

Free Live Free (round table part 2) SPOILERS

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 26 Nov 2002

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Michael Andre-Driussi — 26 Nov 2002, 19:33

Roy C. Lackey wrote:

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.

Well that is true and worth pointing out. OTOH, Free does speak about his impending murder.

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?

The one detail I believe you are missing is that the "seven years" is actually an unspecified amount of time that has passed for Whitten between the time when he saw the B-17 take off in 1983 and the time he met the four in High Country (High Country Whitten says he is unsure of his age but it is between 60 and 70). That is: we know where that lacuna falls within the action of the text.

As I understand it, Whitten was piecing together the mystery of Ben Free when the B-17 took off. He then spent the next x years figuring it all out and fixing it as best as he could, traveling back in time (between 1943 and 1982) leaving calendar-clock triggered tape-recordings of instructions for agents and agencies across the years.

That is to say: Whitten (age 54, say) is the puppet master; once he has figured out that he is/will become Ben Free, then he works to minimize the damage and optimize the outcomes.

On to Adam Stephanides's post.

Adam Stephanides wrote:

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.

First, your number 3: McAlister's first name (chapter 26) is Bill (or William). Since that doesn't ring any bells, I suspect that "McAlister" is to be read as "son of Aleister": witness title of chapter 43, "A Friend of Crowley's" which speaks of Aleister Crowley. Add to this the witch's habit of seeing magical reasons for everything that happens to her, and maybe it works. Or just the demon Alastor ("avenger").

Next, number 1: There were two Whittens: one on the ground at the airport and an older one at High Country. It is confusing.

As for where Free went from the frontier, I wrote:
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).

I'm not sure what timeframe year Free =first= visits the house (that is, where in the timestream the house is located), and I tried to make that clear. In the previous post I wondered that there might be a gray area (1943-1982), a safe place for him to dwell, but on second thought it would be more like (1953-1982) to avoid imploding when Whitten visits 1952, or more narrow than that, since he doesn't want to "write over" a period where he would be naturally living in the time stream. If he figures he will live to be 80 years old, then his natural time stream would be 1889-1969, so he might aim for 1970-1982 as a safe haven.

OTOH the link to the house might be in the 19th century, before Whitten's birth; but while this has possibilities, for the end result (transformation of the four) it seems like the link from the back porch to the kitchen must be in or around summer 1982.

One of the difficulties in pegging the time Free spent at the house in real time: Mrs. Baker says he has only been there a few years (of course, her utterances are always a challenge for interpretation); Dr. Mackee implies Free has been there for decades prior to 1983.

NEW OBSERVATIONS:

"What city, please?"

Where is this novel taking place? I assumed Chicago, but the address is 808 South 38th Street, and looking at a map of Chicago it seems that 38th goes east/west.

Another candidate is Buffalo, birth town and manufacturing location of Whitten. But looking at a Buffalo map, there doesn't seem to be a 38th Street.

Maybe someone has already worked this one out and has the easy answer! Or maybe the city itself is nonexistent, like the city in PEACE.

"Oz books and Oz film"

FLF is like the film in the sense that there are refs to the film, and the "it was all a dream, and the housemates were all different in that dream" sense of the ending. Which does not happen in the books.

FLF is like the books in that, once it has established the principal characters (the four), there is a flood of quirky, nutty, helpful, and often bewildering minor characters.

"The Shadow of the Graves"

Yes, Robert Graves. We have talked before about how odd that Ozzie Barnes, the novelties salesman (note that Wizard Oz was a non-magical magician full of novelties and props), has the name of "Oz" but also the repeated refs to "Popeye," of all things. Seems to me that Gene Wolfe is pulling a Robert Graves stunt: basically, that Oz is the Great American myth, and so other American signatures will appear, compounded and alloyed. Like those later, star-studded Greek myths, for example, the Argonauts, where every participant has their own heroic past and tragic future, but they all come together for this seemingly synthetic yet rousing Big Adventure. (That is: Graves takes the already elaborate Greek Myths and further compounds and alloys them; I think Wolfe is doing the same with "Oz" and other Americana.)

At one point late in the text Ozzie was telling a joke about a farmer who couldn't afford a glass eye, so he bought a wooden one. This seems to me to be a veiled reference to Pinnocchio, whose name of course means "pine eye," but I'm not sure what to do with this.

So who are the other four, if Barnes is Oz/Popeye? I'm not sure. The witch has snake/panther aspects, in addition to being linked in the text to the Oz witches (Wicked and Glinda). Stubbs almost has to be the nameless "Continental Op" of Dashiell Hammett fame (also a short guy, iirc, although perhaps not jockey short <g> (a little Ozzie Barnes humor there--I surprise myself)). Candy seems to be a Venus in transition from the Ice Age Venus figurine

(superhumanly fat) to a more classical form.

=mantis=