

FICTION

Josephine Daskam Bacon

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# A Reversion To Type

A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

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# A REVERSION TO TYPE

By Josephine Daskam

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She had never felt so tired of it all, it seemed to her. The sun streamed hot across the backs of the shining seats into her eyes, but she was too tired to get the window-pole. She watched the incoming class listlessly, wondering whether it would be worth while to ask one of them to close the shutter. They chattered and giggled and bustled in, rattling the chairs about, and begging one another's pardon vociferously, with that insistent politeness which marks a sharply defined stage in the social evolution of the young girl. They irritated her excessively--these little airs and graces. She opened her book with a snap, and began to call the roll sharply.

Midway up the room sat a tall, dark girl, not handsome, but noticeably well dressed. She looked politely at her questioner when spoken to, but seemed as far in spirit as the distant trees toward which she directed her attention when not particularly addressed. She seemed to have a certain personality, a self-possession, a source of interest other than collegiate; and this held her apart from the others in the mind of the woman who sat before the desk.

What was that girl thinking of, she wondered, as she called another name and glanced at the book to gather material for a question. What a perfect taste had combined that dark, brocaded vest with the dull, rough cloth of the suit--and she dressed her hair so well! She had a beautiful band of pearls on one finger: was it an engagement-ring? No, that would be a solitaire.

And all this time she called names from the interminable list, and mechanically corrected the mistakes of their owners. Her eyes went back to the girl in the middle row, who turned her head and yawned a little. They took their education very easily, these maidens.

How she had saved and denied herself, and even consented to the indebtedness she so hated, to gain that coveted German winter! And how delightful it had been!

Almost she saw again the dear home of that blessed year: the kindly housemother; the chubby *Madchen* who knitted her a silk purse, and cried when she left; the father with his beloved 'cello and his deep, honest voice.

How cunning the little Bertha had been! How pleasant it was to hear her gay little voice when one came down the shady street!"*Da ist sie, ja!*" she would call to her mother, and then Hermann would come up to her with his hands outstretched. Had she had a hard day? Was the lecture good? How brown his beard was, and how deep and faithful his brown eyes were! And he used to sing--why were there no bass voices in the States?"*Kennst du das Land*" he used to sing, and his mother cried softly to herself for pleasure. And once she herself had cried a little.

"No," she said to the girl who was reciting, "no, it takes the dative. I cannot seem to impress sufficiently on your minds the necessity for learning that list thoroughly. You may translate now."

And they translated. How they drawled it over, the beautiful, rich German. Hermann had begged so, but she had felt differently then. She had loved her work in anticipation. To marry and settle down--she was not ready. It would be so good to be independent. And now--But it was too late. That was years ago. Hermann must have found some yellow-braided, blue-eyed Dorothea by this--some *Madchen* who cared not for calculus and Hebrew, but only to be what her mother had been, wife and house-mother. But this was treason. Our grandmothers had thought that.

She looked at the girl in the middle row. What beautiful hair she had! What an idiot she was to give up four years of her life to this round of work and play and pretence of living! Oh, to go back to Germany--to see Bertha and her mother again, and hear the father's 'cello! Hermann had loved her so! He had said, so quietly and yet so surely: "But thou wilt come back, my heart's own. And always I wait here for thee. Make me not wait long!" He had seemed too quiet then--too slow and too easily content. She had wanted quicker, busier, more individual life. And now her heart said, "O fool!"

Was it too late? Suppose she should go, after all? Suppose she should go, and all should be as it had been, only a little older, a little more quiet and peaceful? The very fancy filled her heart with sudden calm. A love so deep and sure, so broad and sweet--could it not dignify any woman's life? And she had been thought worthy and had refused this love! O fool!

Suppose she went and found--her heart beat too quickly, and her face flushed. She called on the bright girl in the front row.

"And what have *you* learned?" she said.

The girl coughed importantly. "It is a poem of Goethe's," she announced in her high, satisfied voice. "*Kennst du das*

*Land*"

"That will do," said the German assistant. "I fear we shall not have time for it to-day. The hour is up. You may go on with the translation for to-morrow." And as the class rose with a growing clamor she realized that though she had been thinking steadily in German, she had been talking in English. So that was why they had comprehended so well and answered so readily! And yet she was too glad to be annoyed at the slip. There were other things: her life was not a German class!

As the girls crowded out, one stopped by the desk. She laid her hand with the pearl band on the third finger on the teacher's arm. "You look tired," she said. "I hope you're not ill?"

"Ill?" said the woman at the desk. "I never felt better. I've been neglecting my classes, I fear, in the study of your green gown. It is so very pretty."

The girl smiled and colored a little.

"I'm glad you like it," she said. "I like it, too." Then, with a sudden feeling of friendship, an odd sense of intimacy, a quick impulse of common femininity, she added:

"I've had some good times in this dress. Wearing it up here makes me remember them very strangely. It's queer, what a difference it makes--" She stopped and looked questioningly at the older woman.

But the German assistant smiled at her. "Yes," she said, "it is. And when you have been teaching seven years the difference becomes very apparent." She gathered up her books, still smiling in a reminiscent way. And as she went out of the door, she looked back at the glaring, sunny room as if already it were far behind her, as if already she felt the house-mother's kiss, and heard the cello, and saw Klara's tiny daughter standing by the door, throwing kisses, calling, "*Da ist sie, ja!*"

Lost in the dream, her eyes fixed absently, she stumbled against her fellow-assistant, who was making for the room she had just left.

"I beg your pardon--I wasn't looking. Oh, it's you!" she murmured vaguely. Her fellow-assistant had a headache, and forty-five written papers to correct. She had just heard, too, a cutting criticism of her work made by the self-appointed faculty critic; the criticism was cleverly worded, and had just enough truth to fly quickly and hurt her with the head of her department. So she was not in the best of tempers.

"Yes, it's I," she said crossly. "If you had knocked these papers an inch farther, I should have invited you to correct them. If you go about in that abstracted way much longer, my dear, Miss Selbourne will inform the world (on the very best authority) that you're in love."

"I? What nonsense!"

It was a ridiculous thing to say, and she flushed angrily at herself. It was only a joke, of course.

The other woman laughed shortly.

"Dear me! I really believe you are!" she exclaimed. "The girls were saying at breakfast that Professor Tredick was ruining himself in violets yesterday--so it was for you!" and she went into the lecture-room.

A chattering crowd of girls closed in behind her. One voice rose above the rest:

"Well, I don't know what you call it, then. He skated with her all the winter, and at the Dickinson party they sat on one sofa for an hour and talked steadily!"

"Oh, nonsense! She skates beautifully, that's all."

"She sits on a sofa beautifully, too." A burst of laughter, and the door closed.

The German assistant smiled satirically. It was all of a piece. At least, the younger women were perfectly frank about it: they did not feel themselves forced to employ sarcasm in their references; it was not necessary for them to appear to have definitely chosen this life in preference to any other. Four years was little to lend to such an experiment. But the older women, who sat on those prim little platforms year after year--a sudden curiosity possessed her to know how many of them were really satisfied.

Could it be that they had preferred--actually preferred--But she had, herself, three years ago. She shook her head decidedly. "Not for nine years, not for nine!" she murmured, as she caught through the heavy door a familiar voice raised to emphasize some French phrase.

And yet, somebody must teach them. They could not be born with foreign idioms and historical dates and mathematical formulae in their little heads. She herself deplored the modern tendency that sent a changing drift of young teachers through the colleges, to learn at the expense of the students a soon relinquished profession. But how ridiculous the position of the women who prided themselves on the steadiness and continuity of their service! Surely they must find it an empty success at times. They must regret.

She was passing through the chapel. Two scrubbing-women were straightening the chairs, their backs turned to her.

"From all I hear," said one, with a chuckle and a sly glance, "we'll be afther gettin' our invitations soon."

"An' to what?" demanded the other quickly.

"Sure, they say it's a weddin'."

"Ah, now, hush yer noise, Mary Nolan; 'tis no such thing. I've had enough o' husbands. I know when I'm doin' well, an' that's as I am!"

"'Tis strange that the men sh'd think different, now, but they do!"

They laughed heartily and long. The German assistant looked at the broad backs meditatively. Just now they seemed to her more consistent than any other women in the great building.

She walked quickly across the greening campus. The close-set brick buildings seemed to press up against her; every window stood for some crowded, narrow room, filled with books and tea-cups and clothes and photographs--hundreds of them, and all alike. In her own room she tried to reason herself out of this intolerable depression, to realize the advantages of a quiet life in what was surely the same pleasant, cultured atmosphere to which she had so eagerly looked forward three years ago. Her room was large, well furnished, perfectly heated; and if the condition of her closet would have appeared nothing short of appalling to a householder, that condition was owing to the hopeless exigencies of the occasion. With the exception of that whitened sepulchre, all was neat, artistic, eminently habitable. She surveyed it critically: the "Mona Lisa," the large "Melrose Abbey," the Burne-Jones draperies, and the "Blessed Damozel" that spread a placid if monotonous culture through the rooms of educated single women. A proper appreciation of polished wood, the sanitary and aesthetic values of the open fire, a certain scheme in couch-pillows, all linked it to the dozen other rooms that occupied the same relative ground-floor corners in a dozen other houses. Some of them had more books, some ran to handsome photographs, some afforded fads in old furniture; but it was only a question of more or less. It looked utterly impersonal to-day; its very atmosphere was artificial, typical, a pretended self-sufficiency.

How many years more should she live in it--three, nine, thirteen? The tide of girls would ebb and flow with every June and September; eighteen to twenty-two would ring their changes through the terms, and she could take her choice of the two methods of regarding them: she could insist on a perennial interest in the separate personalities, and endure weariness for the sake of an uncertain influence; or she could mass them frankly as the student body, and confine the connection to marking their class-room efforts and serving their meat in the dining-room. The latter was at once more honest and more easy; all but the most ambitious or the most conscientious came to it sooner or later.

The youngest among the assistants, themselves fresh from college, mingled naturally enough with the students; they danced and skated and enjoyed their girlish authority. The older women, seasoned to the life, settled there indefinitely, identified themselves more or less with the town, amused themselves with their little aristocracy of precedence, and wove and interwove the complicated, slender strands of college gossip. But a woman of barely thirty, too old for friendships with young girls, too young to find her placid recreation in the stereotyped round of social functions, that seemed so perfectly imitative of the normal and yet so curiously unsuccessful at bottom--what was there for her?

Her eyes were fixed on the hill-slope view that made her room so desirable. It occurred to her that its changelessness was not necessarily so attractive a characteristic as the local poets practised themselves in assuring her.

A light knock at the door recalled to her the utter lack of privacy that put her at the mercy of laundress, sophomore, and expressman. She regretted that she had not put up the little sign whose "*Please do not disturb*" was her only means of defence.

"Come!" she called shortly, and the tall girl in the green dress stood in the open door. A strange sense of long acquaintance, a vague feeling of familiarity, surprised the older woman. Her expression changed.

"Come in," she said cordially.

"I--am I disturbing you?" asked the girl doubtfully. She had a pile of books on her arm; her trim jacket and hat, and something in the way she held her armful, seemed curiously at variance with her tam-o'-shantered, golf-caped friends.

"I couldn't find out whether you had an office hour, and I didn't know whether I ought to have sent in my name--it seemed so formal, when it is only a moment I need to see you--"

"Sit down," said the German assistant pleasantly. "What can I do for you?"

"I have been talking with Fraulein Muller about my German, and she says if you are willing to give me an outline for advanced work and an examination later on, I can go into a higher division in a little while. Languages are always easy for me, and I could go on much quicker."

"Oh, certainly. I have thought more than once that you were wasting your time. The class is too large and too slow. I will make you out an outline and give it to you after class to-morrow," said the German assistant promptly. "Meanwhile, won't you stay and make me a little call? I will light the fire and make some tea, if that is an inducement."

"The invitation is inducement enough, I assure you," smiled the girl, "but I must not stay to-day, I think. If you will let me come again, when I have no work to bother you with, I should love to."

There was something easily decisive in her manner, something very different from the other students, who refused

such invitations awkwardly, eager to be pressed, and when finally assured of a sincere welcome, prolonged their calls and talked about themselves into the uncounted hours. Evidently she would not stay this time; evidently she would like to come again.

As the door closed behind her the German assistant dropped her cordial smile, and sank back listlessly in her chair.

"After all, she's only a girl!" she murmured. For almost an hour she sat looking fixedly at the unlit logs, hardly conscious of the wasted time. Much might have gone into that hour. There was tea for her at one of the college houses--the hostess had a "day," and went so far as to aspire to the exclusive serving of a certain kind of tinned fancy biscuit every Friday--if she wanted to drop in. This hostess invited favored students to meet the faculty and townspeople on these occasions, and the two latter classes were expected to effect a social fusion with the former--which linked it, to some minds, a little too obviously with professional duties.

She might call on the head of her department, who was suffering from some slight indisposition, and receive minute advice as to the conduct of her classes, mingled with general criticism of various colleagues and their methods. She might make a number of calls; but if there is one situation in which the futility of these social mockeries becomes most thoroughly obvious, it is the situation presented by an attempt to imitate the conventional society life in a woman's college. And yet--she had gone over the whole question so often--what a desert of awkwardness and learned provincialism such a college would be without the attempt! How often she had cordially agreed to the statement that it was precisely because of its insistence upon this connection with the forms and relations of normal life that her college was so successfully free from the tomboyishness or the priggishness or the gaucherie of some of the others! And yet its very success came from begging the question, after all.

She shook her head impatiently. A strong odor of boiling chocolate crept through the transom. Somebody began to practise a monotonous accompaniment on the guitar. Over her head a series of startling bumps and jarring falls suggested a troupe of baby elephants practising for their first appearance in public. The German assistant set her teeth.

"Before I die," she announced to her image in the glass, "I propose to inquire flatly of Miss Burgess if she *does* pile her furniture in a heap and slide down it on her toboggan! There is no other logical explanation of that horrible disturbance."

The face in the glass caught her attention. It looked sallow, with lines under the eyes. The hair rolled back a little too severely for the prevailing mode, and she recalled her late visitor's effectively adjusted side-combs, her soft, dark waves.

"They have time for it, evidently," she mused, "and after all it is certainly more important than modal auxiliaries!"

And for half an hour she twisted and looped and coiled, between the chiffonnier and a hand-glass, fairly flushing with pleasure at the result.

"Now," she said, looking cheerfully at a pile of written papers, "I'll take a walk, I think--a real walk." And till dinner-time she tramped some of the old roads of her college days--more girlish than those days had found her, lighter-footed, she thought, than before.

The flush was still in her cheeks as she served her hungry tableful, and she could not fail to catch the meaning of their frank stares. Pausing in the parlor door to answer a question, she overheard a bit of conversation:

"Doesn't she look well with her hair low? Quite stunning, I think."

"Yes, indeed. If only she wouldn't dress so old! It makes her look older than she is. That red waist she wears in the evening is awfully becoming."

"Yes, I hate her in dark things."

The regret that she had not found time to put on the red waist was so instant and keen that she laughed at herself when alone in her room. She moved vaguely about, aimlessly changing the position of the furniture. How absurd! To do one's hair differently, and take a long walk, and feel as if an old life were somehow far behind one!

Later she found herself before her desk, hunting for her foreign letter-paper, and once started, her pen flew. There were long meditative lapses, followed by nervous haste, as if to make up the lost time; and just before the ten-o'clock bell she slipped out to mail a fat brown-stamped envelope. The night-watchman chuckled as he watched the head shrouded in the golf-cape hood bend a moment over the little white square.

"Maybe it's one o' the maids, maybe it's one o' the teachers, maybe it's one o' the girls," he confided to his lantern; "they're all alike, come to that! An' a good thing, too!"

In the morning the German assistant dismissed her last class early and took train for Springfield. On the way to the station a deferential clerk from the bookshop waylaid her.

"One moment, please. Those books you spoke of. Mr. Hartwell's library is up at auction and we're sending a man to buy to-day. If you could get the whole set for twenty-five dollars--"

She smiled and shook her head. "I've changed my mind, thank you--I can't afford it. Yes, I suppose it is a bargain, but books are such a trouble to carry about, you know. No, I don't think of anything else."

What freedom, what a strange baseless exhilaration! Suppose--suppose it was all a mistake, and she should wake back to the old stubborn, perfunctory reality! Perhaps it was better, saner--that quiet taken-for-granted existence. Perhaps she regretted--but even with the half-fear at her heart she laughed at that. If wake she must, she loved the dream. How she trusted that man! "Always I will wait"--and he would. But seven years! She threw the thought behind her.

The next days passed in a swift, confused flight. She knew they were all discussing her, wondering at her changed face, her fresh, becoming clothes; they decided that she had had money left her.

"Some of my girls saw you shopping in Springfield last Saturday--they say you got some lovely waists," said her fellow-assistant tentatively. "Was this one? It's very sweet. You ought to wear red a great deal, you look so well in it. Did you know Professor Riggs spoke of your hat with wild enthusiasm to Mrs. Austin Sunday? He said it was wonderful what a difference a stylish hat made. Not that he meant, of course--Well, it's lovely to be able to get what you want. Goodness knows, I wish I could."

The other laughed. "Oh, it's perfectly easy if you really want to," she said, "it all depends on what you want, you know."

For the first week she moved in a kind of exaltation. It was partly that her glass showed her a different woman: soft-eyed, with cheeks tinted from the long, restless walks through the spring that was coming on with every warm, greening day. The excitement of the letter hung over her. She pictured her announcement, Fraulein Muller's amazed questions.

"But--but I do not understand! You are not well?"

"Perfectly, thank you."

"But I am perfectly satisfied: I do not wish to change. You are not sick, then?"

"Only of teaching, Fraulein."

"But the instructorship--I was going to recommend--do not be alarmed; you shall have it surely!"

"You are very kind, but I have taught long enough."

"Then you do not find another position? Are you to be--"

Always here her heart sank. Was she? What real basis had all this sweet, disturbing dream? To write so to a man after seven years! It was not decent. She grew satiric. How embarrassing for him to read such a letter in the bosom of an affectionate, flaxen-haired family! At least, she would never know how he really felt, thank Heaven. And what was left for her then? To her own mind she had burned her bridges already. She was as far from this place in fancy as if the miles stretched veritably between them. And yet she knew no other life. She knew no other men. He was the only one. In a flash of shame it came over her that a woman with more experience would never have written such a letter. Everybody knew that men forget, change, easily replace first loves. Nobody but such a cloistered, academic spinster as she would have trusted a seven years' promise. This was another result of such lives as they led--such helpless, provincial women. Her resentment grew against the place. It had made her a fool.

It was Sunday afternoon, and she had omitted, in deference to the day, the short skirt and walking-hat of her weekday stroll. Sunk in accusing shame, her cheeks flaming under her wide, dark hat, her quick step more sweeping than she knew, her eyes on the ground, she just escaped collision with a suddenly looming masculine figure. A hasty apology, a startled glance of appeal, a quick breath that parted her lips, and she was past the stranger. But not before she had caught in his eyes a look that quickened her heart, that soothed her angry humility. The sudden sincere admiration, the involuntary tribute to her charm, was new to her, but the instinct of countless generations made it as plain and as much her prerogative as if she had been the most successful debutante. She was not, then, an object of pity, to be treasured for the sake of the old days; other men, too--the impulse outstripped thought, but she caught up with it.

"How dreadful!" she murmured, with a consciousness of undreamed depths in herself. "Of course he is the only one--the only one!" and across the water she begged his forgiveness.

But through all her agony of doubt in the days that followed, one shame was miraculously removed, one hope sang faintly beneath: she, too, had her power! A glance in the street had called her from one army of her sisters to the other, and the difference was inestimable.

Her classes stared at her with naive admiration. The girls in the house begged for her as a chaperon to Amherst entertainments, and sulked when a report that the young hosts found her too attractive to enable strangers to distinguish readily between her and her charges rendered another selection advisable. The fact that her interest in them was fitful, sometimes making her merry and intimate, sometimes relegating them to a connection purely professional, only left her more interesting to them; and boxes of flowers, respectful solicitations to spreads, and tempting invitations to long drives through the lengthening afternoons began to elect her to an obvious popularity. Once it would have meant much to her; she marvelled now at the little shade of jealousy with which her colleagues assured her of it. How long must she wait? When would life be real again?

She seemed to herself to move in a dream that heightened and strained quicker as it neared an inevitable shock of waking--to what? Even at the best, to what? Even supposing that--she put it boldly, as if it had been another woman--she should marry the man who had asked her seven years ago, what was there in the very obvious future thus assured her that could match the hopes her heart held out? How could it be at once the golden harbor, the peaceful end of hurried, empty years, and the delicious, shifting unrest that made a tumult of her days and nights? Yet something told her that it was; something repeated insistently, "Always I will wait." ... He would keep faith, that grave, big man!

But every day, as she moved with tightened lips to the table where the mail lay spread, coloring at a foreign stamp, paling with the disappointment, her hope grew fainter. He dared not write and tell her. It was over. Violet shadows darkened her eyes; a feverish flush made her, as it grew and faded at the slightest warning, more girlish than ever.

But the young life about her seemed only to mock her own late weakened impulse. It was not the same. She was playing heavy stakes: they hardly realized the game. All but one, they irritated her. This one, since her first short call, had come and come again. No explanations, no confidences, had passed between them; their sympathy, deep-rooted, expressed itself perfectly in the ordinary conventional tone of two reserved if congenial natures. The girl did not discuss herself, the woman dared not. They talked of books, music, travel; never, as if by tacit agreement, of any of the countless possible personalities in a place so given to personal discussion.

She could not have told how she knew that the girl had come to college to please a mother whose great regret was to have missed such training, nor did she remember when her incurious friend had learned her tense determination of flight; she could have sworn that she had never spoken of it. Sometimes, so perfectly did they appear to understand each other beneath an indifferent conversation, it seemed to her that the words must be the merest symbols, and that the girl who always caught her lightest shade of meaning knew to exactness her alternate hope and fear, the rudderless tossing toward and from her taunting harbor-light.

They sat by an open window, breathing in the moist air from the fresh, upturned earth. The gardeners were working over the sprouting beds; the sun came in warm and sweet.

"Three weeks ago it was almost cold at this time," said the girl. "In the springtime I give up going home, and love the place. But two years more--two years!"

"Do you really mind it so much?"

"I think what I mind the most is that I don't like it more," said the girl slowly. "Mamma wanted it so. She really loved study. I don't, but if I did--I should love it more than this. This would seem so childish. And if I just wanted a good time, why, then this would seem such a lot of trouble. All the good things here seem--seem remedies!"

The older woman laughed nervously. Three weeks--three weeks and no word!

"You will be making epigrams, my dear, if you don't take care," she said lightly. "But you're going to finish just the same? The girls like you, your work is good; you ought to stay."

The girl flashed a look of surprise at her. It was her only hint of sympathy.

"You advise me to?" she asked quietly.

"I think it would be a pity to disappoint your mother," with a light hand on her shoulder. "You are so young--four years is very, little. Of course you could do the work in half the time, but you admit that you are not an ardent student. If nobody came here but the girls that really needed to, we shouldn't have the reputation that we have. The girls to whom this place means the last word in learning and the last grace of social life are estimable young women, but not so pleasant to meet as you."

Three weeks--but he had waited seven years!

"I am very childish," said the girl. "Of course I will stay. And some of it I like very much. It's only that mamma doesn't understand. She overestimates it so. Somehow, the more complete it is, the more like everything else, the more you have to find fault with on all sides. I'd rather have come when mamma was a girl."

"I see. I have thought that, too."

Ah, fool, give up your senseless hope! You had your chance--you lost it. Fate cannot stop and wait while you grow wise.

"When that shadow covers the hill, I will give it up forever. Then I will write to Henry's wife and ask her to let me come and help take care of the children. She will like it, and I can get tutoring if I want it. I will make the children love me, and there will be a place where I shall be wanted and can help," she thought.

The shadow slipped lower. The fresh turf steeped in the last rays, the birds sang, the warming earth seemed to have touched the very core of spring. Her hopes had answered the eager years, but her miracle was too wonderful to be.

A light knock at the door, and a maid came toward her, tray in hand. She lifted the card carelessly--her heart dropped a moment and beat in hard, slow throbs. Her eyes filled with tears; her cheeks were hot and brilliant.

"I will be there in a moment." How deep her voice sounded!

The girl slipped by her.

"I was going anyway," she said softly. "Good-by! Don't touch your hair--it's just right."

She did not wait for an answer, but went out. As she passed by the little reception-room a tall, eager man made toward her with outstretched hands. Her voice trembled as she laughed.

"No, no--I'm not the one," she murmured, "but she--she's coming!"