

FREE LIVE FREE by Gene Wolfe

The Usenet list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 04 Nov 1984

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Donn Seeley — 04 Nov 1984, 10:23

Imagine my amazement when I walked home in the dark in the wee hours of my birthday recently and found a package from Mark Ziesing, sf bookseller and specialty publisher, on the doorstep. Of course it wasn't a birthday present but the result of a check I sent him a month ago for a new book he's published, Gene Wolfe's novel FREE LIVE FREE (\$45, 496 pp.). The book is well-produced, profusely illustrated (a drawing by Rich Schindler appears at the head of every one of the 60 chapters, plus there are several full-page drawings by Rick DeMarco, and the (peculiar, to say the least) cover art is by Carl Lundgren), signed (by Wolfe and each of the artists), numbered (mine is #218 out of 750), and genuinely funny...

The plot of FREE LIVE FREE is very difficult to summarize; not because a summary would give the game away (which games?!), but because the plot is so crazy that I couldn't possibly say anything without being misleading... and I might not realize I was being misleading until the next time I read the book! No worries about spoilers from me this time. About all I can say is that the book appears (stress the 'appears') to take place in a very run-down part of an unnamed large city, in our own time, and involves a literally bewitching cast of characters from the street. There are science-fictional elements in the story; and there are also fantasy elements, detective-novel elements, spy-novel elements, Dickensian elements, satirical elements, occult elements and probably as many other elements as I could name. It's practically a periodic table. (I should mention that Wolfe also reveals a ghastly weakness for puns and malapropisms.)

I can say what this book isn't: it most definitely isn't THE BOOK OF THE NEW SUN. It also isn't 'The Rubber Bend', 'A Criminal Proceeding' (both from PLAN[E]T ENGINEERING) or 'The Eyeflash Miracles' (from THE ISLAND OF DOCTOR DEATH AND OTHER STORIES AND OTHER STORIES), even though it shares themes and styles with all three stories. The ultimate product is unique.

I have some hypotheses about what the book IS (besides 'unique'), but I won't spoil them except to note that the epigraph of the book reads:

'The country needs and, unless I mistake its temper, the country demands bold, persistent experimentation.'
-- Franklin Delano Roosevelt

And I can't resist quoting at least one short passage:

"Well, blow me down! I just remembered, I got a date wit Olive. What time is it?"

'Stubb glanced at his wrist. "Six forty-five."

"Wow!" Candy looked around at the darkened buildings. "It seems more like midnight. It really got late early tonight."

'Nimo capering ahead of the rest, stopped and threw his arms wide. "Lipstick!"

"Listen," Barnes told Stubb. "I got to get slicked up. She's going to pick me up in front of the Consort at eight."

"Okay, you're not heavy. I bet Candy could do it."

'Nimo dropped to his knees before her. "If I only had a lipstick, I could make stripes on these pajamas. I could give myself a red nose, too."

"Jim, get him away from me! I think he's going to sing that song from 'The Wizard of Oz.'"

"I like it," Little Ozzie announced. "We're o-o-off to see the Wizard, the Wonnerful WizardoFoz!"

Because of the wonderful things he does,