

AN INTERVIEW WITH A. STEPHEN ENGEL
In New York City
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by
[Douglas Valentine](#)

DOUGLAS VALENTINE is an author, investigator, consultant and poet. His works include:

The Hotel Tacloban, the account of a soldier's extraordinary experiences in a Japanese prisoner of war camp; *The Phoenix Program*, "the definitive account" of the CIA's most secret and deadly covert operation of the Vietnam War; *TDY*, an action/suspense novel telling the story of one young man's journey from innocence to awareness; and *The Strength of the Wolf: The Secret History of America's War on Drugs*, 2004. Recipient of the Choice Academic Excellence Award, *The Strength of the World* and will be published in Russia this year.

The Strength of the Pack: The Politics, Personalities and Espionage Intrigues that Shaped the DEA, is to appear from TrineDay in September 2009.

The Douglas Valentine Vietnam Collection at the National Security Archive in Washington, DC, has been open and used by researchers since early 2007. The Collection contains the research material, including original handwritten interview notes and government documents obtained through FOIA requests, for the book *The Phoenix Program*. The Collection can be used only in the National Security Archive's Reading Room; it is not available for interlibrary loan, and an appointment must be made to use it. The "resguide" [link](#). . . will help anyone who wants to read the material.

THE INTERVIEW

Douglas Valentine: You've written an extraordinary book. A complex one and in many, many ways a beautiful one and in other ways a very deep one. What brought you to embark on this project?

A Stephen Engel: I started to read intensely when I was about fifteen. Mostly poetry. I remember wanting to write the book I always wanted to read, but couldn't, because it hadn't been written yet, so I'd have to write it myself. I didn't know whether this book would be poetry or prose. But I wanted it to be, you know, "epic."

DV: Speaking of poetry, can we back up a little bit and ask you what exactly it was that Kenneth Koch—I know you studied for a time with Koch—brought to you? But, first, there's a lot of poetry in this novel. Not only in single words and single sentences, but real poems. Like this one, "The Smoker's Ode":

green gone
brown dead
resurrection fire
leaf life
tumors bloom

like tulips
 or teeth
 oh wet pink lungs

That's quite some poem. Did you write poetry as stand-alone work at any point in your career?

ASE: Yes, lots of times. But surely I realize it's more like skeletons of prose work. It's hard for me to differentiate.

DV: You said you read a lot. Who were some of your influences?

ASE: Well, I started with Shelley. I thought he was the man when I was fifteen. I wanted to write like Shelley, and then when I was seventeen I thought, ah, well, he wrote great shit for the 1820s but then Rimbaud and Baudelaire came along, and then Joyce and Stein and Beckett, Faulkner, Hemingway. Later on I got into the poets of the New York School, Koch, Ashbury, and O'Hara, and I was lucky enough, as you mentioned, to study under Kenneth Koch, who really turned my mind around. Introduced me to Gertrude Stein. And now. I think, you *cannot* write pedestrian prose about a completely insane, wild, incomprehensible environment. All you can do is try to match the prose to the environment. Robbe-Grillet said "the prose secretes the story," and that's totally it. And to be honest, it's not just prose, I don't make a distinction. I mean, one of the things I'm proud of is that I took the encyclopedic tradition, it goes back to Rabelais and Cervantes, but in the twentieth century there's Joyce, Dos Passos, Pynchon, Gaddis, Faulkner, and I just merged it with the avant garde tradition in poetry—Gertrude Stein, the Language School, the New York School.

DV: I think you're absolutely right. There are certain kinds of strictures that are false ones. They might have been pertinent in one age, but they're certainly not now.

ASE: One thing Koch taught me, especially with his poem "Fresh Air," is that there's no such thing as poetry. It's not like kids are taught, "It has to rhyme!" or whatever. It's just that poetry is the rhythm, the music, and that's it. All poetry and prose is rhythm, music. We're not so different from musicians. We take our sensory experience and convert it into music. And whatever happens, happens.

DV: You're a remarkable writer. I remember in college I found myself discovering the same thing, in an auditorium after someone had just spoken—that there's no difference between poetry and prose. That opened a lot of doors for me.

ASE: Well take Rimbaud, *Illuminations* and *A Season in Hell*. All of those are prose poems, mixed with other kinds of poems, letters, little sentences. It says nothing, you know? So Rimbaud wasn't—I mean, except for the "Le Bateau Ivre," what of Rimbaud's work is memorable for being what most people would call "poetry?"

DV: Yes. and if you take a peek at Joyce, Faulkner, much of Hemingway, and certainly at A. Stephen Engel, you'll find that throughout the prose is poetic. Here's a tiny little example I have here in front of me—eight, nine, ten sheets of typed paper, that are simply outtakes from my reading of *Topiary*, your novel, and my favorites, things that struck me particularly. One is this little line: "Time. Passing. Time was." Amazing! That's a universe in itself, a complete miniature epistemological or metaphysical study of the paradoxical nature of time in just four short words. And here's another, a little tiny poem in, inside, another sentence, and it reads like this, on page 201 in the book: "taste sex smell sex, consequence." That's extraordinary. Listen to the inner sounds in those syllables, assonance, consonance, and built-in meaning through that structure, that last "consequence." Do you think about that as you're writing?

ASE: Nah. I wish I knew how to scan lines and stuff. I've tried it. I managed to teach freshman composition, and eventually I just said, ah, screw this, you know. Because in truth I studied with one excellent linguist, at NYU, and he had us look at 16 different style manuals and try to find a style, a grammatical style that all the books agreed on. And none of them agreed on it. And he also spoke about Shakespeare, how Shakespeare just made stuff up, you know, before Shakespeare things were pretty standard. I mean what's his name, *Astrophel and Stella*? Sidney. Sidney, he was totally on the mark, whereas Shakespeare just went off, a lot of his stuff was considered junk, slop—even Nietzsche comments on it, that if the Greeks had watched a Shakespearean play they would have laughed their heads off. But, you know, that began a sense of modernism, taking "everything" and stuffing it into "something."

DV: Well Harold bloom thinks that Shakespeare invented modern character and that it hadn't existed before that time. And I think he's perhaps right, which may lead us to ask about the character in the book, but I'd rather leave that for half a minute and ask you more about the language, because that's what this book really is, would you say that? That this book is language and that language is books?

ASE: Well, yeah. Otherwise, why wouldn't you just go to the movies? If you want a "story," well again, Dickens, Thackeray, Flaubert, Dostoevsky, what's his name, Tolstoy, Chekhov, they're all geniuses, but for their *time*. You *cannot* put—there *is* no story now. There's no beginning and ending anymore. We're just in the system, and systems are, you know, where do they begin and where do they end? There's no way to, I can't *conceive* of describing our world today in some kind of story. It doesn't make sense. Unless in a mainstream Hollywood-type movie, yeah, for entertainment, it's cool, yeah. They can do other things in a movie. They can do more than just use language. They can use lighting, and visuals, and music, and sounds that literature doesn't have.

DV: Now you've used that word "entertainment." We also want to get back to that word "story." But listen just to this. Just one thing going back to language and the effectiveness of language, partly for entertainment, but for other reasons as well. The character in the book, whom we'll have to identify in a moment, is gravely ill, and is in the hospital, and the nurse who's taking care of him says, "A Specialist will see you soon. Dr. Creed. He's very good." It's one of the many points in the book where a person must laugh. It's very

brilliant and very, very—a stiletto stab to many things, including organized religion, false belief, control of people through their fears of death. Did you plan that one? Not that I necessarily usually ask that question. But even if you didn't, I'll go ahead and ask this time.

ASE: I don't think so. But I do agree with it, in reading it now. You know, all you can do is learn to use the "tools" and the rest is, is, just comes to you through the, that Jungian thing, the cosmic, whatever. . .

DV: Consciousness?

ASE: Yeah.

DV: You said that things just come to you. But am I correct in understanding that you all in all, though you were doing other things and had other jobs and were working on careers of one kind and another, that you worked on this book for twenty-three years?

ASE: Yeah, but it wasn't a book for 23 yrs. It was stories, sketches, vignettes, many published, many not published, probably hundreds of stories, episodes, and pieces, and tens of thousands of pages. It only became a book about two years before I actually finished it, when I realized, *whoa!* these could all be tied together. And I based it, ironically, on the Linux operating system, which has a kind of modular kernel where you can plug in something and allow it to exist or else take it out. And, you know, you can read one piece and not have to read the rest of the book, or you—the whole book does have a kind of narrative to it, so you can just read various pieces of the book, flip around as though they're separate pieces, or you can read the whole thing and it exists as a whole piece.

DV: I can see that very, very clearly. I mean, my grandmother would have called it a good bathroom book, something like the *Farmers' Almanac*—you can open it at any page while you're sitting there and find something worth reading. On the other hand, what about "story." I think of "story" generally now as a pejorative term. If a book is advertised as telling a great story that will sweep you away, I tend to think it's probably fluff.

ASE: I think so too. But there's a difference between story and narrative—well, there's probably not, really, except in my own interpretation. But a narrative just kind of keeps things together, again in the way a computer operating system does. The components are all working with the same language and you can refer them to each other and connect, and there's a kind of wholeness to it. But again it's not necessarily something you need. I mean, in general—again, I have to quote Robbe-Grillet, "the prose creates the story" and that's where it goes. I mean think of a Burroughs novel like, *The Wild Boys*—where does it begin and where does it end?

DV: Do you think you could identify narrative from story as being distinguishable in the sense that life is a narrative but story has had things added to it?

ASE: Totally. But look, tribal peoples told stories that had specific narratives and certain purposes, but they lived in simpler worlds. Pynchon wrote perhaps the greatest narrative of our time, in *Gravity's Rainbow*, which had a zillion twists and turns but really wasn't a story. It was just various pieces of the landscape of, well it was set during World War II but it came back to the late 60s and the whole thing really is infused with the 60s mentality, and the narrative that he used was just a, kind of structure. A structure.

DV: Well, maybe it was his lens, for his age. I think, for example, of someone like Joyce. In *Dubliners* he really did make up stories.

ASE: Yes, he did, but then in *Ulysses* he tore them down.

DV: Yes.

ASE: And then in *Finnegan's Wake*. . .

DV: They disappeared. . .

ASE: . . . he tore down the entire, he reinvented the English Language using his intense knowledge of the Latin and Germanic languages. Greek too, I think. And Gaelic. You know, I read that book and I didn't understand what the hell was going on. But I just loved it, because I just read it aloud and it just sounded so good and the images were so cool—and that was the trip.

DV: And it does have a beginning and an end.

ASE: It does. And the beginning is the end.

DV: That's right. What I was going to say though, about Joyce and those stories is that what happened when he made those stories up, like "Clay" and "Eveline" and "The Boarding House," he got tremendous punishment for those stories, he was lacerated by the authorities, for. . .

ASE: He was lacerated for *Ulysses*.

DV: True, but what I'm trying to get at is maybe those stories were his way at that time and given the restrictions he was living and working under were his way of putting a lens on the truth, really.

ASE: Oh without a doubt. I think they're brilliant stories and I think perhaps the greatest modern story writer I've ever read, besides Raymond Carver, is William Trevor. And William Trevor learned a hell of a lot from Joyce's stories. And writes stories about tiny places in Ireland and England that have universal significance.

DV: Right. And of course Trevor isn't exactly who'd be called an avant garde figure now, you know?

ASE: Well, no, but he actually, that's his brilliance. I saw his book and I thought, oh, god, an old fart. And I picked it up and read this "O Fat White Woman," "Kinkies," "Lovers of Their Time," "The Bedroom Eyes of Mrs. Vansittart," and all this stuff about people getting wasted on acid, these typical proper British people doing horrendous weird things and I thought, my god, this guy's a genius and it just got better and better—ghost stories, psychological dramas, and everything. It's just the creepiest stuff I've ever read, plus it's hysterical, brilliant.

DV: So he's broken from the traditional subject matter. . .

ASE: Well, no, he learned from the tradition, he learned from Joyce, and then he *extended* Joyce, which is, what, you know—why write like someone before you? Why be boring? I mean, Christ, when I was twenty-two I was told that I was writing publishable stories. I went one rainy day in Cambridge and dumped them in a big dumpster, I wanted to say I burned 'em. I wanted to, but it was too rainy. So I just dumped them in a dumpster. I hate that crap. I *hated* them. I don't care if it's published. Whatever. Why would I write something that's *boring*?

DV: So the stories—in other words, they were derivative?

ASE: You know, they were, they were *kid's* stories. Some twenty-year-old kid writing, trying to write, *New Yorker* stories, in that sense they were, but otherwise they bored me to tears.

DV: I think the *New Yorker* a good service by taking on the works of Donald Barthelme back way back when. But by and large isn't a story, if it's sellable to the *New Yorker*—is it not in fact one of those stories that you think should be in the dumpster?

ASE: Look, Kenneth Koch told me the deal back in 1985. He said, "All right, John Ashbery and Donald Barthelme publish in the *New Yorker* because they have names and they get a lot of money for it, and why not. But really, if you publish in the *New Yorker* I guess your dentist will read you and your psychologist will read you—but I won't read you." Because it's boring, you know? It had its day in the 50s with Salinger, Cheever, William Maxwell, but that's it. And they made the *New Yorker*—and now the *New Yorker* is just, you know—and they made the *New Yorker* by not writing *New Yorker* stories. But by writing weird, creepy stories.

DV: William Maxwell's stories were so wonderful on their own terms that even the *New Yorker* liked them, don't you think?

ASE: Look, the guy was a master. And that's that. And of course, that doesn't mean—and these were stories—well the *New Yorker* wasn't going to publish anything by Burroughs, or even of Vonnegut. I've never seen Alan Ginsburg in the *New Yorker*.

DV: You've talked a lot about language and I'd like to talk more and more about it, but I think we should talk about the shape and depth of the novel also. But first, before leaving words, here's a sentence, or a phrase. that I typed out from the book, and it goes "Starved for sanity." Very well done! Another is "get Word to public." I should mention that the character in the book had an earlier life as an ad agency writer, and his reminiscence here leads him to think that "word was product." Is the book in some degree saying that word is "product" and thus worthless unless a person can rescue it and make it sacred again?

ASE: Look, the heart that beats in the breast of this book is Gertrude Stein. And you talk about prose, poetry, there's hardly any difference, and Stein never had a story except *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, which was really done for money, *Melanctha*, *Making of Americans*, and some other early stuff, but otherwise, she never even had anything published by *people*, or whatever the publishers are, until she was dead, long dead and gone. However, she *did* realize that words were sacred, yet grammar was not. And she actually, in her *How to Write*, which is not what you would think—if you wanted to learn how to write "stories" and you looked in that book you'd be freaked out because it's in *her* language. But in *How to Write*, she has a chapter called "Arthur A. Grammar" and she just messes with grammar and sentences and—she uses verbs, gets rid of as many modifiers as she can because verbs are action, life. Actually, in *Topiary* I did just the opposite. I got rid of as many verbs and adverbs as I could, just to, you know, signify a kind of death, a wasteland, a world of *things*, where even words are now *things*.

DV: Let me ask you two questions. One, is there not a parallel here with one of the most well known elements of T. S. Eliot, in the theme, certainly, and in some of the subject matter; and, second, would you repeat that wonderful thing you said about the heart of the book?

ASE: The heart of the book is Gertrude Stein. The heart beating inside the book is Gertrude Stein.

DV: That's a remarkable thing. I think you deserve a hand and a big round of applause and a lot of congratulations for being probably the only American writer right now who is composing with Gertrude Stein in mind.

ASE: Well I would correct that: The Language School.

DV: Yes.

ASE: Lynn Hejinian, Charles Bernstein, Ron Silliman. That movement went back to two people: Wittgenstein and Gertrude Stein.

DV: Yes. But I meant right now. Right now, you alone are carrying our torch.

ASE: Yeah, maybe. Who knows what's going on right now? We have all major media owned by six people, or corporations. Well I guess corporations are people now.

DV: How about going back to Eliot. Of course, Eliot had deep sources. Two questions for you. One is in what ways is this book similar to “The Waste Land,” and that’s going to be pretty clear; and, also, what are the literary origins of a book like this? In other words, you seem to be a writer who has been deeply nourished by reading in the literary tradition, and I can, I find Voltaire in here, Diderot is in here, certainly the modern greats, like Pynchon, are in here. It’s a book with very deep roots. Can you say something about that?

ASE: Yes. Well, in terms of Eliot, I don’t think it should be *annotated* like Eliot, which I don’t think “The Waste Land” needed to be. But *Topiary* jumps, it’s just small glimpses of the whole, and that’s the way I slant. Because Eliot’s *Wasteland* wasn’t like any other poem before it. It’s actually the only poem except for maybe “Howl” that people would recognize because it’s just brilliant, it encompasses every aspect of society going back to pre-society, the Fisher King, and tribal cultures, without making a fuss—except for the annotations, but in general no fuss. It was just the language itself.

DV: Was that Pound’s work, the annotations?

ASE: I’m not sure, I don’t know, I’m not very into Pound.

DV: But what about “The Waste Land” imagery, the coming-of-spring and re-fertilization imagery? That’s a powerful part of the narrative here, too.

ASE: Well, to be honest, *Topiary* is about, I mean if it’s *about* anything, the book involves this guy, a Don Quixote character, who’s been working as an ad exec and is deluded to thinking he wants to go back to the earth, and going back to the land amounts to watering potted plants in corporate offices so he can see life grow. You know, I love it, he can see life growing before him instead of watching it dying, from behind a desk. But in general the workers he visits are glad he comes because they want to see some kind of life, some kind of plants, in these fluorescent-carpet-tile-and-cubicle offices.

DV: And then there’s a bigger rise and sweep to the story.

ASE: That’s the deal—he becomes famous because—because of no reason whatsoever. He happens to be in the right place at the right time. He’s the Plantman. And so he meets a publicist who says, well, the Plantman has to be connected, has to be known, blah blah blah. And he says, but I’m just the Plantman. And that’s it.

DV: He’s kind of Woody Allen-famous. Like Zelig.

ASE: A little bit. I guess. But he’s more like—he’s outside, he observes, there’s Big Media, movies, television that make a huge part of this book, but none of it’s important to him. He kind of watches it and he’s kind of puzzled. He just doesn’t understand. He’s almost like an idiot.

DV: Doesn't it seem to you in that sense he's sort of a Candide?

ASE: Yeah. Wandering around, looking for "wisdom."

DV: He's looking at things for what they really are instead of seeing them from a pre-constructed notion?

ASE: He's Candide and everyone else is Pangloss.

DV: Very nicely put. I wanted to ask a couple more things about the as-it-were plot of *Topiary* -- not a word, "plot," that a person would immediately leap to in talking about the work of A. Stephen Engel. But something else first—about the satiric prowess of this authorship. The satiric edge can't always be attributed to Plantman, though Plantman is capable of a lot of that wit too. When the doctor says he may or may not survive, Plantman thinks first, "Wilt. Wilt. Wilt." And then a moment later, it's "Will't. Will't. Will't." It's beautiful, the plant imagery as he figures he may very well die. But here also, this fellow who hires Plantman for *Topiary* Techniques, Victor, asks Plantman whether he's qualified for the job and whether he's willing to work hard. The qualification you need to work for the company is that you have to have graduated from college. It reads like this: "'You have to be on the ball,' said Victor. 'That's why we require a college degree. You have to be able to follow instructions, or read them. Sometimes you have to figure stuff out on your own.'" Would you just say something about what the levels of satire there are?

ASE: All you have to do is go out with a tape recorder or a notebook and listen to people talk, like people who used to talk sixties slang, "turned on, tuned in," etc. and many of them didn't know what the fuck was going on, just being a part of the "scene" without really questioning it, you know—so you listen and you get satire. That's it. The way people talk. Like my neighbor in the elevator, the woman who said "Oh, my son just loves blood, blood, blood, he wants to go as Jason from Friday the Thirteenth for Hallowe'en. He just loves blood, blood, blood." When that kid turns up in the paper for killing all his college dormitory mates, his mother will say, "Oh, but he was such a nice kid! What *happened*?"

DV: He was a part of the system.

ASE: That's it. and the language is the language of the system. In this case, in *Topiary*, I created my own system. So that's why I don't think it's such a difficult book to read once you learn the language of the system. It's like reading Unix or the language of any other system. That's it. *Topiary* itself is a system.

DV: Yes.

ASE: And everyone within it are just, you know, *processes*.

DV: The satire here is a pretty good swipe the nature of college study these days. “Sometimes you have to figure stuff out on your own.” As if that’s the extent of a college education.

ASE: The whole thing—anything that’s advertised on TV is probably bad for you. And so they advertise “get an education.” And I’m thinking, what do you mean by an education? Do you mean reading critical analyses of why we’re in the society we’re in and wondering why we’re spending trillions of dollars not on two but on three wars? Or is it just work stuff, “do you need a job?” That’s one of the things about *Topiary*, the whole thing occurs during a war. The war is offstage, in the media. People talk about it, but they aren’t really experiencing the war, but they’re experiencing whatever the—

DV: Whatever the media tells them.

ASE: Yes.

DV: Would you say something about hope and lack of hope? Of course I’m a great admirer of this novel—or else I wouldn’t be interviewing its author, and I wouldn’t have read it three times. I know too many people who reject books or won’t read them on the grounds that they’re “defeatist” or “too gloomy.” What’s your take on this?

ASE: My take is this. Some people are hopeless only because they recoil any time they’re given a possibility of hope, for instance, when the banks screwed up the world economy and then got bailed out, it was time to say hey, what’s going on? But some people don’t want to talk about that, they have kids, they don’t want to hear about the environment or the fossil fuel situation or anything else. Instead of dealing with these problems, they read about celebrity sex triangles. That’s hopeless. In *Topiary*, I myself don’t really understand the end. I’ve got three interpretations. One is that Plantman dies, the other is that Plantman is dreaming the end, and the other is that he’s really, really sick and is just hallucinating everything. I don’t know, I’d follow any of them. The only hope is if he gets out of what’s called civilization and into a more natural tribal society. A community.

DV: Don’t forget The Missing Girl.

ASE: The Missing Girl is missing until she winds up at the end on the bus. She’s Missing because she’s been working underground since she was sixteen and realized, hey, I can’t live in this society. And of course she became “poster child for The Nation’s lost children” because she was good looking—one thing also I want to make note of. I deliberately avoided making any seriously detailed descriptions of people. Plantman could be black, could be Asian, could be white. The Missing Girl also.

DV: Just people.

ASE: That’s right. It’s like they’re generic people. That’s all people *are* now. They’re generic. The Missing Girl got off and became part of the underground called The Missing

Young, and now twenty years later, even though the media always portray her as if she were still sixteen, she's actually thirty-six, and Plantman sees someone, a familiar figure, a middle aged but beautiful woman on the bus that's leaving for out west, and he has a feeling that he knows this woman.

DV: He says to himself "Could I?"

ASE: Might I? There's actually a kind of poem that begins why not, cannot, cannot do, cannot see, cannot be. . .

DV: That poem is beautiful. It's right here in front of my eyes, from page fourteen:

Cannot know.
 Cannot do.
 Cannot relate.
 Cannot define.
 Cannot place.
 Cannot nowhere.
 Cannot no one.
 Cannot nothing.
 Cannot true.
 Cannot be.
 Cannot Cannot
 Cannot
 Say

ASE: Okay, the hope is this: Converting a statement into a question. With a question, at least you have alternatives. With a statement, that's it, that's is the way things are.

DV: And there is a question, of course, at the end of the novel—which is whether or not Plantman, with The Missing Girl on the bus with him, will reach the Tree of Life

ASE: Yes, and the question is, it also depends on whether you know Fire Bush, the phony Indian. He has his heart in the right place.

DV: He's a swell fellow.

ASE: He pretends he's an Indian but of course he's not. His whole deal is that, you know, can you, will you, you know? He says, "If you've got the right something—"

DV: The right condition.

ASE: Yeah, and of course that goes back to the whole idea that Plantman is different and has a different blood, and his blood type can't absorb all that's around him, and he's fatally ill until he finds the love with someone he's seen only pictures and images of—

and he realizes, well, obviously, if anyone has a condition, *he* has a condition, and so maybe he can, with *The Missing Girl*, eat of the Tree of Life and live.

DV: He can *water* the Tree of Life.

ASE: Water the Tree of Life. And she can eat of Tree of Life and renew. And he can, too, if he has the right “condition.”

DV: The novel is also Johnny Appleseed?

ASE: Johnny Appleseed is a kind of folk version of any kind of fertilizer god, even Jesus or Bacchus or Dionysus or Osiris or anyone who is cut apart completely by his environment or culture yet re-integrates and becomes alive and offers a new way. I think Barbara Mor, in her introduction, really caught that.

DV: Very nicely

ASE: She’s a brilliant mythographer

DV: Very nicely indeed. Well, I wish the book all success and a wide readership—which it more than deserves. Thank you very much.

ASE: Thank you.

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