Joe Tone*

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**The dramatic true story of two brothers living parallel lives on either side of the U.S.-Mexico border—and how their lives converged in a major criminal conspiracy**

José and Miguel Treviño were bonded by blood and a shared vision of a better life. But they chose different paths that would end at the same violent crossroads—with considerable help from the FBI and an enigmatic, all-American snitch.

José was a devoted family man who cut no corners in his pursuit of the American dream. Born in Nuevo Laredo, a Mexican border town on a crucial smuggling route, José was one of thirteen children raised by a hardworking ranch hand. He grew up loving the sprawling countryside and its tough, fast quarter horses, but in search of opportunity he crossed the border into Texas to look for work as a bricklayer. He kept his nose clean. He stayed out of trouble.

Back in Mexico, José's younger brother Miguel was leading a different life. While José struggled to make ends meet, Miguel ascended to the top ranks of Los Zetas, a notoriously bloody drug cartel—his crimes had become the stuff of legend and myth on both sides of the border. He was said to have burned rivals alive, murdered Mexican and American law enforcement officers, and launched grenades at a U.S. consulate.

José, married with kids and now a U.S. citizen, gave every indication of rejecting his brother's criminal lifestyle. Then one day he showed up at a quarter-horse auction and bid close to a million dollars for a horse—the largest amount ever paid for a quarter horse at an auction. The humble bricklayer quickly became a major player in the quarter-horse racing scene that thrived in the American Southwest and Mexico. That caught the attention of an eager young FBI agent named Scott Lawson. He enlisted Tyler Graham, an American rancher who would eventually breed José's champion horse—nicknamed Bones—to help the FBI infiltrate what was revealing itself to be a major money-laundering operation, with the ultimate goal of capturing the infamous Miguel Treviño.

Joe Tone's riveting, exquisitely layered crime narrative, set against the high-stakes world of horse racing, is an intimate story about family, loyalty, and the tragic costs of a failed drug war. Compelling and complex, *Bones* sheds light on the perilous lives of American ranchers, the morally dubious machinery of drug and border enforcement, and the way greed and fear mingle with race, class, and violence along America's vast Southwestern border.

## **Praise for *Bones***

“One magnificent piece of border reporting.”—**Sam Quinones, author of *Dreamland: The True Tale of America's Opiate Epidemic***

“*Bones* is a riveting read that transcends the larger-than-life cartels, cowboys, and fast horses at its heart. It's about how hard it is to determine what makes a good guy and a bad guy along our embattled border.”—**Joe Drape, author of the *New York Times* bestseller *American Pharoah***

“What a cast of characters: a bloodthirsty Mexican drug lord, his unassuming blue-collar brother, a daring Texas rancher, and an idealistic young FBI agent. And then there are the racehorses, as fast as the wind, competing for million-dollar purses on the quarter-horse tracks of the American Southwest. Through

amazingly detailed research, Joe Tone has brought us a riveting tale about the pursuit of justice in the most dangerous of worlds.

## **Bones: Brothers, Horses, Cartels, and the Borderland Dream Details**

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## **From Reader Review **Bones: Brothers, Horses, Cartels, and the Borderland Dream** for online ebook**

### **Steve says**

Disclaimer: I received this book as part of GoodReads' First Reads program.

Jose Trevino moved from Mexico to Texas as a teenager and worked for most of his life as a bricklayer. His older brother got involved in smuggling weed, got caught and went to jail. Two of his younger brother became a big player in the drug business as part of a cartel called the Zetas. One brother, known as Z40, became a really bad actor and big time gangster in Mexico. Realizing that he wasn't going to be able to live big forever, he looked for some way to funnel his money into his family and discovered the world of quarter horse racing and breeding. Thus began a huge money laundering scheme, which brought Jose from the legitimate life to the illegal life, and under the scrutiny of the DEA and FBI. This excellent book traces that story, and how the surviving players eventually ended up in jail. A very interesting story and well worth reading.

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### **Laurel Starkey says**

I really enjoyed reading this book, particularly after just finishing "Bloodlines" by Melissa del Bosque which covers the exact same law enforcement operation; the takedown of the Zeta mafia's invasion of American quarter house racing. Together, the reader has an excellent understanding of not only how porous the American border is, how Mexican cartels attempt to operate on both sides of the border, but what it takes for American law enforcement to contain them.

Bones refers to a prize stallion which became the anchor of Miguel Treviños's horse empire in Texas and Oklahoma. Miguel, aka Zeta 40, used his brother José as a front. José had been a bricklayer in Dallas. He lived a quiet life with his wife and kids. He had no criminal history. From all accounts, he actively shunned His younger brother's criminal activities.

Miguel Treviño Morales grew up in Dallas doing lawns, raking leaves and other odd jobs. He moved back to Mexico. Where he lived was controlled by the Gulf cartel. Being an ambitious young man, he began working in the narco industry. Eventually he morphed into one of the cruelest, one of the most vicious, and one of the most dreaded men in Northern Mexico. He was a huge prize for American law enforcement and they were constantly looking for a way to bring him down. Miguel was a family man and believed the money he made should benefit his family. Enter José followed by the FBI, the IRS, HSI and the DEA.

My only complaint with the book is that it makes a number of ideological and political points derived from other author's research but doesn't cite them until the closing chapter where he discusses his research and interviews. I found the book easy to follow and a great narration of a very complex case. It opens a small window on the world of the border but mostly it follows the case. For a closer and better sociological view of life in narco land, I would recommend "Bloodlines."

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## **Steph says**

The more I read, the angrier I get. Men can work with and for criminals, capitalize off these criminals, become millionaires, and are never prosecuted. Tyler Graham knows that narco money funds his business. He knows this! Narco money is an open secret in the horse racing world, according to Joe Tone's work. And still, Tyler Graham does business with psycho killers. All of the people who facilitate the money laundering for Los Zetas (and all the other narcos who use American casinos, business, banks, etc) should be prosecuted, but Joe Tone documents the way in which literally all of the white men involved in this dirty business are given a pass, and all of the Mexicanos were prosecuted.

Why do the Tyler Grahams of the crime spectrum get a pass? Why do FBI agents befriend the fucking Tylers of the world? Why is Tyler Graham allowed to become a millionaire off of narcos' dirty deeds and get a pass? Be celebrated in the winner's circle?

This work of non-fiction investigative writing crushes my spirit. The law is some tricky shit. And yet I feel like I need to read this book again, right now.

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## **Jo says**

... With FBI Agent Scott Lawson as Eliot Ness, Miguel Trevino (aka Cuarenta aka Forty) as Al Capone, and money laundering instead of tax evasion.

This meticulously researched book is an illuminating read. Each chapter revealed something new and fascinating, both about Los Zetas and American quarter horse racing. I picked it up a couple of times, reading a few chapters each time, because there's such a wealth of information that it was hard to assimilate it all. This is one to keep on your shelf and refer to when you need it. Kudos to Mr. Tone.

Note: Every now and then, there was an especially evocative phrase. Scott Lawson as "Big Bird in a cowboy hat" I'm not going to forget anytime soon. ;)

FYI: Bones, for which the book was titled, was the nickname of Tempting Dash, Forty's most prized stallion - the horse that finally lured his brother Jose into quarter horse racing, laundering millions in drug profits, and helping the Zetas infiltrate American horse-racing; brought a number of people under the feds' microscope; and turned Tyler into an invaluable informant.

\*ARC via netgalley\*

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## **Schuyler Wallace says**

Joe Tone has taken three subjects I like a lot, the Mexican drug wars, cops, and racehorses, and written an in-depth true-life study of their intricacies. In "Bones: Brothers, Horses, Cartels, and the Borderland Dream," he has researched the tangle of their being and tries to explain it to his readers. Good luck with that. In spite of the threat of personal harm for daring such a thing, Tone has tackled a toxic pudding of evil subterfuge that has defied all attempts at getting it together in a bowl.

The drug cartels of Mexico, Central and South America amass huge amounts of money; so much that stashing it all in safe places is a daunting task. “Bones” lays out one such method, laundering some of the receipts in the equally hard to follow industry of horse racing. Who knows about the rest of it? I picture moldy bags of paper profits secreted in tumbledown barns all over the border

The author tells of a group of Mexican brothers with differing views of life’s struggles. One works for thirty years as a bricklayer in Texas, barely surviving, and initially rejects the life of a drug smuggler. Another adopts a life among the drug dealers, eventually rising in stature to become a vicious drug lord. Another ultimately rises to the number two position. Others drift in and out of the shadows but over time get caught up in the intoxication of possessing great wealth. Even the bricklayer, a picture of virtue for so many years, cannot stay away from the piles of money, riches he went without for so long.

Outsiders enter the picture, of all ethnic groups, lured by the call of money. There are many jobs in the business of illegal drugs, particularly in cartels as large as Los Zetas, and many characters who want a piece of the action. Tone goes into the depths of the activity and does his best to keep it straight. His research is tremendous. His tracking of the activities of these untouchables is relentless. His ability to create suspense is amazing, making the story a thrilling expose.

The author has even exposed the territorial battles between the governmental agencies charged with keeping these illegal activities in check. That’s not a pretty situation. Combining the complicated criminal acts with the confusion and complexity of law enforcement indicates a battle that will long be with us. The ultimate victims are everywhere.

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## **RMazin says**

The Trevino brothers, Jose and Miguel, were raised in a large family in Nuevo Laredo. Jose migrated to the American side in pursuit of a dream – opportunity and economic independence. He became a bricklayer and worked his way up to afford a modest living for himself and his family. It may be said that Miguel, who stayed on the Mexican side, also wanted opportunity and economic independence. But he pursued his dreams by entering and excelling in the deadly world of the Zetas and the cartels. The two brothers co-existed but saw little of each other. But soon they would be held within the same circle – the world of quarter horse racing.

Miguel needed an outlet to launder his money. Both Jose and he had always had a love of the quarter horse sport. What better way for both to enter that world? Jose would do the purchasing and “run” the horses on the American side, Miguel would provide the muscle, expertise and money to achieve their goals.

But the sudden entry of a modest bricklayer into the quarter horse arena did not go unnoticed. Large sums of money exchanged hands, many horses were bought, trained and bred. An FBI agent was watching and seeking how to link the brothers together so they could bring down the enabling Miguel with the novice Jose. Scott Lawson was the rookie FBI agent assigned to this Southwestern locale. He saw an opportunity to make the case through following the money, the communications, and the quarter horse circuits.

Joe Tone takes the reader to the border world where money, drugs and quarter horse racing intercept. Many are involved but justice does not always bring a resolution where all the guilty are punished in accordance to

their involvement. Race, class and culture are explored within this tableau of violence and a seemingly pastoral but lucrative horse racing setting.

Recommended for those seeking a better understanding of how our drug wars are waged, lost or won on the border.

Thanks to Netgalley and the publisher for the opportunity to read this book which brings a deeper awareness to so many issues.

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### **Joy D says**

Quarter horse racing and drug trafficking converge in this true story of brothers José and Miguel Treviño. José became an American citizen and worked for many years in Dallas as a bricklayer. Miguel, aka *Cuarenta* (Forty), became the leader of Los Zetas, a notoriously violent Mexican drug cartel. Add an ambitious FBI agent and a Texas rancher-turned-informant to the mix, along with a cast of colorful minor characters, and it results in a recipe for a compelling read.

Tone excels at providing just enough background to help the reader understand quarter horse racing and breeding, the various law enforcement agencies involved in counteracting illegal drug trafficking, and the mechanics of money laundering. Tone's background in reporting is evident in his ability to sort through a massive amount of research and bring it together into a fascinating narrative. He has a knack for storytelling, but occasionally takes a rather coarse, slang-laden approach, which somehow didn't bother me as much as it usually does.

He does an excellent job of conveying the complexities involved in issues related to the US/Mexico border, especially as related to how law enforcement agencies sometimes get in each other's way. He makes some valid points about the politicization of the "War on Drugs" and the element of racism involved in crackdowns. It is unfortunate, but certainly understandable under the circumstances, that he was not able to persuade one of the main characters to grant him an interview.

Recommended to readers of true crime, especially those curious about drug cartels or the more nefarious aspects of horse racing. As a warning, this book includes descriptions of graphic violence employed by drug cartels. I received an advance copy of the e-book from the publisher via NetGalley in return for a candid review.

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### **Amy says**

The rags to riches tale of two brothers: Miguel, narco big man, and Jose, bricklayer pursuing his American dream free from his brother's taint. This is engaging reportage on Tejano family culture, quarter horse racing, and our war on drugs and immigrants. (Disclosure: I received a free copy of this book in a Goodreads giveaway.)

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### **Terry McIntire says**

Listened to audio version on a road trip to Big Bend with my wife. This was the perfect traveling companion for the trip to south Texas along the Mexican border. I grew up owning and riding quarter horses; the discussion of the quarter horse racing industry was fascinating and I suspect it would be interesting to anyone with any interest in horses. The analysis of the workings of our government agencies and how they work (or don't work) together is well done and quite interesting. And, the stuff about the drug cartels could be straight out of a novel. Had to keep reminding ourselves this is nonfiction.

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## **Tonstant Weader says**

*Bones: Brothers, Horses, Cartels, and the Borderland Dream* is a true crime story examining the infiltration of quarter-horse racing by drug cartels seeking to launder money through the story of José Treviño Morales, brother to the infamous Miguel Treviño Morales (40) who led the Zetas and Scott Lawson, the rookie FBI agent who brought down some of the money launderers.

The Zetas are a notorious Mexican drug cartel of extraordinary violence and inhumanity. One cartel leader was sentenced last month for chopping a six-year-old girl up in front of her parents, removing and burning her limbs while she was still alive. Unfortunately, since 40 was arrested in a separate operation, violence has only increased and the Zetas have notched more than 12,500 murders in just the first six months of 2017.

This makes this book in turns fascinating and infuriating. Let's consider José Treviño Morales. For most of his life, he worked as a brick layer. His wife worked at Ernst & Young. They did okay, never getting ahead, but supporting their family and children. Because his brother was this infamous drug lord, José was constantly harassed by police, ICE, and the DEA. If he crossed the border, even walking, carrying nothing, they made him sit for hours as though he were a drug mule and interrogated about his family. When his brother committed some atrocity, his house would be searched. Law enforcement harassed him as though he were criminal even though he a brick layer and had no involvement whatsoever in his brother's criminality.

However, that changed when he suddenly bought a horse and got involved in horse-racing. Buying, breeding, and racing horses requires money and a lot of money churned through his business. It didn't seem to enrich him personally, and he worked hard at it, spreading the manure, feeding the horses, and doing what a horse rancher would do...but of course, the financing was all from his brother and eventually, it all came falling down when the FBI swooped in and charged him with money laundering.

The story is interesting, though the most pressing question is never answered. Unfortunately, Joe Tone never interviewed José so he could not answer why, after a lifetime of law-abiding hard work, did he, at last, succumb to temptation? I am sure he comforted himself by saying he was not involved in the drugs – and he was not – but money laundering enables the cartel. So what made him switch? Was it his daughter coming of age for college and marriage? It does not seem so. Perhaps it was being treated by a criminal despite his years of hard work. After all, if law enforcement is going to search his home, interrogate him, hang around outside his house, and harass him while he does nothing, why shouldn't he make some money? We never find out what the straw was that broke his law-abiding back.

Joe Tone notes that implicit bias was involved in many of the FBI decisions but still seems very admiring of Lawson. Lawson decided to approach the white guy who was part of the horse business because he didn't "act like a boss." This guy, Tyler Graham, makes out like a bandit. He gets to keep all the laundered money that comes his way and the horses bred by Tempting Dash, the winning horse whose victories precipitated José's involvement. This was some private judgment Lawson made that seems pretty arbitrary. Most descriptions of José note that he was humble, not prideful. But Lawson thought he acted "like a boss." Did he have some expectation of servility that all the Latinos offended?

There were some very questionable indictments, like the builder brother of one of the conspirators who never should have been indicted, and luckily was found not guilty. Meanwhile, none of the white conspirators were indicted. Bank of America held several accounts that laundered millions but was not accused. Why not? Actively assisting the investigation after the fact is money laundering and getting away with it. Tone does not discuss Bank of America's role in the money laundering in his book which I think is a serious oversight, but when the FBI decided to let them assist, it might be legally difficult to press the point. Let us not forget that HSBC laundered billions of dollars and paid a fine totaling five weeks income.

I thought the story was interesting but was not terribly impressed by law enforcement. I would be happy to see the cartels out of horse-racing, but who believes that taking down one rancher took the cartels out of the industry. The auction houses knowingly sold to and even carried credit for cartel buyers, does anyone believe that stopped when not one of them was touched? The racing industry turned a blind eye to cartel infiltration because it inflated prices and brought in shipments of cash. None of them were held accountable.

This operation took down one small cog in a giant cartel, one that was relatively insignificant, but symbolically important. He was the brother of the kingpin and so his conviction was a win, but what a misplaced set of priorities. The cartels could not operate without banks colluding, without structured money transfers that banks ignored. In all, there was one bank that seemed alert to and unwilling to accommodate the cartel, forcing one of the conspirators to close his account, but the rest were happy to handle the money. They were not indicted. If the FBI wants to really stop money laundering, it needs to start indicting bankers. When we see bankers in perp walks, we will know that the government is serious about ending cartels.

And of course, the Zetas are worse than ever...and nothing done in interdiction will ever stop the violence. There is money to be made and American focus on prohibition over treatment continues to incentivize criminal cartels. Prohibition made the American mafia in the 20s and is made the cartels of today. Unfortunately, this book has no answers. It seems the cartels will continue to terrorize the border and the people of Mexico and American banks will continue to profit with impunity. As to horse-racing? Who knows? Since none of the people who profited the most from cartel involvement were punished, do they have an incentive to keep the cartels out now? Were there any reforms in how horses were auctioned and how payment was made? None are mentioned in the book, so it seems that another operation could step right in.

Joe Tone tells a good story. He raises many questions, though, and answers few. He notes the racial disparities in how the FBI approached the Latino and white participants in the money laundering, but it never seems to impinge on his assessment of Lawson or Graham. Really, Graham made out like a bandit, didn't he? It seems he made the correct assessment he could have his money laundering cake and eat it, too. It would have been nice if Tone had noted who some of the unindicted co-conspirators in the sales barns and banks of America were, the people who profited with impunity because there is where the battle needs to go. In a way, it seems as though Tone pulled his punches the same way the FBI did.

I received a copy of *Bones: Brothers, Horses, Cartels, and the Borderland Dream* through a Shelf Awareness promotional drawing.

*Bones: Brothers, Horses, Cartels, and the Borderland Dream* at Penguin Random House

Joe Tone author site

"The Rookie and the Zetas" – original article about this story

<https://tonstantweaderreviews.wordpre...>

## **dawn rahe says**

Bones: Brothers, Horses, Cartels, and the Borderland Dream (Hardcover)

by Joe Tone I enjoyed reading this book. I loved how the first part is truly the facts that set up the book. The middle introducing The FBI investigation and trial. The end how the key players ended up. I learned a lot. I remember some of the incidents that happened through HLN. Joe did a great job in expressing the foremost in Mexican life Family. If Miguel- Forty had not been so violent and just help Jose get a start Jose's family would have been in a better place.

Scott Lawson first FBI mission did a terrific job in closing out the money laundering case.

It may not be old history YET. This was a good history book.

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## **Daniel says**

I have to admit, this book surprised the heck out of me. I got it as an ARC but didn't jump right into it. I thought it was going to over-simplify the situation on the US/Mexico border and the complexities of the drug war and immigration between the two nations the way that most media narratives in this country tend to do. What a surprise to find that this author really has a boots-on-the-ground understanding of Mexico's complicated underworld and the US demand for drugs that drives so much of it.

The other thing that struck me about this book is the way that it was written. It is ALL OVER THE PLACE which bothered me at first. The author switches voices and styles and perspectives literally chapter to chapter. Sometimes, he's educating the reader in a matter-of-fact style of a nature documentary, laying out the circumstances that make the border with Mexico such a unique place. In another chapter he does something similar laying out a brief history of quarter-horse racing in America and what the landscape of the sports looks like today. All this is done while intertwining these kinds of chapters with the narrative of his main characters.

Without giving much away, the plot revolves around a Mexican cartel trafficker who gets the idea to launder some of his money for his relatives in the US by participating in legal (but barely regulated) world of horse racing, with the intent of funneling his winnings which the DEA can't touch back to his loved ones. It's an interesting premise and it works precisely because he has done his homework on his subjects and the whole thing seems eminently believable.

I recommend this book if you have any interest in either border politics, the drug war/drug trade with Mexico or if you have any interest in horse racing. This is a quick read that doesn't disappoint or ever talk down to the reader, the chapters are fast-moving and engrossing. Overall, this is just a highly enjoyable book that came out of nowhere for me to become one of the coolest books I have read this year.

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## **Emily says**

I am not normally one to review books here, but I was fortunate enough to win an advance copy of Bones through a Goodreads giveaway. I was very excited to receive this book and had been intrigued by the description. I will admit that I found the first half very tedious to get through; it was a lot of background information on the drug wars, cartels, and quarter horse racing--all of which was obviously necessary to the story, but it didn't always hold my interest and was confusing at times. The author goes back and forth between different times and geographical locations frequently. Honestly, I might not have finished the book

if I hadn't won the copy.

At about the halfway point, though, the focus shifted more to the FBI investigation, and the book really picked up for me. I finished the second half quickly and really enjoyed it. I'm left with a lot of questions, but that is due to the subject matter and not to any fault of the author's. Glad I stuck with this and finished it!

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### **Jill says**

Jose Trevino Morales, a bricklayer in Texas, worked hard all his life to distance himself from his brother's drug cartel. He could not resist the opportunity to get into quarter horse racing. Reporter Joe tone traces Jose's life and the impact Mexican drug cartels has on the champion quarter horse breeding and money laundering in Texas. He describes how drug money was used to infiltrate the horse racing industry, the people involved, and the government's efforts to bring the accused to trial. Using a novel format, make it interesting to read. Although Tone mentions his sources, the book lacks the footnote or endnotes. His acknowledged his attempts to interview Jose and/or his family failed leaving some questions unanswered. The reporting does raise questions about how law enforcement chooses and uses informants.

Goodreads Giveaway randomly chose me to receive this book. Although encouraged, I was under no obligation to write a review. The opinions I have expressed are my own.

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### **John says**

Definition of a Quarter Horse: One that violently sprints a quarter-mile at a speed of up to 55 mph. At first I had trouble keeping who's who in my mind -- many Mexican names and nicknames. But then, about midway through, the book's chronicle began to come together. Races, breeders, trainers, owners: how a Mexican drug cartel successfully penetrated the southwest American quarter horse racing establishment in order to launder narc money. Two brothers, one a Mexican drug lord noted for bloody, senseless violence; the other, a mild-mannered brick layer turned major player in the quarter-horse racing scene that began when he started buying horses with his Mexico brother's tainted cash. Book's title derives from one horse in particular with the nickname, "Huesos," or "Bones." Author's narrative is most engaging as he recounts the efforts of an FBI team headed by a Tennessee rookie (who in heck would want to be assigned to "hardship" Laredo, Texas?) who deftly nurtured an Anglo breeder-informant long enough to effect indictments and convictions of the U.S. brother and other bad guys. The Mexican drug Lord brother? He was captured in Mexico by authorities who (amazingly) refused a \$2-million buyoff bribe.

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