

Free Live Free (2002 round table here/now) SPOILERS

The Urth list — 3 messages, 3 voices, 25 Nov 2002

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Michael Andre-Driussi — 25 Nov 2002, 06:02

Well I've just reread FLF for the first time.

I did like it better than the last time. The screwball comedy reminds me now of old films I've seen since the first read: movies like "Bringing Up Baby" and "Philadelphia Story." And yes, "It's A Wonderful Life."

I tried looking back through the archives to see what has been written about FLF, but most of what I saw was mentioning FLF in passing. There was one observation about the "alloying" nature of characters folded back into themselves, and that seems quite relevant. I did not exhaustively read all the messages -- what I did look at was exhausting enough.

Adam Stephanides, several years ago, posted a few questions and it doesn't seem as if they were ever answered around here. I don't even recall what they all were, but one had to do with appearance of Free/disappearance of Whitten, and I'll address that shortly.

First, the ending. Big Ozzie and Little Ozzie are walking through the January 1983 alleyway behind the partially demolished house. They pick their way through the debris -- through the window they can see the ruin, but they open the door and enter a non-ruinous version of the kitchen, in which stand an alloyed (or improved) versions of Candy and Stubbs. Ozzie thinks about how Free had said he'd hidden the gizmo in a wall: the sly part seems to be that a doorway is in a wall, and in this case the door from Jan 1983 back porch leads to Summer (what year in past) kitchen. In mirror-fashion, the door from Jan 1983 kitchen leads to Summer (what year in past) back porch.

The back door is really two one-way time doors.

My question is what year is that Summer kitchen located in? It might be 1982, which would then allow for Barnes, Stubbs, Garth, and the witch to be "alloyed," or folded into their previous selves. If it were 1882, long before their natural life time, or even 1942, it does not seem like this would be the case.

If it is 1982, then the events of the novel amount to a timeline that has been imploded and which only exists as a commonly shared dream among the now-improved four characters. Plus Little Ozzie.

But this doesn't explain why Free says he is too old to use it. Then again, he has advance knowledge of when he will be murdered and he isn't one to interrupt the flow, so that by itself can answer a lot of questions.

Next: High Country. The wooden Laputa flying fort, served by one B-17. Established in 1942, still there but seemingly abandoned in 1982. It carries the gizmo (the "big" gizmo?) which allows time-travel to 1952: Whitten walks through the door, ends up on High Country (1952),

gets information on fission, which he takes back to 1942 . . . or no, wait, the big gizmo must take all of High Country with it, and the B-17, too? Because the B-17 and its crew are from the 1940s.

As to Free/Whitten. Actually, Adam, this part is very much like John Crowley's "Great Work of Time" (1989) -- well no, not this part exactly, but the whole "crisis at time patrol: an insider is starting to mess things up--oops, that person is my future self!" thing. Which may be an off-the-shelf trope for "time travel organization" type of stories, I'm not sure. (And no, I would certainly not guess that John Crowley had read FLF--I would bet money against it.)

Anyway, getting back to it: in FLF it is simply not possible to "talk to yourself" because when the more advanced version of a person appears in the local timestream, the other version implodes and folds into the intruder. We might think of this as a "conservation of soul" or something like that!

So the first and clearest case we have: Whitten goes from 1942 to 1952, gets the info, and returns, but on his return he arrives three months before he left, and his May 1942 version seems to have imploded and folded into his August 1942. He then goes along with repeating history for three months until he goes up to High Country (again), then does not go into time travel but goes to Washington to give the info he had gotten months before.

Things are different in the "eclipses" of the 1980s: for one, neither "Buck" nor "Free" are native to the 1980s, so it isn't as clear-cut a case as "older Whitten displaces/absorbs younger Whitten." But that might still be what happens (even though it doesn't seem like it).

Time for a timeline (based on the US timeline but scrambled into Free's linearity point of view):

YEAR EVENTS

1889 -- Samuel Benjamin Whitten born.

1917 -- (age 28) Whitten in US Army, volunteers for pilot training.

1918 -- (age 29) Whitten in France, March to Nov (war ends).

1924 -- (age 35) daughter "Kip" Whitten born in Manila.

1937 -- (age 48) Brig. Gen. S. B. "Buck" Whitten retires.

1942 -- (age 53) July: Whitten joins OSS.

Aug 18: Whitten goes to High Country, travels to 1952. 1952 -- (age 53) Whitten gets fission info, returns to 1942. 1942 -- (age 53) May 30: returns from time travel, lands at Langley Field; his May self has imploded/folded.

June 2: from Langley Field to Buffalo.

July (again): Whitten joins OSS.

August 18 (again): But rather than time travel again, he reports at Washington with the info he got on the trip before.

August 20: second time travel (into future) with team this time, carrying disassembled gizmo. To 1982?

1982 -- (age 53) Nov 5: B-17 spotted marks arrival of Whitten and team.

1983 -- (age 53?) Jan 14: disappearance of Whitten when Free returns.

Jan 16: Free's ad.
Jan 17: The four move in.
Jan 18: The novel begins.
Jan 19: Kip takes Free prisoner.
Jan 21: Kip kills Free, Whitten reappears.
Jan 22: Before dawn, Whitten disappears again; High Country
interview of Whitten/Free (age 60 - 70) who has
experienced years since he saw them take off hours ago.
Jan 24: Man in duffle coat deserts.

1803 -- (age 60) Ben Free joins Lewis & Clark expedition.

1807-18 (age 64-75) Free visits the house using the portable gizmo to leave the frontier and backdoor gizmo to return to the frontier.

1819 -- (age 76) Free leaves the frontier for good . . . using the portable gizmo in a cave in Kentucky (?), he returns to the house.
Then he retrieves the portable gizmo on foot (in the "house timeframe"), and hides it in the wall of the house.

1983 -- (age 76+) Jan 14: Free visits 1983 house, Whitten disappears.
Jan 16: Free's ad.
Jan 17: The four move in.
Jan 18: The novel begins.
Jan 19: Kip takes Free prisoner.
Jan 21: Kip kills Free (Whitten reappears).

==End Timeline==

So . . . what happens when Free is killed in 1983? Does he go to heaven or some other sort of afterlife? Does he fold into the Free/Whitten version that the four talk to on High Country? Or does Free actually morph into the house, just as he seemed to be telling the witch that he would -- and how he did that telekinesis with the roof shingle to impress her?

That is to say: does Free (age 76+) become the house that the four rebuilt people live in? One of the unexpected Oz echoes here: there is the wizard of Oz, who is named Oz, and there is the country of Oz, which is called Oz. (Naturally Oz has four kingdoms, which links up with the four dwellers, but that is another detail.)

What years are the timeframe for the house? Seems to me that Free would know/guess that there were certain safe zones he could visit without causing disruptive implosions . . . say the years 1953 to 1981. And then the fuzziness of the gizmo catches up and he overshoots into 1983 (rather like the three month miss on the first trip). General Whitten disappears and all hell breaks loose.

That is enough for one post. Help me out, Roy!

=mantis=

Roy C. Lackey — 26 Nov 2002, 06:08 · follows Michael Andre-Driussi

mantis wrote:

But this doesn't explain why Free says he is too old to use it. Then

again, he has advance knowledge of when he will be murdered and he isn't one to interrupt the flow, so that by itself can answer a lot of questions.

I wasn't really prepared for this, but . . .

I think all that Free meant was that he was literally too old and sick to derive any benefit from using the gizmo again; after all, that was why he left the frontier for good in the first place. Any physical benefit to be gained from leaving from and returning to, roughly, the same time period (as when he looked and felt better the second time around in 1942), was limited. He said that the early-model gizmo that sent him back from 1952 three months before he left "couldn't be controlled with pinpoint accuracy then". That implies that subsequent refinements made use of the gizmo more precise. It couldn't be used to 'cheat time', to keep himself forever young. Physiologically, he aged more or less as any man would. He was ready to die when Kip killed him.

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Whitten's explanation is as clear as mud. On the one hand, it seems that the High Country had been in one continuous flight for forty years (it couldn't land!), otoh, it sometimes seems that both it and its tender plane are transported. The crew of the B-17 mentions that they are in the "eighties".

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1803 -- (age 60) Ben Free joins Lewis & Clark expedition.

This is where the inevitable time paradoxes pop up. When Whitten, with Kip and others, went from Aug., 1942 to Nov., 1982, they set up a base at the airport. Two months later, old Free shows up and Whitten disappears for seven days. Where was he? When Free is killed, Whitten returns, age 53. Three days after that, Whitten deserts the time project, presumably for the frontier. The next accounting we have of him is in 1803, age 60. Where was he for seven years?

-Roy

Adam Stephanides — 26 Nov 2002, 15:08 · follows Roy C. Lackey

on 11/25/02 12:02 AM, Michael Andre-Driussi at mantis at siriusfiction.com wrote:

Adam Stephanides, several years ago, posted a few questions and it doesn't

seem as if they were ever answered around here. I don't even recall what they all were, but one had to do with appearance of Free/disappearance of Whitten, and I'll address that shortly.

Here are my questions, from vol. 4 of the archives:

1) Why are there two Whittens (in addition to "Ben Free") in 1983? The younger Whitten (the man in the duffle coat) is there on his second trip with the gizmo for the government. What is the older Whitten doing there?

2) When "Ben Free" reappears on January 14, 1983, where did he come from? He didn't come from the frontier, because he left the frontier for the last time before he hid the gizmo in the wall, and that was presumably before January 14, 1983.

3) A minor point, but in Chapter 52 the witch tells the others that "Today I defrauded a certain one, the namesake of one who possesses much authority, below." Is there a demon named McAlister? Or is there some joke regarding McAlister's first name (which I don't remember ever being stated) which I missed? Or did she defraud somebody else that day?

Nobody responded to them, but whether that was because nobody knew the answers or because nobody cared I don't know.

It's been several years since I last read the book, and I have almost no recollection of Whitten/Free's peregrinations, which were never that clear to me in the first place. (I don't even remember there being two Whittens.) So I have no idea to what extent your timeline answers my first two questions. You seem to be saying that Free did come from the frontier when he reappeared on Jan. 14, 1983; again, I don't recall now why I thought he didn't.

--Adam