

The Library of America Interviews Laura Leslie and Jonathan Lethem about Philip K. Dick

In connection with the publication in July 2008 of [*Philip K. Dick: Five Novels from the 1960s and 70s*](#), Rich Kelley conducted this exclusive interview for The Library of America e-Newsletter with Laura Leslie, Philip K. Dick's daughter, and volume editor Jonathan Lethem.

Sign up for the free monthly e-Newsletter at www.loa.org.

Laura Leslie, as Philip K. Dick's eldest daughter, you serve as the trustee of the Philip K. Dick Estate. What kind of decisions do you make about your father's work in this role?

Leslie: My sister, Isa, my brother, Chris, and I created the Philip K. Dick Testamentary Trust to keep our father's works together rather than divide them among the three of us. Each of us owns one-third of our father's collective body of work. We work collaboratively on every important decision—and in the 26 years since our father died, we have never had a disagreement. Recently, Isa has been the catalyst to propel us to develop a production company, [Electric Shepherd Productions](#) (ESP), which is dedicated to promoting and developing adaptations of our father's work across media.

Russ Galen in the U.S. and Danny Baror internationally have done a fantastic job not only in keeping PKD in print worldwide but also in developing and perpetuating PKD publishing programs. Since my father's death there have been many people who have been involved with us in stewardship of the legacy of Philip K. Dick. Jonathan Lethem and Paul Williams are two significant examples.

It's important to be clear: I don't make any unilateral decisions.

How did the trustees for the estate and Jonathan Lethem decide which works to include in this new volume?

Leslie: It was a collaborative effort between Jonathan, Russell Galen, Isa, and me. We shared our thoughts and opinions via email and in the end we were all very comfortable with the final selection.

Interview with Leslie and Lethem

Jonathan, the five novels in Philip K. Dick: Five Novels of the 1960s & 70s were written between 1962 and 1977. During that time Dick wrote some 20 other novels, including those collected in Philip K. Dick: Four Novels of the 1960s. Why did you choose these five for this second collection?

Lethem: If there is a loose “canon” of eight or ten novels within Dick’s enormous list of titles, most critics and scholars would agree that the splendid *Martian Time-Slip*, *Dr. Bloodmoney*, *A Scanner Darkly*, and *Flow My Tears* are as near to the center of it as the four books I selected for the first volume. Each of those four has its detractors as well—it’s in Dick’s nature that each of the novels is imperfect. *Martian Time-Slip* and *Dr. Bloodmoney*, though written in the same period as the first volume’s *Man in the High Castle* and *Three Stigmata*, were, unlike those two books, published as paperback originals, and so their profile was a little lower. But over time their excellence has become unmistakable. Paperback-original publication exemplified Dick’s marginal fate as a writer, so to see these titles in the LOA provides perhaps an even deeper vindication of his career. *A Scanner Darkly* and *Flow My Tears* were published later, each in hardcover, and were each received with a measure of genuine critical acclaim, as well as with relief. By then, Dick not only had growing cachet as a cult author, but was also seen as resurgent after a period of wasted years. The jury for the 1975 John W. Campbell Memorial Award gave *Flow My Tears* one of Dick’s few literary awards.

The dark horse in this second volume is *Now Wait for Last Year*. The book is a personal favorite of mine, and I’m not completely alone in championing it as a major work. But it was largely rejected by the SF reviewers at the time of publication, and its reputation never completely recovered from that attack. The book shows some signs, especially in the early going, of the slipshod construction and unrevised prose that dogged Dick throughout the 1960s, but the humanity in the novel runs very deep, and by the second half I think the book has asserted itself as a tour de force—undeniable on its own (very unusual) terms.

All nine of the novels in the two LOA collections have a somewhat similar length, each running more or less 200 pages. What determined the length of Dick’s novels? Was it the paperback format he was writing for?

Lethem: That’s a good guess in some cases, though it was also typical of the length of material that a writer could push out in the sort of exhausting dash-to-the-finish-line, often fueled by amphetamine abuse, that was typical of Dick’s manner of work. Then again, it’s worth crediting the fabulous results, and giving Dick credit as a conscious artist—these novels attain a very complete and satisfying relationship of form to material at the length they were written,

Interview with Leslie and Lethem

so who are we to guess that they might have been, or ought to have been, anything other?

Laura, if I follow the chronology in the LOA volume and in Divine Invasions, Lawrence Sutin's biography of your father, you were born in 1960, your father separated from your mother when you were three and it wasn't until 1977, some 17 years later, that you were able to spend any extended period of time with him, yet you remained close because you were in constant communication through letters and phone calls. Is that an accurate description? How did you manage to stay so close?

Leslie: My father and mother did separate when I was three. For a variety of reasons including periods of chaos in my father's personal life, his own emotional challenges, and geographic separation, we saw each other only a few times.

When I was 12, my father reached out to me via a wonderful letter and we began corresponding and talking on the phone regularly until his death in 1982. He wrote incredible letters, sending me envelope after envelope filled with pages typed single-space, sharing what was going on in his life and his latest writing project.

Although we were physically separated there was an intimacy to our relationship that at the time I took for granted. Thinking about it now, I marvel at the closeness I felt between us. His letters made me feel special and loved. I knew he thought and cared about me. The tone of his letters was at times childishly playful but he also wrote to me in adult terms about adult issues. In many ways, he was like a close friend and confidant as well as a dad.

The notes for 1978 in the LOA Chronology say that your father "is thrilled when daughters Laura and Isa finally meet." You were 18 then and Isa 11. Do you remember the circumstances of that meeting and how you felt?

Leslie: My sister, Isa, and I met at the memorial service for our father's mother, our Grandmother Dorothy. Isa was absolutely adorable and I cherished my little sister from the moment I met her. We have been very close ever since. She is a very important part of my life and the best thing about being Philip K. Dick's daughter is that I have this wonderful sister.

The works collected here were written between 1962 and 1977. What can you tell us about your father's writing habits during that time?

Leslie: I can only tell you what my mother told me. She lived with my father from 1959 until 1963. My father liked to write at night and might write through the entire night, typing furiously. At that time he was writing so fast

Interview with Leslie and Lethem

that he might finish a novel in as little as two weeks, writing night and day. Because my mother brought her three daughters with her into their marriage and my birth added a fourth, she wanted to have a more traditional family life where my father worked during the day and then joined her and the girls for a family dinner. At her urging, while they were married, he changed his writing habits to accommodate his new family life.

Jonathan, this reminds me of what Thomas M. Disch once wrote. As you know, Disch was a fellow underappreciated science fiction writer and a good friend of Dick's. In 1982, the year Dick died, Disch founded The Philip K. Dick Award for the best original work of science fiction published in paperback in the previous year and the Philip K. Trust has been supporting this award since 2005. In his introduction to Solar Lottery and Other Works, Disch noted that Dick was more an improviser than a composer and that he made his "experience of the creative act the focus of his art" with no turning back to rethink, rewrite, or erase. Do you find this description accurate and is this what explains the uncanny phenomenon of Dick churning out 140 pages of Flow My Tears in 48 hours?

Lethem: I think Disch's description is an apt and lovely one, and captures one of the pleasures of Dick's work that can be most elusive and difficult to quantify—the pervasive sense that his writing was affectively reciprocal—that is, the writer seems to be overwhelmingly, emotionally altered by his work—by the process of discovering the fates of his invented characters during the process of its composition, leaving evidence of this trail of empathic intensity everywhere in the pages.

Laura, the months of February and March 1974 are known to mark a major turning point in your father's life. What can you tell us about what happened during that period?

Leslie: My father did not share this experience with me in his letters from that period or in our phone conversations of the time.

Jonathan, the Chronology in the volume notes that in February and March of 1974 Dick experienced a vision that obsessed him for the remaining eight years of his life. One of the novels included here, A Scanner Darkly, was written after this experience. Did Dick's writing change after 1974?

Lethem: It certainly did, and *Scanner* reflects his altered perspective in some degree—but together with *Flow My Tears*, *Scanner* forms a watershed, or perhaps a bridge, between the earlier style and the spiritual and autobiograph-

Interview with Leslie and Lethem

ical obsessions to come. For some commentators—and I could be tempted into their camp—if you had to pick one encompassing masterpiece in all his oeuvre, *Scanner* would be the one, perhaps precisely because it draws so much on the earlier work while opening out into what became Dick’s “late style,” in which he shifts from metaphorical and iconographical representations of metaphysical states to direct philosophical reflection.

In Martian Time-Slip, the main character is a recovering schizophrenic who works as a repairman in a rather bleak colony on Mars. After he reread the novel in 1976, Dick wrote in a letter that he “found it weak dramatically (weak in plot) but extraordinary in its ideas. I stripped the universe down to its basic structure. I guess I always do when I write: analyze the universe to see what it’s made of. The floor joists of the universe are visible in my novels.” What in the novel is he referring to here? The depiction of consciousness, of personality, of perception of time?

Lethem: Well, let’s say first that on any given day, depending especially on the listener (or the interviewer, or the person he was writing a letter to) Dick was capable of declaring any number of his works either his masterpiece or a demoralizing failure. He had a tendency to turn his own critical prism this way and that in recalling his works, and to tell his interlocutors what he imagined they wanted to hear—and in most cases apart from this one he probably hadn’t re-read the work in question any time recently when he weighed in on it (or for that matter might never have read it at all, except in the writing).

I feel pretty confident guessing that his remarks about “stripping the universe down” have to do with one element of *Time-Slip* in particular: the vision of what he calls, in the book, “gubbish”—that hallucinatory glimpse of a universe composed only of rotting and dead things, of rags and bones and shreds of mortality. For an interesting point of comparison, look to *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (in the first LOA volume), where a similar epiphany regarding the entropic state of the universe is pegged to the notion of “kipple.” For Dick our world was a vale of “gubbish” and “kipple”—I doubt his vision was ever better embodied than in these two neologisms.

Laura, in the documentary, The Gospel According to Philip K. Dick, D. Scott Apel describes your father as a “big man, heavy, barrel-chested, a tall imposing presence” who “knew that he intimidated people and knew that he consciously had to do everything he could to make them feel at ease.” How would you describe the experience of someone meeting your father for the first time?

Interview with Leslie and Lethem

Leslie: I can't speak about other people's experiences meeting my father for the first time. I can only speak about my own experiences with my father.

When I was very little he did seem big and imposing, with a big booming voice. As an adult, when I visited him in Santa Ana, I found he wasn't much taller than I was at five foot seven. He didn't seem imposing or big then. Finally, when I saw him in the hospital, after his stroke, he had worked very hard to lose weight for an upcoming trip to France. He seemed to me to be much reduced; while not frail, he was no longer a robust man.

In a 2006 interview Richard Linklater, director of the movie version of A Scanner Darkly, quotes you and your sister, Isa, as saying in one of your meetings: "You know, if it wasn't for drugs, our dad would still be writing today, instead of dying in 1982." Did you ever have any discussions with your father about his use of drugs?

Leslie: I was very much in the dark about my father's use of drugs until I read Paul Williams's article in *Rolling Stone* ["The Most Brilliant SF Mind on Any Planet"] in 1975.

We never spoke about this directly. When I was an adult, after he had put drugs behind him, he did periodically refer to his prior drug use in a historical way.

There have been many movies made of your father's works: Total Recall, Blade Runner, Impostor, Minority Report, Paycheck, A Scanner Darkly, Next. Which of those do you think captures your father's work most faithfully?

Leslie: The film that captures my father's work most faithfully is *A Scanner Darkly* while *Blade Runner*, although not as faithful to the novel itself, captures the spirit of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, exploring the question of what makes us human.

Have you licensed any other works for movies that we should be looking forward to?

Leslie: There are actually quite a few projects in the works. Several years ago, before we formed ESP, Dale Rosenbloom and John Alan Simon acquired the rights to *Radio Free Albemuth*, *Valis*, and *Flow My Tears, the Policeman Said*. The first film, *Radio Free Albemuth*, written and directed by Simon and starring Alanis Morissette, is now in post production.

ESP is producing with HBO and Picturehouse a biopic, *The Owl in Daylight*, with Paul Giamatti as the lead actor and producer and with Tony Grisoni (*Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*) scripting. Disney/Pixar recently announced plans to adapt "The King of the Elves" as an animated film to be

Interview with Leslie and Lethem

released in 2012. And we recently entered into a “first look” arrangement with The Halcyon Company (producers of *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles*) and hope to be making an announcement soon related to that.

In an interview on NPR you once said that you’ve read all of your father’s 44 novels and 120 or so short stories. Are there any passages that have a special resonance for you as his daughter?

Leslie: Identifying particular passages that resonate for me has always been a challenge. Every novel includes so much autobiographical information that I relate to his books in a different way than I do to any other author. Reading my father’s work, recognizing the characters and the settings, results in a unique dynamic. The issues he explores remind me of the time in his life when he wrote the novel and what was going on with him then. Some of his themes are so familiar that I joke that they are in my DNA. (I thought everyone’s family talked about alternate realities and was very anxious when Nixon was elected.)

However, I do really appreciate and enjoy the advertisements for *Ubik* at the beginning of each chapter of that book. I love the concept of the Penfield Mood Organ in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* I find *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* and *Ubik* to be really frightening. Reading *A Scanner Darkly* makes me incredibly sad for my father, knowing that this depicts a really dark time in his life. These are just a few points of connection with my father’s works; I could go on and on.

Laura, what do you think your father’s reaction would be to having his novels collected in these editions published by The Library of America?

Leslie: I’ve made it a policy never to speak for my father and never to speculate on what he would have thought. However, in this case, I know with certainty that my father would have been elated and extremely proud. Having his works included in the LOA would have been a defining moment in his life as an author.

My father longed for literary recognition his entire adult life. Living in Berkeley, he was surrounded by literary figures who dismissed SF as a worthless genre. In addition, he was very poor and found that he had a special knack for turning out SF short stories so quickly that he was able to earn a living being paid pennies per page. Writing to make money instead of to create art was frowned upon then. He was doubly damned: for his chosen genre and for the speed with which he cranked out stories and novels.

Recognition was a lifelong dream my father harbored until his death. For

Interview with Leslie and Lethem

Isa, Chris, and me, recognition now by The Library of America is bittersweet because our father isn't here to enjoy it.

Will there be more LOA Philip K. Dick collections?

Lethem: I hope so!

Leslie: Me too!

You can read Rich Kelley's exclusive interview with Jonathan Lethem about *Philip K. Dick: Four Novels of the 1960s* at http://www.loa.org/images/pdf/lethem_interview.pdf.