PROVIDENCE, R.I. — "Searchers after horror haunt strange, far places," wrote Howard Philips (H.P.) Lovecraft, but increasingly those searchers are haunting the crowded, historic streets of Providence, looking for Lovecraft himself.

Lovecraft, who spent his entire life in the Rhode Island capital except for a short, unhappy marriage in New York, looms ever larger in the city's firmament, with a convention in his honor this summer drawing attendees from around the world, plans for a life-sized bronze bust of his likeness, and new editions of his stories being printed every year.

All of which is ironic for the man Stephen King called "the twentieth century horror story's dark and baroque prince," since Lovecraft died penniless at the early age of 46, his work little known outside a small circle of admirers.

It was two of those friends, August Derleth and Donald Wandrei, who founded Arkham House Publishers to collect Lovecraft's stories in a single volume shortly after the writer's 1937 death from stomach cancer.

An Armed Forces edition of his work during World War II helped spread the word even more, and before long Lovecraft — despite the disdain of critics like Edmund Wilson, who famously accused the Providence scribe of "bad taste and bad art" — had become the Edgar Allan Poe of the 20th century.

His work has been translated into more than 30 languages, and his dark visions have been hailed by critics ranging from Jorge Luis Borges to Joyce Carol Oates, who edited a collection of his stories.

Lovecraft has inspired movies, role-playing games, writers ranging from Michael Chabon to Roberto Bolaño, and even people who take the fantastical monsters and strange cults in his tales as documentory accounts of real life instead of the imaginative handiwork of a thoroughgoing rationalist.

For too long, though, Lovecraft has been a relatively obscure presence in his hometown. A small plaque was erected near Brown University's John Hay Library on the centennial of Lovecraft's birth, but there's no Providence equivalent of something like the Mark Twain House to alert visitors that Rhode Island nurtured a writer hailed from Europe to Latin America as a 20th century master.

Thankfully, that's changing. Devotees can now take guided walking tours of Lovecraft sites around Providence conducted by the Rhode Island Historical Society, which typically offers the tours around March 15, when Lovecraft died, and near his Aug. 20 birthday. This year, the spring tour will be offered on March 23, according to Barbara Barnes, tourism services manager for the society.

The walk is being timed to coincide with a March 21 talk on Lovecraft and atheism by Niels Hobbs, the organizer of the Necronomicon convention scheduled for Aug. 23-25 in Lovecraft's honor.

"It's just really neat to be able to say this city is the center for all things Lovecraft," Barnes says.

The tour — a vigorous walk lasting between 90 minutes and two hours around Providence's College Hill neighborhood — takes in both sites associated with Lovecraft's life, like the house where he spent his last years, and those he wrote about, like the famous "Shunned House" he depicted as a haunted dwelling of a vampire-like creature.

"One of the great things about the walk is that almost everything he wrote about in his Providence stories and his letters has been preserved," Barnes says. "You read the description, you look up, and it's all there."

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The tours, which also take in some of Providence’s gorgeously restored Colonial homes and breathtaking views of the city, have drawn people from all over the country, and from as far away as Europe and South America, Barnes says.

“They’re popular tours, and I think the interest is growing,” she says.

Anyone interested in attending this month’s tour should contact Barnes at bbarnes@rihs.org; the cost is $10 per person, and people with limited mobility should note that College Hill is aptly named both for the presence of two major institutions of higher learning, and for its sometimes steep inclines. The tour begins at the John Brown House Museum where you should make sure to ask the guide about the tree root that ate Roger Williams’ corpse; you won’t be disappointed.

Self-guided tours are also popular. Books like Jason Eckhardt’s “Off the Ancient Track: A Lovecraftian Guide to New England and Adjacent New York” (soon to be back in print) and Henry Beckwith Jr.’s “Lovecraft’s Providence and Adjacent Parts” give the eager sightseer all the information necessary to gaze upon the structures found in stories like “The Call of Cthulhu” and “The Case of Charles Dexter Ward.”

A key attraction this year — and the reason the Historical Society is planning multiple tours in August — will be the NecronomiCon, a convention named for an imaginary tome of forbidden lore Lovecraft mentioned in many of his stories, which Hobbs says has already sold out its block of rooms at the stately Biltmore Hotel. The convention will feature workshops, panels, concerts, film screenings, and a guest list that’s a who’s-who of Lovecraft scholars and contemporary horror writers.

“Our goal from the start has been to bring a far greater Lovecraftian presence back to the city he adored,” writes Hobbs.

Lovecraft is also buried in Providence, and it’s a virtual certainty that there will be some kind of celebration at his grave on or near his birthday. Previous festivities have included several dozen people gathering to recite from his works, sing self-penned songs based on his stories, and even eat pastries baked in the shape of the madness-inducing monsters from his tales.

But bear in mind these activities are viewed with varying degrees of displeasure by the private owners of the Swan Point Cemetery, where Anais Nin and a roster of Rhode Island worthies are also buried. Their disposition is not improved by the occasional numbskull who conducts a nighttime occult ritual near Lovecraft’s grave; someone even tried to dig up the old gent’s bones a few years ago.

Such shenanigans have no place in the genuine fan’s itinerary, especially this year: between the walking tours, the NecronomiCon, and a spate of Lovecraft-inspired movies running at an Aug. 17-18 film festival organized by the Arkham Film Society, there should be plenty to occupy those “searchers after horror” mentioned by the man himself.

**Online**

**Rhode Island Historical Society**
http://rihs.org

**NecronomiCon Providence**
http://necronomicon-providence.com

**Arkham Film Society**
http://arkhamfilmsociety.blogspot.com
ABOVE LEFT: Matt Bartlett, of Northampton, Mass., descends the steps of the Providence, R.I., home immortalized by the writer H.P. Lovecraft as "The Shunned House" in a story of the same name. TOP RIGHT: Gravestones rest close to historic homes in the churchyard of the Cathedral of St. John in Providence, R.I. Lovecraft, who lived nearby, would sit on graves here and compose rhymed acrostics. ABOVE RIGHT: A basket of cookies baked in the shape of the monster Cthulhu and the Elder Sign, from the stories of H.P. Lovecraft, is passed out at a graveside birthday party for the writer on Sunday, Aug. 19, 2012.
LEFT: The Fleur-de-Lys Studios, now the property of the Providence Art Club, a stop on the H.P. Lovecraft walking tour conducted by the Rhode Island Historical Society. The building, which looks much the same as it did during Lovecraft’s lifetime, plays a key role in his famous tale, "The Call of Cthulhu."

ABOVE: A Catalan-language translation of the stories of H.P. Lovecraft, one of countless editions of his stories available in more than 30 languages. When the Providence, R.I. author died in 1937, his work was little known outside a small circle of friends and admirers.

BELOW: A plaque erected in Lovecraft’s honor sits in front of Brown University’s John Hay Library in Providence, R.I., where many of the writer’s papers are kept.

Tom Breen / For the Journal Inquirer