HAVE YOU MET H.P.?

NECROMONICON PROVIDENCE RESURRECTS LOVECRAFT

BY PHILIP EIL

If you live in Rhode Island in 2013, it is increasingly inexcusable not to know H.P. Lovecraft.

We don’t mean “know” Howard Phillips Lovecraft, personally; the man The New York Review of Books once dubbed “The King of Weird” has been dead 76 years.

And we’re not even suggesting you have to be a fan of the author, whose stories can lead readers into dank, fetid, underground spaces or the depths of madness, and often feature slimy, murderous aliens, sea creatures, and/or reanimated corpses. Some people will simply never slap a “CHULUUH IS MY HOMEBUY!” bumper sticker on their Chevy.

But to be unfamiliar with the “Old Gentleman of Providence,” whose words echo in cinemas and libraries all over the world — and whose fictional monsters, rest assured, are being passionately discussed on social media at this very second — is to ignore an ever-expanding piece of our state’s cultural significance. If local high school teachers haven’t included “The Shunned House” on their syllabi by now, then perhaps we should convince the DMV to add questions about R’leyh and Azathoth to the written test at the end of driver’s ed.

There are many reasons for our adamantancy on this issue, but, for now, we’ll point to just three.

First is the fact that, in the years since his 1937 death from intestinal cancer, Lovecraft has ascended to superstardom. The man whose work appeared only in pulp magazines like Weird Tales and Astonishing Stories in his lifetime has now been canonized in the Library of America alongside Abraham Lincoln, Jack London, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. His works have been translated into nearly 30 languages, including Japanese, Polish, and French.

The Lovecraft merchandising industry — from shot glasses to key chains to Cthulhu masks and “Arkham Sanitarium” white lab coats — seems to expand by the hour. And, nowadays, Lovecraft counts among his fans Metallica, Stephen King, and the 2013 blockbuster Pacific Rim’s, director Guillermo Del Toro, who told The New Yorker in 2011 that an adaptation of Lovecraft’s novella The Mountains of Madness was the film he most desperately dreams of making.

A second fact worth noting is that, perhaps more than any other American author, Lovecraft is inextricably tied to his hometown. The man strayed from Rhode Island a few times on sightseeing adventures and a brief, ill-fated marriage in New York. But mostly, he lived here and he loved it here. Again and again, he describes the city in his work. There, in his poem “Providence” are “centuried domes of shining gold” and “A rotting wharf where gambrel roofs/Keep watch above the sea.”

There, in his novella, The Case of Charles Dexter Ward, is a character whose “head swarm curiously as the vehicle rolled down the terminal behind the Biltmore, bringing into view the great dome and soft, roof-pierced greenery of the ancient hill across the river, and the tall colonial spire of the First Baptist Church limned pink in the magic evening light.”

A letter the author wrote upon his return in 1926 stands as perhaps the most passionate homage to the city ever written. As the train nears its destination, Lovecraft breathlessly ticks off its progress — “a hiss of air brakes — a slackening of speed — surges of ecstasy and dropping clouds from my eyes and mind — HOME — UNION STATION — PROVIDENCE!!!” — before announcing, when he finally stands on the “holy ground” of his birthplace, that “there is no other place for me. My world is Providence.” He goes on like this for pages. Finally, and most urgently, is fact that, this upcoming weekend, more than a thousand of Lovecraft’s most obsessive fans will descend on Providence for NecronomiCon, a reboot of a bygone, smaller conference in his honor that was held in Danvers, Massachusetts and Providence. It is these fans — and, if we can briefly be a tad cynical, their wallets; the Providence Convention & Visitors Bureau estimates they’ll bring more than $600,000 in direct spending — who provide the strongest reminder of how Providence is the undisputed center of the Lovecraft Universe.

Traveling to NecronomiCon will be people like the Washington state-based writer and filmmaker, Jason Brock, who says “Providence is to Lovecraft aficionados as Mecca and Medina are to the faithful of Islam . . . it looms large in their mental landscape.”
It's people like Mallory O'Meara, a veterinary technician from Newburyport, Mass., who tell us that she and her boyfriend are "absolutely in love" with Providence and they "would have never visited if it wasn't for Lovecraft." They're trying to move here, she says.

It's people like Sean Branney, founder of the H.P. Lovecraft Historical Society (the Facebook group with more than 7,000 members) who is traveling with a contingent of fellow fans from Southern California. At his organization's website, cthulhulives.org, visitors can download vintage replica Providence postcards featuring Brown University's Van Wickle Gates and City Hall. "He might have sent notes on postcards just like these!" the page reads.

Also hopping on a plane to Rhody is Willum H. Pugmire, poet laureate of NecronomiCon, who wrote us a gushing email from Seattle about what the "Genius of Providence" means to him. When he visited Providence in 2007, he says, he walked the streets from College Hill to Federal Hill with a diary in hand, scratching impressions as he went. Some of those notes turn up in his latest book, Bohemians of the Sesqua Valley, which he'll be reading from at NecronomiCon.

As for this upcoming trip, "I think that I shall be so inspired by the city when I visit . . . that I'll be able to write an entire book of horror stories set therein," he says. "In dark of night, I shall attempt to venture out for solitary midnight strolls through areas near to the Biltmore, strolling beside the river and contemplating the things that swim and crawl beneath the water."

Fellow Rhode Islanders: when Willum Pugmire & Co. arrive in our capital city, let's greet them not with confused stares, but with a cosmic, slimy, multi-tentacled, madness-inflected hospitality that would make Lovecraft proud.

**CHTHULU AND BEYOND**

When the Phoenix covered the 75th anniversary of Lovecraft's death last year, we — and various local Lovecraftians — offered more questions than answers. Where are the statues in Lovecraft's honor? The museums? The gift shops? The "Tentacle Trail" leading visitors to the First Baptist Church, Fleur-De-Lys Studios, and other buildings that figure so prominently in his writing? We printed the underlying question on our cover: "Are Rhode Islanders finally ready to recognize Providence-born H.P. Lovecraft's legacy as a horror writer hero?"

It's a testament to the exponential growth of Lovecraft's reputation (and the tireless work of some of those local fans) that, only a year later, there are numerous visible answers to these questions. Today (August 22), the Providence Athenaeum will unveil a bronze bust of the man that will make its permanent home at the library. (The Kickstarter campaign to fund this bust nearly doubled its $30,000 fundraising goal.) A few blocks away, at the corner of Angell and Prospect streets, another permanent tribute has recently been installed: a green metal street sign reminding passersby that they have arrived at "H.P. LOVECRAFT Memorial Square." In addition, Brown University recently christened the S.T. Joshi Endowed Research Fellowship — named for the preeminent Lovecraft scholar and biographer — that, beginning in 2015, will fund annual "scholarly work with the world renowned resources on Lovecraft" available at the John Hay Library.

But, of all of these tributes, NecronomiCon Providence is by far the biggest. The convention, to use an obvious metaphor, is a monster. It spans two concerts at Lupo's, three gallery exhibitions, four hotels, 30 some-odd panel discussions, walking tours, a handful of film screenings, a WaterFire populated by Lovecraft-themed Naoz Lab creatures, and a costume ball in the Biltmore ballroom.

A $75 three-day pass or $30 one-day pass will give guests access to everything from scholarly presentations like "Attempting to Untangle the Mind, Body, and Phallus in Lovecraft's 'The Thing On the Doorstep,'" panel discussions like "HPL's Phobias — Race, Class, and the Outsider," and to a special cordoned-off area at the Hotel Providence dedicated solely to Lovecraft-related gaming.

(For the uninitiated, Lovecraft has an enormous presence in the board game and role-playing game worlds — most notably via the game, The Call of Cthulhu. "It's a horrible game, in a way," convention director Niels Hobbs explains. "You basically play a protagonist in a Lovecraft story and, if you've read a Lovecraft story, you know it doesn't end well . . . You're playing someone that gets weaker and weaker and more insane and probably loses an eye over the course of playing and eventually has to get locked up in a loony bin or gets gobbled up by a monster.

Meanwhile, in addition to convention-specific programming, there are plenty of events that will be open to the public: midnight screenings of films like Dream Quest of Unknown Kadath and Cthulhu Mansion at the AS2O0 Black Box, for example, or the Friday night Eldritch Ball at the Biltmore where guests are encouraged to come dressed as their favorite Lovecraftian creature.

Indeed, if you've driven around Providence in recent days, it's likely you've seen evidence of what convention organizers have been calling the "Month of Lovecraft." At Books On the Square in Wayland Square there's a prominent display case overflowing with various Cthulhu tchotchkes (cell phone charms, breath mints, water bottles, Christmas tree ornaments), collections of Lovecraft stories, Lovecraft travel guides, and HPL spinoffs like Young Lovecraft comics and Tales from Lovecraft Middle School: Professor Gargoyle. At the swank Providence Art Club on Thomas Street, the gallery's usual ambiance — polished wood
floors, soft jazz with tinkling pianos playing from speakers, guests in blazers and ties chatting in the nearby dining room — has been invaded by paintings with unpronounceable names like "Tsathoggua" and "Shub-Niggurath" and sculptures of gnarled, rotting hands preserved under glass cases. At the Big Nazo Lab behind City Hall on a recent afternoon, a fluttering "TO DO" list was taped to a table: "GIVE TOP SHOGGOTH EYE TENTACLES, ADD SOME WARTS . . . PAINT 'ANGRY PLANT' HEAD MASK SHELL GREEN."

As for NecronomiCon, who are all these people who will swarm into the city? Historically, HPL fans have been stereotyped as nerdy and male. But if the analytics for the convention's Facebook page (6800-plus "Likes") are any indication, Hobbs says, Lovecraft fans now include men and women from all over the world.

Emails we swapped with a NecronomiCon attendee traveling from Illinois corroborated this. His name is Reber Clark and he's coming to perform the music and sound effects of "icy polar winds" and "strange subterranean monsters" to accompany the H.P. Lovecraft Historical Society's live radio theater performance of The Mountains of Madness. In his down time, he says, he'll savor the unique camaraderie Lovecraft fans share.

At events like this, "There is no single focus except for the effect HPL has had in our lives," he says. "I have met heavy metal head-bangers and priests (Catholic and Episcopal), pagans and plumbers, biblical scholars and atheists."

"Somehow," he adds, "we are all united by this cosmic perspective that Man may exist in an impersonal universe that cares not one whit for his existence." ☺

NecronomiCon Providence runs through August 25. According to event organizers, non-reserved passes will be available on a first-come, first-served basis. Go to necronomicon-providence.com for details.

AWESOME ART John Coulthart's Cthulhoid will be on display.
'MY WORLD IS PROVIDENCE' HPL in 1930.
From Dam Bor to T'yog

EXCERPTS FROM AN H.P. LOVECRAFT ENCYCLOPEDIA

The star of NecronomiCon Providence is, of course, Howard Phillips Lovecraft. But unless some seriously freaky Lovecraftian stuff takes place this weekend, H.P., himself, will not actually show up.

This means that the walking, talking, breathing star of the convention will be a man named S.T. Joshi: prolific literary scholar and critic: editor of countless Lovecraft collections; author of the definitive Lovecraft biography, I Am Providence: The Life and Times of H.P. Lovecraft; and NecronomiCon's "Revered Scholar."

Joshi will be ubiquitous during the convention. He's scheduled to appear on more than 15 hours' worth of panels (from "History of Lovecraft Literary Criticism" to "Lovecraft's Essays and Poetry" to "Weird and Fantastic Poetry") and he'll co-deliver the convention's keynote address at First Baptist Church alongside Providence Mayor Angel Taveras on Thursday, August 22.

For the sake of those who won't be attending his "Intro to HPL" panel on Friday morning, he was kind enough to grant us permission to quote selections from his An H.P. Lovecraft Encyclopedia, published by Hippocampus Press and co-written with David E. Schultz.

Some of the entries have been edited and condensed.

"BEAST IN THE CAVE, THE" | Juvenile story (2500 words); first draft written in the spring of 1904; final draft completed April 21, 1905...A man slowly realizes that he is lost in Mammoth Cave and may never be found. He wavers between resignation at his fate and a desire for self-preservation; but when he begins shouting to call attention to himself, he summons not the guide who had led his tour group but a shambling beast whom he cannot see in the blackness of the cave but can only hear. In attempting to protect himself from the creature he hurls rocks at it and appears to have fatally injured it. Fleeing from the scene, he comes upon the guide and leads him back to the site of his encounter with the beast. The "beast" turns out to be a man who has been lost in the cave for years. HPL notes that he spent "days boning at the library" (i.e., the Providence Public Library) in researching the locale of the tale. Mammoth Cave in Kentucky.

BOR, DAM | In "Collapsing Cosmoses," an operator of a "cosmoscope" who sees a dangerous enemy approaching the planet from outer space.

BRIDEN, WILLIAM | In "The Call of Cthulhu," a sailor on the crew of the Emma who, seeing Cthulhu, goes mad and later dies.

DEATH DIARY | HPL's so-called death diary (written January 1-March 11, 1937) is mentioned in his obituary in The New York Times: "As he neared the end of his life, he turned his scholarly interest to a study of his own physical condition and daily wrote minutely of his case for his physician's assistance. His clinical notes ended only when he could no longer hold a pencil." The diary does not survive.

"DESPAIR" | Poem (40 lines in 5 stanzas), written c. February 19, 1919. First published in Pine Cones (June 1919).

A brooding, pessimistic poem speaking of "Sweet Oblivion" to be found "beyond the groans and grating/Of abhorrent Life." HPL notes that the poem was written in response to the illness of his mother, who had suffered a nervous breakdown and would soon be transferred to Butler Hospital, where she would die two years later.

LETTERS, LOVECRAFT'S | Shortly after his death HPL's longtime friend Maurice W. Moe wrote "If there is ever a survey to determine the greatest letter-writer in history, the claims of Lovecraft deserve close investigation."...

The number of letters written by HPL has been a matter of debate. L. Sprague de Camp (Lovecraft: A Biography [1975]) casually estimated a figure of 100,000, but this is probably too high. HPL stated in 1936 that he wrote 5 to 10 letters per day, "if we assume that he maintained this ratio over his literary career (1914-36), we arrive at 42,000 to 84,000 letters. Given that HPL was probably not considering the vast number of postcards he wrote during his travels, the total figure is probably closer to the higher than the lower amount. But mere numbers do not tell the whole story. What makes HPL's letters remarkable, beyond their sheer quantity and size, is their extraordinary candor; their abundance of wit, humor, satire, and persiflage; and their exhaustive and penetrating discussions of a wide range of topics including philosophy, literature and literary theory, history, art and architecture (especially of colonial America), and the contemporary political, economic, cultural, and social trends of the nation and the world.

NECROMONICON | Mythical book of occult lore invented by HPL...When asked later in life by James Blish why he did not write the Necronomicon himself, HPL noted that in "The Dunwich Horror" he had cited from page 751 of the work, making the writing of such a book a very extensive undertaking. We wisely added: "one can never produce anything even a tenth as terrible and impressive as one can awesomely hint about. If anyone were to try to write the Necronomicon, it would disappoint all those who have shuddered at cryptic references to it." This has not stopped several individuals over the past twenty-five years from producing books bearing the title Necronomicon, some of which are indeed clever hoaxes but surely very far from HPL's own conception of the work.

© 2013 PROVIDENCE PHOENIX
All Rights Reserved.

Account: 8266PW (16154)
RI-34
For reprints or rights, please contact the publisher.
PHT'NYA-L'HII | In "The Shadow over Innsmouth," she is the wife of Obed Marsh and great-great-grandmother of Robert Olmstead. According to HPL’s notes, she was born 78,000 B.C. Olmstead meets her in the dream that convinces him to join his forebears and to live forever in Y’ha-nthlei under the ocean.

SLAUNWITHE, DR. THOMAS (1885-1932) | In "Winged Death," a physician who discovers an insect whose bite is fatal and that supposedly takes on its victim’s soul or personality. He uses the insect to kill a colleague. Dr. Henry Moore, but later finds that he is pursued by an insect that appears to exhibit Moore’s personality. When he himself dies, his own soul enters the body of the insect, and he tells of his plight by dipping his insect body in ink and writing his message on the ceiling.

TYOG | In "Out of the Aeons," the millennia-old petrified mummy housed in the Cabot Museum of Archaeology in Boston. The curator of the museum, Richard H. Johnson, thinks that the mummy is that of a man spoken of in Von Junzt’s Black Book. This man, Tyog, attempted to scale Mount Yaddith-Gho on the continent of Mu 175,000 years ago to free the people from the tyranny of the god Chatanothoa, but was turned to stone (with his brain still living) by the god.

ULL | In "Till A’ the Seas," a young man who, in the distant future, becomes the last surviving member of the human race. After tending to Mladdna, an old woman, until she dies, he seeks out what he believes to be another colony of human beings beyond the mountains, but finds it full of decaying skeletons. He dies shortly thereafter by falling into a well.