



Lovecraft fans to celebrate his work and influence

By Michelle R. Smith

ASSOCIATED PRESS

PROVIDENCE — If you've enjoyed the works of Stephen King, seen the films "Alien" or "Prometheus," or heard about the fictional Arkham Asylum in Batman, thank H.P. Lovecraft, the early 20th century horror writer whose work has been an inspiration to others for nearly a century.

The mythos Lovecraft created in stories such as "The Call of Cthulhu," "The Case of Charles Dexter Ward," and "At the Mountains of Madness" has reached its tentacles deep into popular culture, so much that his creations and the works they inspired may be better known than the Providence writer himself.

Lovecraft's fans want to give the writer his due, and this month are holding what they say is the largest celebration ever of his work and influence. It's billed the "NecronomiCon," named after a Lovecraft creation: a book that was so dark and terrible that a person could barely read a few pages before going insane. The Aug. 22-25 convention is being held in Providence, where he lived and died — poor and obscure — at age 46 in 1937.

Howard Phillips Lovecraft was born in 1890. His parents both died in an insane asylum, his father when Lovecraft was just 8 years old, said S.T. Joshi, who has written a biography of Lovecraft and edited several collections of his work. He attended just three years of high school, leaving because of a nervous breakdown, Joshi said. Besides a brief and unhappy marriage that took him to New York from 1924 to 1926, Lovecraft lived his whole life on Providence's East Side, close to Brown University. He wrote his most significant work after returning to Providence, publishing many of his stories in the magazine *Weird Tales*. He barely scraped together a living but developed a wide network with fellow writers through letters, and wrote an estimated 80,000 of them in his lifetime.

Lovecraft said several times he

could not live anywhere but Providence, a sentiment reflected in the gravestone his fans put up decades after his death: "I AM PROVIDENCE," a line they took from letters he wrote. The grave in a city cemetery is often visited today by fans, who leave trinkets or notes behind.

He combined horror with science fiction and developed what is commonly referred to as cosmicism, the idea that man is inconsequential in the universe, that there are forces that defy human understanding in the cosmos, represented by gods or creatures who are far more powerful than us but also indifferent to us.

"A lot of these creatures have baffling physical properties that don't fit into our perceptions of natural law. For him the most terrifying thing that could happen is to defy our understanding of the known laws of physics," Joshi said.

His most famous creature is Cthulhu (commonly pronounced kuh-THOO'-loo). He likens it to an octopus, dragon, and human caricature. In "The Shadow Over Innsmouth," he writes of a race of creatures that are a cross between fish, frogs, and man. The story inspired a Metallica song, "The Thing That Should Not Be."

Lovecraft's writing is detailed and dense. He weaves in historical and architectural references throughout his stories, many of which are set in his beloved hometown. In Providence, most of the buildings he wrote about are still standing, said Niels Hobbs, 43, a marine biologist who is among those organizing the conference.

"When you walk the streets of Providence, especially College Hill, his old neighborhood, you can see Lovecraft's Providence. It's simply everywhere," he said.

Even so, many Providence residents have no idea of Lovecraft's connection with the city and his importance in literature. There are no Lovecraft museums or prominent markers in the city.

His fans hope to change that with





this week's conference, which will include walking tours of Lovecraft's old haunts, the unveiling of a new Lovecraft bust at one of his favorite places, the Providence Athenaeum, and panel discussions on Lovecraft's work, even the negative aspects. He was steeped in the past and suspicious of change, and like some of his contemporaries was racist and anti-immigrant, themes reflected in his stories including "The Shadow Over Innsmouth."