

# Los Angeles Times

## Philip K. Dick finds God and madness at his doorstep

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### PART 4: PHILIP K. DICK, THE LAST DECADE

*During 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 fourth 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.*

Of course, for all the action of **Philip K. Dick's** Orange County years — the marriage, the divorce, the birth of his son **Christopher**, the suicide attempt, the bouts of depression, the new novels, the development of “**Blade Runner**” — the most significant is surely what the author came to call “2-3-74.”

Those months of 1974 were when Dick either lost his mind completely or was visited, ravishingly, by God. The story has become, for the Dick faithful, as familiar a tale as the **Three Wise Men's** manger visit, and it shows up in at least two novels and numerous letters.

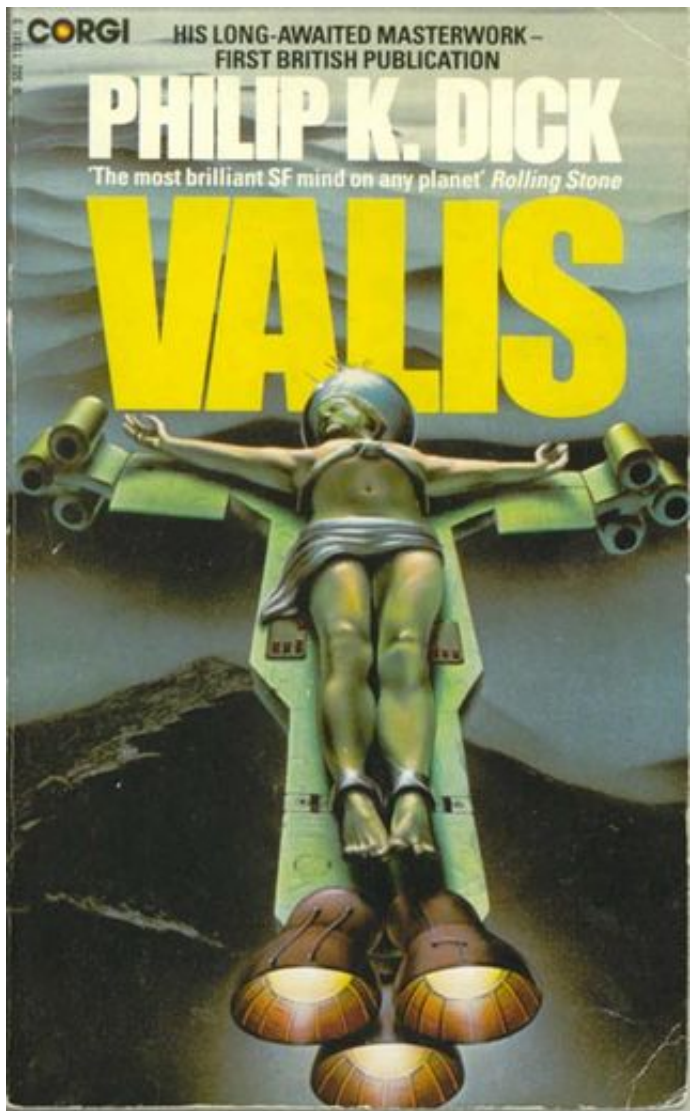
The author had just had an impacted wisdom tooth pulled, and was awaiting the delivery of a painkiller from the pharmacy. “The doorbell rang and I went,” he wrote in a letter to **Ursula Le Guin**, “and there stood this girl with black, black hair and large eyes very lovely and intense.”

A bit stunned by her beauty and perhaps by the possibility of relief from pain, Dick asked about her necklace. “The girl indicated the major figure in it, which was a fish. ‘This is the sign used by the early Christians,’ she said, and then departed.”

Soon after, Dick began having nightmares and visions, many of them of what he called “modern abstract paintings” by [Kandinsky](#) and others. “I did recognize the styles of [Paul Klee](#) and one or two of [Picasso's](#) various periods. ... So I spent over eight hours enjoying one of the most beautiful and exciting and moving sights I've ever seen, conscious that it was a miracle.”

And he began to sketch out a theory — growing in part from his longtime interest in Gnosticism and explained in detail in the novel “**VALIS**” — that he'd been visited by divine interventions. And that what looked like 1970s Orange County, with its looming freeways and earthbound strip malls, was actually First Century Rome. Despite appearances, “The Empire never ended,” Dick wrote, realizing he was an early Christian living as a fugitive in 70 A.D. (VALIS – an acronym for “**V**ast **A**ctive **L**iving **I**ntelligence **S**ystem” — also has a role in both the novel and [upcoming film](#) “**Radio Free Albemuth**.”)

Theories abound on what really happened. To some, it's final proof that he was crazy, or loaded up on more drugs than he admitted to. (Despite a period of heavy pharmaceutical use in the Bay Area, friends and family recall Dick very rarely touching anything stronger than Orange Crush and [Dean Swift Snuff](#) during his time in Southern California, and he became, at times, ardently anti-drug.)



Some see the visions as a true sign of the author's divinity: After all, wasn't the Bible full of this kind of miracle? Tessa Dick, the wife of the author at the time, thinks it may've been caused by the huge stash of electronic equipment in the abandoned condo next to theirs, beaming radiation into their brains; this had been enough to make the radio play when it wasn't plugged in, she says. Others speculate that the author had a mild case of temporal lobe epilepsy, which can produce

visions.

Dick himself went back and forth on the issue, arguing each possibility with equal earnestness. “You know how I am with theories,” the Phil character in “Albemuth” says. “Theories are like planes at L.A. International: a new one along every minute.”

But he knew how his “divine invasion” would come



across. “‘He’s crazy,’ will be the response,” the author, who had an odd ability to detach himself from his own crises, wrote in a letter. “‘Took drugs, saw God. BFD.’”

Who knows? “In the grandest Dickian sense, it’s a mystery that will never be solved,” says David Gill, a San Francisco literature professor who runs a website devoted to Dick’s life and work. “Whether it was real or imagined, it was important to his life because it really mellowed him out. Dick felt, I think, like the Universe cared about him, and that all his suffering had not been in vain.”

Some think that whatever the cause or meaning of the 2-3-74 visions, they were valuable as a way to focus Dick’s thinking and writing. Mysticism and religion — which had interested the author deeply from at least the early ‘60s — became his abiding concerns in the years after his visitation.

The science fiction writer [Thomas Disch](#) once mused darkly on whether Dick could have invented a religion as successful as the [Scientology](#) concocted by fellow scribe [L. Ron Hubbard](#). To Disch, who killed himself in 2008, Dick’s story changed each time he told it, based on the listeners’ expectations.

Disch called him “a professional entertainer of beliefs — and what else is a con man. He wants to turn anything he imagines into a system. And there’s his delight in making people believe. ... The urge to translate every imagined thing into a belief or suspended disbelief is a bit of a jump. Yet it was probably Dick’s ability to sew those things together that was his main strength as a novelist.”

Tessa Dick isn’t sure those weeks of swirling Picassos were good for him. “He became more obsessive after that,” she recalls. “He had been obsessed with [a] hit on his house, and he shifted the focus of his obsessions to his visions. I tried to go along with it ... for a while.”

– Scott Timberg

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*Photos: (second image down) Philip K. Dick with his son Christopher. Credit: Courtesy of the Dick family*

*(bottom) Dick in Orange County in the 1970s. Credit: Courtesy of the Dick family*

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