

R.A. Lafferty.

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Lafferty?

the Man and his Work

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The Man

I had the pleasure of meeting R.A. Lafferty at the St. Louiscon. He first struck me as anything but a science fiction author. He looked old--ten or more years older than his fifty-odd years. He stood tall, around six feet; fat, around two-fifty. Toothless--well, not quite, but his dental work was not the highlight of his face. His complexion could at best be called ruddy. Later, when I read Fourth Mansions, he reminded me of Bertigrew Bagley, a character in it. In fact, Bagley is a version of the author himself. The character of Mr. Lafferty is expressed in Fourth Mansions as: "a crackpot, but it was not an ordinary pot that had cracked. It was a giant grotesque Gothic garboon." And, "fat and ungainly, grown old ungracefully, balded and shaggy at the same time, rheumy of eyes and with his mouth full of rotten teeth..." "an earthen pot, and a cracked one at that."

When I first saw Mr. Lafferty it was quite late in the evening. He was staggering (well, not staggering, but he couldn't walk in a straight line, either). When he would see someone in the hall, he would drop into a gunslinger's crouch, whip out his imaginary blasters and cry: Bang-Bang. He did it very jovially and a happier man I have never seen. Some friends and I managed to put Mr. Lafferty to bed. The hotel men were uneasy that night, and there would have been hard feelings if Mr. Lafferty had run into them that evening.

The following night I again met Mr. Lafferty, but this time he was in a more sober mood. He remembered me from the previous night and invited me and several others to an early morning breakfast in the ho-

tel's overpriced cafe. Mr. Lafferty inquired over a cup of tea if I had read his novel Space Chantey. I answered that I had and quoted a passage from memory. He chuckled and explained that of all the short stories and novels that he had written the only one that pleased him was Space Chantey.

"All the others started out right, but they went bad. They became mixed and twisted. The only thing that turned out right was Space Chantey."

"But what about Past Master?" I asked. "I thought that it turned out very well."

"No, the only thing that ever came out right was Space Chantey."

We talked for a while longer, and Mr. Lafferty mentioned that he had just given a short story to some fanzine about "Maybe Jones City," a name and idea that he had used in Space Chantey. The conversation then drifted to his then-forthcoming novel Fourth Mansions. After this I thanked Mr. Lafferty and our group split to our separate ways.

The blurbs on Mr. Lafferty's novels say that he has lived in the midwest for most of his life, except for a few years when he lived near Washington, D.C. He is an electrician who works mostly as a jobber. (Does anybody know what a jobber is?) Harlan Ellison's introduction to his short story in Dangerous Visions further states that he is a language nut (knows Latin, French, Spanish, Irish, Slavic offshoots, Pasar Malay, Tagalog). Mr. Ellison further praises Mr. Lafferty: "He is a man of substantiality, whose writing is topflight. Not merely competent fiction, but genuinely exemplary fiction."

Lafferty to some extent writes himself into his novels. One might see some trace of Mr. Lafferty in the characteristics of Fred Foley (Fourth Mansions) or Thomas More (Past Master). More was a Catholic, and liked to take long walks (to Thunder Mountain and the Feral Strips)--as does Lafferty. Fred Foley is and was well acquainted with the effects of drink. Foley travels to the Midwest, and to the area in Maryland where Lafferty lived when he worked for the government.

His abilities in languages he uses in his poetry and names. The coins in Space Chantey and Past Master all end in the letters d'OR, which is French for "of gold."

Mr. Lafferty writes from his own world. It is not one of young heroes, of mighty feats, of the total pure good against the hideous loathsome evil. Rather he writes of a world of unsuspected evil, old friends and older enemies. Places that have changed. Absolutes are not absolutes. But behind it all there is the death fear, of non-existence, of the creeping emptiness. These are his worlds, not white nor black but shades of faded gray that dim to blackness.

The above ideas are not the thoughts of the young; they come from the old. It is Lafferty's age that gives him his uniqueness. No other author in science fiction came in at such a late date. Mr. Lafferty is in a class all his own.

His works

The short stories of Lafferty are divisible into two types. The first is seen mostly in his earlier works. This is not an absolute rule, however, for some of his later stories are of this nature. This earlier style is characterized by simple characters and plots. They are often humorous, with a tongue-in-cheek humor that resembles to some degree the works of Charles S. Finney (The Circus of Doctor Lao, The Ghosts of Manacle). Examples of this style are: "Six Fingers of Time," "Seven-Day Terror," "The Polite People of Pubundia," "In the Garden," "Rainbird," and "This Grand Carcass."

The second type is much more complex. The characters are varied and the plot is loaded with analogies and allegories. Past Master and Fourth Mansions are both of this category. This style is the more advanced of the two. Short stories of this type are: "Configuration of the North Shore," "Slow Tuesday Night," "Thus We Frustrate Charlemagne," and "Among the Hairy Earthmen."

This division can also be applied to the novels of Mr. Lafferty. However, here the division is less sharp. Space Chantey is of the first group, The Reefs of Earth has qualities of both, and as previously stated, Fourth Mansions and Past Master are in the second.

Space Chantey is a bit separate from the rest of Lafferty's works. I do not know whether Space Chantey or The Reefs of Earth was the first novel that Lafferty wrote, but I will lay any odds that Space Chantey was. It seems to be the crudest of all the novels. It is as if the author originally planned the novel as a series of short stories. It is for the same reason the simplest of the four, and the most humorous.

The plot of Space Chantey is a loose version of Homer's Odyssey. The hero Roadstrum (Ulysses) is a captain of a small troop carrier called a hornet. The story opens with a ten-year war just closing. Roadstrum and a few fellow captains decide, since they cannot immediately obtain permission to go home, to go to the planet Lotophage (The Land of the Lotus Eaters) for a rest. They do, and all fall under the spell of the planet. At last, just before the planet has him completely into its clutches, Roadstrum realizes the danger of a planet where men die of pleasure. He breaks the spell and gathering what crewmen he can tear away from the lethargy of the planet, he leaves the world and tries to reach home. After this, the saved men and Roadstrum go through a series of adventures that sometimes resemble the odyssey of Ulysses, but more often do not. At last alone, he reaches home only to find that his wife has been plagued with suitors for the twenty years that he has been away. He disposes of them by the usual method (kills them), and settles down to a happy life. Alas, he has not been unaffected by his journeys and now is a character of epic story and verse. The quiet life of the victorious is not one that he can now stomach. He goes out and the story goes on.

Space Chantey was a proto-work of Lafferty. It has in it a lot of

ideas that Lafferty later rewrote into short stories and incorporated into his novels. But the thing that differentiates it from the rest of his novels is that it has an excellent ending. In fact the ending is the best part.

The Reefs of Earth was Lafferty's second novel. It is a much tighter story than Space Chantey. The plot is the story of a group of abiens on earth. The Pucas are related to humans but only distantly. Both the Earth people and the nature of the planet itself are hostile to them. The Pucas are trying to survive. The adults are killed early in the book. The children decide that it is either them or Earth. So the children in their quiet alien ways go about trying to reduce the Earth's population by themselves. The story is handled well, the plot moves well, and the characters, while strange, are believable.; But the end drops, as if Mr. Lafferty decided that the story was long enough and ended it at the end of a convenient chapter.

Past Master is a much better book. The characters are very well handled. The plot is concrete and believable.

On the planet Astrobe, the civilization is in trouble. It suffers from a moral dry rot, a social cancer eating at its vitals. To save the world the leaders send for Thomas More (A Man for All Seasons). They feel that there is no man capable of leading the world in their day and age, so they send back in time for one.

More arrives and goes through a series of adventures that give a cross section of the Astrobean civilization. The true evil of the world is revealed and the famed More dies trying to save the same thing that he died and was sainted for here on Earth.

The end of the novel suffered from the same dilemma that plagued The Reefs of Earth. Lafferty dropped it as if he did not care to go any further than he had to. However, the ending was much more acceptable than the one in The Reefs of Earth, because the ending had been prophesied earlier in the story. The explanation of the mechanics is the purpose of the plot, which was very well handled.

Fourth Mansions is Lafferty's biggest work to date. Its plot, however, is repetitious of Past Master. This takes the edge off an otherwise excellent novel.

The plot is a battle of good and evil, of existence and non-existence. It is set on Earth only slightly in the future. Fred Foley runs across a group of telepaths-clairvoyants called Harvesters. They are the beginning of an adventure in which Foley appears to be mainly a fall guy, a pawn in a four-sided chess game. The four sides are the Pythons, (harvesters), Badgers, Falcons, and Toads.

These four sides are all trying to control the world.. The civilization in which Foley lives is about to fall. The way it falls will determine the future course of history. The Toads want a static world in which they control everything. Others dream of an ever-thghtening that will lead into non-existence. The rest, Foley included, want it to enter an ascending spiral that will lead to heaven.

The end of the story, as in Past Master, fails to answer any issues. It ends directly after the climax. One is left to guess without any direct evidence the fate of the world. However, by now Lafferty is getting good at dropping novels suddenly. One is not bothered much by it.

The trend in novels is to more complexity. Lafferty has now reached a point where unless he finds another style his works can only decrease in quality.

Between Past Master and Fourth Mansions there is great similarity. The problem in both is the battle for finding an ascending type of civilization, as compared to a static or destructive system. In Past Master, More fights against the God Ouden and the Programmed People; in Fourth Mansions, Foley fights the Toads and the theory of the "Glass Bowl Lectures." "Liar on the Mountain" reminds one of "On Thunder Mountain." There are more similarities if one cares to look.

The plots are of the same breed, too: the early development of character, the first attack on the enemy, the complexities of the last parts, the final flurry of action, and the two endings which could be exchanged for each other.

So far as I know, the only thing that Lafferty has written has been science fiction. However, he is writing a gothic novel entitled The Fall of Rome, and is contracted for four more novels of a historical nature.

In the near future, he has several short story collections coming out that I am looking forward to. The first of these is Nine Hundred Grandmothers, published in June as the Ace Science Fiction Special.

Next issue will see the beginning of a new feature:

ANALYSIS

In which we examine--not the big pros, but the little ones. The new writers who are beginning to make their marks.

Everyone is invited to contribute to each analysis. You dig through your magazine files and read through the subject's stories. Then you write us with your opinion. Will he someday be a major writer, or will he be relegated to producing space-filers?

Next issue we look at James Tiptree, Jr.

(We are open to suggestions as to the writers we cover.)

You can find Tiptree stories in most of the magazines. Here is a partial bibliography: AMAZING 3/70; ANALOG 3/68, 9/69; FANTASTIC 8/68; GALAXY 1,3,4/69; IF11/69, 5/70; VENTURE 11/69; WORLDS OF FANTASY #2.