



Sodom and Gomorrah, Texas
Lafferty, Raphael Aloysius

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About Lafferty:

Raphael Aloysius Lafferty (November 7, 1914 - March 18, 2002) was an American science fiction and fantasy writer known for his original use of language, metaphor, and narrative structure, as well as for his etymological wit. He also wrote a set of four autobiographical novels, *In a Green Tree*; a history book, *The Fall of Rome*; and a number of novels that could be more or less loosely called historical fiction. Lafferty was born on 7 November 1914 in Neola, Iowa to Hugh David Lafferty (a broker dealing in oil leases and royalties) and Julia Mary Burke, a teacher, the youngest of five siblings. His first name, Raphael, derived from the day he was expected to be born on (the Feast of St. Raphael). At the age of 4, his family moved to Perry, Oklahoma. He attended night school at the University of Tulsa for two years from 1933, mostly studying math and German, but left. He then began to work for a "Clark Electric Co.", in Tulsa, Oklahoma and apparently a newspaper as well; during this period (1939-1942), he attended the International Correspondence School. R. A. Lafferty lived most of his life in Tulsa, with his sister, Anna Lafferty. Lafferty served for four years in the U.S. Army during World War II. He enlisted in 1942. After training in Texas, North Carolina, Florida, and California, he was sent to the South Pacific Area, serving in Australia, New Guinea, Morotai and the Philippines. When he left the Army in 1946, he had become a 1st Sergeant serving as a staff sergeant and had received an Asiatic-Pacific Campaign Medal. He never married. Lafferty did not begin writing until the 1950s, but he eventually produced thirty-two novels and more than two hundred short stories, most of them at least nominally science fiction. His first published story was "The Wagons" in *New Mexico Quarterly Review* in 1959. His first published science fiction story was "Day of the Glacier", in *The Original Science Fiction Stories* in 1960, and his first published novel was *Past Master* in 1968. Until 1971, Lafferty worked as an electrical engineer. After that, he spent his time writing until around 1980, when he retired from that activity as well, due to a stroke. In 1994, he suffered an even more severe stroke. He died 18 March 2002, aged 87 in a nursing home in Broken Arrow, Oklahoma. His collected papers, artifacts, and ephemera were donated to the University of Tulsa's McFarlin Library, Department of Special Collections and University Archives. Other manuscripts are housed in the University of Iowa's Library special collections department. Source: Wikipedia

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Manuel shouldn't have been employed as a census taker. He wasn't qualified. He couldn't read a map. He didn't know what a map was. He only grinned when they told him that North was at the top.

He knew better.

But he did write a nice round hand, like a boy's hand. He knew Spanish, and enough English. For the sector that was assigned to him he would not need a map. He knew it better than anyone else, certainly better than any mapmaker. Besides, he was poor and needed the money.

They instructed him and sent him out. Or they thought that they had instructed him. They couldn't be sure.

"Count everyone? All right. Fill in everyone? I need more papers."

"We will give you more if you need more. But there aren't so many in your sector."

"Lots of them. *Lobos, tejones, zorros*, even people."

"Only the *people*, Manuel! Do not take the animals. How would you write up the animals? They have no names."

"Oh, yes. All have names. Might as well take them all."

"Only people, Manuel."

"*Mulos*?"

"No."

"*Conejos*?"

"No, Manuel, no. Only the people."

"No trouble. Might as well take them all."

"Only people—God give me strength!—only people, Manuel."

"How about little people?"

"Children, yes. That has been explained to you."

"*Little* people. Not children, little people."

"If they are people, take them."

"How big they have to be?"

"It doesn't make any difference how big they are. If they are people, take them."

That is where the damage was done.

The official had given a snap judgement, and it led to disaster. It was not his fault. The instructions are not clear. Nowhere in all the verbiage does it say how big they have to be to be counted as people.

Manuel took Mula and went to work. His sector was the Santa Magdalena, a scrap of bald-headed and desolate mountains, steep but not high, and so torrid in the afternoons that it was said that the old lava sometimes began to writhe and flow again from the sun's heat alone.

In the center valley there were five thousand acres of slag and vitrified rock from some forgotten old blast that had melted the hills and destroyed their mantle, reducing all to a terrible flatness. This was called Sodom. It was strewn with low-lying ghosts as of people and objects, formed when the granite bubbled like water.

Away from the dead center the ravines were body-deep in chaparral, and the hillsides stood gray-green with old cactus. The stunted trees were lower than the giant bushes and yucca.

Manuel went with Mula, a round easy man and a sparse gaunt mule. Mula was a mule, but there were other inhabitants of the Santa Magdalena of a genus less certain.

Yet even about Mula there was an oddity in her ancestry. Her paternal grandfather had been a goat. Manuel once told Mr. Marshal about this, but Mr. Marshal had not accepted it.

"She is a mule. Therefore, her father was a jack. Therefore his father was also a jack, a donkey. It could not be any other way."

Manuel often wondered about that, for he had raised the whole strain of animals, and he remembered who had been with whom.

"A donkey! A jack! Two feet tall and with a beard and horns. I always thought that he was a goat."

Manuel and Mula stopped at noon on Lost Soul Creek. There would be no travel in the hot afternoon. But Manuel had a job to do, and he did it. He took the forms from one of the packs that he had unslung from Mula, and counted out nine of them. He wrote down all the data on nine people. He knew all there was to know about them, their nativities and their antecedents. He knew that there were only nine regular people in the nine hundred square miles of the Santa Magdalena.

But he was systematic, so he checked the list over again and again. There seemed to be somebody missing. Oh, yes, himself. He got another form and filled out all the data on himself.

Now, in one way of looking at it, his part in the census was finished. If only he had looked at it that way, he would have saved worry and trouble for everyone, and also ten thousand lives. But the instructions they had given him were ambiguous, for all that they had tried to make them clear.

So very early the next morning he rose and cooked beans, and said, "Might as well take them all."

He called Mula from the thorn patch where she was grazing, gave her salt and loaded her again. Then they went to take the rest of the census, but in fear. There was a clear duty to get the job done, but there was also

a dread of it that his superiors did not understand. There was reason also why Mula was loaded so she could hardly walk with packs of census forms.

Manuel prayed out loud as they climbed the purgatorial scarp above Lost Souls Creek, "*ruega por nosotros pecadores ahora*—" the very gulches stood angry and stark in the early morning—"y en la hora de nuestra muerte."

Three days later an incredible dwarf staggered into the outskirts of High Plains, Texas, followed by a dying wolf-sized animal that did not look like a wolf.

A lady called the police to save the pair from rock-throwing kids who might have killed them, and the two as yet unclassified things were taken to the station house.

The dwarf was three foot high, a skeleton stretched over with brown-burnt leather. The other was an un-canine looking dog-sized beast, so full of burrs and thorns that it might have been a porcupine. It was a nightmare replica of a shrunken mule.

The midget was mad. The animal had more presence of mind: she lay down quietly and died, which was the best she could do, considering the state that she was in.

"Who is census chief now?" asked the mad midget. "Is Mr. Marshal's boy the census chief?"

"Mr. Marshal is, yes. Who are you? How do you know Marshal? And what is that which you are pulling out of your pants, if they are pants?"

"Census list. Names of everybody in the Santa Magdalena. I had to steal it."

"It looks like microfilm, the writing is so small. And the roll goes on and on. There must be a million names here."

"Little bit more, little bit more. I get two bits a name."

They got Marshal there. He was very busy, but he came. He had been given a deadline by the mayor and the citizen's group. He had to produce a population of ten thousand people for High Plains, Texas; and this was difficult, for there weren't that many people in the town. He had been working hard on it, though; but he came when the police called him.

"You Marshal's little boy? You look just like your father," said the midget.

"That voice, I should know that voice even if it's cracked to pieces. That has to be Manuel's voice."

"Sure, I'm Manuel. Just like I left, thirty-five years ago."

"You can't be Manuel, shrunk three feet and two hundred pounds and aged a million."

"You look here at my census slip. It says I'm Manuel. And here are nine more of the regular people, and one million of the little people. I couldn't get them on the right forms, though. I had to steal their list."

"You can't be Manuel," said Marshal.

"He can't be Manuel," said the big policemen and the little policeman.

"Maybe not, then," the dwarf conceded. "I thought I was, but I wasn't sure. Who am I then? Let's look at the other papers and see which one I am."

"No, you can't be any of them either, Manuel. And you surely can't be Manuel."

"Give him a name anyhow and get him counted. We got to get to that ten thousand mark."

"Tell us what happened, Manuel—if you are. Which you aren't. But tell us."

"After I counted the regular people I went to count the little people. I took a spade and spaded off the top of their town to get in. But they put an *encanto* on me, and made me and Mula run a treadmill for thirty-five years."

"Where was this?"

"At the little people town. Nuevo Danae. But after thirty-five years the *encanto* wore off and Mula and I stole the list of names and ran away."

"But where did you really get this list of so many names written so small?"

"Suffering saddle sores, Marshal, don't ask the little bug so many questions. You got a million names in your hand. Certify them! Send them in! There's enough of us here right now. We declare that place annexed forthwith. This will make High Plains the biggest town in the whole state of Texas."

So Marshal certified them and sent them into Washington. This gave High Plains the largest percentage increase of any city in the nation, but it was challenged. There were some soreheads in Houston who said that it wasn't possible. They said High Plains had nowhere near that many people and there must have been a miscount.

And in the days that the argument was going on, they cleaned up and fed Manuel, if it were he, and tried to get from him a cogent story.

"How do you know it was thirty-five years you were on the treadmill, Manuel?"

"Well, it seemed like thirty-five years."

"It could have only been about three days."

"Then how come I'm so old?"

"We don't know that, Manuel, we sure don't know that. How big were these people?"

"Who knows? A finger long, maybe two?"

"And what is their town?"

"It is an old prairie-dog town that they fixed up. You have to dig down with a spade to get to the streets."

"Maybe they were really all prairie dogs, Manuel. Maybe the heat got you and you only dreamed that they were little people."

"Prairie dogs can't write as good as on that list. Prairie dogs can't write hardly at all."

"That's true. The list is hard to explain. And such odd names on it too."

"Where is Mula? I don't see Mula since I came back."

"Mula just lay down and died, Manuel."

"Gave me the slip. Why didn't I think of that? Well, I'll do it too. I'm too worn out for anything else."

"Before you do, Manuel, just a couple of last questions."

"Make them real fast then. I'm on my way."

"Did you know these little people were there before?"

"Oh, sure. There a long time."

"Did anybody else ever see them?"

"Oh, sure. Everybody in the Santa Magdalena see them. Eight, nine people see them."

"And Manuel, how do we get to the place? Can you show us on a map?"

Manuel made a grimace, and died quietly as Mula had done. He didn't understand those maps at all, and took the easy way out.

They buried him, not knowing for sure whether he was Manuel come back, or what he was.

There wasn't much of him to bury.

It was the same night, very late and after he had been asleep, that Marshal was awakened by the ring of an authoritative voice. He was being harangued by a four-inch tall man on his bedside table, a man of dominating presence and acid voice.

"Come out of that cot, you clown! Give me your name and station!"

"I'm Marshal, and I suspect that you are a late pig sandwich, or caused by one. I shouldn't eat so late."

"Say 'sir' when you reply to me. I am no pig sandwich and I do not commonly call on fools. Get on your feet, you clod."

And wonderingly Marshal did.

"I want the list that was stolen. Don't gape! Get it!"

"What list?"

"Don't stall, don't stutter. Get me our tax list that was stolen. It isn't words that I want from you."

"Listen, you cicada, I'll take you and—"

"You will not. You will notice that you are paralyzed from the neck down. I suspect that you were always so from there up. Where is the list?"

"S-sent it to Washington."

"You bug-eyed behemoth! Do you realize what a trip that will be? You grandfather of inanities, it will be a pleasure to destroy you!"

"I don't know what you are, or if you are really. I don't believe that you even belong on the world."

"Not belong on the world! We own the world. We can show written title to the world. Can you?"

"I doubt it. Where did you get the title?"

"None of your business. I'd rather not say. Oh, well, we got it from a promoter of sorts. A con man, really. I'll have to admit that we were taken, but we were in a spot and needed a world. He said that the larger bifurcates were too stupid to be a nuisance. We should have known that the stupider a creature, the more of a nuisance it is."

"I had about decided the same thing about the smaller a creature. We may have to fumigate that old mountain mess."

"Oh, you can't harm us. We're too powerful. But we can obliterate you in an instant."

"Hah!"

"Say 'Hah, *sir*' when you address me. Do you know the place in the mountain that is called Sodom?"

"I know the place. It was caused by a large meteor."

"It was caused by one of these."

What he held up was the size of a grain of sand. Marshal could not see it in detail.

"There was another city of you bug-eyed beasts there," said the small martinet. "You wouldn't know about it. It's been a few hundred years. We decided it was too close. Now I have decided that you are too close."

"A thing that size couldn't crack a walnut."

"You floundering fop, it will blast this town flat!"

"What will happen to you?"

"Nothing. I don't even blink for things like that."

"How do you trigger it off."

"You gaping goof, I don't have time to explain that to you. I have to get to Washington."

It may be that Marshal did not believe himself quite awake. He certainly did not take the threat seriously enough. For the little man did trigger it off.

When the final count was in, High Plains did not have the highest percentage gain in population in the nation. Actually it showed the sharpest decline, from 7313 to nothing.

They were going to make a forest preserve out of the place, except that it has no trees worthy of the name. Now it is proposed to make it the Sodom and Gomorrah State Park from the two mysterious scenes of desolation there, just seven miles apart.

It is an interesting place, as wild a region as you will ever find, and is recommended for the man who has seen everything.

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