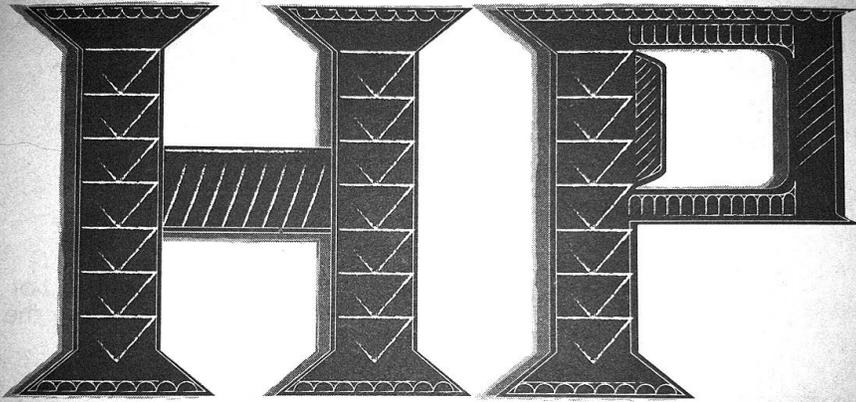


FEATURE:



CTHULHU'S CALL STILL ECHOES

by Adam Schirling

A century ago, a man walked the tranquil east side streets of our capitol city. He was a quiet, unassuming man. He was a man who would be vastly unappreciated in his time. He was an author and poet with a fascination for chemistry and astronomy. And he was a man who had peered deep into the dark canyons of his macabre psyche to become one of the most prolific and influential horror and science fiction writers of the 20th century. The name of this Providence native son was Howard Phillips Lovecraft—H.P. for short—and he was the father of weird fiction.

Lovecraft fans come from all cuts of life. His appeal is vast. His work has influenced some of the greatest creative minds of our time such as Stephen King, John Carpenter and Clive Barker. His themes of fate, guilt, forbidden knowledge and humanity under attack are unmatched in their ability to mesmerize generation after generation. Yet at the same time, I can hardly think of any other writer who maintains such a cult following so long after death. Many talented wordsmiths are unappreciated in their day and become cherished authors after their passing. With H.P., his ever-growing fan base has not peaked nor ebbed and flowed; it has climbed steadily since the day he first put pen to paper in an effort to silence the demons scratching at his nightmares. Lovecraft fans are much like the cults H.P. writes of in his Cthulu Mythos – fanatical, undying and growing in number daily. But

how can one author so long after still command such a reverence from a fan base so vast while maintaining ever-growing pop culture popularity?

I asked this question of Niels Hobbs, of the Lovecraft Arts & Sciences Council of Providence, RI. Niels is the director of the biannual NecronomiCon convention that celebrates all things H.P. He told me, "It's difficult to attribute it to any one particular factor. Of course, it took some decades before he really began to gain any particular notoriety outside of a very small Weird Fiction community. After some cult popularity in the 60s and 70s, due in large part to the tenacious campaigning of friends of his, Lovecraft began to be recognized in the popular culture. Stuart Gordon's movies and Sandy Petersen's role-playing games, coupled with a strong resurgence in Lovecraft scholarship from S.T. Joshi and many others, has lead to a steady increase in his fame and recognition. However, I think the biggest factor now is the democratic power of social media."

Indeed, the legacy of the father of cosmicism is well-established on social media. Fan pages and Twitter feeds attributed to H.P. fandom are plentiful. There, die-hard Lovecraftians can praise their literary demi-god while bringing fresh meat into the fold.

The best example of a 21st century Lovecraft fan is Rhode Island tattoo alternative model and burlesque dancer Jeselyn Online. She has chosen to honor the genius of H.P. one step further than most by permanently inking his likeness to her flesh at Marco's Tattoo in Wakefield. When I asked her why, she replied, "I don't just have one, I technically have three! The first was a tattoo based on the old school design of Miss B Haven. We turned her into Cthulhu and it says San-Loss. The second was the portrait of H.P. on my shoulder with one tentacle. And the third was a tentacle on the side of my head that goes down onto my neck. It's just a deep-seated love of his work that made me want to get it done. And fellow geeks and fans absolutely adore them."

Niels Hobbs again had great insight into this phenomenon of young, hip fans of Lovecraft. "It really is astonishing! This stuffy old New England blueblood aristocratic wannabe who was largely a failure in life but created this remarkable collection of tales that finds more and more fans every day. It's remarkable, particularly, because he certainly didn't write in the most approachable style. I think the biggest factor is that

the Pantheon of Elder Gods and alien creatures he created still stand head and shoulders (or pseudopods and tentacles) above anything that Hollywood or most other imaginative authors produce to date.”

One of the major hallmarks of the greatest writers in history has been the ones who connect with the city around them, the ones who let the blood and soul of the pocked streets sink into their marrow. They taste the essence of the city on their lips, and they breathe it back into the atmosphere. The utter humanity of these urban centers fills their being and their words with a staunch industrial, yet organic fluidity. There is no doubt that the quiet, chilly streets of Providence greatly influenced H.P. on his journey into the madness of weird fiction. Where else but Providence, the long-time haven for artists, merchants, sailors and writers, could have birthed a man who not only led us down the path of cosmic horror so ghastly, but did so with such New England stoicism? Nowhere will you find a city more enamored with H.P. than Providence. In 1977, local fans discontent over H.P.'s name being inscribed on the Philips plot of his mother's family raised the money for a headstone of his own in the historic Swan Point Cemetery. On this is inscribed the words "I am Providence," a quote from a letter of personal correspondence. The Rhode Island Historical Society holds walking tours around his East Side haunts. And now, in 2013, the Providence City Council is beginning to thank H.P. for his influence on our fair city by voting to rename the corner of Angell and Prospect streets H.P. Lovecraft Square.

I asked Niels, "Many people say that H.P. was shaped by his life in Providence. After so many years after his death, why do you think the city council is just now choosing to honor H.P. with the renaming of a square on the East Side?"



illustration by Zach Becker

“Well, part of it is the hard work and dedication of several local diehard fans who've been struggling for years, back to the original NecronomiCons held more than a dozen years ago, to keep the flame of Lovecraft burning. And, it certainly seems to really be burning bright right now. I think Providence, as a city, is finally starting to wake up to the realization that Lovecraft is a major asset for the city – both financially, with a global canvass, and culturally, as our very own literary star. As the fame of Lovecraft begins to reach into the stratosphere, with rumors of ever-increasing pop culture prominence (Guillermo del Toronto and Alan Moore!), Providence will do well to claim this fame all for itself!”

But what does the average citizen on the street think about the dark master of sci-fi? I asked native New Englander Mark Leighton what he could say about the man. “My dad once said his stories were the only thing ever in print that actually made him scared to shut the lights off. Coming from a tough guy from Maine, who seemed like nothing could ever rattle him, that made me want to read them even more.”

That, friends, is how the cult continues to grow and breathe and expand. Much like the horrific monsters that haunted H.P.'s

dreams, the swarming beast that is his fan base will continue to feed on the hearts and minds of all those young souls who are handed a book from an older Lovecraftian, along with a wink. For they know all too well from their own introduction into the cosmos of the mind of a quiet man from the East Side of Providence, who taught the world to be afraid of the monsters that lurk beneath the waves, in the stars, and indeed deep in our own hearts: Once you are in the cult, you cannot leave. You are now a missionary for the macabre prophet of the cosmic indifferences to humanity. You are the air that H.P. breathed as he walked the streets of the East Side. You are Providence.