

Free Live Free: Liberty Four

The Urth list — 2 messages, 1 voices, 16 Dec 2002

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Michael Andre-Driussi — 16 Dec 2002, 23:56

Adam Stephanides wrote:

This response is way late, but...

It is not that late, really!

I'll start with the last bit first:

And if the four will not become the quadrumvirate of Madame Serpentina's prediction, what was the point of including the prediction at all?

It is a common staple of myths, fairy tales, and genre to have prophecies come true, but with a surprise twist -- that is, they come true, in a sense, but not exactly as everyone assumed they would. This is different from sacred writings, where prophecies come absolutely true with no ambiguities. I believe I can think of examples where Wolfe uses prophecies that come true with a twist, but I cannot remember a single case where a prophecy comes absolutely true with no ambiguities and no twists.

If Madame Serpentina's prediction comes absolutely true with no ambiguities and no twists, then it would be as you say -- they would be, let's call them, the Liberty Four. Allow me to develop the idea further.

Having reread the end of FLF (from the man in the duffel coat's speech), I see that I'd gotten the circumstances of Free's death wrong, and that the U.S. government is no longer being run from the High Country. But nevertheless I think my reading still holds up. When the man in the duffel coat arranges to have the four's dreams crushed, he is acting (he thinks) as an agent of Big Government; granted, it's the Big Government of 1942, but I very much doubt that Wolfe thinks the federal government has improved since then. And the man in the duffel coat's speech, it seems to me, establishes Big Government as the book's philosophical antagonist, whether or not he believes it himself at this point.

I see the revelation that Whitten who will become Free is on the High Country, and that he has been "conspiring" to help the four (unknown to his past self as well as to his subordinates), not as undermining the anti-Big Government position, but as Wolfe's way of giving the story a fairy-tale happy ending -- like Dorothy learning that she can still get home even though the balloon is gone, if you will.

When Stubb asks duffle-coat why he had "tried to take all of you [four] down as far as we could," duffle-coat answers, "Because those were our orders from on top" (end of chapter 54, p. 365). I assume this is what you are referring to.

Opinions will differ as to where he thinks he is getting those orders from; whether he is lying or not; etc.

Before this, duffle-coat has described HC as a government above the president:

"The President's not one of the key people. Never has been. Basically a front man. These were the decision makers" (p. 357).

Technically the key people could be members of Congress, but there is a definite "non-elected" sound to what he is saying, which suggests, imho, that HC is living up to its image as Laputa: a sky-castle of illuminati puppet-masters. Or we could be more pedestrian and call them the military/industrial complex. In any event, HC is an emergency shadow government established in time of terrible war and not entirely dismantled 40-odd years later.

Now sure, if you like you can say Wolfe is attacking FDR and FDR's legacy, but I think you have to say that it is an oblique attack, since it isn't some vague FDR-thing in the text, it is a specific not-real thing, the High Country cabinet. Wolfe is not talking about income tax, or welfare state, or makework programs, or any of that stuff in Archie Bunker's song: he is saying that the governing of the country had been taken over by a secret plutocracy. It is less "Big Government" than it is conspiracy theory; it is less FDR's programs than the fact that as a president he made this choice to protect the country from Hitler (who had his own weird powers thing going, according to the text) and presumably even a Republican or Socialist president would have done the same.

Look, duffle-coat paints a downbeat picture of American from the moment the Europeans arrive -- the arrival of FDR's government is hardly the worst (in fact, it doesn't even seem to rank at all)! But the take-over of the elected government by a plutocratic cabal is that nightmare scenario shared by far-Left and far-Right, as well as the entertainment media: if this is the source of the curse that has turned 1980s America into a dreary Kansas, then yes, the Liberty Four can expose the shadow government, putting the fat cats into prison and releasing political prisoners, and restore "Ozma" (democratically elected government) to the throne. (Gee, that sounds more and more like Oz book #2!) Making the prediction come true.

(Duffle-coat seems a bit disillusioned with things at the time of that speech. His break with the HC command may be starting with these weird orders to torment a bunch of nobodies and send them up to HC.)

Furthermore, if this is the case, then the four must represent not just individuals but American society: Candy does not represent abstract Gluttony but American Gluttony/Obesity; Ozzie is American satyrism/deadbeat dads; the witch is American occultism; and Stubb is American cynicism. That is to say, they must each exhibit a facet of "what is wrong with America," and thus as they are healed, America is healed/balanced/made right again.

The answer then is not "return to the frontier" but "return to the republic."

=mantis=

Michael Andre-Driussi — 17 Dec 2002, 02:12 · follows Michael Andre-Driussi

I should mention that a lot of inspiration for the Liberty Four came from Mrs. Baker's comment to Robin Valor:

"But look at the way we do here. We don't try to change the way things are. If one of those boys down the street steals a car, why he goes to prison for years. But if some rich man that's had everything a person could want all his life steals a million dollars, the only thing that happens is he doesn't get elected again unless he's pretty lucky. The comics in the paper have all these men that fight against crime. If they were real, they'd go and find that man and shoot him.

Maybe if we were real, we'd do the same thing" (ch. 42, p. 284).

What Mrs. Baker is saying sounds like a call for a Chinese-style Cultural Revolution (as opposed to the American style counter-culture revolution of the 1960s). But she is identifying a few details which seem to go along with the witch's prediction, as well as the plutocratic situation that duffle-coat describes. Which suggested to me the idea of looking at the four as being more like comic book heroes.

=mantis=