

# Los Angeles Times

## Philip K. Dick in the land of the John Birch Society

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### PART 2: PHILIP K. DICK, THE LAST DECADE

*The last years of his life, **Philip K. Dick** lived in, of all places, Orange County, a Southern California setting that made the life-battered sci-fi writer something of a stranger in a strange land (to borrow from **Robert Heinlein**). This is the second of a six-part series looking at those final years. The series is written by **Scott Timberg**, the L.A. freelance journalist who runs the West Coast culture blog [the Misread City](#). He's also a longtime (albeit sometimes closeted) fan of science fiction. **READ PART 1** [right here](#).*

**Philip K. Dick** arrived in Orange County in 1972 by flying to LAX, where he showed up in a sport coat he'd outgrown, hauling the Jehovah's Witness translation of the Bible and a cardboard box, doubling as a suitcase, tied closed with an extension cord. Dick — who has been described, alternately, as paranoid, hilariously funny, childish and deeply empathetic — was in some of the weirdest shape of his life.

Overall, Dick came to Orange County after a tattered and often erratic life that, though beginning in Chicago in 1928, had been spent almost entirely in the Bay Area.

He grew up mostly in Berkeley, attended the public high school, dropped out of the nearby **University of California** after less than a semester, wrote several failed realist novels and worked in classical record stores — at times reduced by poverty to eating horse meat with his first wife — while

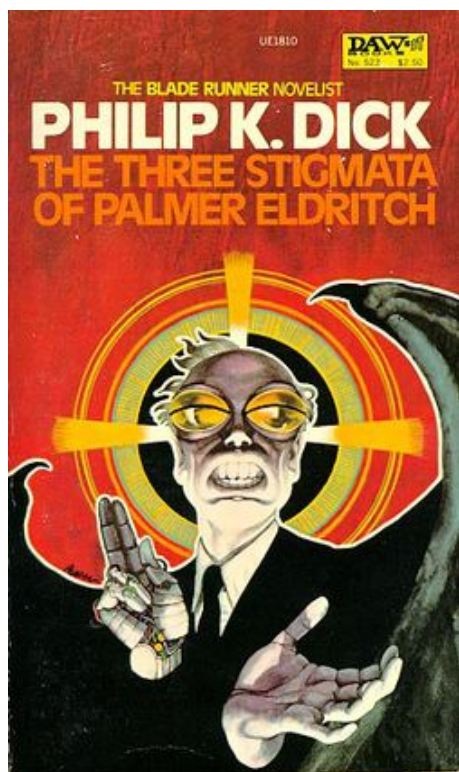
waiting for a literary career to take off. He chose science fiction, he wrote in 1969, because its “audience is not hamstrung by middle-class prejudices and will listen to genuinely new ideas. There is less of an emphasis on mere



style and more on content – as should be.”

During the ‘60s, he’d begun to experience acclaim in the science-fiction world, winning the Hugo, the field’s major award, for “**The Man in the High Castle**” – a novel in which the Axis powers win the war — and writing several dozen novels that made him the wild-man genius of a then-insular fan community. His fame eventually began to spread to the larger bohemian culture: **John Lennon** called Dick from his and **Yoko Ono**’s “[bed-in](#),” for instance, to discuss his hallucinatory philosophic novel “**The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldrich**,” which the Beatle hoped to film.

The mainstream knew little of the author. His daughter Isa, born in 1967, never heard word of him outside the family. “I used to look at his apartment,” she recalls, “see all the books he had there, and wonder if every copy of his books was right there in his apartment. ‘Is he *really* a real author?’”



Still, the Bay Area – Berkeley, Oakland and Marin County – served as home to the writer, until one day in November 1971, when he entered his house in San Rafael after getting groceries. His doors and windows had been blown out, and asbestos floated in a layer of water on the floor. His stereo and many of his papers – stored for security purposes in a half-ton steel cabinet — were gone. To Dick, it was a confirmation of the old joke, “Just because you’re paranoid doesn’t mean they’re not out to get you.”

The author would blame the **Black Panthers**, the **KGB**, neo-Nazis and other assorted culprits depending on which day you asked him; some speculate today that he was entangled in a drug deal that went bad. In any case, he wanted out of there, as soon as possible. When an offer came to appear at a science-fiction convention in Vancouver, B.C., Dick set out for Canada, and, a month later, had not yet returned.

During that time in Vancouver, he wrote to his **Berkeley High** classmate, author **Ursula Le Guin**, who lived in Portland, Ore., asking to visit. But Le Guin, who had small children at the time, was uncomfortable at the prospect of Dick, then at a high point in his drug use, being around her family. Dick had also been corresponding with an English professor at **Cal State Fullerton** who’d asked him to visit.

“Anyhow, if I could make by degrees my way down to Fullerton,” Dick wrote to **Willis McNelly**, “do you think it’s the sort of place I might like to live, at least for a while?”

“You must realize of course,” McNelly wrote back, “that Fullerton is in the heart of darkest Orange County... Upper middle-class suburbia... OC is also the place where Nixon’s representative in Congress is a card-carrying member of the **Birch Society**.” You can see a real friendship developing in the letters between the admiring professor and the novelist trying to recover his bearings. Both men joking back and forth, admitting little insecurities: It seemed like the start of something solid.

But Dick’s next letter came on a new letterhead. “Dear Will, Well it happened, I flipped out. Grief, loneliness, despair, the alienation of being in a strange country in an unfamiliar city.” The letter came from the **X-Kalay**

**Foundation Society**, a rehab facility dedicated primarily to heroin addicts. “Without them I wouldn’t be alive now.”

Dick had been running with some young women in Vancouver; “all three girls, were addicts, and ripped me off everything I owned.” He’d also tried to kill himself. John Birch Society or not, Orange County – from this vantage — didn’t sound so bad at all.

– Scott Timberg



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*PHOTOS: Courtesy of Isa Hackett-Dick.*

<http://herocomplex.latimes.com/2010/01/26/philip-k-dick-in-the-land-of-thejohn-birch-society/> printed on January 1, 2012

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