

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Free City, Rebirth of a Novel

Hardy Griffin · Wednesday, December 9th, 2020

Imagine you published a novel in 1996. Quite a coup, for beyond the longshot odds of having a book published by a major press, this one is set in 17th-century Saxony and incorporates humor and fantastical elements, such as a speaking, and thinking, duck. *Free City* takes the form of a journal penned by the inventor, L., who, even as a crisis builds in his hometown remains preoccupied with scientific endeavors and his burgeoning love affair with the mysterious naturalist, Adela.

The literary success of your little purple book surprises you. It garners critical acclaim from such diverse sources as *The New York Times*, *The Review of Contemporary Literature*, *Publisher's Weekly*, *The LA Times*, and *The Cannes Film Festival* newsletter. Two years later, Spanish and German translations also bring accolades, from *El País* and *Der Standard* in Vienna among many others.

Then the hoopla simmers down, as it so often does. Readers leave glowing reviews on Amazon—one directly requesting that the publisher bring out a paperback or re-release the original as copies become scarce.

But you're a writer, not a book industry heavyweight, so what can you do but move on? Your next book is a non-fiction cultural history of the World Trade Center—pre-9/11—that eventually hits the *NY Times Bestseller List*. And you publish short stories, contribute to anthologies, become a fiction editor for a well-respected literary magazine. And above all, continue writing.

Time passes. Your little purple book has a diehard core of fans who sing its praises at the drop of a hat, but the commercial publishing machine has lumbered on.

What *Free City* needed was a champion in the literary world. Someone like John O'Brien, whose overwhelmingly positive 1996 write-up in *The Review of Contemporary Literature* says, "If Hawthorne, Poe, and Kafka had collaborated, *Free City* may have resulted. [This book is written] in a style that is utterly invented, authentic and arched, and transpiring in an atmosphere of eeriness that would make Lovecraft envious..."

In fact, twenty-four years after its original publication, O'Brien did champion *Free City* again, this time in his role as the founder and editor-in-chief of [Dalkey Archive Press](#). Dalkey is devoted to non-mainstream American and world literature. From its very beginning, O'Brien wanted Dalkey "to define the contemporary period, or at least what I saw as what was most important in the contemporary period." And in October 2020, Dalkey republished *Free City* in paperback and e-

book editions.

I was not, unfortunately, one of the lucky people who bought this novel hot off the press in 1996. Instead, I came across it in 1999. At the time, I was in the Master's program for fiction at the City College of New York, and was beginning to despair that only exquisite prose along the lines of Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* would ever get published. I fell in love with Lahiri's story collection but also immediately knew I could never write in that style.

It was a revelation, then, to read the "utterly invented, authentic" voice of the protagonist, L.:

There is not a vessel intact in the laboratory and fully half my manuscripts are reduced to ashes, yet I am infused with a great sense of accomplishment. I have eliminated a host of false possibilities and remain convinced as ever that the volume of a gas varies in relationship to pressure, yet am at a loss to find a means of proving this to my or anyone else's satisfaction.

What I love the most about *Free City* is this: L. is not at all the kind of hero we'd come to expect at the close of the 20th century. He's much more likely to fail repeatedly even as he revels in what he learns along the way. At the same time, he has a cantankerous streak that fills the pages with humor. This is how the Fourth Day begins, as L. recovers from a near-disastrous experiment with the relationship between the volume and pressure of a gas:

O, black night and grateful dawn! For an eternity of darkness, Roberto's duck declaimed at me from his perch on my bedstead. It has mastered Greek, Latin, and several Oriental tongues. It recites a burlesque Dante in the most degraded Veneto dialect, and I could not lift a finger to set it aflight. Instead, I had to endure its infernal quacking, its coy and witless pantomime of the tortured Ugolino devouring his tender progeny. In vain I attempted to rise, with the intention of roasting and dividing the bird among the famished Count and his progeny.

Lest you believe L.'s culinary designs on the bird, you should know that not thirteen days later, Friedrich (the duck) and L. begin a series of clandestine pre-dawn meetings to counter the rise of an autocratic entrepreneur undermining the freedoms of the city. L. begins these meetings by setting out a line of kippers. Then Friedrich divulges the secret plans emanating from the new giant tower whose shadow covers half the town even as its construction has displaced much of the other half.

Anyone familiar with life in New York City around the turn of the 21st century will recognize the shameless land grabs hand-in-hand with increasingly inhumane police tactics that led to the corporate takeover of Times Square. The success of this one-two punch led to the 'redevelopment' of whole swaths of not just Manhattan but Brooklyn and Queens as well. And indeed, the relevance of this work of humorous, magical-realist historical fantasy has increased a thousandfold. For the marauding Watchmen and the rise of the monolithic tower are mere symptoms of the struggle to shake off the insipid rise of fascist autocracy. Now more than ever, the sly rhetoric of the usurper Roberto hits home: "Show me a people anywhere on your globe who are entirely free of tyranny,"

he argues. “At least in our republic, our dogsbodies know their place!” And it takes all the duplicity, invention, magic, and strength that L., Adela, and Friedrich can muster, along with an embrace of the teachings of repeated failure, to save this Free City from the despotic forces at work.

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