

Something Weird This Way Comes: NecronomiCon PVD is revived



Photo credit: Todd Chicoine / LASC

NecronomiCon Providence is a four-day convention held in the city Aug 18-21, calling itself the “International Festival of Weird Fiction, Art, and Academia.” Previously held every two years since 2013, due to the pandemic it skipped 2021 and resumes in 2022.

The name is a pun combining the “con” of convention with the fictional “book of the laws of the dead” imagined in the 1920s by horror author HP Lovecraft, native and resident of Providence.

“NecronomiCon has become this international destination for fans and devotees of Weird fiction, from Lovecraft up through myriad modern authors and artists who come to Providence as a nexus for the community of fans of Weird,” said **Niels Hobbs**, “keeper” (director) of the event. “Weird is one of those things that’s in the eye of the beholder, but I think of it as kind of a special Venn diagram overlap between horror, science-fiction and fantasy. But it’s also its own genre of fiction. Sometimes it’s easier to point to examples rather than definitions, but there are literally hundreds of active authors who could be, maybe, categorized as Weird in some way. Some of them are more horror, some more sci-fi.”

“Lovecraft’s work inspired a host of creative minds, most notably Stephen King, who declared him ‘the greatest horror writer of the twentieth century,’ as well as Guillermo del Toro, Neil Gaiman, Jorge Luis Borges, and Metallica,” according to a statement from the organizers of the event, which “includes discussion panels, academic talks, author readings, theater performances, gaming, film screenings, and a month-long art exhibition.” In an interview, Hobbs cited the Duffer brothers and their hit show “Stranger Things” as exemplars of Weird.

Guests of honor in 2022 include editor Ann Vandermeer, Argentine artist Santiago Caruso, writers Gemma Files and Cassandra Khaw, game designer Oscar Rios, Canadian filmmaker and critic Kier-La Janisse, British podcaster Jonathan Sims, and the convention's own poet laureate Bryan Thao Worra. Over 2,000 attendees from over 20 countries typically attend.

The convention events take place at a number of different venues throughout the downtown area. "That's one of the reasons why the official name of the convention is actually 'NecronomiCon-Providence' because it says much about Providence and the uniqueness of Providence and the weirdness of Providence. Rather than just have it, say, in the Convention Center where everyone's stuck inside of a cement building, so it could be in Kansas as well as it could be in Providence, we actually make the people that come to Providence have to wander the streets and see an amazing city. We use something like a dozen different venues and that makes attendees and guests have to explore Providence, and we've never had complaints about that," Hobbs said. The focus has evolved away from Lovecraft specifically and more toward the broader field of the Weird, Hobbs said, although "there's very much Lovecraft at the root of it, people actually being able to come to a city and see the landmarks that inspired Lovecraft and places where he wrote."

"One of the things we try to do is kind of overwhelm people with choices. So at any given time, there's three or four different panel discussions going on. There's probably other things happening. There's film screenings... walking tours of Lovecraft-related sites, and any number of other things, and also just social interactions happening. It's sort of two different things. If people are coming and attending the convention, try to just pop around and enjoy different things. There's also gaming going on [where] people can drop in and play a game for a few hours. But we also try to have open programming that anyone from the general public can just walk in and check out some films, pay ten bucks for the day and you see all the films that are screening or pay five bucks and you can go into the vendor hall. Buy some Weird stuff for your Weird friends," Hobbs said.

Asked, "How many capital-W Weirdos do you get versus lowercase-w weirdos?" Hobbs answered, "It's one of the reasons why I think people enjoy Providence so much. I mean, Providence is such an amazing, quirky town. I think it's such a beautiful, unique city. We have people come from 20 different countries usually, and they come and immediately fall in love with Providence history, its creative aspect. So they're our kind of Weird I should say."

Lovecraft, who died in 1937, has been widely criticized for racism and xenophobia ("HP Lovecraft: His Racism in Context," by Michael Bilow, Aug 14, 2019). "It's a challenge, but we really tried hard, especially over the last few iterations of the convention, to make people know this isn't strictly about Lovecraft. There will never not be some aspect of Lovecraft in the convention there. There simply has to be, it would be silly to not include him. But for a while, we've been realizing there's so much more to Weird fiction. There's so much more to Providence than strictly Lovecraft that we can't keep doing the same program over and over again. I come from an academic background, help stage science conferences and such. So my view is very much that of an academic: Lovecraft isn't a sacred cow, he is somebody that we should discuss, warts and all. I think that there's a lot - millions of people around the world - who revere his writing," Hobbs said.

"People in Portugal consider Lovecraft one of the world's preeminent authors, which is an astonishing thing. Coming to our store in Providence: we have people from China, we have people from Argentina, we have people from Spain, Italy, all these countries and from all these ethnic backgrounds that Lovecraft himself may have been, frankly, terrified of, yet they have found something special in his

fiction. The convention really tries to give a home for everybody and acknowledge the flaws and, at the same time, acknowledge that he is this remarkable, influential author, and then also look beyond that to all the latest authors and the artists who are now expanding the field of fiction. Many of them don't draw any influence [from Lovecraft], but they're still kind of in the umbrella of Weird," Hobbs said.

Asked to comment on the satirical *Lovecraft Country* by Matt Ruff, set in the 1950s and featuring an African American protagonist who is an ardent fan of Lovecraft, Hobbs said, "I personally think it's great. I know there are some people that disagree and there's also people that completely agree with me that think the book - and then the HBO series that came from it that Misha Green made - are amazing, and I think it's the right blend of pastiche but also making it relevant and important and making some kind of commentary out of it." Hobbs continued, "It gets some criticism because it includes a bit of modern politics. I don't think that's at all a bad thing. I think that anything that makes Weird fiction and Lovecraftian fiction relevant today, I think it's a good thing."

Jordan Peele, who is Black, and his Academy Award-winning (for Best Original Screenplay) anti-racist satire film *Get Out* also falls within the scope of Weird, Hobbs said. "Jordan Peele is another great example. He is an old nerd who grew up enjoying all the kinds of fiction. One of the things that he'll say is, when he was a kid, it was hard to find that kind of Weird or sci-fi stuff, where he could see himself. Now there's many more Black authors, Black filmmakers, artists that are starting to represent a much more complete picture. I personally, I'm kind of psyched that they incorporate Weird sci-fi, Weird horror elements. I'd love to get Jordan Peele to become a guest of honor for us."

"When people come into our store [in the Providence Arcade] and they're like, 'What are you? What is weird fiction?' We basically can list all these things that they've been watching that they've been enjoying for the past several years, past decades or more, going back to the *Twilight Zone* and before that, are absolutely things that fall under the umbrella," Hobbs said.

Because of the pandemic, the convention itself has faced increased costs, and uncertainty affecting everything from supply chains to airline travel will have unpredictable effects. "When we first started selling passes, we were just excited to have something to look forward to. Now I think the realization is the practicality of travel, especially international travel, is challenging. I'm worried that our international participation won't be as high as it has been.... We'll see how we'll do this year. It'll still be a great convention, but I'm looking forward to 2024 when we can hopefully, fingers crossed, get back to something more normal. By 'normal,' of course, I mean Weird normal," Hobbs said.

As to COVID-19 accommodation, "We are requiring mask-wearing indoors," Hobbs said. "We now live in a world where there's no guarantees, nothing that can foolproof protect us. People making the choice to attend, I'm sure, realize there is some risk, and we just have to do our best to try to mitigate that risk as much as we can. We've decreased some of the room [capacities]. We've actually spread things out more and require mask-wearing." Exceptions to mask-wearing will be speakers while actually speaking, for whom it will be optional, as well as events involving active eating and drinking. "All the hotels have assured us that their ventilation systems are up and running well-filtered. It's nerve racking to put on an international convention and not be able to assure some greater degree of normal safety, but, under the circumstances, I think we're doing the best that we can."

The convention typically has drawn over 2,000, but, Hobbs said, "I'll be perfectly happy if we have 1,500 attendees who have a good time and stay safe. Keep it safe and enjoyable. We were on target to completely overshoot previous records, and we may still be there and we may still break previous

records. But my bigger concern - as long as the bills get paid, which is a huge thing - is that everyone has a good time and stays relatively, reasonably safe as well."

Although committed to running the convention in 2024, Hobbs said he may back away after that. "It's an awful, arduous experience for all of us. None of us really get paid: a few people get expenses covered and stuff like that, and small stipends because they have to give up work or whatever. This has sort of taken its toll on a number of us mentally and physically."

The final event closing the convention is a screening of the Lovecraft-inspired film *The Dunwich Horror*. "The film, it's kind of grown on me. At first, I was like, 'Oh, that film is just terrible,'" Hobbs said. "We do this thing that we've made a tradition now at the Columbus [Theater on Broadway] on Sunday night. It's open to the public, \$5 admission. We call it *The Dunwich Horror Picture Show*. It's kind of our version of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, but even more weird. Not particularly musical at all, but a really strange 1970s psychedelia movie... which is based on a Lovecraft story, but it's very much its own trip from the height of psychedelic filmmaking in 1970. And we screen it from a 35mm print which is slowly degrading more and more and more, and people recite their favorite lines, yelling at the screen as the movie is projected. We have a great time with that. So that's Sunday night at 9pm.... You have a whole room full of people who all, to some extent, know it and can shout along their favorite goofy lines. And there's plenty of goofy lines in it. Meanwhile, Big Nazo is waving tentacles in your face and you have a good Narragansett beer that you're drinking. It's a lot of fun and it's the very last event of the whole convention. It's kind of 'All right, we're done.' Now we could just relax."

When it was pointed out that it would take a lot of Narragansett beers to make that movie watchable, Hobbs said, "We actually are good partners with Narragansett; they've helped us out with a lot of stuff. *Motif* has been an incredible help for us over the years, too. The Providence Tourism Council, Providence Convention Visitors Bureau have been huge supporters and allies for us. We get a variety of private sponsors and public sponsors."

NecronomiCon-Providence is run by the Lovecraft Arts & Sciences Council, a non-profit organization that also operates the store in the Arcade at 65 Weybosset St, PVD: weirdprovidence.org

Passes and tickets for the convention as day-passes for film screenings and access to the vendor hall are available on the web: necronomicon-providence.com/passes-and-tickets

Volunteers can earn free passes and other goodies: necronomicon-providence.com/volunteer