



Free Live Free

Gene Wolfe

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"Free Live Free," said the newspaper ad, and the out-of-work detective Jim Stubb, the occultist Madame Serpentina, the salesman Ozzie Barnes, and the overweight prostitute Candy Garth are brought together to live for a time in Free's old house, a house scheduled for demolition to make way for a highway.

Free drops mysterious hints of his exile from his homeland, and of the lost key to his return. And so when demolition occurs and Free disappears, the four make a pact to continue the search, which ultimately takes them far beyond their wildest dreams.

This is character-driven science fiction at its best by a writer whom, at the time of its first publication, the *Chicago Sun-Times* called "science fiction's best genuine novelist."

Free Live Free Details

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Author : Gene Wolfe

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Paul says

It would be great if someone could explain to me how someone capable of writing *The Book of the New Sun*, one of the greatest works of fiction ever produced (and the answer to the question: "what if Proust wrote science fiction?"), was also capable of writing mind-bogglingly terrible garbage like *Free Live Free*, or basically everything else in his later career.

Let's take a look at some passages selected at random from the first couple chapters of *The Book of the New Sun*:

The space about it had been a garden in summer, but not such a one as our necropolis, with half-wild trees and rolling, meadowed lawns. Roses had blossomed here in kraters set upon a tessellated pavement. Statues of beasts stood with their backs to the four walls of the court, eyes turned to watch the canted dial: hulking barylambdas; arcothers, the monarchs of bears; glyptodons; smilodons with fangs like glaives. All were dusted now with snow.

The vanishing sun, whose disc was now a quarter concealed behind the impenetrable blackness of the Wall, had dyed the sky with gamboge and cerise, vermillion and lurid violet. These colors, falling upon the throng of monomachists and loungers much as we see the aureate beams of divine favor fall on hierarchs in art, lent them an appearance insubstantial and thaumaturgic, as though they had all been produced a moment before by the flourish of a cloth and would vanish into the air again at a whistle.

Or some dialogue:

"Oh, there's no question of that--not the least. Nine persons died, after all, and the man was apprehended on the spot. He's of no consequence, so there's no possibility of pardon or appeal. The tribunal will reconvene at midmorning, but you won't be required until noon."

And now a couple passages selected at random from the first couple chapters of *Free Live Free*:

Neither of the others answered, and he went into the kitchen. There he washed a teapot and put a pan of water on the stove. There was a tablespoon of black tea loose, in a cannister, and, to his surprise, a little sugar in the sugar bowl. In the refrigerator he discovered a small cube of cheddar, which he ate. . . .

The towel lay in a crumpled heap to one side. He stood up, wrapping the towel around him. Candy looked like a bear lying there in her brown blanket, her back to him. Barnes went into the bathroom and switched on the lights. He laughed softly to himself. He made sure his empty wallet was still in the pocket, put on his trousers, switched off the light, and left.

Or some dialogue:

"How'd you do?" she asked. She loomed over him, a head taller than he.
"How'd *you* do?" Stubb said.
"I haven't yet. I just went out for gum and stuff."
"You shouldn't smoke," he told her. "Screws up your lungs."
"Yeah," the fat girl said. "That's right." She opened her purse and took out a pack of Viceroy.
Two were gone. She pulled out two more. Stubb reached up to light hers, and she smiled. . . .

Or take a passage from another, equally terrible later Wolfe novel, *Pirate Freedom*:

There is a lot more I could say, how we threw the dead Spanish overboard and buried our own at sea, and who they were, and so forth. But time is getting tight. There is another thing I should say. Okay, maybe a couple. One is that he had taken no prizes. The other is that I turned loose the doctor and the others as soon as we dropped anchor, exactly like I had promised. . . . They wanted me to take them there, which of course I would not do. A day or so after that, they decided to go to Jamaica with us. It meant we had the carpenter, which turned out to be a lucky break. It is not a long trip, but we ran into a calm that made it a bit longer than it should have been.

What is actually going on? Why did Wolfe suddenly start writing terrible genre fiction at a fourth-grade reading level?

Michael Battaglia says

Sometimes I think Gene Wolfe was challenged as a young author to see if he could write just about anything, and then set about for the rest of his career attempting to prove that's possible, or he often takes bets with people who believe he can't make a functioning plot out of whatever bizarre fragment they decide to throw his way. As a SF author his books tend to veer toward allusive fantasy, where it seems like magic and mysticism are happening just in the periphery but there's also a more concrete underpinning, or simply more than one method of perceiving things.

That tendency works wonders when he's actually writing straight out SF, because that combination of

evasive tone and elusive explanations is quite the heady brew for those so inclined, while others may be frustrated that he's forcing you to read the book as if looking through slanted funhouse mirrors (or, even more likely, the mirrors are telling you true and its what they're showing that's skewed) . . . however, when he's not dabbling in exhilaratingly confusing science-fiction, his attempts at playing it straight often have more mixed results, either because the mix is a bit more uneasy the closer it gets to our reality, or that he simply operates better in settings that aren't quite here.

This novel starts out with four very different people living for free in a rundown apartment building run by an old man, Benjamin Free. Each of them has different reasons for being down on their luck and even with the building being slated for demolition very soon, it's still the best option any of them has had for a while. But when they finally get kicked out of the building, the old guy disappears in the midst of the chaos and, lacking anything better to do, the four of them, separately and together, attempt to figure out where he went and what secrets it was that he was alluding to.

With characters like a salesman with one eye, a private detective without a license, a gypsy woman who insists on being called Madame Serpentina (if she lets you call her anything at all), and an overweight prostitute named Candy (and in case you think I'm being unfair, that's pretty much exactly how the book describes her repeatedly) all roaming around fairly quirky neighborhoods of Chicago engaged in various quests that don't seem to go anywhere at all, it's fair to think that Wolfe is writing some kind of parody of post-modern novels, with a lot of the played-straight nuttiness that hints at but never quite lapses into camp suggesting a second cousin of some of the wackier moments of a Thomas Pynchon novel, with an undercurrent of dark humor that oddly makes it feel more realistic as they separate and come back together again, believing they are pursuing their own agenda when they always wind up back on the same streamlined track. In the meantime it becomes clear that there is a larger plot going on around them so that most of their bizarre travails are indeed possessed of some purpose, even if that purpose is abundantly not clear.

Along the way the novel careens through several setpieces that feel grounded in some place just sideways of reality, a seedy hotel, a very strange asylum, often times giving it the impression that Wolfe is just using the book as a clearinghouse for all the scenes that he couldn't find a place for in his other novels (or make an entire novel out of), and you may find yourself asking more than once, "just where the heck is he going with this." Where it succeeds, and what helped the book maintain my interest, was his gift with setting a mood and having the characters feel fully formed even in their strangest moments . . . he has a knack here for crafting dialogue that feels very real even in the midst of very strange surroundings, so that even the weirdest scenes come across as real people existing in a slightly blurred reality, so that instead of coming across as cartoons, the four main characters hint at lives before they encountered each other, and plan they have for the future, so that even scenes where one character decides right in the middle of the plot to make plans for a date with someone he's met through an ad feel natural and not just the author vamping.

Unfortunately, and this is hard to write, he muffs it with the ending, attempting something that is too concrete to be believed, with an explanation coming entirely out of left field (it's possible that a careful rereading will make the ending seem less surprising, but there don't seem to be that many hints . . . for the record, I thought Ben Free was an alien and I was wrong) that seems more concocted to give readers the least likely outcome than anything that resembles a logical extension of where we've come before. It's not an "everything you know is wrong" as much as "oh by the way for the entire story nobody was wearing pants" and that winds up being the key fact that ties everything together. Not only is the explanation a "wha?" moment but the resolution that follows muddles exactly what was at stake and what makes these people so special and what it is they have to gain or lose. In a different setting it might have worked and come across as more poetic or metaphorical but here it just feels like he's trying too hard to be surprising, and instead of opening the world up so that we're forced to consider it anew, it feels almost like a cheat, a painted backdrop

draped over a fairly normal scene in an effort to convince us that real magic is occurring, even when we can still smell the paint.

Malquiviades says

Here I have found an unexpected and nice surprise.

This story is an unconventional quest taken up by the oddest characters you can think of. And here it lies its strength and charm. Because that pack of losers just made a hole in your heart and meant to stay there. You do not know why, but...

Besides, Wolfe shows a cunning style that easily takes you from the hilarious scene (not that I laugh so easily, but Wolfe just made it happen: my prise for that) through strange settings and spiced with Sherlock Holmes' ways.

It is true that you try to guess how it will end or the explanation to all that from every possibility perspective you may imagine. Wolfe knows, masters that and plays delightfully with you all over the novel. So well he does it that I did not care so much about explanations at the end. Although they came. As unexpected as the rest of the book. That part I enjoyed less, but it was so (again) unconventional that it fits well in the novel.

I may gladly put a five star finally, but let it be a four for the time being.

Karl says

This limited hardcover edition is copy 248 of 750 produced and is signed by Gene Wolfe and artist Carl Lundgren .

Bill Hsu says

I'm still intrigued by the central ideas. But I can't take more than 200+ pages of details of uninteresting garment choices, smoking cigarettes, drinking coffee and other beverages, mundane meals, sleeping on floors, getting in and out of vehicles, checking in and retrieving items from lockers etc, sorry.

Now somebody will probably point out to me that on page 359, one of those cups of coffee contained that fabled ticket to the High Country.

Bbrown says

A commonality that I've noticed in lesser Wolfe books is serious pacing problems, where little seems to happen for many pages, where inconsequential dialogue extends far beyond its needed length, and then where a rush of things is jammed into the final few pages of a section or of the book. For its first fifty pages or so *Free Live Free* dodges this problem, introducing us to our main characters and their situation as down-

on-their-luck Chicagoans, and then having things actually happen. It's great! If you've read any Wolfe before, you know the man can write- in the beginning pages of *Free Live Free* he shows that he can write about poverty and the struggle for daily survival to rival Steinbeck or Hemingway. Stubbs scrounging food, Barnes attempting to keep his dignity despite his lack of money, Candy and her career as an overweight prostitute, I could read a whole book that was just about their struggle to make it through a Chicago winter together in an old boarding house (though Madame Serpentina wouldn't exactly fit in a book like that). But this is Wolfe, of course, so the story doesn't stay so simple.

After the characters have put up a valiant effort but failed to save Ben Free's boarding house (which I would consider the end to the introduction of the story), the book falls smack into the pacing problem I mentioned above. For long swaths of pages we have dialogue in hotel rooms about food, pulp magazine article interviews, and various other minor intrigues. There's seventy-five pages on the protagonists visiting/getting trapped in/escaping a mental hospital, then another thirty on them navigating a Chicago blackout, with new characters introduced every few pages. We get to know the main quadrumvirate of characters very well, but the rest are bare sketches. Much of the "action," what little there is, seems inconsequential. There are extended segments of Stubbs delivering middling Sherlock Holmes detective exposition and explanation, a feature that also dragged down early volumes of *The Book of the Long Sun* (making that work inferior to the works in the series that it was sandwiched between). Once we get to the resolution, it's pretty out of left field, not very satisfying, and delivered in jumbled dialogue and crammed into the final twenty pages of the book.

Wolfe is one of my favorite writers. Unlike a lot of the top-tier science fiction writers, he's doesn't rely on his ideas to mask an inability to write, as he can craft stunning prose. He's not just a one-hit-wonder, either: though not many reach it, *The Book of the Short Sun* is phenomenal, a rival to *The Book of the New Sun*. *Peace* and *The Fifth Head of Cerberus* are also great, and *The Wizard Night* is a fun take on fantasy. Even what I would consider some of his lesser works are interesting, like *Pandora* By Holly Hollander and how it tells you a mystery without giving you the real solution. Wolfe is also a frustrating writer. Many of his books never rise above mediocrity- the only thing I can remember about *Castleview* is that it featured a cat named G. Gordon Kitty. He writes books that are filled with riddles, even when the book might be better without them. He's been on a streak lately of unimpressive books. I'll keep reading him as long as he keeps writing, but I expect I've already read (and he's already written) his best. *Free Live Free* is a lesser work of Gene Wolfe, if you're an adherent of his like I am then you'll probably read it regardless of what I say here. If you aren't, you should skip it and read the books I highlighted earlier in this paragraph.

Panagiotis says

Ο Γουλφ γρ?φει πολλ? πρ?ματα. Πα?ζει με το ?φος, με τη δομ? - ε?ναι ?νας ευφυ?ς συγγραφ?ας. Μα ?πως ?λοι οι ?νθρωποι με ?ραμα, ?χει τις εμμον?ς του. Και μ?α απ? αυτ?ς ε?ναι το γριφ?δες, κρυπτικ? γρ?ψιμο. Αυτ? που απαιτε? την ολοκληρωτικ? συμμετοχ? του αναγν?στη.

Αυτ? κ?νει και σε το?το εδ? το βιβλ?ο του, ?που οι ανατροπ?ς ?ρχονται απανωτ?. Τ?ποτα δεν ε?ναι αυτ? που φα?νεται. Και τ?ποτα δεν εξελ?σεται ?πως το περιψ?νει ο αναγν?στης. Κι ?μως, καταφ?ρνει να γρ?φει με αυτ? τη σπ?νια, λ?για οικονομ?α του, και η αν?γνωση να ε?ναι τ?σο απολαυστικ? που ποτ? δεν θες να βγεις απ? τους κ?σμους που χτ?ζει ο Γουλφ.

Εδ? διαβ?ζουμε: ?να κατεδαφιστ?ο κτ?ριο φιλοξενε? τ?σσερις ανθρ?πους που βρ?σκονται, ο καθ?νας με τον τρ?που στον π?το της οικονομικ?ς κλ?μακα;, σε μια Αμερικ? ευημερο?σα, το '80. Κοντολογ?ς ?νθρωποι του περιθωρ?ου. Το κτ?ριο κατεδαφ?ζεται, ο οικοδεσπ?της τους, γηραλ?ος,

υπαινικτικ?ς, κ?τοχος κ?ποιων παρ?ξενων πραγμ?των, εξαφαν?ζεται. Και απ? 'κει ξεκιν? μια αναζ?τηση, κατ? τη δι?ρκεια της οπο?ας προσωπικ? μα και κρατικ? συμφ?ροντα συγκρο?ονται. Σ?χτες, το απ?κρυφο, η μα?ρη μαγε?α, το π?νθεον των σκοτειν?ν δυν?μεων, η παραφιλολογ?α των θεωρι?ν συνωμοσ?ας - ?λα μπλ?κονται γοητευτικ? σε μια αχλ? νου?ρ. Και φυσικ?, τα π?ντα συνεχ?ς πα?ρνω αδι?ρατα μια στροφ?. Κοιτ?ντας τον κ?ρφο του ο αναγν?στης συνειδητοποιε? πως ο Γουλφ τον π?ει ?που ο ευφυ?ς νους του θ?λει.

Καταπληκτικ?ς και ξεχωριστ?ς, στριφν?ς για πολλο?ς, ο καλ?τερος εν ζω? και τ?δο αδικημ?νος για ?λλους -μεταξ? αυτ?ν κι εγ?- συγγραφ?ας. Ε?ναι ο Γουλφ και για ?λλη μια φορ? παραδ?δει αυτ? που ξ?ρει τ?σο καλ?: ξεχωριστ?, καλογραμμ?νη, ευφ?ναστη λογοτεχν?α με τα ?λα της.

Christopher says

Gene Wolfe's novel *Free Live Free* is a fantastical tale set in an American downtown (hinted to be Chicago) in the early 1980s. The mysterious old man Benjamin Free finds that his home is scheduled to be demolished to build a highway overpass. Seeking to put off the demolition by keeping the house permanently occupied, he places a classified ad inviting people to live there for free. Who would answer such an ad? Losers such as the traveling salesman Ozzie Barnes, the overweight hooker Candy Garth, the out-of-work private investigator Jim Stubb, and the Gypsy occultist Madame Serpentina. When Free goes missing, these four decide to find him, and soon find themselves wrapped up in a conspiracy greater than they can imagine, pursued by government agents.

Before the science fiction basis of the plot is revealed near the end, the characters proceed Keystone Kops-like through a series of zany episodes. Wolfe loves to construct his books as puzzles, and quite often meaning of one scene is only revealed in a following one, or when the same scene is told again from another character's perspective. No doubt many readers will find this a frustrating cock and bull story for more of its length, but it holds interest due to the details with which Wolfe endows the lives of his four protagonists, especially the techniques of desperate salesmen and the tribulations of prostitution. The plot does start to pick up in the last 50 pages, and I don't regret reading the novel to the end.

But the great downside of the book, which makes it something of a disappointment in Wolfe's output up to this time, is that it is written in exceedingly pedestrian prose. In his works of the 1970s (*The Fifth Head of Cerberus*, *Peace*, *Seven American Nights* and *The Book of the New Sun*), Wolfe was a master of prose style, with his narrators lapsing into Proustian reverie that made for a number of quotable moments. Here he has focused so much on the characterization and plot that he has forgotten to write prose that truly moves us. Sadly, this trend continued through his other novels of the 1980s and most of his work since.

Eric Wisdahl says

In the novel, a group of four down on their luck strangers answer an add and soon move in with the eccentric elderly owner, Ben Free, of a house that is to be knocked down in just a few days. His only requirement of them is that they help him to try to delay the destruction of the house. From there, the story unfolds...

I'm not quite sure how to set about reviewing this book. On the one hand, the portrayal of the actions and motivations of the main characters involved was very good. Quite a few scenes were downright hilarious.

The ending was somewhat of a surprise (a rarity) - but then, I had been warned of that before reading the book. Yet, somehow, the book as a whole seemed like something was somewhat lacking. I think that the reason for this feeling is my extremely high expectations from anything that Wolfe writes.

I would still recommend this book, as it is a good read. But if you have yet to read anything else of Wolfe's I would suggest *Peace*, the "New Sun" series, or *The Fifth Head of Cerberus*.

Jason says

Pretty disappointing, since Wolfe has written a great number of books I have a lot of esteem for. The setting and plot are quite grab, while the characters repeatedly indulge in one of my least favorite cliches of noir (and of Wolfe other works), which is to ramble on about what they know and how they know it.

The exquisite and strange world-building and uncanny narration that characterizes Wolfe is basically completely absent, in my mind.

Andrew says

I read online that the ending of this book was really bizarre, but I says to myself, I says, "Andy, you know how Wolfe rolls, you're down with him, you won't think it's that weird."

I was wrong.

The book is interesting in part because it's written about things I don't usually associate with Wolfe. The protagonists are fairly ordinary, desperate people starving their way through a Chicago winter. They live in the America of the eighties, but it feels a little bit more like the fifties, a place where novelty salesmen, washed-up private eyes, and whores smoke cigarettes and drink coffee like a million decrepit Bogarts. Plus there's magic. Maybe. And some really arresting images.

Of course it's well-written, but overall I would say it's a minor Wolfe work. Still, I don't regret it.

I'm not going to provide a sample quote, but I will paraphrase one of the books better puns:

"How is that door like Samson?"

"It's unlocked!"

Oh, Gene Wolfe.

Greg Curtis says

I liked this book.

The premise behind it is strange, four complete strangers, all down on their luck and suffering, invited to live in Ben Free's house and try to keep it from being pulled down. Its the sort of thing you'd expect at the start of

a slasher movie, but its just not. Its magical and beautiful, and completely unexpected, the ending more so.

Gene Wolfe writes the characters wonderfully, bringing them to life and even though they are not the people you'd choose to hang out with, letting you into their lives and granting you a glimpse of how they could have been.

It is by turn sad and happy, strange and familiar and always entertaining even as it leaves you wondering. If it has a failing, it would be that its slow, and as the reader I constantly found myself waiting for something to happen, looking for answers. But patience was its own reward.

James Proctor says

Lovely book. Having picked up the paperback on the strength alone of the author's name, I was unsure what to make of the first hundred pages. I come to Wolfe from his dense and very serious New Sun books and could not tell if this was meant to be the same tone or something completely different. The latter, very much. The comedy achieves Rabelaisian fervor. Once the stage is set, a funny and poignant novel unfolds.

From among the rough and tumble character set, one emerged for whom I developed an abiding fondness: Mrs Baker. Her mangling of commonplace phrases becomes a kind of performance-in-miniature of the book's general skewer of social norms. When asked who broke into her house, Mrs Baker replies, "...They weren't uniform. Besides, they drank my tea. It was my obsession, when those two nice policemen broke my door, that policemen bought and large won't drink tea, only coco. Tea and symphony is what they say, and policemen bought and large don't care for music." Her madness is poetic.

Another Bakerism, if you will: "Goodness, how time fleas, just jumps away whenever you try to catch at it... Pretty soon I'll be dead and then I won't feel sad anymore, so I figure I'd better get it done now. People always complain if a child laughs or an old person cries, but pretty soon they're quiet, and that's for a long time."

Michael Frasca says

This may not be one of Gene Wolfe's best books, but it was one of the most fun for me to read.

"Free Live Free" is a roman a clef of a sorts. I figured out it about a third the way through, after which everything then fell into place with a solid "click." Past that point I had a lot of fun reading along as Wolfe spun his tale.

There are many clues to the key sprinkled throughout the book. In the the last few paragraphs Wolfe reveals what it is... well, as much as he ever reveals anything.

For those of you who were disappointed in this book, I would suggest re-reading it with the key in hand.

Pairs well with Hearts in Atlantis.

Scott says

Call it 3.5 stars. This is an intriguing novel about 4 people who seem very different on the surface - a portly prostitute, a sharp yet out-of-work detective, a semi-sleazy salesman, and an enigmatic "witch". All of them share free lodgings in a dilapidated old tenement, but when the tenement is condemned & destroyed, they all work together to try and find the last "valuable" treasure of their kindly old landlord. For most of the book, this is one of the most straightforward tales Wolfe has ever written. Most of the characters are wonderfully fleshed out, the dialogue is fantastic, and each chapter is almost a great little short story unto itself. Several questions go unanswered, and there is a bit of a deus ex machina at the end, but overall it's a fun read that's more accessible than much of Wolfe's other works.
