

ILLUSTRATIONS BY Joseph Adolphe

by Patrick J. Kiger

THE UNENDING TALE
OF PHILIP K. DICK

he's one of the most bankable
storytellers in Hollywood—
and very much in the news.

Nearly three decades later,

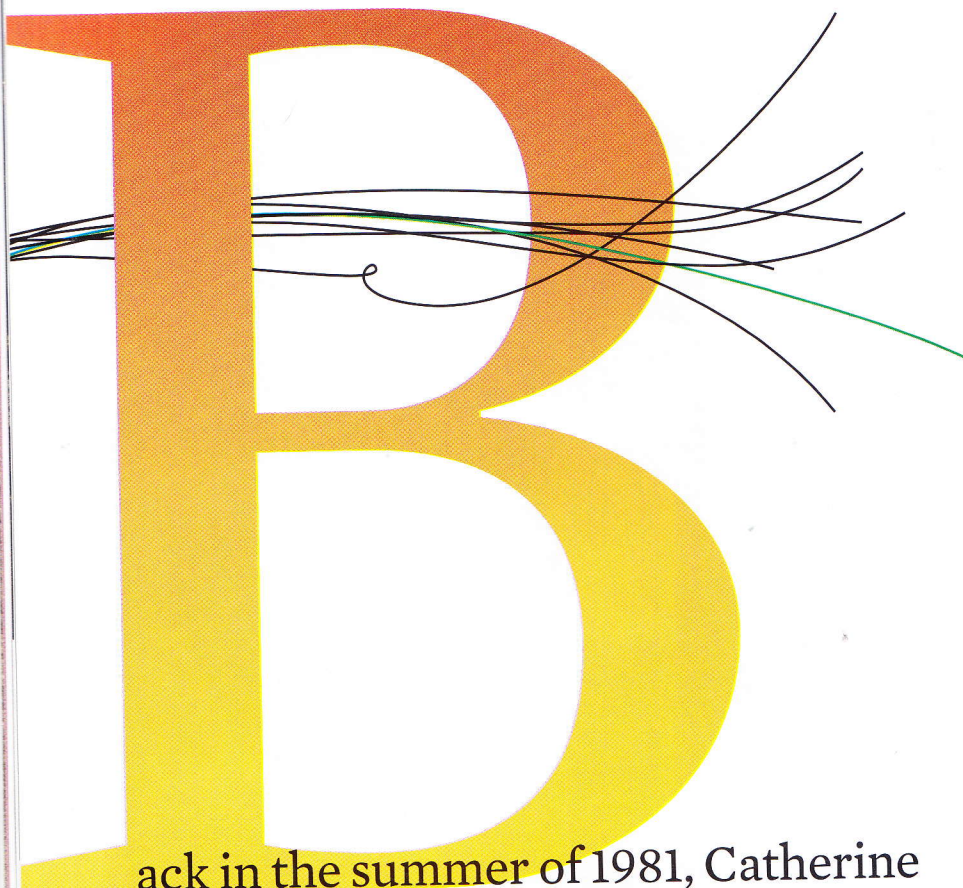
of ardent science-fiction fans.

practically unknown outside a circle

spent his final years in Orange County, and died in his Santa Ana condo in 1982,

most brilliant writers

One of the 20th century's



ack in the summer of 1981, Catherine Cate recalls, she and the other young condo owners at 408 E. Civic Center Drive in Santa Ana had a custom of gathering after work at a table in the building's courtyard. "We'd pour some glasses of wine, or mix a few margaritas or Singapore slushes, and just unwind a little," she says. Occasionally, the casual conversation about their working days took an offbeat turn, when their third-floor neighbor wandered down to join the group.

Phil, as they called him, was pleasant and sociable, but older than his fellow condo residents and a refugee from the Bay Area, where they suspected he may have experimented with a few illegal substances. He had a Berkeley Bohemian dis-

habille—wrinkled clothes, stringy gray hair, dirty fingernails, an apparent indifference to shaving. "Grooming was not his priority," Cate recalls. "And his color was not good. He had an overall aura of not being in the best health." He was pleasant

and convivial, albeit somewhat distracted, as if his mind were somewhere else.

Phil told them he was a writer, though Cate had never heard of him, and mentioned that one of his books was being made into a movie called "Blade Runner." It was when Phil started to talk, though, that she recalls him morphing from just some aging, eccentric anti-yuppie into a visitor from some preternatural, alternative reality. "Flights of fantasy, almost nonsensical," Cate explains. "Sort of 'What if ...?' or 'Have you ever considered this?'"

"At the time, I wasn't a science-fiction fan, so I wasn't familiar with Philip K. Dick," Cate says. "Not really knowing about his writing career, our knowledge of him was really based upon what we saw of him and what we talked about. And he was a very strange person from that perspective ... it was a little bewildering. You'd listen and look at him and think, 'Is this guy on the same planet?' And the answer was probably no."

As Cate learned more of her neighbor's literary notoriety, she had to wonder why one of the most important American writers of the 20th century, a genius that *Rolling Stone* once proclaimed "the most brilliant [science-fiction] mind on any planet," was living in a Santa Ana starter condo. "When he finally told us a little about himself, he emphasized he was seeking privacy," Cate recalls. "In fact, he told us that, should anybody come looking for him, we needed to protect him, to neither confirm nor deny that he lived there. He tried to stay under the radar."

Today, even as Dick's literary legend grows, his connection to Orange County remains obscure. Though he often is thought of as a Northern California writer, he lived his final decade in Fullerton and Santa Ana and wrote several of his most important books—"A Scanner Darkly," "VALIS," and "The Transmigration of Timothy Archer"—during his time here. And Orange County was the place where Dick in 1974 experienced the transcendental visions that, depending on your degree of open-mindedness, either gave him a secret glimpse of a universe with multiple realities and the nonlinear imper-

manence of time, or shoved him out on the crumbly precipice of sanity.

TODAY, NEARLY THREE DECADES AFTER his death in Santa Ana at age 53, Dick has a vastly higher profile. Much of his prolific output—he published 44 novels and 121

Shepherd Productions—the film production arm of the Dick estate founded by his daughters Isa and Laura—and his literary agent Russell Galen. She claims she is being deprived of a share of the earnings from two of Dick's works—his 1977 novel "A Scanner Darkly," which was made into

a movie in 2006, and a screenplay version of "Ubik," which she says the author gave her in their 1976 divorce settlement. Christopher Tricarico, an attorney for the estate, declined to comment, but said in an e-mail he will be "vigorously defending" against the claim, which may mean even more headlines in the months and years ahead.

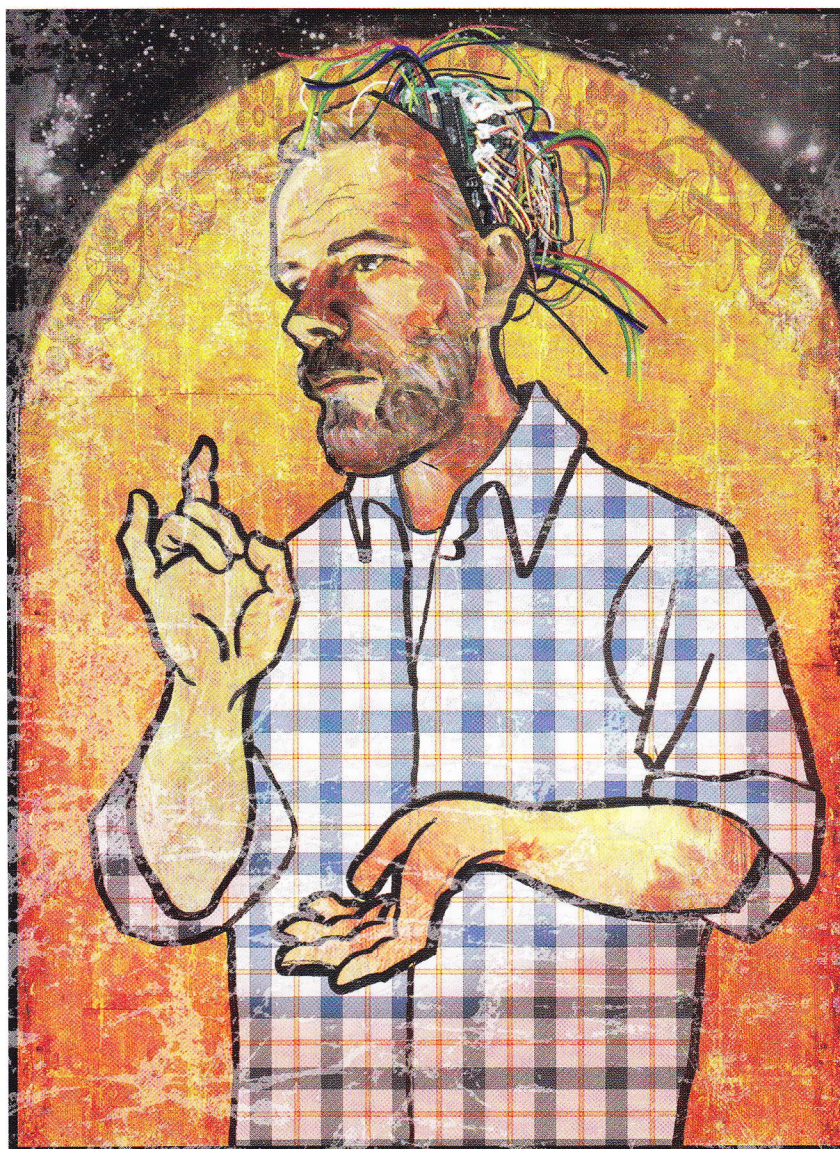
Dickian devotion has grown to such extremes that a few years ago, a robotics researcher built a life-size android version of the author, which, according to a *New York Times* account, "was able to conduct rudimentary conversations about Dick's work and ideas." Fans lined up at conventions for a chance to meet

Fans lined up at conventions for a chance to meet the ersatz Dick, until the android's head was accidentally left in an airline overhead bin, then apparently misrouted by luggage handlers.

short stories—still is in print. Critics hold him in increasingly high esteem, not just as a master of the science-fiction genre in the same league as Isaac Asimov or Ray Bradbury, but as a philosophical novelist who explored the shifting, ambiguous nature of reality and the question of what it means to be human. In 2005, *Time* magazine selected his 1969 novel "Ubik" as one of the 100 most important American novels of all time, and contemporary writers such as Jonathan Lethem cite him as a major influence.

In Hollywood, Dick has become an industry. Nine of his novels and stories have been made into films that collectively grossed more than \$1 billion worldwide, including the 2002 Tom Cruise-Steven Spielberg hit "Minority Report," which generated \$132 million in the United States alone. Many others are in the works, including projects involving big names such as Paul Giamatti and Matt Damon. (See related story, Page 88.) A Web search yields an ever-growing number of sites devoted to Dick's life and work, such as www.philipkdickfans.com and the Total Dick-Head blog (<http://totaldickhead.blogspot.com>).

And Dick again is in the news, thanks to a legal struggle that has developed over the profits from his literary legacy. In April, the author's fifth wife, Tessa Busby Dick, who was with him during his time in Orange County, filed suit against an array of plaintiffs that includes Electric



the ersatz Dick, until the android's head was accidentally left in an airline overhead bin, then apparently misrouted by luggage handlers.

IT MAY SEEM INCONGRUOUS THAT DICK, who for years fueled his writing efforts with amphetamines and described him-

self as a "religious anarchist," would choose to live in what at the time was the nation's most deeply conservative hotbed. "He used to joke about living in the shadow of Disneyland, and about how everything in Orange County was made of plastic," recalls Tim Powers, an award-winning science-fiction and fan-

tasy author who became a friend of Dick's while a student at Cal State Fullerton. "But he seemed to find it convivial. He made some friends here."

And to Dick, who'd become entangled in the darker side of the Northern California counterculture, then-staid Orange County may have seemed like an appealing refuge. "I think he liked the anonymity," Powers says. "Nobody in Santa Ana knew who Philip K. Dick was. He was just this guy going to Trader Joe's [to buy] lunch."

As recounted in "Divine Invasions," Lawrence Sutin's 1989 biography, Dick was in a rough situation when he began looking to relocate in the spring of 1972. At 43, he was coming off four failed marriages, bouts of depression and paranoia, a longtime amphetamine habit, decades of financial struggle, and the respectable literary world's indifference to his work. He hadn't written anything in two years. After his house in San Rafael was burglarized—Dick alternately theorized it was the FBI or CIA, black militants, religious fanatics, or disaffected mem-

The Philip K. Dick Filmography

Dick's novels and short stories are among the hottest commodities in Hollywood nearly three decades after his death. In 2007, the Philip K. Dick Trust and Electric Shepherd Productions struck a deal with the Halcyon Co., owner of the "Terminator" franchise, which gives Halcyon first-look rights at all of Dick's literary properties, as well as the opportunity to develop video games based on them. In addition to the films below, projects currently in the works include a Disney animated version of "The King of the Elves"; a \$62 million adaptation of "Adjustment Team," starring **Matt Damon**; "The Owl in Daylight," a biopic starring **Paul Giamatti**; and "Flow My Tears, the Policeman Said," announced in May by Halcyon at the Cannes Film Festival. An adaptation of "Radio Free Albemuth," starring singer **Alanis Morissette**, is awaiting release.



BLADE RUNNER

(1982) Director **Ridley Scott's** adaption of the 1968 novel "Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?," set in a monstrously decayed Los Angeles, initially struggled at the box office, but the **Harrison Ford** flick has become a cult classic.

TOTAL RECALL

(1990) This **Paul Verhoeven** directorial effort bears little resemblance to Dick's 1966 story "We Can Remember It for You Wholesale." But audiences loved **Arnold Schwarzenegger** as an ex-secret agent. A remake is underway, scheduled for a possible 2011 release.

CONFESSIONS D'UN BARJO

(1992) A French adaptation of Dick's 1975 non-sci-fi novel "Confessions of a Crap Artist," about an eccentric ne'er-do-well obsessed with preposterous theories. An Amazon.com reviewer called it a "very strange movie, at turns comic, harsh, and fantastic."

SCREAMERS

(1995) **Peter Weller** starred in this flop, based on the 1953 story "Second Variety." Miners fighting their former employer on a distant planet create autonomous killing machines, which then turn on them. Critic Roger Ebert said the film depicts a future so grim "it makes our current mess look like Utopia."

IMPOSTOR

(2002) TV stars **Gary Sinise, Vincent D'Onofrio,** and **Tony Shalhoub** were cast in this unsuccessful adaptation of a 1953 story of the same name, about a man accused of being an alien double of himself. *Variety* called it "a penny-pinched 'Blade Runner.'"

MINORITY REPORT

(2002) Directed by **Steven Spielberg** and starring **Tom Cruise**, this adaptation of Dick's 1956 story "The Minority Report," about a future police officer arrested for a crime he has not yet committed, was a huge success critically and at the box office.

PAYCHECK

(2003) **John Woo** directed this **Ben Affleck-Uma Thurman** vehicle, faintly inspired by a 1953 story with the same title about an engineer who plants clues to thwart his employer's erasing of his memory of a secret project. Mixed reviews and mediocre box office.

A SCANNER DARKLY

(2006) Director **Richard Linklater's** adaptation of Dick's 1977 novel about a future undercover narc, played by **Keanu Reeves**, and a personality-fragmenting drug. Critics declared it brilliant, but it opened the same week as "Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest."

NEXT (2007)

Bears almost no resemblance to Dick's 1954 story "The Golden Man," upon which it was loosely based. In lieu of Dick's golden-skinned mutant protagonist, it stars **Nicolas Cage** as a Vegas magician who can see two minutes into the future. Panned by critics, it did well at the box office. —P.J.K.

bers of his circle of drug-using acquaintances—he fled to Vancouver, where he attempted suicide, and then checked into a rehab center to kick drugs and get a respite from the craziness.

Eventually, he turned to Willis McNelly, an English professor at Cal State Fullerton who died in 2003. McNelly was one of the first academics to look at science fiction as serious literature. “Phil wrote to Willis and said, ‘I’ve got nowhere to go,’” recalls Powers, who then was a Cal State Fullerton graduate student. “Several of Willis’ students wrote back to Phil, saying, ‘We just lost a roommate; you can move in with us.’ Such was Phil’s desperation that he said, ‘OK. I’ll get on a plane. Meet me at LAX.’ He didn’t really care where he was going.”

A welcoming committee included his two potential roommates plus Powers and Linda Levy Castellani, another of McNelly’s students, who drove to Los Angeles to pick him up. Castellani recalls that Dick made a striking, if bizarre, impression on her. “Here was this portly, bearded man who looked somewhat like a rabbi,” she says. “He was in a trench coat and was carrying a Bible and a box wrapped in an electrical cord. But the strangest thing was that he never took his eyes off me. The attention was so intense, it scared me to death.” The author, who had a thing for dark-haired women and a tendency to fall in love at a moment’s notice, already was enamored with her.

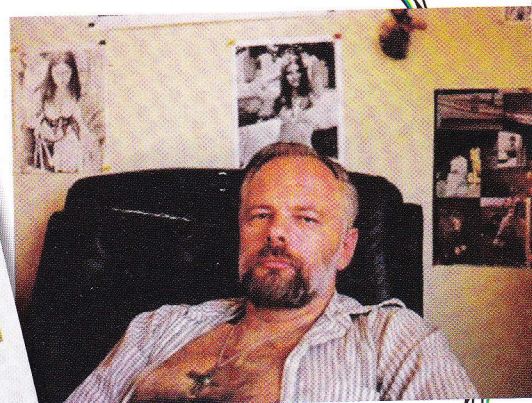
The middle-aged writer soon tired of sleeping on the couch and the expectation that he spring for the students’ groceries, and moved into a two-bedroom apartment with a recently divorced male roommate. Meanwhile, he continued his pursuit of Castellani, taking her to dinner in Los Angeles with sci-fi great Harlan Ellison and suddenly shocking her with a marriage proposal. “He and Harlan were having this intense conversation and I was just listening, when Phil handed me this thick envelope,” she recalls. “It was this amazing letter—a scary sort of good, page after page about how wonderful I was, and at the end, it said, ‘P.S. Will you marry me?’” Castellani ultimately



The author and Tessa Busby Dick in front of their Fullerton apartment in 1973, “the most wonderful time of my life,” she says.

Tessa snapped this photo of her husband in 1974, at their home on Cameo Lane.

A reporter interviews the android of Philip K. Dick at NextFest 2005 in Chicago.



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rejected Dick’s romantic advances, but the two remained friends and talked on the phone regularly until his death.

But Dick wasn’t without female companionship for long. A few months later, at a party in Santa Ana, he met an 18-year-old soon-to-be college student from Anaheim who aspired to be a writer and had sold a few pieces to small magazines. “I didn’t know who he was,” says Tessa Busby Dick,

who became the author’s fifth wife. “But I just knew that he was a remarkable man. And as I read more of his work, I appreciated his genius.” Dick wasn’t just attracted to Tessa’s looks—the dark-hair thing again—but also to her intelligence and empathy. On a visit to Disneyland with friend Powers, he proposed to her, though the romantic ambience was disrupted when he

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began arguing with Powers over a pickle that he had snatched from Dick's plate.

TESSA RECALLS THE YEARS SHE SPENT with Dick in Fullerton as "the most wonderful time of my life." In 1970s Orange County, Fullerton was a bohemian oasis, a college town with war protesters, cappuccino, even an organic grocery. Dick and his new wife lived near the Cal State campus, where he could be around the students and intellectuals whose company he found stimulating. In July 1973, Tessa gave birth to son Christopher, Dick's third child after his daughters from previous marriages. (Though Christopher, along with his half-sisters, owns and manages their father's literary properties, his mother did not name him as a defendant in her recent lawsuit.)

A few months later, in September 1973, according to biographer Sutin, United Artists picked up an option on Dick's 1968 novel "Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?," putting a much-needed \$2,000 in his pocket. He even started to write again, completing the novel "Flow My Tears, the Policeman Said," which he had set aside back in Northern California. He conceived a new novel, "A Scanner Darkly," set in a seedy dystopian version of Orange County, in which a narcotics agent pursuing the source of a new, personality-fragmenting designer drug goes so far undercover that he begins to investigate himself. As Dick admitted in a 1975 *Rolling Stone* interview, it was the first time he'd written a novel without the help of amphetamines.

But beneath the fragile normality, Dick was in turmoil. "His method was to think about a book for a long time, and then write the entire thing in 10 or 11 days, hardly eating or sleeping as he pounded it out at high speed on a manual typewriter," Powers says. "That was the way he'd done it in the 1960s, when he was doing a heap of amphetamines to fuel

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his production. But even after he quit the drugs, that was the only way he knew how to write, in one sustained burst. ... Particularly in the last 10 years that I knew him, the writing of his books began to take a real physical toll on him."

In February 1974, after being given anesthesia for dental work, Dick returned home and began experiencing bizarre visions—a rectangle of pink light on his bedroom wall containing writing in a strange language he could not read, along with mathematical equations. He heard voices, and was visited by strange beings who "looked almost human, but they had large heads, small noses, small chins and mere slits for mouths," as Tessa later recalled in a self-published memoir, "The Dim Reflection of Philip K. Dick." Instead of abducting him, the alien visitors used holograms to turn Dick's apartment into a classroom, where they taught him a secret theory of existence. Dick only explained parts of it to Tessa: The past wasn't immutable; to the contrary, someone was in the process of changing history. And neither was it linear; somehow, Dick simultaneously existed in the present and in ancient Rome. Neither was the physical world solid and stable; even something as basic as a light switch on a wall might mysteriously vanish when you reached for it.

Dick would ponder his "2-3-74" experience, as he came to call it, for the rest of his life, and it eventually would help inspire his 1981 novel "VALIS," a mind-bending synthesis of science fiction and the mysteries of Gnosticism and Christian theology, in which mystical revelations are beamed by laser from an orbiting satellite.

"He was his own skeptic, always ready to dismiss and deride his theories when he saw flaws in them," Powers says. "One day he'd think it had been God talking to him. The next day, he'd say it was just acid flashbacks. The day after that, he'd decide it was psychosis, or some sort of secret Soviet telepathy experiment. But he kept coming back to the idea that it was God." He pauses. "I'd put money on it that it was God who spoke to him, crazy as it seems. His sort of ongoing, contentious dialogue with God does have the tone of Teresa of Avila [a 16th century Catholic mystic]. Or maybe it's just a better story that way."

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By 1975, Dick's marriage to Tessa was falling apart, and he had become involved with another woman, Doris Elaine Sauter—a relationship that became even closer when Sauter, in her mid-20s, was diagnosed with lymphatic cancer. According to biographer Sutin, Dick again attempted suicide—gulping a combination of pills, slitting his wrist, and sitting in his garage with the engine of his car running, before having second thoughts and calling for help. “When I went to see him in the hospital, he said, ‘See, I tried to kill myself. You have to move in with me now,’” Sauter recalls. “I read him the riot act about that.”

Dick moved from Fullerton to downtown Santa Ana, where he rented a two-bedroom apartment that he later bought when the building went condo. As a bohemian hipster whose work depicted future people oppressed by life in their monstrously huge, regimented, soulless “conapt” complexes, Dick couldn't escape the irony that he lived in a condo. In a 1980 *Slash* magazine interview, he denounced the condo association's resident meetings

as creepily intrusive.

In truth, Dick's new residence was in some ways ideally suited to him. His building had an elaborate security system, which assuaged his latent paranoia. For the agoraphobic author, the apartment was within walking distance of the post office and a Trader Joe's, where he could pick up roast beef sandwiches and frozen dinners.

Sauter did her best to get Dick out of his Santa Ana comfort zone, but it was tough work: “It was more anticipation anxiety. Prying him out of the house was hard, though if you could get him to go, he'd be glad that he did. I could never get him to go to the Santa Ana Public Library, for example. But when Ray Bradbury would speak in O.C. and take a room at the Disneyland Hotel, I'd get Phil to go out and have a drink with him. He always liked that.”

FOR ALL HIS PSYCHOLOGICAL MALADIES and quirks, though, Dick remained a focused, professional writer. “He would get up at 10, have some coffee, write until 3 in the morning, sleep for five hours, and then get up and do the same thing the

next day,” Sauter recalls. “He'd switched to using an IBM Selectric typewriter, and he was a lightning-fast typist. I don't recall him doing a lot of rewriting. The first draft was always very readable.

“After he passed away, people would always ask me, ‘How sane was Philip K. Dick?’ Anybody who could wake up at 5 a.m. like he did and play hardball on the phone with his agent in New York—I mean, how crazy could he be? There's been a tendency to picture him as a psychological mess, because of the suicide attempts and so on. But Phil had the ability to put aside whatever he was feeling or thinking to do business.”

Over the last few years of Dick's life in Santa Ana, Sutin reports, he finally managed to earn a high five-figure income from larger advances, royalties, resales of his early books, and payments from the producers of “Blade Runner.” But to him, relative affluence wasn't entirely a positive development. “People always say it's too bad that he died before he made serious money, but he would have been uncomfortable with it,” says Powers. “Remem-



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ber, he grew up in Berkeley in the 1950s, when rich guys were not OK. As it was, he always was finding excuses to give it away feverishly—charities, UNICEF. One time he even had a bank teller who'd seen his account balance call him up and ask for a loan of a couple of thousand bucks. It was an unbelievably inappropriate thing for the guy to do, but Phil just said, "OK."

IN FEBRUARY 1982—A FEW MONTHS before the release of "Blade Runner," the Harrison Ford movie that would introduce Dick to mainstream audiences—he suffered a major stroke at his condo, dying on March 2 at age 53. The facts of his demise have not been universally accepted—perhaps fitting for someone who believed in multiple realities. Someone once assured Powers that Dick had committed suicide, just as musician Kurt Cobain had, though Powers quickly corrected them. Six weeks after Dick died, Sauter was startled to read a claim in an article that he was still alive. She once made arrangements to see the android version of the author. "It really felt like it was going to be a big emotional shakeup, like seeing a dead family member," she says. "Then we finally decide to do it, [but] the head disappears ... Phil, who had this great droll sense of humor, would have thought that was hysterically funny."

It's all part of an Internet-age version of the ancient Greek mystery cult that has sprouted during the last two decades, with Dick as its deity-oracle-role model. "Phil's work, with its hints of insights into God and the universe, lends itself to that sort of obsessive interest," Powers says. "A lot of people respond to that. But I think Phil would have been a bit bewildered, just as he was in the '70s when Marxist critics in Europe adopted him as a hero. He never had to deal with the kind of prominence he has now."

If he had lived, Powers wonders if Dick might have followed the same course as Hawthorne Abendsen, the fictional writer in Dick's "The Man in the High Castle," who writes a novel revealing an alternative reality—and then goes into hiding to avoid the consequences of his revelation.

PATRICK J. KIGER is an Orange Coast contributing writer.