

Russia discovers R. A. Lafferty — to be continued on the next rock?

BY SERGEI SOBOLEV AND YAKOV VARGANOV

In 1965 an unusual short story appeared in August's issue of *Yuniy Technik* ("Young Mechanic"), a popular magazine for young readers.

The humorous tale entitled "Sem Strashnih Dney" ("Seven Days of Horror," published in the US as "Seven Day Terror") was written by a writer with an intriguing name previously unknown to Russian readers—R. A. Lafferty. A month later the same translation was printed in the agricultural magazine *Selskaya Molodezh* ("Rural Youth") and finally, three years later, in 1968, the story made its third appearance in a charismatic Science Fiction anthology *31 iyunya* ("July 31st") edited by Arkady Strugatsky (of the Strugatsky Brothers) the insanely popular SF book series *Zarubezhnaya Fantastika* ("Foreign SF"). This time the short but impactful absurdist tale had been freshly translated under the title "Nedelya Uzhasov" ("The Week of Horrors") and was featured in the collection alongside other fine examples of humorous foreign SF. Remarkably, yet another new translation of the same story saw the light a couple years later in the groundbreaking hardcover series *Biblioteka Sovremennoy Fantastiki* ("Modern Science Fiction Library").

An unsuspecting Russian reader in the late 60s could have been forgiven for thinking that R. A. Lafferty was an interesting but rather unproductive writer!

Only in 1974 two new stories by R A Lafferty came out in the Soviet Union. "Oh uzhi eti mne rebyata" ("Enfants Terribles") was printed in *Rural Youth*. Another popular Soviet periodical, *Knowledge is Power*, introduced "Prozhorlivaya Krasotka" ("Hog-Belly Honey") translated by Raphail Nudelman, a prominent researcher and translator of quality British and American Science Fiction.

The apparent breakthrough turned out inconsequential. There was a long dry spell with no new Lafferty publications until 1986, the early days of Perestroika, when *Knowledge is Power* brought RAL

back with the story “Bezlyudniy Pereulok” (“In Our Block”).

It should not be too surprising that Lafferty was receiving a cold welcome by Soviet publishers. Unlike some of his peers, such as Robert Sheckley or Robert Silverberg, whose stories were frequently translated and published in the USSR, Lafferty has always made editors and party ideologues uneasy. His works could not be cast in one of the approved molds, such as “criticism of capitalistic exploitation” or “satire on American militarism.” There were things and themes in them that censors could not quite place but with unfailing instinct recognized them to be subversive.

During the increasingly stagnant and surrealistic decade of the 70s in the Soviet Union, “surrealism” was a bad word and any author suspected of its sins was to be purged. In the eyes of censors Lafferty was a prime suspect with no redeeming qualities. He was not scourging the evils of capitalist society like Robert Sheckley; neither was he poking fun at greedy entrepreneurs like Robert Silverberg. He did not appear to be sympathetic to the plight of rural drunkards like Clifford Simak. And for sure he was not singing hymns to the technical genius of humanity like Arthur C. Clarke. Lafferty simply turned the reader’s brain inside out and tickled it incessantly with dangerous existential questions. Any way you look at it, he was a very inconvenient author!

He still is in Russia nowadays.

In the early 1990s, a unique period in Russian history, a time of unprecedented freedom and heartbreaking poverty when the State institutions were crumbling and everything seemed to be possible, a crop of newborn SF magazines appeared out of nowhere to the immense joy of the starved Russian readership. New translations of Lafferty stories began surfacing one after another, especially on the pages of *Esli (If)*, the first Russian magazine entirely dedicated to foreign SF. Since 1992 *Esli* has delivered nine new RAL stories, introducing such gems as “Slow Tuesday Night” and “Thieving Bear Planet.” It was becoming more and more apparent to the readers that what they were witnessing was just the “tip of the iceberg” of an immeasurably exciting and tremendously important body of work by a visionary writer virtually unknown to them.

The remarkable essay by Michael Swanwick, “In the Tradition...” was published in 1996 in Russia. It introduced many unfamiliar names from the vast archipelago of English-language fantasy and poured new oil into the fire of readers’ curiosity with a reverent (albeit very brief) mention of Lafferty. Swanwick compared RAL to a fish shaped too irregularly to be caught by any literary nets.

It has to be noted that Russian readers’ hunger for science fiction and fantasy literature at the time was insatiable. Anything stamped with “SF” on its cover guaranteed an instant sale. It was time when Lafferty works could land on the fertile ground of many open minds ready for the Strange.

But when it finally seemed inevitable, the stream of new RAL stories suddenly dried up. The times were changing fast; Russian readers, fed up with poorly translated American and British pulps, were turning their focus to domestic SF and endless epic fantasy cycles. Deemed too complex to translate, too complicated to read, too non-commercial to sell, Lafferty’s books were shunned again by the market-savvy new Russian publishers. The time of change and discovery that brought some previously unknown luminaries of the SF genre into the Russian orbit has almost entirely bypassed Lafferty’s body of work. The opportunity to discover RAL was squandered.

And thus we enter the 21st century.

In the late 2000s a tiny trickle of Lafferty books resumed from an unlikely source—a fledgling field of small and self-publishers. A few fans who got a taste of Lafferty’s worlds and wanted more, have decided not to wait for publisher’s grace and have taken destiny in their own hands. Often imperfect, these new editions were nevertheless proclamations of love to Lafferty’s work.

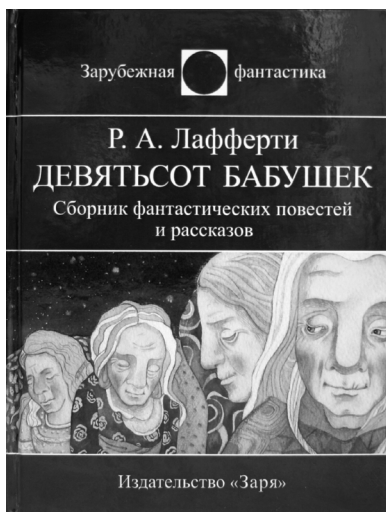
By the latest count (as of February 2015) the fan-based publishers have produced eleven books by RAL since 2000. This includes five novels—*Past Master*, *The Reefs of Earth*, *Space Chantey*, *Fourth Mansions* and *Arrive at Easterwine* and at least 75 short stories. The highlights were complete translations of Lafferty’s original collections *Nine hundred Grandmothers* and *Strange Doings*.

The best of these books had professional quality translation and even included original illustrations from now-decrepit old

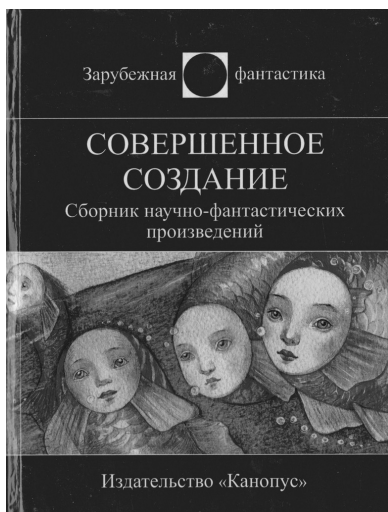
American pulp magazines, as well as some fine newly-commissioned art. They were beautifully made artifacts. The number of copies of each such volume could be often counted on one hand. They were destined to become curiosities rather than flagships of a new wave of Lafferty books, but who knows what this new movement portends? With a bit of luck these exquisite little tomes might herald a happier new chapter in a long overdue discovery of Lafferty works by Russian readers.



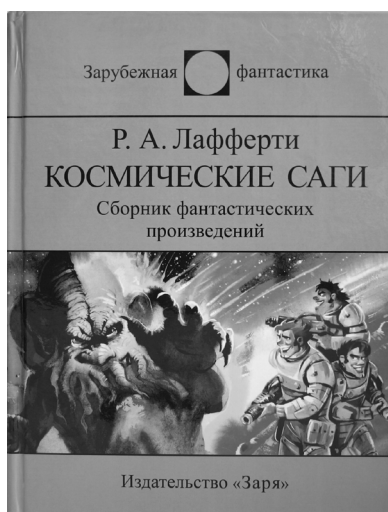
Illustration for "Guesting Time" by Natalya Zatulovskaya



Nine Hundred Grandmothers,
cover art by Natalya Zatulovskaya



The Ultimate Creature,
cover art by Natalya Zatulovskaya



Space Chantey,
cover art by Vladimir Anakin



Strange Doings,
cover art by Vladimir Anakin

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Sergei Sobolev is a history teacher and a regular contributor to the fan-based internet portal fantlab.ru dedicated to creation of complete bibliographic database of Science Fiction and Fantasy publications in Russia. He discovered R. A. Lafferty's work after reading "Slow Tuesday Night" published in the Russian SF magazine Esli. He lives in Lipetsk, Russia.

Yakov Varganov is a research biologist. His interest in Lafferty's writing was initiated by the same story, "Slow Tuesday Night" in Esli. Following his immigration to the US in 1997 he started collecting and reading all Lafferty's works he could find. Currently he resides in Scotch Plains, NJ.

The authors are very grateful to Sergei Gontarev for his generous help and advice in the process of writing this piece. We especially appreciate the images of the small press RAL editions he contributed. Sergei is a translator and a relentless promoter of Lafferty's works in Russia.