



# Woke Up Lonely

*Fiona Maazel*

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## **Woke Up Lonely** Fiona Maazel

Woke Up Lonely is an original and deeply funny novel that explores our very human impulse to seek and repel intimacy with the people who matter to us most.

Thurlow Dan is the founder of the Helix, a cult that promises to cure loneliness in the twenty-first century. With its communes and speed-dating, mixers and confession sessions, the Helix has become a national phenomenon - and attracted the attention of governments worldwide. But Thurlow, camped out in his Cincinnati headquarters, is lonely - for his ex-wife, Esme, and their daughter, whom he hasn't seen in ten years.

Esme, for her part, is a covert agent who has spent her life spying on Thurlow, mostly to protect him from the law. Now, with her superiors demanding results, she recruits four misfits to botch a reconnaissance mission in Cincinnati. But when Thurlow takes them hostage, he ignites a siege of the Helix House that will change all their lives forever.

With fiery, exuberant prose, Fiona Maazel takes us on a wild ride through North Korea's guarded interior and a city of vice beneath Cincinnati, a ride that twists and turns as it delves into an unsettled, off-kilter America. Woke Up Lonely is an original and deeply funny novel that explores our very human impulse to seek and repel intimacy with the people who matter to us most.

## **Woke Up Lonely Details**

Date : Published April 2nd 2013 by Graywolf Press

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Author : Fiona Maazel

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## From Reader Review Woke Up Lonely for online ebook

### Jeff Golick says

An extremely rich book. The story is far-fetched -- est-like cult; secret Sin City beneath Cincinnati; undercover operatives from the West going deep into North Korea --- but despite the narrative extremes, the well-drawn characters and even more deeply felt situations and relationships keep us pinned to the ground, as we wish, perhaps more than some of the characters, that these people find what they are looking for.

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### Abbey says

Oh man, I wanted to love this book. Sincerely. I love the concepts - exploring loneliness within the context of community - the power dynamics of loneliness between leaders & followers - political conceptions of loneliness (and East vs. West). The idea behind this book is SO strong and interesting.

And yet, the delivery is treacherous to get through. Maazel is a talented writer, no doubt. Amazing imagery, fantastic one liners; but this book was trying to do TOO much. It was mostly confusing, stuck between wanting to be a philosophy book or just fiction, and just chaotic- but not in an intended or satisfying way.

I would have preferred an unpacking of just one of the characters or story lines instead of minimal information about over 10 people with many different plots and chaos.

That being said, I finished it - which I normally don't do when I'm feeling frustrated. That's because I feel so much promise in the ideas behind this book. It made me conceptualize & think about loneliness (and togetherness) in very specific ways...but something important was off. I am so sad to report this!

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### Matt says

I can't think of a book I've disliked more than *Woke Up Lonely*. I've left books disappointed, unnerved, irritated or angry that I wasted my time. *Woke Up Lonely* left me feeling grateful to rid myself of the company of a smiling sadist.

There's lots of great (and good...even *passable*) literature that deals with unpleasant, difficult, damaged and flawed characters. There's just as many worthy works that shine light on tragic, fantastic and far-flung "realities". I found no emotional or social truth in *Woke Up Lonely*...it feels like the glimpse into the mind of a sociopath looking into the hearts of men. It's shocking—and unprecedented in my reading experience—how much *contempt* author Fiona Maazel has for her creations and, by proxy, her readers.

Admittedly, I never figured out the story's stylistic locale. The book is tethered to (and utilizes) a very specific moment in U.S. history (2000 and 2005) and world geopolitics: the Bush-year mindset and contemporary world events very much drive story and plot mechanics. However, dialogue, action, character motivations and story elements are so farcical that they could not actually happen in even the most extreme state of fictional hyper-realism. It's like the Scooby-Doo gang as the leads in *Zero Dark Thirty* (*Zero Zoinks Thirty?*). It's not literary juxtaposition when elements are so incongruous that they undermine and invalidate the other. No one and nothing here is true.

I could go on explicating the broad, unreal characters, the muddy and confusing POV shifts, the nonsensical too-clever-by-half loop-de-loop metaphors and look-at-my-thesaurus dialogue, but it's really not worth it. I try to judge a work on how well it accomplishes what it's trying to do. I'm at an complete—unprecedented for me—loss for what Maazel is doing unless it's to create a book that makes you hate humankind for being human. Whatever charity I can extend to a flawed work withers up in the face of the contempt Maazel exhibits for her characters, her readers and her fellow women and men.

Maazel may well have cut this feeling some with a series of happy endings for the characters. I don't know...I quit reading on page 270 (out of 320ish) after I saw how she concluded one main character's story.

Overwritten, self-pleased, misanthropic, emotionally false and contemptuous, *Woke Up Lonely's* sole notable attribute may be that it somehow dislikes me more than I dislike it. And I hated *Woke Up Lonely*.

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### **Tracy says**

Ok, I read this book because it's the play-in for the Morning Tournament, which is the reason I kept reading the book after I could already tell I loathed it.

Early on I was thinking, ok, this is a 3 star read, but the writer doesn't really understand how humor works, that it requires more than scenario and character setups that read like bad Saturday Night Live skits. But I thought the story itself could be redeemed from that.

It couldn't. It was just awful. The ... the sheer contempt that bleeds through this book is just ugly. The plot was, quite frankly, ridiculous and stupid and not well-thought out by the author. The characters were caricatures cut out of cardboard, all equally repulsive in different ways, sent into situations that didn't make sense ... which would have been ok, if it had been \*funny\* and managed to perform as satire. It didn't. Worse, the cardboard cutout characters weren't even internally consistent!

If I could give a book negative stars, I WOULD.

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### **Jodi says**

When you crack open Fiona Maazel's *Woke Up Lonely*, strap in and just go with it. The more you give yourself over to Maazel's dark satire the more you will enjoy your ride. Here's where I exhort yourself to give in and don't think about it too much. Because if you start the "but, really, is that even plausible?" you'll just ruin everything and the ending of this book is so touching and sweet that it's worth all the "hrmmm. . . ."

Oh, and before I forget, if you dig Vonnegut you will dig this one. Maazel's got some Vonnegut about her and the fact that she drops his name early on in this novel means she gets it. Read more.

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### **B.r. Stagg says**

Maazel can write amazing sentences. From the very first page:

"Thurlow had many epithets of notoriety, but this was his least known. Ex-husband. How about: Cult leader. Fanatic. Terrorist. On a bus in D.C., staring her down with those eyes. Not the pellucid blue of men who compel for being unreachable, but the crepuscular blue of day into night, a transition as reliable as it is fleeting and, for these twin qualities, emblematic of the thing you'd love all your life."

When I read that I thought I was in for an amazing book. But then I kept reading, and it continued to get weirder and weirder. This is one of the more oddly structured books that I've ever read. There are long tangents devoted to side characters that didn't hold my interest, and then the thrust of the story, a hostage crisis, is shown in small glimpses. The larger portion of the novel is devoted to the psychology of the two main characters, and I'll admit that they are richly conceived. I just felt that Maazel intentionally kept the reader at arms length with her odd approach to the book's structure. She litters revelations throughout that are just mentioned and left for you to pick up on, and they completely change your perception of the characters relationships to one another. You really don't get a good idea of how deeply flawed both the cult leader, Thurlow, and his ex-wife, Esme, are until half way through the book. From the beginning you know they aren't normal at all, but when you get a long section about their early relationship, as told by Thurlow, you start to see how much they are intertwined and screwed up. I really wish I had been more engaged by "Woke Up Lonely" because the themes are interesting and important, but I was continually put off by what I've been calling the "wonkiness" of the plotting.

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## Judy says

The publisher's letter to the reader in the front of my review copy of *Woke Up Lonely* suggests there are two ways to read the novel: speedily while being propelled by the action or taking one's time to savor Maazel's precision, wit, and prose. In my first reading I attempted the speed method but kept being foiled by the prose. I got to the end feeling supremely annoyed. Who is this Fiona Maazel anyway, I thought, and why is she considered to be so hot?

She tells us the story of Thurlow Dan, founder and leader of Helix, a cult that promises to cure loneliness. The opening pitch in Dan's words:

"Here is something you should know: we are living in an age of pandemic. Of pandemic and paradox. To be more interconnected than ever and yet lonelier than ever. To be almost immortal with what science is doing for us yet plagued with feelings that are actually revising how we operate on a biological level. Want to know what that means? I'll tell you."

Of course, in the way of people who found cults in an effort to solve their own problems, Thurlow Dan is hopelessly disconnected from other people. He deserted his wife and year old infant nine years earlier after being serially unfaithful and has wound up rich, famous, under investigation by the American government for possible acts of terrorism, still in love with his ex-wife, and lonely as hell.

Esme, the ex-wife, is a freelance agent working for Homeland Security. She does her best to raise her daughter Ida in her spare time while secretly trying to save Thurlow from himself. Time is running out though because the cult leader's misguided attempt to test his theories on North Korea's Dear Leader has landed him in some very hot water. The lunatic fringe of his cult harbors terrorist leanings and if Esme doesn't pull off something brilliant, the man she still loves is going down.

My problem was that I did not figure all this out until I had almost finished the book. Due to the author's

impressive vocabulary, I had to keep stopping to look up words. Nothing wrong with that; I love words. But I kept losing track of the plot as Maazel's brilliant set pieces, such as the speed dating as procurement method for Helix and the creation of Esme's elaborate disguises and the mother/daughter scenes with Ida, kept flashing like rooms from a fun house. Not to mention that at least six of the main characters each has his or her own plot.

The advance-praise blurbs for *Woke Up Lonely* left me sputtering with refutation. "I may have bruised ribs from laughing." I didn't remember laughing. Once. "This is a book you need." Why do we need to be told how lonely and disconnected we are? "It leaves your ears, mind and soul ringing for days." Well, actually a few days later I had to admit it did. So I tried the second suggested reading approach. I began again, taking my time, paying attention, letting Fiona Maazel talk to me.

Sure enough, like meeting someone who at first comes across as despicable and later becomes a great friend, the whole thing fell out and I got it. This author writes with the absurdist sense of early Iris Murdoch. She comports herself with the linguistic showmanship of Michael Chabon. *Woke Up Lonely* is a satirical social critique, a modern day romance, a literary thriller, and a tragedy that as it turns out, is also comedy. In my second reading, I am laughing.

I am not worried about bruising any ribs though. I've come through denial, anger, and bargaining. We are in deep trouble. I am depressed and don't plan on achieving acceptance. In the final scene comes the ultimate mockery of achieving acceptance. Instead, I challenge readers to finish this book and report back.

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## **Tuck says**

graywolf is just tearing up the book world this spring and summer with "city of bohane", "translation of dr apelles", "on sal mal lane", "love is power, or something like that", "airmail", "my lesbian husband", "percial everrett by virgil russell" and this one, "woke up lonely" (and lots more really, graywolf press is set to take over the world in 2013, well maybe)

maazel was also picked top "5 under 35" by national book award

this story is about how isolated and lonely one can be in this our modern world. even couples, or even maybe especially couples.

LOTS of voices in the story, lots of story lines, from wash DC, to north korea, to a "cult" headquarters in Cincinnati ohio. the apocalypse and revolution has been a long time coming, but at least young authors have started thinking about it. this neat novel is in the smart, politically aware, doomsday style like Blueprints of the Afterlife or maybe also Zazen and most definitely The Snow Whale and the weather, of course The Weather Stations

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## **Elaine says**

Man, I hated this book. I've never been one to be down on MFA programs - I have enough friends who teach in them - and I don't see why writing can't be studied and improved like any other skill, but this book is a poster child for a certain kind of pretentious, overly stylized, wanna be hip, all in your head writing that I have heard other people perjoratively associate with MFA programs!

This is parody that is absolutely unfunny, satire that is totally blunt, a love story that will leave you utterly cold, a heavily plotted novel that moves in fits and starts - dragging in places, and rushing in others - and leaves a shawl's worth of loose ends dangling.

Maazel's style is profoundly annoying. She uses a lot of esoteric vocabulary words and disconcerting sentence constructions (lots of times you'll stumble over a sentence that feels like a grammatical mistake or a fragment, only to conclude - upon closer study - that it's technically OK enough, but still irritating). She sets up over a half dozen characters, several intricate plot devices, and a lot of deep backstory, only to leave almost all of it simply hanging until a rush conclusion that leaves most of the novel not making sense. Instead of development of any of these (all rather unlikeable) characters, we get trite yet convoluted meditations on loneliness, the limitations of love, and the State? (yeah, the State). Unfortunately, there's nothing about Maazel's writing that makes you remotely interested in any insights she might have to share on these subjects,

I wanted to quit 100 times. I should have quit. Ugh!!!!

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## Oriana says

So look, Amazon bought Goodreads so they could turn us all into data and capture the elusive beast "discoverability" (a beast in large part created because all the goddamn bookstores were driven out of business by, um, Amazon). Which makes me kind of want to cloak and deny what brings me to a book, right? Just to at least make them work for it. But then for fuck's sake, I often leave little breadcrumb-reviews of how I heard of a particular book for *myself*, because I do not go out and buy every book I want the very second I want it (if only!), and I will want to remember, many moons hence when I am scrolling through this list, why I to-read-ed something or another. Meaning that refusing to leave myself these notes would be a classic case of cutting off nose to spite face. So no.

And honestly, it's not like the discoverability I will lead Great God Amazon to would be such a surprise—I am a product of my demographic, my location, my habits. Obviously I read what *Vice* tells me to, what Flavorwire tells me to, what the wonderful authors I love and friends I respect tell me to. Isn't everyone like this? Why did goddamn Amazon have to buy Goodreads, presumably signaling the death of its innocence, its neutrality, and its candor, just to fucking find that out?

Gah, it is so sad and stupid. Whatever.

So look, let me just come right out with it: Hey Amazon Overlords, guess what! I read about this book in Flavorwire (which I love), wherein Heidi Juliavatis (whom I love) is quoted as saying this (which I love):

*Woke Up Lonely* is the novel equivalent of a sonic boom — it builds, it explodes, it leaves your ears, mind, and soul ringing for days. Who else writes sentences like this, who else writes sound art prose that transports a heart-killing story of human frailty, susceptibility, loyalty, and isolation? No one.

What do you know? That's three... what's the opposite of a strike? Unstrike? Fine, that's three unstrikes for Fiona, which means I now very very badly want to read this book.

Got that, Amazon Overlords? Now can you please retract your Goodreads purchase since I've gone ahead and solved the problem for you?

Please?

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For a semi-refutation of part of this review (the part about discoverability being mappable) but a reinforcement of the main thrust of it (argh, Amazon), check out what I wrote about *Hidden Cities* .

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Oh, and about *Woke Up Lonely* itself? This is rather anticlimactic after all that, but it turns out I really didn't like the book at all. Heidi promised me "sound art prose," and this book features nothing of the kind. It features instead a sprawling plot, too many unevenly developed and unlikable characters, some sort of wacky hijinks, international intrigue, heartstring-tugging, and a host of other things that are not what I expected and not what I particularly enjoy. Pretty disappointing.

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## Dotty says

This book was given such rave reviews:

"It's as if a Paul Thomas Anderson movie (*The Master*, *There Will Be Blood*) married a David Foster Wallace novel and had a baby. Which is to say, this story is weird, thrilling, and inimitable. The talented Maazel has plenty of imagination." —USA Today

"[Maazel] has a real talent for taking these existential millstones of modern life—fear of death, failure, being alone, everything—and filtering them into morbidly funny, troublingly familiar forms. . . . *Woke Up Lonely* easily refutes the idea that the novel is a staid, obsolete form of writing. The stakes in Maazel's book are at least as real as any work of nonfiction, and it's a good deal more fun to read than any manifesto." —The Daily Beast

"*Woke Up Lonely* is another wunderkammer, a deeply felt and wildly original novel that repays the attention it demands, and once read won't be soon forgotten." —Justin Taylor, Bookforum

"There's nothing better than a really good cult novel—especially a wonderfully written, brutally satiric one." —Flavorwire, "10 New Must-Reads for April"

"A great novel. Great, major, important—say it however you like. This is a book you need." —Darin Strauss, author of *Half a Life*

Sounds amazing, don't you think? But no, this book is all over the place and just simply not very well written - I didn't care about any of the characters - and kept reading in hopes that it would somehow all tie neatly together. It didn't. I was very disappointed.

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## Amanda says

The only reason I read this is because it was on the Tournament of Books finalist list. It is also the only reason I finished it. With all the books to choose from I'm really not sure what this is doing on the list. I found it to be on the ridiculous side. There is a scientology like cult that is supposed to help people deal with being lonely but that also has ties to North Korea. There are hostages and dysfunctional families and some stream of consciousness writing that is actually pretty good but the whole story just did not work for me.

## Jenny (Reading Envy) says

This book has a lot of inconsistencies that made me not enjoy it as much as I might have otherwise. The characters have incredible power - one is an international cult leader so influential that North Korea has started developing a relationship with him and the feds are watching him, the other is a master of disguise and spying - but both fall apart because they miss each other (they were married at one point.)

Great portions of the book feel like the author got tired - at one point the cult leader is recording a message for his daughter in case he is killed (and so the author didn't even need to write dialogue or action in that entire section), at a later point his ex-wife is writing to him on hostage negotiation notecards, at a point in the novel which should be exciting but instead turns into one very long list. It felt lazy. The author teaches writing and I thought writing was about showing not telling. There is too much telling in this book.

I think there was a lot of unrealized potential here. I read it because it was listed for the Tournament of Books that will happen in March, and this book was one of two selected for the pre-tournament.

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## Casey says

This book is great! The language is so strong, and the story's action chugs ahead without pausing to breathe. But then, when you're finished, you can think back on all of the poignant moments of the novel. Because there are a lot of them.

Read this one in April 2013.

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## Travis Fortney says

My review from the Chicago Center for Literature and Photography, which you can find here:  
<http://bit.ly/ZwLTyr>

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As the title would suggest, Fiona Maazel's second novel--after 2008's *Last Last Chance*--is concerned with loneliness. In its pages, we meet Thurlow Dan, who has founded a cult called the Helix to solve the problem of loneliness. It isn't working particularly well for him, and in the course of the novel he will go to desperate extremes to cure himself of this affliction once and for all. One of the people he is lonely for is his ex-wife Esme, an FBI agent and the leader of the team who is assigned to track him. Esme is lonely for him in return. Their daughter is lonely for her missing father, her workaholic mother, and her recently dead grandparents. The other FBI agents who Esme brings onto her team are all lonely, too. Anne-Janet has a sick mother and cancer to deal with, and has never had a serious boyfriend. Ned dresses up as a Stormtrooper and visits internet chat rooms. Bruce is a misunderstood documentary filmmaker. Olgo is lonely because his wife has run off and joined the Helix.

Maazel sums up what exactly the Helix is about midway through: "...everywhere and all the time, people are crying out for each other..." Thurlow says to a group of supporters, "and when you look back on your life you'll see it's true: woke up lonely, and the missing were on your lips." It's a nice thought, and lyrically

expressed, but I have to admit that the premise of a movement founded to "cure loneliness in the twenty-first century" left me a bit confused.

I didn't understand why Thurlow had a greater claim as an authority on the kind of loneliness specific to our current age than anyone else, especially since his loneliness is mostly a direct result of his alienation from his wife and child, and he founded the Helix before he and Esme ever met. I wasn't sure what this twenty-first century loneliness looks like to Ms. Maazel. I know she might assume it's obvious--something to do with communications technology, greater population density, a higher divorce rate, a move to more urban areas--but these are just guesses, because I am not an expert on the subject. One problem with *Woke Up Lonely* is that Thurlow Dan doesn't appear to be an expert on the subject either--I don't think he needed to be for this novel to be successful, but I would like to have known what got him started down this path in the first place. It felt to me like Ms. Maazel didn't want to state the obvious reasons why people today are especially lonely because to do so would have made the book less unique, but she has such a gift for observation that I wished she had given it a try. I'm sure that she could have made Thurlow's loneliness both universal and unprecedented, and it would have added a lot to the novel if his character was more than a bumbling sad sack (albeit a very funny one).

Last week in this review I wrote that there is a certain kind of modern novel where the male protagonist could always be played by Steve Carrel in the movie version. Since *Woke Up Lonely* is a book in the maximalist tradition, we have four male characters, all of whom are vying for maximum face time. And all four of them could be played by different versions of Steve Carrel. Suffice to say, every male character in this book is nice enough, fairly easygoing, easy to laugh at, kind of sad, and basically average.

To be fair though, Ms. Maazel saves her best character work here for Esme, whose character I thought embodied the conflicts at her core very nicely. Indeed, *Woke Up Lonely* could be read as a post-feminist novel where the most compelling conflict is the career vs. family struggle that's going on within Esme. She initially rejects Thurlow, then gets pregnant with their child, leaves him, reunites with him, marries him (although this decision is motivated by the opportunity for career advancement), finally falls in love with him, leaves him again, pawns her child off on her parents, adopts a foster child because she misses her own child, secretly follows her ex-husband's movements, never really stops loving him, struggles to connect with her estranged daughter, and eventually decides that family is the most important thing. I suppose Thurlow and Esme could even be read as allegorical to a great many twenty-first century relationships, where the world is full of background noise, careers are all consuming, it's easy to know everything about a person without ever interacting in the flesh, and true connection can be difficult.

But, again, that plot arc isn't fully developed, and to read the novel that way is a bit of a stretch. What we have instead is a complex web of stories laid over top of each other, told in a way that seems intentionally confusing. A large section of the novel is told on a series of sixty or so note cards. Another large section involves sometimes confusing switches from first to third person when we are in the same character's point of view. Much of the story takes place in North Korea, and for whatever reason these sections seem a bit stale. Maybe this is due to all of the escalating talk about the new North Korean regime recently, maybe it's due to the recent Saturday Night Live skits, or maybe it's the appearance of *The Orphan Master's Son* last year. It might also be that the scene about North Korea Ms. Maazel seems intent on making her big emotional reveal (that Esme is posing as Kim Jong-il while Thurlow is meeting with him) falls flat, since Thurlow never believed he was meeting with the real Kim Jong-il in the first place, and we already know Esme has a proclivity for disguise.

In another layer on top of all this, we have the stories of the members of Esme's team, all of which are told in some detail. It doesn't help that despite all the ingenuity on their surface, the team's stories are fairly conventional. Anne-Janet's story is about cancer, Bruce's is about pregnancy, Ned's is about adoption, and Olgo's is about infidelity. The team's stories provide a nice way for Maazel to clarify her theme and showcase her humor early on, but it's a bit puzzling when she abandons Thurlow and Esme at the end of the

book to wrap up the story of each individual team member instead of providing real resolution for our two protagonists.

This book reminded me of Ryan Boudinot's *Blueprints of the Afterlife*, which was unique, funny and entertaining, and which I also had trouble connecting to on an emotional level. Like Boudinot's novel, *Woke Up Lonely* is filled to the point of bursting with spot-on observations and laugh-out-loud funny lines, but all of these wonderful parts don't necessarily add up to a satisfying whole. Still, it's well worth picking up *Woke Up Lonely*, giving it a read, and discovering the good humor and great fun to be had in its pages for yourself.

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