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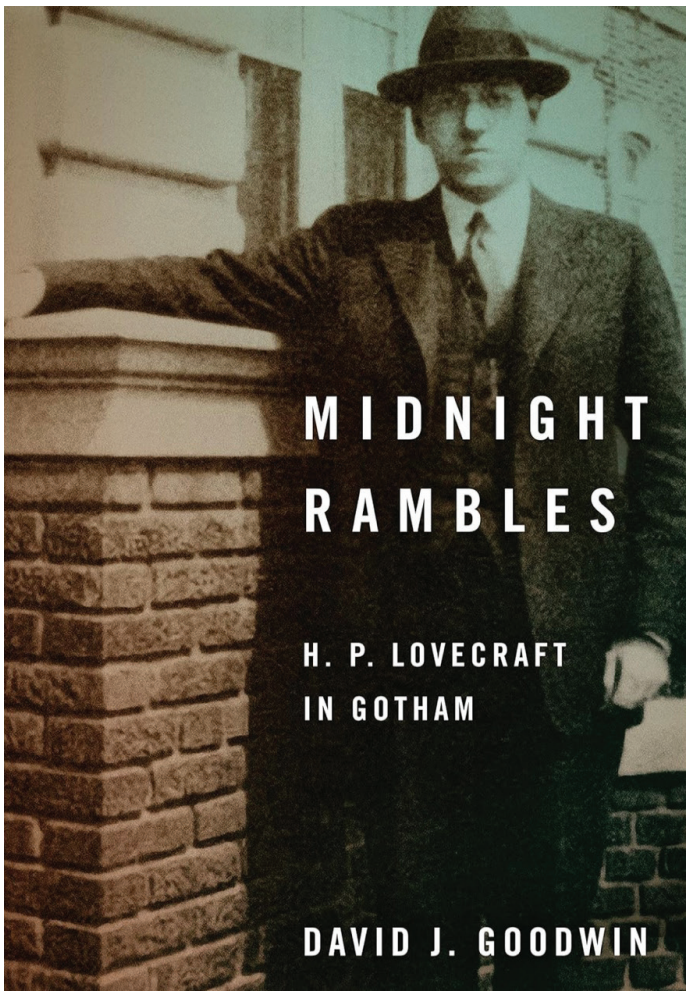
Commentary: H. P. Lovecraft, Gotham, and Food

BY DAVID J. GOODWIN

In a 1935 letter to his fellow pulp fiction author and one-time collaborator E. Hoffman Price, Howard Phillips Lovecraft explained that he "always preferred to use established folklore legends as little as possible" and strove to "invent his own fantastic violations of natural law" (Lovecraft 1976). This statement might surprise both casual and longtime readers of Lovecraft and his genre-breaking horror and science fiction.

Although Lovecraft died penniless and in obscurity in 1937, he arguably ranks as the most influential genre practitioner of the 20th and now 21st centuries. His writings, with their alien monsters and ancient secrets, have fascinated successive generations of fans. His influence seeps into various cultural and media forms. The fiction of Stephen King and Victor LaValle and the films of John Carpenter and Guillermo del Toro all, respectively, bear traces of Lovecraft. During August 2024, NecronomiCon Providence, a biennial conference in the author's Rhode Island hometown, attracted thousands of devotees from across the United States and the entire globe. As his popularity and impact continues to grow, critical attention has been dedicated to examining Lovecraft's reactionary, persistent, and extreme racial, anti-Semitic, and xenophobic beliefs and how they might have informed his work.

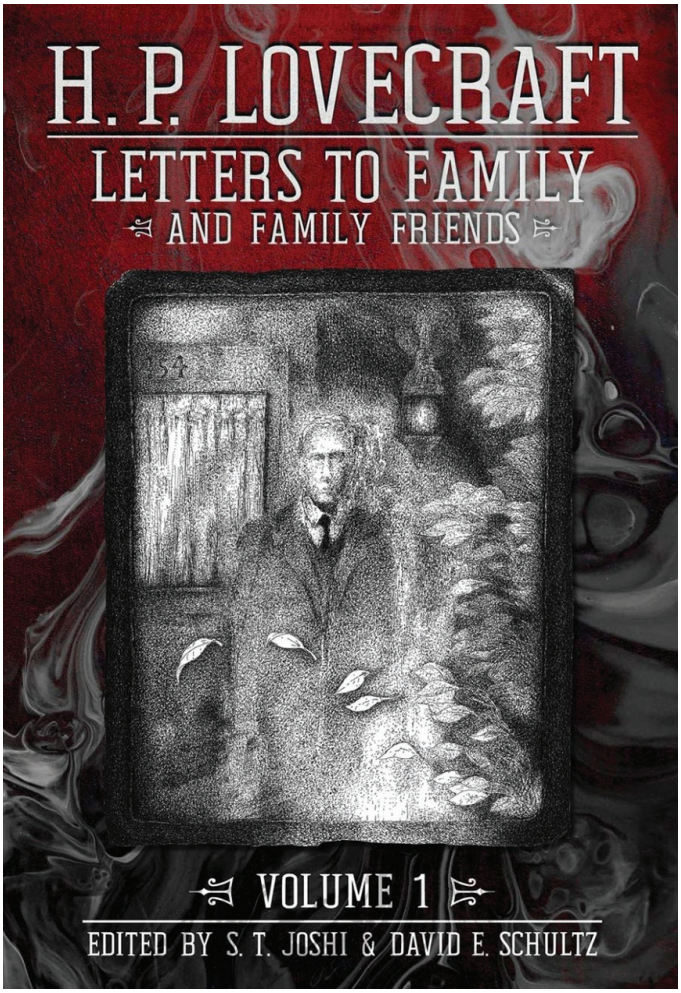
Today, Lovecraft is largely associated with his native New England, and he mined that region's architecture, history, and geography for ingredients for his own writings. Many of his more accomplished and more popular short stories and novellas, such as "The Shadow Over Innsmouth," "The Case of Charles Dexter Ward," or "Pickman's Model," unfold in a realistic and recognizable (yet, admittedly fictionalized) New England, provided with a further authenticity by the inclusion of vernacular architecture, folk speech, and identifiable sites. Although Lovecraft avoided the usage of New England or other traditional folklore in his fiction, he regularly relied upon folkloric mainstays or devices to structure plot or establish atmosphere. A cursed house operates as the central setting for "The Lurking Fear." The format of the legend undergirds "The Whisperer in Darkness."



Lovecraft himself stands as a folkloric (or possibly, "folkloresque") figure because of his own mythmaking during his lifetime and the responses to his work from generations of fans, critics, and writers (Foster and Tolbert 2016). Such a phenomenon highlights the dynamic and often posthumous exchange between an author, artist, or other creative individual and his or her audience, especially one with a cult-like devotion. Lovecraft has been characterized as an asexual loner and a hidebound misanthrope, disinterested in his contemporary culture and world—a man out of time, content to craft fiction within the isolation of his rented rooms in Providence. However, a deep examination of his two years living and writing in New York City distorts, if not outright ruptures, much of the folklore surrounding Lovecraft today.

Lovecraft stepped off a train in Grand Central Terminal in Midtown Manhattan on March 2, 1924—a little more than one hundred years ago—to wed Sonia H. Greene, a Jewish–Ukrainian immigrant, trained milliner, fashion professional, and Brooklyn resident. During his New York period, Lovecraft stood as the central figure of a writing circle known as the Kalem Club. He juggled a full social calendar, sharing part of nearly every day with one or more of its members. He was an avid consumer of theater and cinema. His letters brim with references to advertisements and popular music. These relationships and biographical details complicate various stubborn images of Lovecraft.

Ever the stereotypical impecunious writer, Lovecraft whiled away an inordinate



amount of time in diners, cafés, and coffee shops during his years in New York. A favorite of Lovecraft and his fellow Kalem Club members was the Double R Coffee House, an establishment founded and operated by the direct descendants of former President Theodore Roosevelt. Amid his late-night quests for his beloved colonial architecture in New York neighborhoods, Lovecraft took breaks in Horn & Hardart Automats—self-service cafeterias where diners purchased freshly prepared food displayed within coin-operated glass compartments. He had a favorite Italian restaurant, John's Spaghetti House, near Borough Hall in Brooklyn, and he even sampled Middle Eastern cuisine several blocks away on Atlantic Avenue. As a temporary resident of Gotham, Lovecraft partook in the city's diverse foodways.

Many of these eateries frequented by Lovecraft might be classified as third spaces, separate from home or work, and he looked to them as venues for conversation and socializing. These businesses brought Lovecraft in close proximity with individuals and groups from various and differing backgrounds. Automats were popular with more than struggling writers: Black New Yorkers found them to be a welcoming environment. The Double R Coffee House, beloved by Lovecraft and his literary friends, attracted a distinctive clientele during the late hours: it served as a safe space for Queer men and women. It is not inconceivable that Lovecraft ate a meal in an Automat populated by Black diners or nursed a cup of coffee while drag queens sat at a nearby table in the Double R. However, he never included any mention of such encounters in his letters.

As Lovecraft's literary reputation continues to evolve, and as his writings attract new audiences, fresh and possibly overlooked avenues of criticism and scholarship might be applied to his biography and canon. Lovecraft's New York sojourn, which he looked back on as one of the worst periods of his life, suggests that foodways and its relationship to folklore might stand as one such area for further inquiry into his history and writing. Food arguably exposes individuals to different cultures and chips away at personal prejudices. Lovecraft's literary output reveals that culinary third spaces failed to exert any such an effect on him. He partially attributed his inspiration for "The Horror at Red Hook," composed while he lived in New York and easily his most problematic story, to his interactions with immigrant, working-class, and formerly incarcerated individuals in Brooklyn diners. In "Cool Air," another story written by Lovecraft in New York, the narrator complains about the smells of "obscure cookery" in his boarding house, largely filled with immigrant tenants (Lovecraft 2005). On Lovecraft's wedding day in March 1924, he and his soon-to-be wife enjoyed a leisurely lunch at an Italian restaurant. Lovecraft choose a common ethnic slur to describe the restaurant in a letter to his family, underscoring the stark limitations of culinary exposure and third spaces in diluting Lovecraft's deeply ingrained beliefs (Lovecraft 2020). Racial and xenophobic thinking were just as integral to his personality as a passion for literature and New England. Even the most inviting café or restaurant could not change that.

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