

Science Fiction Book Club Interview with Kevin Cheek (July 2022)

Kevin Cheek is the founding editor of the R.A. Lafferty magazine/book series Feast of Laughter. He has been a Lafferty fan for a good four decades or so. He first discovered Lafferty's work in old anthologies like Orbit and New Dimensions and Terry Carr's Best SF of the Year series. Then a series of events led him to the collections Nine Hundred Grandmothers and Ringing Changes. When the wife of an exiled Czech poet loaned him a copy of Fourth Mansions, his fate was sealed--he has been encouraging and inveigling friends, acquaintances, and random passersby to read Lafferty ever since.

With the internet came online communities of Lafferty fans. There are multiple hundreds of fans out there, now mostly congregating in a FaceBook group called "East of Laughter." One fine October evening Kevin mentioned to the fan group that they should create their own fanzine dedicated to Lafferty. Less than a month later, the first issue of Feast of Laughter was published--just in time for Lafferty's 100th birthday!

Kevin lives and works as a Technical Writer for a large tech firm in Colorado. He and co-editor Gregorio Montejo are currently assembling Feast of Laughter, Volume 6. You are enthusiastically invited to contribute!

Wing Fu Fing: It seems Lafferty's short stories are going through a bit of a resurgence - I discovered him only recently after reading an article in Wired Magazine and easily tracked down a collection - but his novels are increasingly harder (and more expensive) to come across. Do you think this resurgence of him will snowball and we will see reprints of his novels and an overall resurgence of all his fiction or is this just a blip?

The recent *Best of R. A. Lafferty* edited by Jonathan Strahan and introduced by Neil Gaiman is a welcome collection of many of his best stories. The fact that it is published both in the UK by Gollancz and in the US by Tor is a really good sign. I sincerely hope the sales figures will justify publication of more Lafferty collections to the powers that be in charge of such things.

There does appear to be a resurgence in publishing his novels:

- *Past Master* was recently republished in a beautiful new trade paperback by Library of America with text corrections, footnotes, and a new introduction by Andrew Ferguson, Lafferty scholar and biographer. Kindle and Audible editions are also available. *Past Master* is also included in an omnibus edition *American Science Fiction: Four Classic Novels 1968-1969* from Library of America.
- *The Reefs of Earth* was republished a few years back by The Locus Press from The Locus Science Fiction Foundation (LSFF) in both trade paperback and Kindle editions. Man wouldn't this also make a great audiobook with the right reader?
- *Okla Hannali* has been available from the OU Press for decades. Order it. Read it. This may be the most important American novel published in the 20th Century.
- *Okla Hannali* was also recently released as an audiobook with an excellent reading by Stefan Rudnicki. I may have had something to do with this: A few years ago I read about a number of legal initiatives to whitewash the teaching of history, specifically to ban teaching about the massacring and general genocide of Native Americans and instead to highlight the resilience

and ingenuity of the frontiersmen. I emailed members of the LSFF, suggesting that in this climate a well produced, well marketed audiobook of *Okla Hannali* could have a large cultural impact. A few months later the LSFF approached the online Lafferty fan group with a request to help with pronunciations of some of the Choctaw words and neologisms in *Okla Hannali* for a new audiobook. Within a year, the audiobook was released. It is wonderful, but it will make you cry.

- *Space Chantey, Fourth Mansions, and Past Master* were published in an omnibus edition *R. A. Lafferty, Three Great Novels* by Golancz, available on both sides of the pond.
- Gateway Press, a UK publisher has published Kindle editions of every previously published Lafferty novel and collection. However, they are only available in the UK. I don't know how to hack them to download and read on a US-based reader.
- **AND** The Ktistec Press is working on a new academic edition of *In a Green Tree*, Lafferty's semi-autobiographical novel about life in and around Tulsa from about 1919 through 1979. The novel was originally broken into five parts and partially published in a series of chapbooks by Chris Drumm. We have signed a contract with the LSFF and are working on transcribing Lafferty's typed and hand-edited manuscripts into a publishable file. There is a lot of work to do, so it will take us a while to create a publishable draft.

I sincerely hope there are more to come. The world needs a really good edition of *Fourth Mansions*, *The Fall of Rome*, and perhaps *Aurelia* right now.

MX Anton: Back in the day when he was getting published regularly, an editor remarked that there are science fiction stories, fantasy stories, and Lafferty stories. He was a genre unto himself, one that I enjoyed very much. What do you think makes Lafferty so unique?"

That was Theodore Sturgeon. He also commented that you could recognise a Lafferty story by reading a single sentence. I believe he was right. Lafferty was a genre unto himself, and we in SF are lucky to have been able to claim him.

What makes him so unique? It was the combination of a number of things. For one thing, Lafferty had a deep love of language, and would use words very carefully, often pointing out archaic uses of a word and using the difference from modern usage to underscore a point. This is part of what makes his individual sentences so identifiable. For example, there is the wonderful comment by the Black Pope of the Carmelites in *The Flame is Green*,

"Things are set up as contraries that are not even in the same category. Listen to me: the opposite of radical is superficial; the opposite of liberal is stingy; the opposite of conservative is destructive. Thus I will describe myself as a radical conservative liberal; but certain of the tainted red fish will swear that there can be no such fish as that. Beware of those who use words to mean their opposites. At the same time have pity on them, for usually this trick is their only stock in trade."

There is also his sense of humor. Lafferty wrote with a deep chuckle. While outright jokes are few and far between in his writing (and sometimes deliberately lame to highlight a character's humor deficiency), the situations build until you find yourself laughing out loud while passersby look at you and wonder just what you are reading. Tell them. Turn them on to Lafferty so they may in turn laugh out loud to the derision of other passersby.

And there is the sense of deep wonder that comes from his consistent Catholic faith. He wrote with great reverence for humanity and individuality and unhyprocritical spirituality. His voice was consistent and I believe informed by the reverence for mystery that is at the core of his faith.

On top of that was his ability to tell tall tales. His characters were exaggerated. Nobody quite talks like his dialog in real life. For example, in "Hole on the Corner"

"Where'd you get the monster, Mama?" son Robert asked as he came in. "What's he got your whole head in his mouth for? Can I have one of the apples in the kitchen? What's he going to do, kill you, Mama?"

"Shriek, shriek," said Mama Regina. "Just one apple, Robert, there's just enough to go around. Yes, I think he's going to kill me. Shriek!"

Most of all, I think what set Lafferty apart was the joy with which he wrote. By the late '60s and '70s, a lot of New Wave writers were becoming consumed with nihilistic or at least pessimistic writing. Stories like Harlan Ellison's "I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream" or Gene Wolfe's "When I was Ming the Merciless" were beautifully written but grim. Lafferty wrote in such a way that the joy just leaps off the page. Even when he is holding up a mirror to our deepest failings or writing stories that have a body count in the thousands, the joy in his writing is infectious. You can't read Lafferty without a smile!

Eva Sable: I remember seeing Lafferty's name on bookstore shelves, but I don't recall ever being tempted to purchase any of his work. Is there a good starting point that will give me a sense of who he was as a writer?

The best introduction depends as much on you as the material. I and most people I associate with prefer short stories to novels. We probably all have ADHD, or just not enough time. That being said, a common opinion is that Lafferty's short stories are the best place to start. The new *The Best of R. A. Lafferty* is a wonderful collection to start with. I would recommend reading "Slow Tuesday Night," "Narrow Valley," "Thus we Frustrate Charlemagne," "Ride a Tin Can" (which may make you weep), "Nine Hundred Grandmothers," "Old Foot Forgot," and then my personal favorite "Days of Grass, Days of Straw." If you're not hooked by then, you might not be a Lafferty fan.

I also have friends who strongly prefer his novels to his short stories. If you have the patience to start with longer works, start with the omnibus *R. A. Lafferty: Three Great novels. Past Master* is probably his most accessible novel. It posits a golden utopia in the future that is failing. The leaders of the world bring Thomas More forward in time and make him world president. He sees their world and declares that he wrote Utopia as a satire, didn't they understand that?! I haven't given the novel away--that's the set up in the first couple of chapters. From there, it gets wild. *Space Chantey* is a slapstick retelling of *The Odyssey* set in a far distant space-faring future. It is hilarious and deeply silly. *Fourth Mansions* is my favorite novel by any writer in any genre. It is the story of a young cub reporter, a representative everyman who encounters four distinct preternatural conspiracies that threaten to derail humanity's chances of spiritual and cultural evolution. The narrative happens on several layers of reality and metaphor all at once, and yet it is ultimately a very hopeful story. Many readers find it daunting, however. So if you prefer novels to short stories, start with *Past Master*.

Damo Mac Choiligh: I have heard it said that Lafferty had an Irish influence, that he regarded himself as writing with an Irish voice. Do you think there is any truth to this? Had he read much Irish literature? (I'm assuming he would be restricted to Irish literature in English). Did he ever visit Ireland or did his

parents have any connection to there? Or is he simply an American who is the recipient of a long passed-on Irish name?

Lafferty's family were Irish immigrants. In the latter part of the 19th century, they homesteaded near Neola, Iowa, and then moved to Tulsa, Oklahoma in 1918, when Lafferty was four. He grew up listening to old relatives swapping stories. These would be considered Irish folk tales and tall tales. There was an element of one-upmanship in the storytelling. If you can find an online copy of his unpublished story "Club Mentiros" you will see a perfect example of this kind of thing. "One at a Time" is a story that could have been told in an Irish dock-side tavern in the hour before closing.

He does include elements lifted straight out of Irish folklore. His recurring character Finnegan is based not on James Joyce's Finnegan but directly on Finn McCool, or Fionn mac Cumhaill, the Irish cultural hero from shortly after the time of Saint Patrick. More educated heads than mine can give you a list of Irish folk elements in Lafferty's work.

In addition, Lafferty grew up on the border of the Choctaw Nation, and many of the old men telling stories were Choctaw elders. Native American, or at least Choctaw tall tales figure heavily into his storytelling style. He will state something seemingly ridiculous baldly enough to make you wonder, then it may just prove to be balderdash after all and he was just pulling your leg. Or it may prove to be completely true. You never know until the end of the story--and even then you're sometimes left wondering. Read "Narrow Valley" for a perfect example. Listen carefully to Willy McGilly.

John Grayshaw: Was Lafferty religious? How did this effect his writing?

R. A. Lafferty was deeply and devoutly Catholic and he was extremely knowledgeable about historical Catholic theology. There was a story in one of his obituaries about Lafferty in church. He never missed a mass. The priest would sometimes look up and see Lafferty sitting there quietly shaking his head.

He strongly believed in a form of Catholicism that had started to disappear by the 20th century and was dealt a huge blow by Vatican II. He staunchly believed in the Latin mass, and the traditional view of the Trinity. I am not well versed, and cannot point out specific items he took argument with, but essentially, it's not too much of an exaggeration to say that his religious beliefs were very closely aligned with Thomas Aquinas, or perhaps even with the church as it existed in the final days of the Roman Empire.

While his faith shaped and guided everything he wrote, he did not write religious diatribe or morality stories designed to convert. Paul Rydeen, a book collector I corresponded with summed it up: "I see Lafferty as a writer who was religious, not a religious writer."

Sometimes the influence of his faith was obvious. The most obvious, perhaps, is the novel *Aurelia* where a 15-year-old girl has to take over and govern a primitive planet to complete her class in World Government. She is not a very good student and bungles most of it. She does develop a tremendous following on the extremely Earth-like planet she lands on, and she delivers daily lessons to her followers that are essentially synopses of Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologicæ*. Aurelia does deliver far more approachable and engaging versions of the text, and this novel would serve as a great introduction to the study of Aquinas' theology.

The story "Ginny Wrapped in the Sun" is inspired directly by one of the chapters in the Book of Revelation. It's a difficult story, because the protagonist is a four-year-old and terrible things happen.

However, it works as an SF story on its own without any religious interpretation or understanding. It asks the question, if the dinosaurs ruled the Earth for over a hundred million years, and we've been here less than a hundred thousand, what makes us think we'll last?

Still highly religiously inspired, but less directly obvious is "Old Foot Forgot." This is a wonderful story about individuality. It is the story of a doctor who is about to die of an illness. He lives in a world where dying is celebrated because at death one joins "the oneness that is greater than the self," the great "gnostos" in which individuality disappears and one becomes an infinitesimal part of the giant overarching consciousness of life. The doctor doesn't want to lose his sense of self and seeks a remedy that will allow him to retain awareness, saying "I would rather burn in a hell forever than suffer happy obliteration! I'll burn if it be *me* that burns." In spite of moments like that, it's a joyful, funny story. There is a religious order depicted in this story, with the initials P. T. de C. It was not until years after first reading the story that I understood that it's a direct criticism of the philosophy of Piere Teilhard de Chardin. To me that's the point, it was one of my favorite stories upon first reading without any religious interpretation. The understanding of its religious aspects does not change that, it deepens my admiration for the story. Most of his work is like that. The stories work. Oddly, of course, but they work on their own without considering the faith of the author. When you do consider his faith, it adds another dimension.

In my opinion, what Lafferty's Faith adds most consistently to his writing is a sense of reverence and deep mystery. This is not restricted to Catholic themes. One of the stories that brought him to the attention of the world was "The Land of Great Horses" in *Dangerous Visions*. The story hinges on the sense of cultural identity and history of the Romany. It draws upon their language and folk stories to enrich the story and make the conclusion work. Without that sense of something running deep underneath the story, it would not have worked as well. Almost all of Lafferty's work is like that, seemingly light but carrying a tremendous weight of human identity and history.

In *Feast of Laughter Vol 3* I wrote an essay "Outside the Cathedral" about how Lafferty's faith helps make his writing appealing even for those who do not remotely share his belief.

John Grayshaw: What makes Lafferty interesting from a critical perspective? What first drew you to his work?

Not being as formally educated in literary criticism as some (my degree is in Technical Writing), I'm going to give some educated guesses and opinions here. I think the answers to your two questions here are closely related.

I think Lafferty is intriguing critically because of a few distinct elements:

The way he used language was unique. He was extremely careful in his word choice, while seeming drunk on words. He would add historical comments on individual words that would seem at the time like flights of fancy, but were integral to the plot of the story. Look at Bertigrew Bagley's riff on "flatlander" in *Fourth Mansions*:

"Foley, a supreme word of contempt is 'flatlander.' Somehow there is the belief that people in the Dark Ages believed that the world was flat. They didn't. But it is the contemptuous ones of today who have made a really flat world that is the sad answer to everything."

The way he used Irish and Native tall tale storytelling techniques made his stories always an adventure. This let him break the supposed rules of literature and tell stories that didn't have traditional plot arcs. For example, look at the story "In Our Block." There is no plot. Nothing really happens except that a run-down block is inhabited by probable aliens with incredible capabilities. Everything seems like an exaggeration but it's presented in deadpan fashion with the protagonists left unimpressed.

Lafferty's characters were outside the norm of regular short fiction. It always felt like he was using old archetypes to stand in for characters as a shortcut for character development. But then he could create those archetypes on the fly, making it seem like a character was an old archetype you should be aware of, but in reality, he just made it up on the spot and made it seem that it should resonate with something deeper--something half-remembered. Try this in your writing, it's much harder than it looks, yet he does so effortlessly.

I also believe that Lafferty writes in what can be called a uniquely American voice. In this I group him with Mark Twain, Kurt Vonnegut, Richard Brautigan, and sometimes Howard Waldrop. I think this is a combination of the elements above along with his keen ear and eye for daily life in Tulsa and for the changes over the post-war decades. This is only my opinion, but I think it bears looking into.

As for what drew me to his work:

Firstly, I think it's his humor and the joy evident in his writing. I stumbled into reading Lafferty in my late teens in the early '80s. I had been reading a lot of new wave SF, writers like Zelazny, Ursula Le Guin, Samuel Delany, Philip K. Dick, Gene Wolfe, Marta Randal, Kate Wilhelm, Joanna Russ, etc. I was getting bogged down by the relentless pessimism in a lot of their stories, yet I was intrigued by the idea of SF holding up a mirror to our society. Here comes Lafferty holding up an often sharper mirror, yet in a way that inspired a deep chuckle.

I was intrigued by his stories which imply there is more going on in the world than meets the eye. A perfect example is "Days of Grass, Days of Straw" in which there are days out of count that impact us, but we are unable to recall. The brain-weave in *Fourth Mansions* intrigued me because I had a close group of friends I'd been playing D&D with weekly for years. We had a close enough friendship that much of our communication was nonverbal, and felt almost telepathic. The brain weave seemed like a natural extension of that.

In college I majored briefly in creative writing. The more I learned about writing, the more fascinated I was at how Lafferty could break the rules and make it work so damn well! I even tried to write a paper for a modern literature class on *Arrive at Easterwine*. The paper earned a B-, which in retrospect I think was generous. I wasn't up to tackling it. I love the book, but there are so many different intertwined levels at play in the narrative, it can be daunting!

I was also drawn to the sense of otherness (for lack of a better word) in Lafferty's writing. His faith and sense of reverence created worlds in his stories that felt complete yet deeply unfamiliar. I have a similar reaction to Cordwainer Smith whose Chinese-inspired storytelling creates a rich, vibrant world that feels very odd and new to my Western reading experience.

And primarily, all those elements and more combine to make him fun to read. Deeply, joyfully, wildly fun.

John Grayshaw: How did Lafferty's mundane real life contribute to his fantastical writings?

Lafferty had a very good eye for people's habits and interactions. He used elements of day-to-day life in Tulsa as a backdrop for most of his writing. It was most evident in stories like "In Our Block" and "All the People" which show the fantastic overlaid on an exaggeratedly dull average Tulsa day. Look for it in almost any of his stories. It provides the "normal" against which the fantastic elements stand out.

His portrayal of Freddy's old neighborhood in *Fourth Mansions* has the ring of honest memory. I've often wondered if that was a neighborhood Lafferty knew well growing up. The description of the clumps of houses, the sound of the train whistles, the neighborhood bullies with their strings of hounds all seem like an account directly from memory. Some of those elements, like the clay pits, coincide directly with the images and events in *In a Green Tree* in the first 10 chapters published by Chris Drumm as *My Heart Leaps Up*.

His portrayal of neighborhood children as terrors was pretty consistent. I do not know how children gained this overtone of menace for him. He had none of his own, nor did his siblings. For example, in "All the People" gangs of children taunt Tony with chants of "Tony the Tin Man" and of course thrown rocks. Then there are the vicious rock-throwing children in *Arrive at Easterwine* when the institute members walk down into town to test the impact of their love essence.

The Willoughby children in stories like "Seven Day Terror" are a slightly different matter. They are still menaces, but they are precocious menaces. Then there's Carnadine Thompson in "Transcendent Tigers." Watching humanity slowly destroy this planet lately, I shiver when I even think of that story!

John Grayshaw: Is Lafferty a "writer's writer?" What is it about his work that other writers enjoy?

"He started by breaking things" (the opening line of "The Six Fingers of Time"). Lafferty broke the rules, yet his stories worked! They soared where more conventional narratives would shuffle. One review said (quoting from memory here) "Show don't tell? The joy's in the telling!"

A traditional narrative arc sets the scene, provides character development, has rising action to a point of climax, then a resolution, denouement, and perhaps a coda. Lafferty skipped the first several parts, dumping the reader into a scene already familiar to the characters but completely unfamiliar to the reader. He would often start at the climax, continue through the climax, and then stop. The reader is smart enough (we hope) to weave the threads together.

This was even true to some degree in his novels. Look at my description of *Past Master* earlier. A golden utopia is failing. The leaders of the world bring Thomas More forward in time and make him world president. He looks at the world and proclaims that he wrote Utopia as a satire, not as an instruction manual for building a world. From most writers, that would be the entire novel. They would provide grim scenes portraying the failure of the society in detail, they would write gradually accelerating action to the eventual capture of Thomas More and installation of him as president. Lafferty disposes of all of this in the first two chapters as set up for the rest of the novel, and even has time to work in stories like the account of Paul as Sour John with a vitrified kidney.

And then there are his endings. *Past Master* brings us to the moment of Thomas More being brought to the scaffold for execution and the battling mobs fighting to save him. The novel cuts off at this moment with "We wait and watch."

Writers *wish* they could get away with tricks like that, and study Lafferty to try to learn how it can be done. Neil Gaiman, in his introduction to "Sunbird" describes trying to write a Lafferty story. He said the main thing he learned from the attempt is that it's not as easy as it appears. We're still trying to figure it out.

John Grayshaw: What do you feel are Lafferty's most significant works? And why?

Okal Hannali is in my opinion both his best-written novel and his most important. In *Hannali Innominee*, it gives us the Choctaw as deeply human, with rich humor, flaws, tragedy, and above all, beauty. Here's an exercise: Search for the history of the various battles and massacres mentioned in the novel. You will find the battles and events mentioned. They did happen, and historical documents exist. However, you will often see them reported with small numbers of white casualties and little or no mention of Native casualties. The numbers Lafferty gives us are vastly different. I am inclined to believe him. He got his stories directly from if not survivors of those very battles, the sons of those survivors. *This needs to be taught!*

Past Master is widely regarded as his most accessible novel, and I imagine it is the highest-selling. It serves as a magnificent introduction to Lafferty's writing and to his philosophy. It also serves to show other writers just how it can be done.

The Flame is Green and then entire Coscuin tetralogy sheds an interesting light on the revolutionary movements around the world in the mid 19th century.

"Old Foot Forgot" is a masterclass on worldbuilding. Within the first couple of pages, he builds a world where a Dookh Doctor treats dozens of alien species, is a member of a religious order with a reverence for the "oneness that is greater than the self" and introduces the Spharikoi, perfect spherical beings. From there he writes a story about human individuality.

"Been a Long, Long Time" is a story I use (along with Gardner Dozois' "A Special Kind of Morning" and Ursula K. LeGuin's "The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas") to teach literary snobs just what SF can do!

"Through Other Eyes" is a perfectly structured Science Fiction story. It could be a template for determining whether a story is Science Fiction or not. At the core is the invention of the Cerebral Scanner; the plot depends on it. The story is really about what makes us human, and how using the invention is part of learning and examining our humanity. And for a bonus he throws off and dismisses a complete time travel story in the opening two pages!

And then there are stories like "Thus We Frustrate Charlemagne," "Hole on the Corner," "Narrow Valley," "Slow Tuesday Night," and "Days of Grass, Days of Straw."

John Grayshaw: Do you have personal favorites of his work? And why?

Yes.

All smart-alecricy aside, my favorite novel in any genre by any author is *Fourth Mansions*. I identify strongly with Freddy Foley, as should we all. He is the malodorous worm in the middle, the everyman and everylout. Yet he has enough simplicity to integrate with all four monsters at the end. This novel gives me tremendous hope, because Freddy succeeds (succeeds? Maybe, it never tells us) because of his simplicity, and I secretly fear that I am far more simpleminded than my friends, family, coworkers, etc. This novel is a perfect prescription for anyone with imposter syndrome. I also resonate with it because of the humor--it is a deeply funny novel at times. At its core is the implication that there is far more going on in the world than meets the eye *and* that we clueless, befuddled individuals caught up in the maelstrom may be able to survive and even master those forces.

My top favorite stories is a revolving list that includes "Hole on the Corner," "Thus we Frustrate Charlemagne," "Narrow Valley," "Slow Tuesday Night," and the one story that always is in first place as my favorite by any author "Days of Grass, Days of Straw." I love that story because of the play between the levels of reality, and again the hope that we too, if we're courageous enough, may be able to count coup on God and wrest a day of our own!

John Grayshaw: What are some of Lafferty's works that you feel should be better known than they are?

Okla Hannali I regard as one of the most significant works of American Literature of the 20th century. It tells a chapter of American history that is not comfortable from a perspective that is at best overlooked, and at worst deliberately erased from most accounts. It should be required reading in American Studies curricula the nation over. *Okla Hannali* breaks many of the rules of prose, but does so in a way that celebrates the language of the Choctaw people. It is at many points a beautiful book, and at times deeply funny. There is a wonderful scene where he describes Hannali sitting in front of his house, describing him as a giant man with a painted face, buckskin trousers, and a giant turban sitting there reading Plutarch. He captures the essence of Hannali, being both what whites of the time saw as a "wild indian" and also deeply civilized. He shows him as all of these not living a divided life in two worlds, but living wholly in his world--a world that was both thoroughly Choctaw and thoroughly civilized. At the same time, the passage is somehow profoundly funny. This is the key to the book, it is a book of deep, often beautiful, often devastating history told with great respect and a slow rumbling chuckle. If you can read it without both tears and laughter, you are made of far sterner stuff than I--and I pity you a little for missing out on the joy and sadness.

The Fall of Rome is a book that sheds a different light on the people and events leading up to the sack of Rome in 410AD. It is *not* an academic history, it is a novelization of the life of Alaric, King of the Goths. But it is more than that. It is a portrait of the political and cultural structures of the late Roman Empire. As such, It gives us a much greater sense of who the people were in that era than any longer, drier history. *The Fall of Rome* would be a great companion to a study of Rome.

Fourth Mansions is well known among Lafferty fans. It deserves a wider audience because of what it tells us, but upon a careless reading, it could be a dangerous book. It tells the story of a cub reporter discovering and taking on four distinct powerful conspiracies against mankind. As with much of

Lafferty's work, what you get out of the book depends on what you bring in. If you are determined to see nefarious plots around every corner, this book can stoke that perception more strongly than the *Illuminati Trilogy* (and in much better prose). However, I see the novel as ultimately very hopeful. It is only by incorporating all four external creatures that Freddy can lead us to the next level of cultural and spiritual evolution. Freddy is not some chosen one or a hereditary prince in unknown disguise, he is a true everyman. Because Freddy stands in for each and every one of us malodorous worms in the middle, the commonality of humanity, the message of the book is that each one of us has the potential to lead us into the next Mansion. However with the potential comes the responsibility. It behooves all of us to try, and trying means embracing and understanding those we perceive as our enemies.

I also think *Fourth Mansions* would make a hell of a movie in the right hands!

John Grayshaw: Who were some of the writers Lafferty grew up reading? And who are some writers that were his contemporaries that he enjoyed/admired?

While I don't know exactly who he grew up reading, over his career he was a voracious reader.

He dropped hints in his stories, interviews, and letters over the decades. He certainly read and studied Thomas Aquinas in detail--*Aurelia* is a short-form recounting of the *Summa Theologica*. He obviously read and enjoyed Chesterton. Quotes from Chesterton litter his stories. In an interview once, he commented on his education as a kid, saying that once you read Augustine, you were an Augustinian for life.

Beyond the classical and theological, his reviews showed that he read widely in contemporary SF. In addition he published a chapbook of short snarky verse about other science fiction writers. Some were snarkier than others, most so in his retort to Spider Robinson after Robinson gave him a dull review:

He cannot write nor yet apprise
He ladles with a rusty ladle
He's neither talented nor wise.
But spider bites are seldom fadle.

John Grayshaw: Did Lafferty have favorites of his own works?

I am a little less knowledgeable about Lafferty's favorites. I know in his introduction, "How I Wrote 'Continued on Next Rock'" he talked at great length about bringing the story to completion. From that, I've always assumed it was one of his favorites--it's certainly one of mine.

In an interview with Robert Whitacre Sirignano, he expressed embarrassment about winning the Hugo for *Eurema's Dam*, stating that in that same year he had published five stories that were far better. A bit of digging through ISFDB shows the other stories from 1972: "Once on Aranea," "A Special Condition in Summit City," "Rang Dang Kaloof," "Dorg," and "And Walk Now Gently Through the Fire." I seem to recall Someone saying that "Rang Dang Kaloof" was a personal favorite of Lafferty's. Certainly "And Walk Now Gently Through the Fire" deals with matters of dissolution of faith in the world that were very personal to Lafferty, so I imagine that may have been one of his favorites.

John Grayshaw: Are there any examples of Lafferty corresponding/meeting with fans?

Gaaah! How much I would have loved to have met him! He did go to conventions and was considered shy but always gracious with his fans. Many of the people in the FaceBook Lafferty fan group, "East of Laughter" have met him. By all accounts, he was kind but quiet, and occasionally fall-down drunk.

Harlan Ellison was both a fan and an editor. In his interview with Andrew Childress, he talked about sitting at a bar with Lafferty, utterly in awe of the man. Ellison was trying to draw as much out of Lafferty as possible, while Lafferty was calling him an "imp of Satan." It appears they remained friends.

Neil Gaiman was a tremendous fan, and talks of writing Lafferty several times. Lafferty always wrote back with genuinely good writing advice.

As part of his biographical research, Andrew Ferguson has collected hundreds of Lafferty's letters. It appears he wrote back to most fans and other writers who wrote to him. Try and find some of those letters online or in the biography when it is eventually finished. They are characteristically brilliant!

John Grayshaw: Did Lafferty have any particular writing habits or routines he stuck with?

I know surprisingly little about Lafferty's personal life--I can't wait for the biography to be published!

One story I have heard is that he kept a large number of cheap made-in-Mexico knock-off manual typewriters. When one would jam or break, he would pull the paper out and put it in the next one. Every now and then, he would bring the broken typewriters to a friend of his who ran a typewriter repair shop and have them repaired. Thus, everything he wrote for decades was written on the same set of manual typewriters.

When he retired, he gave arthritis in his hands making it too difficult to type as the reason. No wonder. I learned to type on an old Royal upright manual typewriter from the mid 1930s. That thing required the finger strength of an 800-lb gorilla. I can only imagine what that must've been like on his 70-year-old fingers!

John Grayshaw: What is Lafferty's legacy? Why was his work significant at the time? And why is it still important today?

As you mentioned in an earlier question, Lafferty is often considered a writer's writer. While there's a lot more to him than that, most writers of literary SF today have been influenced either directly or indirectly by him. He is one of those writers who, like Mark Twain, has changed all published fiction that followed.

Today, we live in a world that is changing so fast, and has so much division that despair is a common reaction. Lafferty wrote with a keen eye for social, technological, and cultural/spiritual change. He wrote of our accelerated technological life in stories like "Slow Tuesday Night" and "Lord Torpedo, Lord Gyroscope." He wrote about our divisions and sense of being caught in the middle of battles far larger than ourselves in *Fourth Mansions* and *Past Master*. Yet he did so with a sense of joy. His message to us seems to be to fully understand the straits we are in, and to confront them with glee.

Understanding and Joy. There you have it, no writer better prepares us to take on our future. That is why he deserves to be read and reread for centuries to come.