

Festival to draw fans of horror legend H.P. Lovecraft to his home turf

August 18, 2013 01:00 AM

By Bill Van Siclen

Journal Staff Writer

bvansicl@providencejournal.com

PROVIDENCE — If you believe the official accounts, horror writer H.P. Lovecraft died 76 years ago in 1937. Yet in a plot twist worthy of one of Lovecraft's supernatural tales, the Providence-born author's reputation continues to grow even from beyond the grave.

Consider these recent signs of a Lovecraft revival:

One of Lovecraft's biggest fans, Stephen King, is on a roll this summer, with a new book ("Joyland") and a hit television series ("Under the Dome"). In interviews, King has repeatedly praised Lovecraft, calling him "the greatest horror writer of the 20th century."

Another Lovecraft fan, director Guillermo del Toro, released "Pacific Rim," a sci-fi thriller that contains several elements — notably a race of giant slime-spewing monsters who emerge from a parallel dimension — that comes straight from the Lovecraft playbook.

This month Providence is hosting its first-ever "NecronomiCon," a four-day celebration of Lovecraft's life and work. The event, which includes everything from scholarly talks and presentations to Lovecraft-themed art exhibits and walking tours, takes place Thursday through Sunday at locations around the city. (For a full list of events, visit necronomicon-providence.com.)

"It's kind of an amazing transformation," says Niels-Viggo Hobbs, one of the organizers of this week's NecronomiCon Providence. "For a long time, it was almost as if people were afraid to acknowledge Lovecraft's influence. Then, all of a sudden, he's everywhere."

To illustrate his point, Hobbs cites the growing number of conferences,

conventions and other events devoted to Lovecraft and his work. So far this year, the cities of Rutland, Vt., Portland, Ore., and Tampa, Fla., have all hosted Lovecraft-related events. Los Angeles, meanwhile, is holding its fourth annual “H.P. Lovecraft Film Festival” beginning next week.

The Lovecraft brand is also doing well internationally. In June, Lovecraft fans in France staged the “Colloque: Presence de Lovecraft,” a two-day conference devoted to Lovecraft’s impact on contemporary films and illustration. Among the topics: Lovecraft’s influence on the movie “Alien” and the arcane mythology (much of it centered on a group of ancient gods known as The Old Ones) that informs many of his best-known tales and stories.

Sweden, meanwhile, is a veritable hotbed of Lovecraft love: according to Hobbs, the Swedes have already hosted two separate Lovecraft festivals this year.

“Yeah, I don’t know why but they really seem to like him there,” he says. “On the other hand, there’s always been a very strong Lovecraft fan base in Europe.”

Sadly, the same can’t be said for Lovecraft’s reputation in the United States. Though he enjoyed modest success during his lifetime, his famously dense writing style and his penchant for obscure words such as “noisome” (smelly), “cenotaph” (tomb) and “ichor” (liquid) ask a lot from potential readers. Then, of course, there are the stories themselves — a strange literary brood filled with tales of demonic possession, walking corpses and ancient gods who demand grisly sacrifices from their adherents (and who might actually be visiting aliens in disguise).

Today, such stories might fuel a summer’s worth of Hollywood blockbusters. But in Lovecraft’s day, they were often consigned to small-circulation magazines with names like “Weird Tales,” “Wonder Stories” and “Fantasy Magazine.”

“He’s definitely an acquired taste,” says Hobbs, who, like many Lovecraft fans, first read the author’s stories as a teenager. “But once you start looking at the impact he’s had — not just on other writers, but on filmmakers, artists, musicians — he’s really been hugely influential. A lot of what we now call dark fantasy or weird fantasy starts with him.”

Howard Phillips Lovecraft was born in Providence on Aug. 20, 1890. His father, Winfred Scott Lovecraft, was a traveling salesman who specialized in what were then two of the city’s signature products: jewelry and precious metals. His

mother, Sarah Susan Phillips Lovecraft, was a New England blueblood who traced her roots back to the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

Unfortunately, whatever joy the family felt didn't last long.

In 1893, Lovecraft's father suffered a breakdown during a business trip to Chicago. He was brought back to Providence and placed in Butler Hospital. Five years later, he died — possibly from complications related to syphilis — never having rejoined his family.

Other problems soon followed. In the early 1900s, the Lovecrafts were forced out of their longtime home at 454 Angell St. after suffering a series of financial setbacks. (They wound up in much smaller quarters just down the street, at 598 Angell.)

In 1908, Lovecraft was forced to leave Hope High School after suffering what he later described as a “nervous breakdown.” In 1919, Sarah Lovecraft herself was hospitalized for “hysteria” and depression. She died in 1921 after undergoing gallbladder surgery.

Despite these setbacks — or perhaps because of them — Lovecraft spent his childhood immersed in books. He recited poetry at age 3, wrote poems at age 6 and had published several of his own stories and poems by the time he was 8. He also read widely, devouring everything from “The Arabian Nights” to books on chemistry and astronomy.

Much of this material would eventually find its way into Lovecraft's most enduring work: the dozens of Gothic-style horror stories he wrote between 1917 and his death in 1937.

In particular, Lovecraft turned out to be adept at capturing the subtle shades of horror, able to register every gradation of fear from mild shock to mounting panic to sheer terror to outright madness. He was also one of the first horror writers to give his work a backstory, inventing a series of faux-mythical gods and creatures that reappear in story after story.

“I think that's one of the things that really makes him feel contemporary,” says Hobbs. “It's not just that you're telling a story that might be scary or terrifying in itself. It's that the story itself takes place against much bigger backdrop that might

be even more terrifying.”

As it turns out, Hobbs knows a thing or two about scary things. A marine researcher by training, he’s spent the past few years studying the effects of non-native plants and animals along the New England coast. “We’ve definitely seen some strange stuff,” he says.

Hobbs says he first got the idea for a Lovecraft conference several years ago, after realizing that no such event existed in Lovecraft’s own hometown.

“It just seemed weird that there were Lovecraft events all over the world, but none in the city where he lived and worked,” Hobbs explains.

Despite being a first-time event, NecronomiCon Providence will offer a wide array of Lovecraft-related events and activities. Last week, for example, Hobbs and other organizers opened three separate exhibits devoted to Lovecraft-inspired artworks and illustrations. The exhibits, all of which run through the end of the month, are at the Providence Art Club and the Granoff Center for the Creative Arts on the East Side and at Julian’s restaurant on Broadway.

Other highlights include a weeklong series of Lovecraft-inspired films, an opening night ball on Friday at the Biltmore Hotel and a series of walking tours of Lovecraft-related sites led by guides from the Rhode Island Historical Society.

For more hardcore fans, the convention also features a series of scholarly talks, workshops and panel discussions at various sites around Providence.

Prices for these events range from \$30 for a one-day pass to \$75 for a three-day pass to \$400 for a special “Gold Key” pass that, according to the conference website, grants visitors access that “the human mind simply may not be able to comprehend.”