A Bridge over the Waterland: Linking the Past with the Present in Graham Swift's *Ever After*

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ABSTRACT

The British historiographic novel of the last decades of the 20th century challenges the conventional distinction made between the factual and the fictional, showing instead how the two heterogeneous substances – the land of history and the water of stories – merge together. Proceeding from the notion of memory plasticity, i.e. a constantly updated reconstruction of the past, the article discusses the process of readjustment of memories and reshaping of the past in Graham Swift's novels. It briefly refers to the oxymoronic world of Waterland *and then examines at length the way how the narrator's personal memories merge into history in* Ever After. *The article also discusses the specific character of historical representation, the rejection of the notion of history as a sum of purposeful events unfolding around the great personalities, the ambiguous function of Shakespearean and fairy-tale allusions and some metaphorical implications such as bridges linking the past with the present in* Ever After. *It particularly emphasises the mingling of facts and surmises in the representation of both fictional and real historical events. This article is intended as a case study of the novel in the context of Swift's general style and the postmodern conceptualization of history and fiction.*

During the last decades of the 20th century the British historiographic novel (dealing with how history works) replaces the historical novel (focused on what happened in the past). Tearing up in dramatic ways the old "reality-contract" of belief which existed between writer and reader it devotes itself to challenging continually the distinction between historical fact and imaginative invention in order to highlight both the fictionality of fact and the truthfulness of fictional representation. As historical theory finds its way into narrative so narrative finds its way into history[1].

It is argued by some[2] that this new type of fiction is a form of highly effective political action, drawing attention to the role of textuality in the creation of identity and the distribution of power. But for others[3], the obsession with recurrence and mixture mean that, within the context of postmodern culture, style rises up to annihilate content. The refusal to countenance any type of hierarchy or categorisation as well as blurring of a border between the solid substance of facts and the watery substance of fiction

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1 For example Hayden White's characterization of historiography as a form of "fiction-making" ultimately calls into question the very possibility of distinguishing between literary and nonfictional narratives and, in effect, wipes out the difference between fiction and history. Historical narratives, according to H. White, are "verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much *invented* as *found* and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences." White, "The Historical Text as Literary Artefact," in *The Writing of History: Literary Form and Historical Understanding*, ed. by Robert H. Canary and Henry Kozicki (Madison: Wisconsin University Press, 1978), 42.

2 Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London, New York: Routledge, 1988). Linda Hutcheon, "The Postmodern Problematizing of History," *English Studies in Canada* 14.4 (1988): 365–382.

3 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991).

dissolves history and truth into an epochless liquid, or rather, into a special territory of a swampy waterland.

In *Waterland*, Graham Swift's 1983 novel canonized as a major example of what Linda Hutcheon called "historiographic metafiction,"[4] a relation between fiction and fact, story and history is metaphorically implied in the recurrent juxtaposition of two confronting elements – "water" and "land". History for G. Swift is primarily a narrative or, more precisely, a chain of stories.

Tom Crick, the amphibious protagonist of the novel, is a history teacher who tells stories to his students. He begins the narration out of an almost existential need to recount the past. Typically for G. Swift's novels, it is a crisis protagonist is facing that makes him trace its causes in one's personal history: "History begins only at the point where things go wrong; history is born only with trouble, with perplexity, with regret. So that hard on the heels of the word Why comes the sly and wistful word If. If it had not been for... If only... Were it not... Those useless Ifs of history."[5] Tom's stories--retrospections are a means to look into an involved plot of the past events which have led him to his present situation.

The *Waterland*'s narrator projects the outlines of his life into history, or rather, he masterly puts his personal story into an intricate, self-made narrative system where mythology, metaphysics and metahistory are intertwined with the mysticism of a family curse. a textbook history – the narrator's references to the French Revolution, the growth of the British Empire, the Second World War – loses its solidity diluted with Tom Crick's half-invented half-real stories. The more secrets of the past his memory reveals, the more integrity the present gets. The narrative unfolds dramatically and finally culminates in a very significant for the protagonist moment of epiphany. When the past merges with the present in the same way as land dissolves in water they turn into a coherent whole – "Iswas".[6]

Critical readings of Graham Swift's novels tend to concentrate either almost exclusively on *Waterland* or on Swift's works in their entirety. The former group of researches mostly interpret *Waterland* like a text with a clear theoretical and political agenda.[7] The latter focus more on a discussion of the ethical dimensions of the narratives.[8] And practically all the studies read Swift's texts as extended explorations of the ways in which an individual is affected by and responds to history.

Individual memories or *stories* that in Swift's novels refer to a personal experience of narrators[9] go outside the limits of an individual and intervene in the wider group, become related to the society at large, in other words are transformed into *history*. Swift's works revolve around a reshaping of the collective and the individual past in the process of constant readjustment of memory.

Contemporary scholars generally agreed that memory is a reconstruction of the past according to present concerns. For instance, American psychologist D.L. Schacter's

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4   Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, 15, 55, 108, 117-18.

5   Graham Swift, *Waterland* (New York: Pocket Books, 1983), 80.

6   Swift, *Waterland*, 238.

7   See for ex. Bernard, "Dismembering/Remembering Mimesis"; Botting, "History, holes and things"; Cooper, "Imperial Topographies"; Landow, "History, His Story, and Stories in Graham Swift's *Waterland*"; Schad, "The End of the End of History".

8   See for ex. Craps, *Trauma and Ethics in the Novels of Graham Swift*; Lea, *Graham Swift*; Malcolm, *Understanding Graham Swift*; Poole, "Graham Swift and the Mourning After"; Wheeler, "Melancholic modernity and contemporary grief"; Widdowson, *Graham Swift*.

9   Mark Freeman, "Telling Stories: Memory and Narrative," in *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates*, ed. Susannah Radstone and Bill Schwarz (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010).

research shows that memory does not retain and does not reconstruct the original impression. The scholar argues that memory only stores fragments, bits and pieces of the past, that later serve as a foundation for the reconstruction of the past experiences.[10] M. Halbwachs also emphasizes how present concerns modify our memory of past events, so that the past continually evolves in memory.[11] T. Todorov points out that forgetting as an integral part of memory plays a major role in the reconstruction process.[12] Thus, memory considered as a dynamic phenomenon does not represent a simple faithful reflection of the past. This notion of memory plasticity, i.e. a constantly updated reconstruction of the past, is essential for historiographic novel as it introduces the idea of reinvention of history.

In a number of British historiographic novels a protagonist[13] or a group of characters[14] confront a past they have buried, fled, or repressed. This act of looking backwards takes the form of a retrospective dialogue of a character's past and present selves, that results in a transformation of both selves in the end. Due to some events and decisions the past self influenced the present one, meanwhile the present self changes the past one re-envisioning it from the contemporary perspective. As the reconciliation of the past with the present brings healing and freeing to an individual, the revision of the past becomes the way to renew integrity of the character's personality. The past functions as a clue to the present. According to *Waterland*'s narrator, "so long as we have this itch for explanations, must we not always carry round with us this cumbersome but precious bag of clues called History?"[15] The history is revised and readjusted along with the reconsideration of personal stories.

In *Ever After* (1992) – Graham Swift's fifth novel which received far less critical response than *Waterland* or the 1996 Booker Prize winner *Last Orders* – a flow of the present-day narrator's memories dissolve the factual solidity of the last two centuries' history. As a historiographic novel, *Ever After* contains a blend of collective and individual memories taking the form of the intersection of epoch-making historical events and private histories.

Waterland and *Ever After* are related both in style and in subject. "We're back on low-lying Waterland territory. Not the Fens, but a wet (tear-stained) world of stories that flow into each other like meandering tributaries joining their river."[16] Like *Waterland*'s Tom Crick who researches the history of his native land and his ancestors, *Ever After*'s protagonist Bill Unwin delves deeply into the family archive. He comes across historically sensational documents – the private Notebooks and a letter of his great--great-grandfather Matthew Pearce, a Victorian topographer. Studying Matthew's life, Unwin is seeking to bring coherency to his own past. He, in a way similar to the *Waterland*'s narrator, is trying to put his particular personal story into a far wider context of the 19th and the 20th century history. And once again the protagonist's revisiting of his

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10 Daniel Schacter, *Searching for Memory: The Brain, the Mind, and the Past* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 112-116, 345-350.

11 Maurice Halbwachs, *La Mémoire collective* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1950), 57-66.

12 Tzvetan Todorov, "The Abuses of Memory," *Common Knowledge* 5 (1996): 6-26.

13 E.g. Geoffrey Braithwaite in *Flaubert's Parrot* by J. Barnes, Stevens in *The Remains of the Day* by K. Ishiguro, Tom Crick in *Waterland* and Bill Unwin in *Ever After* by G. Swift.

14 E.g. narrators in G. Swift's *Last Orders*.

15 Swift, *Waterland*, 80.

16 Lorna Sage, "Unwin Situation," review of *Ever After*, by Graham Swift, *The Times Literary Supplement*, February 21, 1992, 6. *The Times Literary Supplement*, February 21, 1992.

past is induced by the deep personal crisis: Bill Unwin lives through a series of deaths of his close relatives and his own attempted suicide. The narrator's recurrent memories are centred on the most painful of his life's events of which his father's killing himself is especially obsessive. Bill is relentlessly haunted by the question what caused this suicide.

The past and the present time perspectives in *Ever After* are separated, with an obvious prevailing of the present-day focus. Postmodernist fragmentation and chronological disruptions in the text are made – by way of alternating the contemporary character narration with the passages from the Victorian journal – set aside visually by typographical means. Alternating fragments also contrast stylistically: Matthew Pearce's diary is an elaborated pastiche of literary Victorian writing whilst the style of the late 20th century narrator is less formal.

For Unwin, the examining Matthew Pearce's Notebooks is a historical research and a search for his own identity at the same time. The narrator keeps insistently asking himself: "What is real and what is not? And who am I? Am I this, or am I that?"[17] His retrospections mainly have a format of a monologue – while trying to transform a fragmentary external reality into a coherent internal world Unwin is speaking first and foremost to himself. Swift's character boldly chooses for himself the main part in the Shakespeare's tragedy, pretending to be a Hamlet in relation to his mother-Gertrude, his stepfather-Claudius and his wife-Ophelia. However, Hamletian model doesn't generally fit the story of Swift's novel's protagonist.

The quest for truth by Hamlet-Unwin gets all the more difficult as everything around him keeps changing appearance – the wife-actress who plays various roles and quite probably plays him false; the father who turns out to be not his father; the mother whose image Bill assembles out of separate fragments of obscure impressionistic memories; the stepfather whom Unwin would rather like than hate, and so on. And when the narrator principally changes the cast, choosing Matthew for Hamlet, his mother for Ophelia and casting himself as either Polonius or Horatio, it becomes obvious that the Shakespearian pattern is not merely transformed but, on the whole, is used by the narrator for drawing the focus away from more significant things. Postmodernist farce serves the character as a protective disguise for a real tragedy. Meanwhile, Hamlet's figure – invisibly present throughout the novel – implies and emphasises the profound existential scepticism defining the worldview of both the contemporary narrator and the Victorian protagonist.

It is this scepticism together with a lack of confidence in oneself and in the present day that brings Unwin to read Matthew Pearce's journal. Yet the contemporary character appeals to the past not in search of a source of stability and certainty, which would be quite ironic since Matthew's outlook was also fundamentally shattered. Pearce himself was facing a family crisis and a crisis of his religious belief originated from his encounter with ichthyosaur fossil and then considerably deepening with the death of his little son Felix. The character of Darwinian epoch questioned the postulates of faith and became an apostate in the end. As a religious crisis of this kind was quite a common thing for an educated Victorian, Unwin is attracted not by the singularity of his great-great-grandfather story but by this very crisis of the sincere belief that was possible in the Victorian period though unlikely to happen in the postmodern era when the certainty of any belief seems to be absent altogether. The force and the authenticity of his ancestor's feelings magnetize the man of the end of the 20th century who lives

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17 Graham Swift, *Ever After* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 100.

in a plastic, polymerized world of "substitutes", artificial substances replacing "the real stuff."[18] Thus, Unwin turns to the past primarily because he sees in the Matthew's history a crisis worse than his own but the one expressed honestly and open-heartedly without a gloomy postmodernist irony, without any attempt to avoid the reality or to delude oneself.

The reconstruction of both Matthew Pearce's and his own life stories leads Bill Unwin to revealing for himself the fact that a general pattern or a providential plan that arranges historical events into an order is not "found" in the past but is projected into it. The notion of history as a sum of purposeful events unfolding around the great personalities, like Charles Darwin, does not take into account an element of accident behind the historical events including Darwin's discoveries. It's a chance, Unwin argues, that played a decisive role in the Victorian biologist's career: "The captain of *Beagle*, an amateur phrenologist, nearly rejected Darwin as a suitable shipmate on account of the shape of his nose."[19] In this way an accident is guiding the history.

Bill doesn't as much find any answers or a retreat in the past as "helps the past out" providing Matthew with what he lacks: "I give to Matthew's life that very quality of benign design that he had already glimpsed might be lacking from the universe. I choose to believe ... "[20] The narrator admits that there is a good deal of invention andstructuring in his manner of telling Matthew's story. In this sense Unwin is a historiographer who transforms the past together with a present experience into a coherent story. History for Swift's character becomes therefore a life-enhancing and literally death-challenging means.

The essential part in his research Unwin leaves to an invention. Declaring: "I don't believe that these Victorians were really ... so Victorian,"[21] he imagines this contradictory era in the way different from the traditional view. The narrator explains: "I am not in the business of strict historiography. It is a prodigious, a presumptuous task: to take the skeletal remains of a single life and attempt to breathe into them their former actuality."[22] The only certain facts in "the historical document" which is Pearce's journal are the date and the place of birth of its author as well as the fact that he began the Notebooks on the day of Felix's death, all the rest are "the facts infused with a good deal of theory, not to say imagination."[23] The narrator recurrently emphasises this mingling of facts and surmise together in his version of the Victorian man's history.[24] In *Ever After* this blend becomes more compound with putting fictional documents alongside the real ones (e.g. an authentic abstract from Charles Darwin's *Journal*).

Unwin endeavours to feel Matthew's feelings: "You have to picture the scene. You have to reconstruct the moment, as patient palaeontologists reconstruct the anatomies of extinct beasts."[25] Such an imaginative empathy with his subject taken as a principle of a historical research makes Unwin's approach substantially different from stiff formal

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18 Swift, *Ever After*, 10.

19 Swift, *Ever After*, 238.

20 Swift, *Ever After*, 114.

21 Swift, *Ever After*, 138.

22 Swift, *Ever After*, 100.

23 Swift, *Ever After*, 100.

24 See Swift, *Ever After*, 88, 120, 138, 155, 226.

25 Swift, *Ever After*, 197.

methodology of his "rival" – an academic called Dr Potter[26] who is seeking to lay hold of the Notebooks and without realizing an irony is insisting: "The spiritual crisis of the mid-nineteenth century is *my subject*!"[27] These two approaches to historical studies opposed in the novel are correlated as a historiorgaphic novel and a scholarly historiography.

It is essential that in Unwin's view the fictional not only integrates with the factual but also serves as a necessary condition of "the reality" of the reconstructed history: just after having begun to keep "the record of his life as a fiction" Matthew Pearce becomes "real" and "from now on, ... he would live according to the way things truly were."[28] In the same way, Unwin's past is being transformed into history by means of invention and fictionalization: "The fiction of my life ... may as well serve as the fact. ... I am who I am. I am Bill Unwin (there, I declare myself!). I am Hamlet the Dane."[29] Herein the general formula for a historiographic novel is outlined, that lies in the documenting of the factual as the fictional and the fictional – as the factual.

In the Swift's novel the real historical events are represented in the same "mixed" manner. For instance, fictional Matthew Pearce collaborates with real historical I.K. Brunel on the construction of the Great Western Railway. The famous Victorian engineer appears episodically in the novel – "these little glimpses of the great"[30] – and is portrayed mainly as a man with a human touch: "So Brunel was a smoker too."[31] Meanwhile, the Second World War, "whose historic rumblings occurred, so far as I was concerned, off--stage"[32] and the atomic bombings of Hiroshima quite distantly and almost inconspicuously become intertwined with the life of the contemporary character. The narrator recalls as on the 5th of August in 1945 he went with his mother to the picturesque village of Aldermaston – the place near which Bill was born later notorious as a site of the Atomic Weapons Research Establishment – to celebrate his mother's birthday, having not known at that time "that for ever afterwards she would share her birthday with the anniversary of the last pre-atomic day."[33]

However, such a remoteness and secondariness of the historical references is rather misleading since the character's crisis with apparently personal and solely internal dimensions can at the same time be seen as a direct result of the historical events. It is the war and its aftermath that changed dramatically the lives of the protagonist and his family. The event most traumatic for Unwin – the suicide of his father, an honourable war veteran – was presumably caused by a sense of guilt for his secret service having to do with the nuclear weapons development. In the same way the crisis of the Victorian protagonist of *Ever After* has the root in historical developments.

Fictionalizing his past the narrator appeals not only to *Hamlet* but also to a fairy--tale pattern. Already in its title *Ever After* overtly refers to the fairy-tale while a fairly-tale "they have lived thenceforward happily ever after" is a recurrent phrase of the novel.[34] This leitmotif is obviously ironic as Swift turns upside down a traditional fairy-tale

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26 It is worth noting that such a Dr Potter is a recurrent character in a number of historiographic novels (e.g. M. Kneale's *English Passengers*, B. Bainbridge's *Master Georgie*).

27 Swift, *Ever After*, 177.

28 Swift, *Ever After*, 195.

29 Swift, *Ever After*, 171-172.

30 Swift, *Ever After*, 141.

31 Swift, *Ever After*, 141.

32 Swift, *Ever After*, 213.

33 Swift, *Ever After*, 244.

34 See Swift, *Ever After*, 85, 99, 118, 132.

paradigm according to which all the ordeals the heroes are coming through are rewarded with a happy-ending: the readers of *Ever After* are informed about the death of the protagonist's beloved wife at the beginning of the tale. As a matter of fact, the novel tells not as much about what had been *before* the happiness as what has happened ever *after*.

At the same time the fairy-tale allusions, similar to the Shakespearean ones, are used with a double purpose – both as a postmodernist farce and as the means to affirm after all an optimistic vision of the relation between the past, the present and the future. The fairy-tale atmosphere that in Unwin's memories colours the bleak pre- and post-war reality transforms the special apocalyptical mood of Swift's novels. a fairy-tale magic interferes in narrator's retrospection about his childhood in Paris; Unwin also fills with fairy-tale motifs the story of his birth in a critical moment in his country's history:

> I was born in December 1936, in the very week that a King of England gave up his crown in order to marry the woman he loved. Naturally, I knew nothing about this at the time and, of course, other events than the Abdication Crisis were then at large in the world. But I have always felt that the timing of my arrival imbued my life, for better or worse, with a sort of fairy-tale propensity. I have always had a soft spot (a naïve view, I know) for the throneless ex-king sitting it out on the Riviera. And I have often wondered whether my mother's pangs with me on that December day were eased by that concurrent event which must have been viewed by many, rather than as a crisis, as a welcome intrusion of Romance, allowing them fondly to forget for a moment Hitler, Mussolini and Franco. All for Love. Or, the World Well Lost. "Let … the wide arch of the ranged empire fall!" (As indeed it began to do under poor, put-upon George VI.) All for love, yes. Amor vincit …[35]

"Amor vincit omnia" ("Love conquers all") – this motto was engraved on the mantel clock made by Matthew's father, a clockmaker, as a wedding gift for his son. The clock was passed on from one generation to another and finally was presented to Bill by his mother on the occasion of his marriage with Ruth. Created to guard the family happiness – "One day, sweetie, when you get married…"[36] – this wedding gift, however, had rather an ironically subversive than a romantic fairy-tale history. It was passed on almost accidentally. Even Bill and Ruth received it "rather late in the day."[37] "This little clock which presided not only over Matthew's marriage but over his scandalous divorce, and seems to have presided since over a good many marred marriages, including my mother's to my father."[38]

Thus, the clock is one of the ironically transformed fairy-tale elements in *Ever After* as well as the Latin inscription on it was the popular misquotation from Virgil, the word order being inverted in the original.[39] However, despite this subversion the clock has its important symbolic meaning in the novel.

The clock that was passed over successive generations implies the notion of historical coherence. Is it possible to overcome a historical gap between people and cultures in the same simple manner as to pass a clock to an inheritor? Is a link with the

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35 Swift, *Ever After*, 63.

36 Swift, *Ever After*, 54.

37 Swift, *Ever After*, 51.

38 Swift, *Ever After*, 53.

39 In Eclogue 10, line 69 Virgil wrote: „Omnia vincit amor: et nos cedamus Amori" (Love conquers everything and we yield ourselves to Love). In *Canterbury Tales* G. Chaucer used "Amor vincit omnia" (Prologue, line 162) as an ironic transformation of a Bible verse (1 Corinthians 13:13).

previous generations possible given the lack of a common belief that time's progress is the realization of a teleological design? Such an idea was an irrefutable truth for Matthew's father who was engaged "not only in the making of clocks but in the manufacture of this vital stuff called Time,"[40] but it ceased being like this for Matthew and even more so for Unwin. Nevertheless, the contemporary character makes an effort to restore and to keep up the continuity of time. He winds the clock regularly. And it is significant that the clock does not stop even after the death of Ruth who made it a point of special concern to keep it wound. Unwin explains: "It has been my resolution never to let the clock wind down ... . When I wind the clock, I hold the key which Ruth once held, and holding the key that Ruth once held, I hold the key once held by Matthew."[41] The clock here is a kind of a bridge linking the past with the present.

In *Ever After* there is a number of such "bridges", i.e. things or events that linger on from the past and make its presence evident here and now. For example, planning a pilgrimage to the place where Pearce's relatives lived and were buried, Unwin reflects on a reality of the past, on its connection with the present: "There always is. And *they* will still be there. ... Real people, real bones (not this cast of characters)."[42] Another "bridge" from the past and an ironic echo of Matthew's history is the fact that Unwin's biological father, as it turned out, was an engine-driver on The Great Western Railway in the construction of which Matthew Pearce was involved. And the most expressive metaphor to illustrate a link between the past and the present in the novel is the building of Brunel's bridge. This metaphor gets us back to an ambiguous world of "waterland". To erect a solid construction over the water is as difficult as to connect the past with the present, or figuratively, to span the water of stories with a safe bridge of History. Bill exclaims with admiration: "To build a bridge! To span a void! ... These happy bridge-builders, these men of the solid world."[43]

Lastly, the clock with the inscription "Amor vincit omnia" symbolically embraces the two main recurrent themes of *Ever After* – time and love, – thus provoking the question whether love conquers time. And despite all the postmodern scepticism and an existential horror the novel unpredictably answers this question in the affirmative. In the final episode the narrator recalls the happiest moment of his life – the first night with Ruth. This scene remarkably lacks a sense of an ending while the History itself is being coloured with a touch of a fairy-tale: "The two young people who command our attention still have a quaint, residual feeling that the world has already been saved, that the great cosmic battle for good and evil has already been fought and won ... And it is only four years since a new queen rode in a fairy-tale coach to her coronation."[44] Emotionally uplifting, in a fairy-tale way *happy* end of the novel shows a stark contrast with its dismal beginning, as the protagonist eventually "finds and meets his former self" once lost "in a place of serene detachment."[45]

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40 Swift, *Ever After*, 115.

41 Swift, *Ever After*, 53.

42 Swift, *Ever After*, 142-143.

43 Swift, *Ever After*, 217.

44 Swift, *Ever After*, 271.

45 Swift, *Ever After*, 5-6.

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