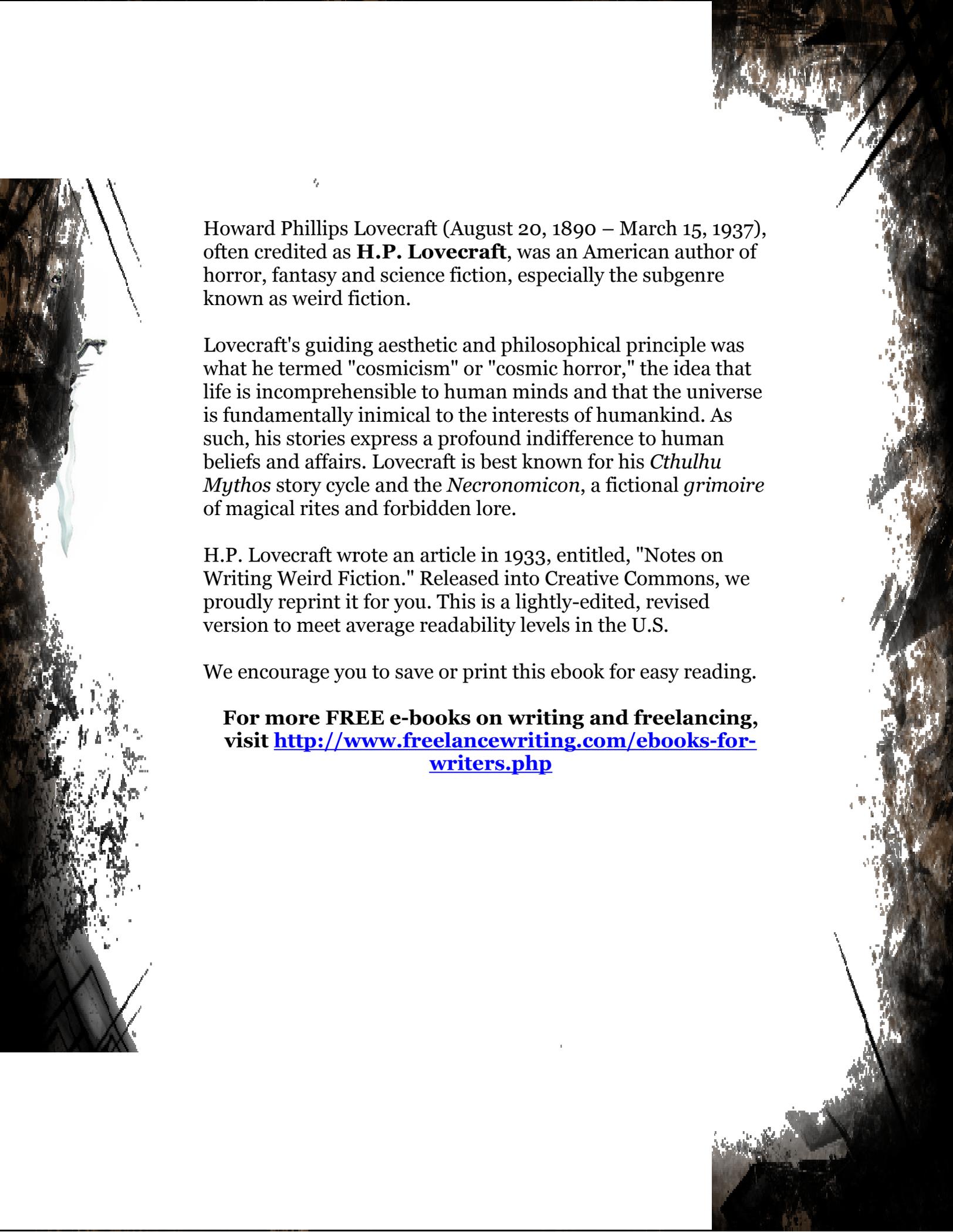


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Howard Phillips Lovecraft (August 20, 1890 – March 15, 1937), often credited as **H.P. Lovecraft**, was an American author of horror, fantasy and science fiction, especially the subgenre known as weird fiction.

Lovecraft's guiding aesthetic and philosophical principle was what he termed "cosmicism" or "cosmic horror," the idea that life is incomprehensible to human minds and that the universe is fundamentally inimical to the interests of humankind. As such, his stories express a profound indifference to human beliefs and affairs. Lovecraft is best known for his *Cthulhu Mythos* story cycle and the *Necronomicon*, a fictional *grimoire* of magical rites and forbidden lore.

H.P. Lovecraft wrote an article in 1933, entitled, "Notes on Writing Weird Fiction." Released into Creative Commons, we proudly reprint it for you. This is a lightly-edited, revised version to meet average readability levels in the U.S.

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# H. P. Lovecraft On Writing Weird Fiction



My reason for writing stories is to satisfy my desire to visualize the vague, elusive, fragmentary impressions of wonder, beauty, and adventurous expectancy. These things are conveyed to me by certain sights (scenic, architectural, atmospheric, etc.), ideas, occurrences, and images which I have encountered in art and literature.

I write weird stories because they suit my inclination best. I have a strong and

*H. P. Lovecraft* persistent wish to—  
momentarily—suspend or violate

the illusion of time, space, and natural law. The natural laws of the universe imprison us, and frustrate our curiosity about the infinite cosmic spaces beyond our sight and analysis. My stories frequently emphasize the element of horror. Fear is our deepest and strongest emotion. *Fear best lends itself to the creation of Nature-defying illusions.*

Horror and the unknown, or the strange, closely embrace one another. It is hard to create a convincing picture of shattered natural law or cosmic "alienage" or "outsideness." One must greatly stress the emotion of fear. The reason why *time* plays a great part in my tales is that this element looms up in my mind as the most profoundly dramatic and grimly terrible thing in the universe. *Conflict with time* is the most potent and fruitful theme in all human expression.





While my chosen form of story writing is a special and narrow one, it is a persistent and permanent type of expression, as old as literature itself. We will always have a small group of authors who are curious about unknown outer space, and a burning desire to escape reality. These authors whisk themselves away into enchanted lands of incredible adventure; they want to experience the infinite possibilities which dreams open up to us: things like deep woods, fantastic urban towers, and flaming sunsets momentarily suggest. Great authors as well as insignificant amateurs like myself—Dunsany, Poe, Arthur Machen, M. R. James, Algernon Blackwood, and Walter de la Mare being typical masters in this field.

**As to how I write a story**—I have no set way. Each of my tales has a different history. Once or twice I have literally written out a dream; but usually I start with a mood, idea or image which I wish to express. I revolve it in my mind until I can think of how I want to embody it in a chain of dramatic occurrences so I can record it in concrete terms. I run through a mental list of the basic conditions or situations which I adapt to a mood, idea or image; and then I begin to speculate, logically and naturally, on the basic condition or situation which motivates the given mood, idea or image.

The process of writing is as varied as the choice of theme and initial conception; but if I were to analyze the history of all my tales, I think it is possible to deduce the following set of rules from the *average* writing process:



1. Prepare a synopsis or scenario of events in the order of their absolute *occurrence*—*not* the order of their narration. Describe with enough fullness to cover all vital points and motivate all incidents in your story. Details, comments, and estimates of consequences are sometimes desirable in this temporary framework.
2. Prepare a second synopsis or scenario of events—this one in order of *narration* (not actual occurrence), with ample fullness and detail, and with notes as to changing perspective, stresses, and climax. Change the original synopsis to fit if such a change will increase the dramatic force or general effectiveness of the story. Alter or delete incidents at will—do not bind yourself by your original concept, even if may alter your entire story. Let anything in the formulating process help you add and your story.
3. Write out the story—rapidly, fluently, and not too critically—following the *second* or narrative-order synopsis. Change incidents and plot whenever the developing process suggests such change, and never restrict yourself by any previous design. If the development suddenly reveals new opportunities for dramatic effect or vivid storytelling, add whatever you believe is advantageous. You may need to go back and reconcile the early parts to the new plan. Insert and delete whole sections if necessary or desirable. Try different beginnings and endings until you have found the best arrangement. Thoroughly reconcile all references throughout the story with the final design. Remove all possible superfluities—words, sentences, paragraphs, or whole episodes or elements—observing the usual precautions about the reconciling of all references.



4. Revise the entire text. Pay attention to:

- vocabulary,
- syntax,
- rhythm of prose,
- proportioning of parts,
- niceties of tone,
- grace and convincingness of transitions (scene to scene, slow and detailed action to rapid and sketchy time-covering action and vice versa... etc., etc., etc.),
- effectiveness of beginning, ending, climaxes, etc.,
- dramatic suspense and interest,
- plausibility and atmosphere, and
- various other elements.

5. Prepare a neatly typed copy. Do not hesitate to add final revisions where they seem in order.

The first of these stages is often purely a mental one: I work out a set of conditions and happenings in my head. I never sit down until I am ready to prepare a detailed synopsis of events in order of narration. Then, too, I sometimes begin the actual writing before I know how I should develop the idea. Rather, I begin forming a problem which I will exploit in my story.

I know of four distinct types of weird story:



- 1) one expressing a *mood or feeling*;
- 2) another expressing a *pictorial conception*,
- 3) a third expressing a *general situation, condition, legend or intellectual conception*, and
- 4) a fourth explaining a *definite tableau or specific dramatic situation or climax*.

In another way, I can group weird tales into two rough categories: 1) those in which the marvel or horror concerns some *condition or phenomenon*; and 2) those in which it concerns some *action of persons* connected with a bizarre condition or phenomenon.

Each weird story—especially horror—seems to involve five definite elements:

- a) some basic, underlying horror or abnormality: condition, entity, etc.;
- b) the general effects or bearings of the horror;
- c) the mode of manifestation—object embodying the horror and phenomena observed;



- d) the types of fear-reaction pertaining to the horror; and
- e) the specific effects of the horror in relation to the given set of conditions.



In writing a weird story I try to achieve the right mood and atmosphere, and place the emphasis where it belongs. A writer cannot present a marvel—an account of impossible, improbable, or inconceivable phenomena—as a commonplace narrative of objective acts and conventional emotions. To make inconceivable events and conditions believable, the writer must maintain a careful realism in every phase of the story *except* that touching on the one given marvel.

A writer must treat this marvel impressively and deliberately—with a careful emotional “build-up” —else it will seem flat and unconvincing. Being the principal thing in the story, its mere existence should overshadow the characters and events. But the writer must make the characters and events consistent and natural, except where they touch the single marvel. In relation to the central wonder, the characters should show the same overwhelming emotion which similar characters would show toward such a wonder in real life. Never take a wonder for granted. Even when my characters become accustomed to the wonder, I try to weave an air of awe and magnificence to what the reader should feel. A casual style ruins any serious fantasy.

Atmosphere, *not action*, is the great necessity of weird fiction. Indeed, all that a wonder story can ever be is *a vivid picture of a certain type of human mood*. The moment a writer tries to make it something else, it



## H. P. LOVECRAFT On Writing Weird Fiction

becomes cheap, puerile, and unconvincing. A writer should emphasize *subtle* suggestions—imperceptible hints and touches of selective associative detail. This technique will help the writer express shadings of moods and build up a vague illusion of the strange reality of the unreal. Avoid bald catalogues of incredible happenings; they have no substance or meaning apart from sustaining a cloud of color and symbolism.

These are the rules or standards which I have followed—consciously or unconsciously—ever since I first attempted the serious writing of fantasy. That my results are successful may well be disputed. But I know, had I ignored these tips in the last few paragraphs, my storytelling would have been much worse. ■





**"At night, when the objective world has slunk back into its cavern and left dreamers to their own, there come inspirations and capabilities impossible at any less magical and quiet hour. No one knows whether or not he is a writer unless he has tried writing at night."**

**H P LOVECRAFT**

American author of horror, fantasy and science fiction

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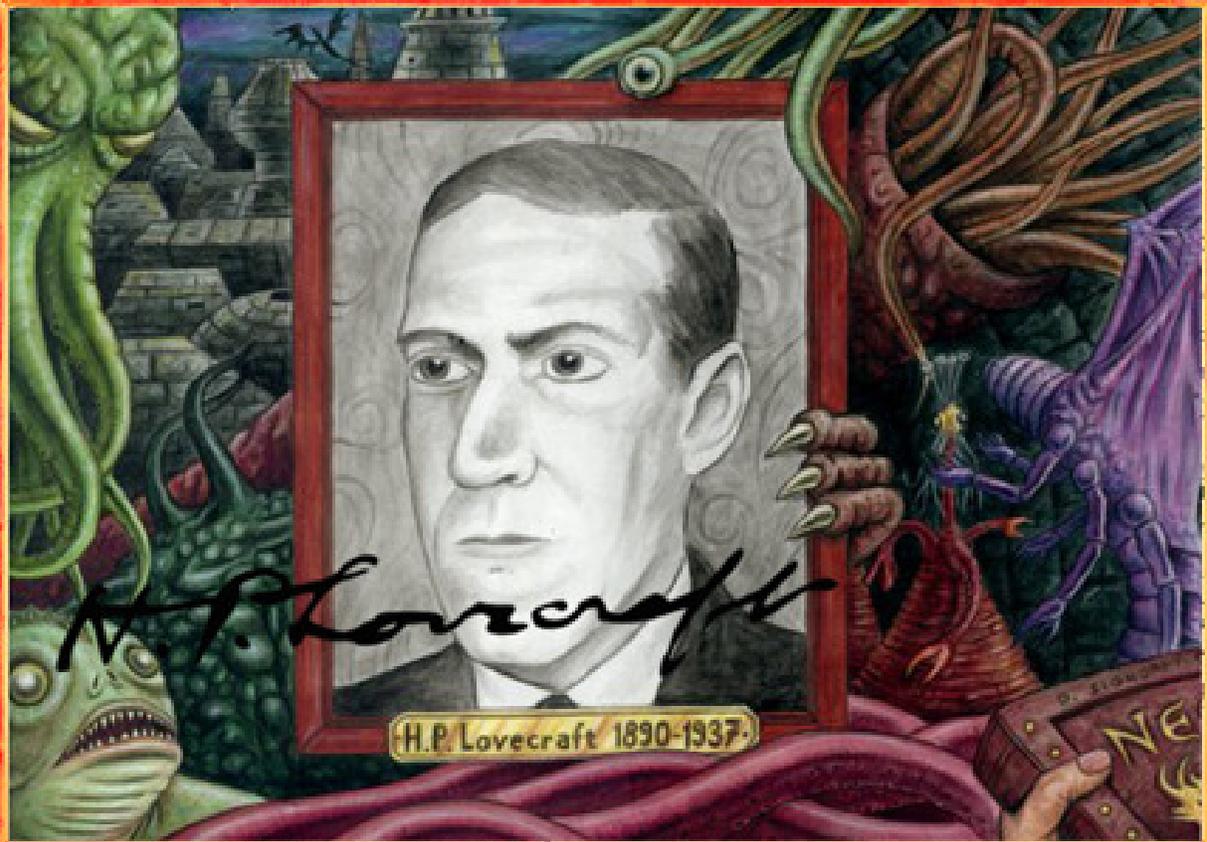
Lovecraft's final home from May 1933 until March 10, 1937, when he was moved to the Jane Brown Memorial Hospital in Providence; where he died of cancer of the small intestine and kidney disease on March 15, 1937. The Samuel B. Mumford House (1825) - 65 Prospect Street - Looking East-South-East.





The gravestone of H.P. Lovecraft, famed 20th-century horror writer.





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