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Philip K. Dick in Orange County, a stranger in a strange land

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PART 1: PHILIP K. DICK, THE LAST DECADE

The last years of his life, _____ lived in, of all places, Orange County, a Southern California setting that made the life-battered sci-fi writer something of a (to borrow from Robert Heinlein) stranger in a strange land. Today, we begin a six-part series looking at those final years. The series is written by _____, the L.A. freelance journalist who runs the West Coast culture blog _____. He's also a longtime (albeit sometimes closeted) fan of science fiction.

When author **Philip K. Dick** called **Tim Powers** to ask him to come by his Fullerton apartment for a drink one evening, the Cal State student expected the kind of night he and other aspiring writers often spent with the science-fiction titan. That is, a wide-ranging bull session about religion, philosophy and the glories of Beethoven — along with some incongruous chatter about car repair — over wine and beer.

That night in 1976 started out the usual way. But it soon took a bizarre turn: While writer and student were chewing the fat, Dick's wife, **Tessa**, and her brother began grabbing things — lamps, chairs, the crib — seemingly oblivious to the two friends.

"She and her brother were carrying things out of the house," recalls Powers. "I said, 'Phil, they're taking stuff, is this OK?' "

"Powers, let me give you some advice, in case you should ever find yourself in this position," Dick responded. "Never oversee or criticize what they take. It's not worth it. Just see what you've got left afterward, and go with that."

“And then,” Powers recalls, “her brother said, ‘Could you guys lift your glasses? We want the table.’”

Dick was an old hand at marital dissolution. Tessa had reached her breaking point with her husband’s infidelity, and that evening was the beginning of what would become his fifth divorce. The author could bounce in and out of love affairs, stints in rehab and drug overdoses — while keeping his cool — better than most.

After Tessa left, Dick told Powers not to stick around for his sake — he’d be OK. But that night, the novelist’s nonchalance would not last. After Powers left, Dick took 49 tablets prescribed for his heart condition, alongside a cocktail of other pills including blood pressure meds. He slashed his wrist and sat in his car, parked in his garage with the door closed, so the carbon monoxide would finish him off.

In other words, he tried to commit suicide three different ways. For a man approaching 50, who’d abused his body with drugs and bad habits for much of his life, it should have been enough to kill him several times over.



But instead, he threw up the pills, and his car stalled. The blood from his wrist clotted. He eventually clawed his way to the mailbox, where he happily found the typeset manuscript to his latest novel, and called the paramedics. After a quick stay in the hospital and two weeks in a psychiatric ward, Dick returned home. The gas fumes, the wrist slash and the pills would almost — but not quite — do him in. (Tessa Dick recalls the scene’s details, which come from Powers’ journals,

slightly differently.)

Dick would go on to publish “**A Scanner Darkly**,” “**VALIS**,” “**Flow My Tears, the Policeman Said**” and other novels now collected by the prestigious Library of America. (The series’ third collection — Dick is the only science-fiction or fantasy writer to be so honored — came out last summer and is a compilation of his late work.)



He was also able to see a reel of special effects from “**Blade Runner**,” the now-iconic film of his 1968 novel “**Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?**” though Dick died three months before the film opened.

He would go on, in the years after his death, to assert his position as one of the key American writers of the ‘60s and ‘70s and perhaps the science-fiction writer whose work most closely anticipates our world today.

That evening in 1976, odd as it may sound, captures the paradox of Dick’s years in Orange County — which seems like an odd setting for a Berkeley bohemian in the first place. Those were the years of his most stable social life, his healthiest living, his fewest divorces and virtually no drugs ... as well as some of the most disruptive and intense experiences of a disruptive and intense life.

Dick’s life and work, which began to resemble and blend into each other during his years in Southern California, are the subject of a new film, “**Radio Free Albemuth**,” starring **Alanis Morissette** and currently

seeking distribution. (The novel, published after his death, and film both offer a character named Philip K. Dick.) “**The Adjustment Bureau**,” an adaptation of an early Dick story starring **Matt Damon** and **Emily Blunt**, is due in the fall, and several other projects — as well as lawsuits over his ever-growing estate — are cooking.

Even with the triple suicide attempt and Dick’s supposed visitation by God in 1974 — an event he recounted in a never-published 8,000-word manuscript — the author’s decade in Fullerton and Santa Ana made up, in some ways, his good years. A French filmmaker who visited during the ‘70s recalls Dick as burly, engaging and charismatic — “a low-culture **Hemingway**.”

“I’d say he made the strongest long-term friendships of his life,” said **David Gill**, a San Francisco literature professor who runs an informative [website about the author](#).

“If you had to pick a period of his life where everything was fitting together, this would be it,” Gill says. “In Southern California, he found good friends, a modicum of literary respectability, relative financial stability and an improved prose style borne of years of full-time writing. He was perfectly positioned to do his most ambitious storytelling.”

It was, then, the author’s most serene period — except when it wasn’t.

– Scott Timberg

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Top photo: Philip K. Dick in the early 1970s. Credit: Isa Dick-Hackett. Bottom photo: Dick-Hackett, the author’s daughter. Credit: Robert Durrell / Los Angeles Times

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