

"Free Live Free" by Gene Wolfe

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Bruce Holloway — 07 Jan 1987, 18:05

Okay, so it finally came out in paperback, and I had this gift certificate to Waldenbooks....

"Free Live Free" is actually three stories in one book, all intermingled. Wolfe could have written a book from any of them. In fact, I'd rather. The book opens as four destitute people... a Gypsy witch, a salesman, a private detective (with a badge), and a fat hooker - these titles describe them completely - try to save the home of Benjamin Free from destruction to make way for a new freeway overpass. They live free - no rent - as long as they do whatever they can to keep that building standing.

Ben Free hints that there is a ticket to his home - the "High Country", hidden in the walls somewhere. The witch takes this in a figurative sense... that Free is some sort of supernatural being who has taken on the mantle of mortality for a time, and has left his "crown" somewhere about.

In any event, Free passes out hints to everyone about the "crown", then the house is partially destroyed and Free disappears. Okay, that ends the first part of the book. Before I bought it, I thought that's all there was.

But it continues for several hundred more pages. It's not the writing I have issue with; Gene Wolfe is a fantastic writer. But as all the characters scurry about trying to find Free and his "crown" or "ticket", it begins to read a little like a John Irving novel, but without the characterizations.

Because about a third of the way through the book, I realized that every character was a stereotype - each character acted exactly as you'd expect. Not only the four main characters, but a reporter from a pair of supermarket rags, employees at a mental asylum (where everyone is automatically assumed to either be a patient, or very much deserving to be), the fanatical cop, nosey neighbor (who talks entirely in fractured cliches), etc.

So after a couple of hundred pages of these unrealistic characters shuffling from one screwball encounter to another, the last part of the book zips in to gather up the loose threads and tie them together in one incredibly convoluted knot. I won't spoil this -- it'd take away any reason for reading the book.

My recommendation: Read the book if you can get it without paying for it. Or if given to you, then read the first part of the book, then skip directly to the last part -- the middle isn't really necessary to the ending.

Also, the American paperback edition includes a timeline of Ben Free's life in the back. A note explains that the American publisher asked for this, and it does not appear on foreign editions, or any hardback edition.

And then go read Glen Cook's "A Matter of Time".