Philip K. Dick: Reflections on the 30th Anniversary of his Death

Part of: An American Story

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4 comments

Thirty years ago, on March 2nd 1982, one of the greatest ever science fiction writers died a pauper. His work is now well known through adaptations such as Blade Runner and Minority Report. He was Philip Kindred Dick.

This is a short memorial to a much troubled but talented man who wrote more than 40 novels and 100 short stories. Let us talk about his life.

Born on 16th December 1928, within six weeks his twin sister, Jane, had died and here was arguably the most important event of his life. In her death she became the "dark twin" who was to be in his mind constantly. Rather bizarrely, her gravestone also had his name on it, with only the date of his death missing.

His father left in 1938 and his mother then took him to California where she continued to support him both during his early life and into his later years. He had troubles dealing with women, was married five times and never really managed to write well about them.

Yet even during the drug-induced troubles of his later years he asked some of the most important questions of the 20th century.

Questions like “How do we know what is real?” and “How do we rise above the mind set of our times and see things in perspective?”

Paranoia and mental illness came to his later days and he had to confront these demons in an age when mental illness was hushed up.
Interestingly, during his later years he started to have visions about an earlier life, living in the first century B.C. He was in Palestine, living under Roman occupation. For a man who had always questioned what was real these must have been strange experiences.

He suffered a stroke in February 1982 and five days later, on March 2, his life support was turned off. Shortly after this he was buried beside his dead twin sister and the date inscribed on his waiting tombstone.

So let us remember a talented man who tried to see through the many veils of our lives and in so doing left us with some great stories.
I didn’t know that Dick had had such issues - perhaps that’s part of what led to his greatness. While I’d like to be able to claim that Asimov and Heinlein were the two most influential authors in the SF field, it’s beginning to look like - with the possible exception of Clarke - Dick will have had the greatest influence as the decades pass by.

Hello Glenn,

Heinlein helped Dick quite a bit - if my memory serves me right here. Also Dick graduated in the same class as Ursula K LeGuin. A small world indeed.

Colin

An interesting insight into a troubled creative life (sadly, like so many others in history). Written with respect and compassion. I hope others will read this. Thank you.

Hello Shelagh

Thank you for your kind words. It would be a shame if he was just remembered for his Hollywood blockbuster stories. There was a talented and unique man behind the books.

Colin

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