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The Wife's Story

Anne Dick. *Search for Philip K. Dick, 1928-1982. A Memoir and Biography of the Science Fiction Writer*. Lewiston/Queenston/Lampeter: The Edwin Mellon Press, 1995. vii+374. $99.95

The price is not a misprint. This book was never intended by its publisher for individual readers, but for libraries. Whether Anne Dick wrote it for libraries is doubtful—but then it's not clear what sort of reader the book was intended for.

Anne Dick, Philip K. Dick's third wife (of five), was married to Dick from 1958 until 1964. This was, arguably, Dick's most productive and creative period, during which he wrote *Confessions of A Crap Artist, Dr Bloodmoney, We Can Build You, Martian Time-Slip, The Man in the High Castle, The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch, The Simulacra, The Zap Gun, Now Wait for Last Year*, and *Clans of the Alphane Moon*. Already the mother of two girls from a previous marriage, Anne had one child with Philip before their divorce. They lived in Point Reyes, in Marin County, California, the setting of many of Dick's novels from this period, in what was perhaps the most settled, bourgeois period in Dick's life, when his ambition to be a mainstream writer was greatest. Anne Dick was his most conventional wife and was the model for several of his female characters at this time. Their relationship was intense and difficult.

Half of the *SFPKD* consists of a personal narrative of Anne's marriage to Phil. The other half is her attempt to reconstruct what happened in Dick's life before they met and after their divorce, from interviews with a number of Dick's associates and Dick's own letters to her and others. Much of the information in it has appeared in *Divine Invasions: A Life of Philip K. Dick* by Lawrence Sutin, who made extensive use of Anne Dick's manuscripts before their publication.

Searching for Philip K. Dick is a difficult book to assess. It is what it says it is: a search, an attempt by a wife to puzzle out the character of a disturbed and dangerous husband whom she loved and admired, and who insulted and injured her gravely. Anne is neither a writer, nor a trained biographer. Her search does not involve finding a psychological, cultural or literary pattern in Dick's life that would explain his myriad inconsistencies and personality-shifts. She makes no attempt to explicate the work from the life. She wants to puzzle together the life from the work. She is not particularly interested in Philip the

artist, and the book contains little that could be considered critical commentary. What matters is Philip the man, the husband, father, misfit, shape-changer, madman, soulmate.

She looks for answers in details, or perhaps it's that everything she gathers becomes a detail. *SFPKD* seems at times like a dumpster filled with rags and trash of memory, collected almost automatically, as if its author had hoped that something meaningful might show in a chance combination. As a result, more than the reconstructions of a biographer, the book resembles the search of a computer search-engine, or the flow of talk in psychotherapy. One damn memory after another, with little modulation, connection, or intimacy.

There is something almost Hitchkockian about *SFPKD*. At first, until I began thinking about this review, I considered it utterly inept as biography. Anne Dick has no ear for writing, for constructing a narrative, even for the most obvious patterns. The intensely dramatic moments are instantly deflated by trivial recollections. There are no depths, no insight. Banality everywhere. And yet... perhaps this is exactly the way one should write about Phil's world.

When she writes about events that affected her directly, Anne can be moving and chilling. Her vivid recollection of their courtship ("when even his telephone number had a kind of mystical significance"), or her bewilderment at Phil's attempts to have her committed, stay in my memory. But these are her own reactions, and throughout it all Phil remains obscure, a Confidence Man against his will. For Anne, little is left in the end but double-meanings, mixed signals, contradictory gestures and outright lies. The most intriguing questions Anne raises in the book (raised also by Sutin, Rickman and other commentators on Dick) remain even more difficult to answer: what was Dick's mother's character and role truly? is there a credible explanation or pattern for Dick's actions? was he really homosexually molested as a child? how did he transform his life into his work?

Although as a person she is clearly educated and sophisticated, the flatness of Anne Dick's writing and the banality of her imagination in this book is fatiguing. And yet, after a while, fascinating. For fascinating banality is a Dickian trait—and even if we do not feel we are getting closer to some sense of what makes Philip run, we feel we are in his world. Biographers of Philip must confront this problem of banality. Attracted to his writing by the dizzying play with realities and psychic states, his biographers at first find a life context that promises the same sort of rich confusion—the cold mother, the Beats, Berkeley bohemians, drugs, Eisenhower and Nixon, Panthers and Angels, the Bay Area utopia, sci-fi culture, street anarchy, Synanon-style rehab cults, deranged delusions, mystical visions, women by the dozen, Hollywood, and years of reading in esoteric lore. One could use Dick as a pretext for a whole history of postwar America. But the surprise is how the diversity and change of Dick's California milieux in the 50 through the 70s reaches critical mass and turns dreary and flat. Dick saw this from the outset, he was its bard. Where we might remember the playful vertigo of Dick's science fiction, at heart it is not only not sublime, it is anti-sublime. Dick's surprising contrasts

and time shifts are always embedded in a world of little people, unpretentious and petty—for whom, in paraphrasing Lem, the most sublime metaphysics becomes a street-matter, where ultimate concerns take material form and become petty ones as a consequence. This double operation of the imagination—making the everyday the scene of metaphysical conflict, and then making the metaphysical prosaic—is what makes Dick funny and Kafkaesque. It also makes him creepily flat. Troubled by the banality of evil and the evil of banality at the same time, Dick also tries to find transcendence in the dumpster, always running the risk that it was he who threw it in there in the first place.

It may be, consequently, oddly appropriate to imagine Philip through Anne Dick's eyes. It may be important to know that Philip always chose the old shoe for his counter in *Monopoly*, that he badly wanted to own an owl, that he felt bad for the hated Nixon because Nixon had cried when he lost the California senatorial election, that he hated *Kukla, Fran and Ollie* at first, but then grew to appreciate the show. It may be important to know which neighbors from real life Point Reyes became which characters in the novels. From Anne Dick's perspective, Philip took all of his characters from real-life, transposing their roles and personalities in jarring ways—but Anne attempts no insight into these ways. On the evidence of *SFPKD,* everything in Philip's work was a transposition of daily prose. *Martian Time-Slip*, for example, began when Philip told her he was "going to write about the plumbers union and the Berkeley Co-op but I'm going to put them on Mars" (84). So there may be deep truth when she later writes of *The Crack in Space*, "I bet he got the idea when his muffler sprung a leak" (130).

Most of the time, however, the banality is less a matter of capturing the prose of the life world, than of Anne's own inability to follow any detail beyond its first appearance in the web of impressions. Anne seems so busy gathering shreds of memory that she forgoes trying to tell a story or paint a picture.

> Next, President Kennedy was shot. Phil *literally* fell on the floor when he heard the news over the radio. He followed the events of the next several days closely and was terribly emotional about the whole situation. He remained depressed all that fall.
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> Tumpey, Phil's beloved cat disappeared for good. Phil began muttering that the fates were out to get him. "We'll get some kittens, Phil," I said, "some darling Siamese kittens. Twins, a boy and a girl."
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> Shortly after we got home, they developed cat distemper. (118)

> On one of our excursions with the girls we went to the little town of Sonoma to visit the Buena Vista winery. Phil fell in love with the Zinfandel which Buena Vista Wineries grew and bottled, a wine made of mysterious grapes of unknown origin. In the evening when we returned he opened a bottle and sat in the living room drinking and saying "In vino veritas" and "Whom the mills of the gods would destroy they would first make mad." Followed up by "That's the way the cookie crumbles," and then he talked of "hubris."
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> "What do you mean," I asked him apprehensively. He laughed and laughed, and never did explain. We also brought back some duck eggs from that excursion that Phil had found under a bush in the Sonoma town square. (36-40)

There is something eerily Phildickian about these, and the many similar, paragraphs. Animals, the love of which appears to have been one of the strongest of Anne and Phil's shared interests, figure much more prominently than psychological, let alone political, events. Could Kennedy's assassination have had so little significance in the household of the paranoid, conspiracy-suspecting Phil that it was immediately displaced by anxiety about acquiring new cats? Could Philip's musings about madness and pride have had so little impact on Anne that she can leave them with "[he] never did explain" and go on to hatching found duck eggs? From one point of view, this is a plausible way of telling the story: intense personal and political disturbances immediately displaced onto caring for dumb animals. (And indeed, if there is a single work of Dick's that Anne's bio helps to explicate it is *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?,* written several years after the divorce, but set in Marin County and evidently reflecting Philip's concerns while he was living in Point Reyes.)

From another, less generous perspective, these revealing shifts are unconscious, part of Anne Dick's character in the memoir: she does not ask painful questions. There is a paradox here: Anne is searching for Phil, but she is only slightly less afraid of what she will find than she apparently was when she was married to him. In an excruciatingly revealing passage, she refers to one of the black visions Dick had that inspired many of his stories of that time:

> That spring Mamie Eisenhower, our oldest ewe, had triplets.
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> On Good Friday afternoon Phil played Handel's *Messiah* on the record player, and worked just outside on the flower beds around the patio. He came running back in the house and told me, "I saw a great streak of black sweeping across the sky. For a moment there was utter nothingness dividing the sky in half." There was no doubt in my mind that he had seen *something*.
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> It seemed to me that it would be a good thing if the house were legally in both of our names instead of just mine. (76)

Dick did not even tell her of the vision of demonic face in the sky that inspired Palmer Eldritch. Her revealing remark is: "If he had, I might have said to him, 'You probably ate something that didn't agree with you"' (124).

The self-portrait of Anne Dick that emerges from the bio makes it more interesting as a document, but also less reliable. For she appears (allowing of course for the possibility of the brilliant sophisticated use of unreliable narration) to be as clueless about her own character and role in Philip's life as she is of Philip's in hers. Dick himself appears in many guises, shifting suddenly from doting lover, affectionate parent, animal-steward, generous friend, comedian, victimized son, to liar, vindictive cheat, near-murderer, crap artist, self-concealer, paranoid, spineless mess. These are not surprises, they have been documented in Sutin and in Rickman's first volume, in others' memoirs. One might expect that an intimate witness of some of the most violent shifts would have had deeper insight into the problem than the outsiders, but this is not the case. In fact, Anne often writes like someone in shocked denial, unable to look at her own role in the fiasco. Despite her interesting detective work

regarding Philip's mother and his post-divorce years, she seems unable to penetrate the surface of their lives together. They had terrible fights:

> I could never figure out what these fights had been about. We got along beautifully, had an exceptional understanding. The fights seemed to have no identifiable source. One day I threw half the dishes we owned, one crashing through the window by the front door. I threw the penny bank. Tandy picked up the pennies as we continued to yell at each other,
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> Afterwards I was terribly upset.... I had an idea. To make us all feel better we all should go to Disneyland. (67)

After an incident in which Dick almost pushes her over a cliff in their car, "I pulled away from him, annoyed...and immediately put this incident out of my mind" (121). The couple keeps having violent fights and separations, then coming back together, without any motivation given.

Occasionally, Anne allows a glimmer of self-reflection about what her role might have been in the marital disaster: "I continued to worry aloud about money. I didn't mean to put pressure on Phil and, underneath, I always believed that we would manage. But, looking back, I think Phil didn't perceive my faith. Perhaps I only expressed the negative side of my thoughts and feelings verbally" (106). Perhaps, in other words, Philip felt she was a fussbudget and a nag.

The most painful moment of self-revelation comes regarding the by-now famous remark Phil made to Anne about being homosexually molested as a child, which forms a central hypothesis of Gregg Rickman's bio of Dick.

> ...one day, before going to church, Phil said he had something very serious to tell me; something that would explain why he couldn't function properly in life. Already I knew I didn't want to hear whatever it is he wanted to tell me. He could function just fine. Why did he have to go on as if he couldn't? [...] Phil told me. "When I was quite small I was homosexually molested." Confused thoughts flashed through my mind, "it's probably not true," or "Probably a neighbor," or "things like this just don't happen." "Why is he telling me this? I can't do anything about this and it's just too horrible."
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> But all I could say out loud was, "You should tell your psychotherapist." It is possible that I had an opportunity to really help Phil and I blew it. I just couldn't process this information. My poor excuse is that in the climate of those times, even homosexuality was very exotic and unknown. Pedophilia was believed to hardly exist. I had never heard of a case of it. I was trying to hold a middle-class marriage together and this information was beyond my range. The timing was hardly propitious, either. His admission went unresolved. He never told anyone else. (126-7)

Interesting in its own right, since this is the only recorded instance of Phil mentioning the childhood abuse, Anne here reveals much about the biographer: sheltered, rigidly bourgeois, easily shocked, defensive at the time, and now feeling deep guilt. It is a fearful and wounded narrator.

There is little doubt that whatever part she played in the domestic catastrophe, she was cruelly abused mentally by Phil, and yet survived the marriage far better. I suspect that *SFPKD* was inspired in part by Anne's need to correct the image of her that Phil himself created, to get ahead of the writer's power

of damaging her from the grave. Phil's description of her to his post-divorce friends was of a bitch-ogre, detestable and formidable. Yet, judging from her own story, Anne's flaws were only fearful attachment to bourgeois security and respectability. She appears to have given Phil a great deal of freedom to do what he wanted, although perhaps exacting a price in resentment and hysteria. Surely nothing in her own bio, or in the published work of others, remotely motivates the cruelty that Phil showed her. The periods of domestic joy must have meant much indeed to a woman who could endure abuse ranging from minor comments and symbols (such as giving her a garbage disposal for a Christmas present), to murderous practical joking, and intrigues. The description of Phil's attempt to have her committed to a state mental hospital, and keep her drugged on stelazine is deeply disturbing and elicits from her perhaps the only "philosophical" emotions in the book, raging against the way the tranquilizers had robbed her of important memories. Indeed, Anne typically misses—or forgoes—the opportunity to meditate on how easy it was for a husband to have his wife committed, even when *he* was the delusional one. And what sort of a man abandons a woman, whom he had invited for the evening, carless, alone on the streets of bad neighborhood in Oakland at 2 a.m.? Anne's description of the event is cursory; but the scene has its own power.

There are many such moments in *SFPKD* that help create a picture of Phil as a bizarre, negative character. One looks for the Rashomon-effect, how Dick would have explained things. Later biographies may supply that other side—though we should not be surprised if it does not appear, since Phil himself often admitted his cruelty. Unfortunately, there is little of the hilarious entertainer or the spiritual seeker in Anne Dick's book. Though she tries sincerely to present Dick's good side, it is the dark side that stays with us.

SFPKD is thus interesting because it has a complex emotional agenda beneath its surface coolness. Correcting Phil's image of her is an important part of it. And it is telling that Anne does much to call into question Phil's image of his mother as another bitch-ogre. Supplying excerpts from Dorothy Hudner's notebook entries about Philip as a child, Anne makes it hard to square Dick's image of his mother with her own words. But then that's what this bio, and Dick's work as a whole, is all about.

SFPKD is, I feel, a therapy-driven book. It is introduced by an old friend, a psychiatrist, Dr. Benjamin Gross, MD, who writes that it "represents a healing experience for the author." Gross and Anne Dick herself speak of two losses: the divorce of 1964 and Dick's death in 1982. Evidently, Anne did not marry again. She remained in sporadic contact with Philip until the end, and appears to have borne him no ill will. The initial mystery, in Anne's mind, is what happened to Phil to transform him from the ideal husband-lover-artist in 1958 into the madman of 1964; but Anne says she did not follow his career after the divorce and only picked up interest in her ex after his death. So the book has complex motivations: it is a romantic quest to piece together whatever evidence she can to explain a decisive, rending experience in her life and also a calculated attempt to exorcise her image as the bitch-ogre third wife of the great sf author.

Philip Dick lived in a therapy-universe, in which the metaphysics of gnosis and kenosis can be translated in the wink of an eye into psychology and family dysfunction. Therapists move in the shadows of *SFPKD* like demons (the evil Dr A, who took Phil's side, even though it was manifestly wrong) and angels (the good Dr J, who gave Anne the straight dope). This tangle of therapists was like a natural element for Phil, who seems to have been a tangler by vocation—he knew how to lie in the language of therapy, and he seems to have found willing victims everywhere, including (especially?) himself. A master of reduced capabilities, Dick could make art out of his lies, but he seems to have needed practice in life.

After collecting materials for her own story, Anne continued to interview Phil's associates and relations about his life after their divorce. Most valuable is her attempt to reconstruct the reputation of Dorothy, Phil's mother, with whom she sympathizes throughout the book. Here, too, however, there is an astonishing gap between Anne's apparent desire to set her own record straight and a biographer's task. On page 344, we learn that Dorothy was a dianetics auditor. This is the first, and last, mention of this fact, which cannot but have had some bearing on Dorothy's life at the time, and on Phil's relationship with her.

In the last analysis, this is not a book for most readers, but it is impossible to say what fans and biographers of Philip Dick might find interesting. Blessed be Interlibrary Loan.