

The Free

Willy Vlautin

An elegy for the blue-collar worker, Vlautin's (*Lean on Pete*) fourth novel focuses on three ordinary people and spotlights their essential dignity in the face of economic hardship. Eight years after leaving Iraq with a traumatic brain injury, Leroy Kervin in a rare moment of clarity attempts to commit suicide at his group home, unable to see any way that he could live a happy life. Freddie McCall, at the first of his two jobs he works to fight off mounting medical bills, is the night caretaker at the home and calls in the accident. Leroy is moved to a hospital, bedridden and lost in the fog of his own mind, in which he plays out a fantastical adventure with his girlfriend Jeanette as they elude a mysterious gang known as the Free. His nurse, Pauline Hawkins, who lives alone and cares for her aging and infirm father, develops a bond with one of her patients, a heroin-addicted 16-year-old runaway. VERDICT Despite touching on urgent national issues such as health care and the death of the middle class, Vlautin's deeply sympathetic novel never feels labored or overtly political, telling its characters' stories in direct, unvarnished prose that recalls the best of John Steinbeck.

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