

REREADING PHILIP K. DICK

They were ugly little things. I mean the first editions of Philip K. Dick's first novels—squat, scrunchy, cheaply printed 1950s paperbacks, artifacts of a primitive era in science fiction publishing. Ace Books was the name of the publishing company—they are still in business, though vastly transformed—and Ace writers then were paid one thousand dollars per novel, which even then was the bottom rate for paperback books, although in modern purchasing power it's a good deal more than most new SF writers can command today.

Still, there were harbingers of things to come in those early Dick books. The very first sentence of the very first one tells us that in the most literal way: "There had been harbingers." That's *Solar Lottery*, Dick's debut novel, an Ace Double Book of 1955, printed back-to-back, as Ace did in those days, with Leigh Brackett's *The Big Jump*. As the novel opens, the harbingers include "a flight of white crows over Sweden," "a series of unexplained fires," and the birth of a two-headed calf. For us, the readers of science fiction half a century ago, the harbinger was the book itself, the announcement of the presence among us of a brilliant, quirky new writer.

How I read and re-read that book! How I studied it, and its successor of just a few months later, *The World Jones Made*, and *The Man Who Japed* that followed just a few months after that. How I loved those books! And how I yearned to write the way Philip K. Dick did! Like an earlier idol of mine, Henry Kuttner, whose work Dick had plainly studied, he was prolific, he was a compelling storyteller, he was a fountain of cunning ideas. I could not have chosen better models for the sort of writing career I hoped to have than Dick and his earlier avatar, Kut-

tner. Dick was only twenty-seven when *Solar Lottery* came out, a youthful beginner who had appeared in the science fiction magazines just three years before with a double handful of ingenious short stories. I had already begun to sell some stories myself in 1955, so in terms of career launch we were virtually contemporaries, but I was only twenty, a college junior, and that seven-year gap in our ages made me regard Dick as vastly older, vastly wiser, vastly more skillful in the art of storytelling. I was an earnest beginner; he was already a pro.

He was good, all right. But I don't think either of us realized, back there in 1955, that he was destined to make an imperishable mark on American popular culture.

Solar Lottery is a crisp, fast-paced book, unmarred by the convoluted, contorted style of Dick's later work, a style that led one astute critic to say that his prose read like a bad translation from the German. It hums along at an unrelenting pace. The basic extrapolative situation shows Dick's early debt to the frantic, dizzyingly intense novels of A.E. van Vogt: out of the midcentury television-quiz popular culture has somehow evolved a world ruled by the Quizmaster, a dictator chosen by a random twitch of an electronic lottery, who can be displaced from supreme power as readily as he has been elevated to it. There is something of Robert A. Heinlein in this, the early Heinlein of *If This Goes On* and *Beyond This Horizon*, but the main inspiration had to be van Vogt.

Van Vogt, giving us similar situations in *The World of Null-A* and *The Weapons Makers* and other classic 1940s novels, rarely made sense, but the breathless tumble of one idea over another led his

readers to ignore or even welcome that. Dick, in *Solar Lottery*, does a van Vogt novel that makes sense . . . almost. He does one other thing that van Vogt never achieved: his characters seem like real people. They yearn, they suffer, they get angry, they get frightened. They fret and worry and bicker in a way that no one in any of the novels of van Vogt or Heinlein or Asimov in science fiction's 1940s Golden Age ever did, and the strange world they inhabit becomes all the more real because of that. And the book ends not in a slam-bang pulp-magazine climax but in a wistful, open-ended vision that tells alert readers that Dick, even at the age of twenty-seven, wanted to break free of the mold that had shackled other science fiction novelists in that era of the rigidly formulaic three-part magazine serial. He wanted, in fact, to be a novelist, period, without the "science fiction" label. (Between 1952 and 1958 he would write eight mainstream novels, novels without a shred of science fictional concept—*Voices from the Street*, *Mary and the Giant*, *In Milton Lumky Territory*, etc.—which no publisher would touch during his lifetime. I saw them, once, stacked up in boxes in his agent's office. They all were published, finally, after his death, when the movie *Blade Runner* had conferred bitterly ironic posthumous fame and fortune upon him.)

Solar Lottery had a powerful impact on me when I read it, in one wide-eyed sitting, in the autumn of 1955. I had already begun to pattern my short stories after Dick's, and now his first novel would reshape my notions of what a longer science fiction story ought to be. I had it very much in mind when his publisher, Ace Books, asked me to write a novel of my own the following year. Reading it again now, at the far end of my long career, I still admire the mastery Dick showed at the outset of his. The book fizzes and sparkles with ideas, and, miraculously, they all hang together in a way that the myriad plot explosions of Dick's predecessor in this mode, van Vogt, never managed to do. And his crisp dialog and lucid

exposition carry the story along efficiently and powerfully.

The World Jones Made came out, again from Ace, just a few months later. It's an even better book. Again we have the van Vogt technique of concept piled on concept, but again, where van Vogt simply stacks one idea on another without much of an attempt at an integrated plot, Dick manages, astonishingly, to hold everything together to tell a coherent story—an atomic war that fills the world with bizarre mutant humans, mysterious alien creatures drifting in from space who may be planning to colonize Earth, a security-minded government with a strong KGB flavor, and—the primary van Vogt touch—a sideshow performer who claims to be able to see the future, and, as it turns out, actually can. It is that sideshow performer—Floyd Jones is his name—who provides the unique Philip K. Dick flavor. In a van Vogt novel, Jones, the superman, would have been a remote and incomprehensible figure who had made himself emperor of the world before the story opened. To some extent power of that sort is what Jones achieves in the course of the Dick novel; but Dick shows his superman as a tragic, almost pathetic figure, whose anguish under the burden of his extraordinary gift makes him far more real than any of van Vogt's miracle-men. ("It's not so much like I can see the future; it's more that I've got one foot stuck in the past. I can't shake it loose. I'm reliving one year of my life forever.' He shuddered. 'Over and over again. Everything I do, everything I say, hear, experience, I have to grind over twice.'") The complexity of Jones' predicament and the pathos of his character lingered in my mind for decades, and traces of it showed up in such novels of mine as *The Masks of Time* (1968), *Dying Inside* (1972), and, most particularly, *The Stochastic Man* (1975). None of those books is anything like *The World Jones Made* in plot, setting, or tone, and yet the spirit of that 1956 Dick book hovered over all three as I was writing them, many years later.

He was twenty-eight years old when he wrote *Jones*, living in Berkeley with the first of what would eventually be five wives, and trying to earn a living as a free-lance writer in the wobbly and uncertain science fiction market of the 1950s. (He had been working as a clerk in a record shop until his early flurry of short-story sales encouraged him to take the rash step of making writing his full-time profession.) That decision meant that he would spend most of the remaining twenty-six years of his life living close to the poverty line, which gives an even darker twist to his posthumous Hollywood prosperity. I had no idea at the time, of course, of how little Dick was actually earning. I saw him as a figure to emulate: a successful full-time writer, selling stories to every magazine around, and now writing brilliant novels for Ace. To me he was already one of the best science fiction writers in the business. Two more books that followed in quick succession, both of them from Ace in the same low-echelon format, served to confirm that belief: *The Man Who Japed* and *Eye in the Sky*. 1959 brought *Time Out of Joint*, the escape from Ace into hard covers and the first of his significant explorations of the nature of reality. And then, in 1962, came the Hugo-winning masterpiece, *The Man in the High Castle*. From then until the end of his short and troubled life in 1982 there could be no question of his place at the highest levels of the field.

Reading *The World Jones Made* fifty-five years later, I see no reason to revise my youthful opinion that it, and *Solar Lottery*, demonstrate that their author was not just a facile producer of clever short stories, but a writer of major stature. (They have been reissued often over the years, and copies are not hard to find.) In those early books he isn't yet tinkering with the nature of reality as he did, again and again, in the great novels of his mature period, *Ubik* and *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* and *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*

(which became the movie *Blade Runner*), nor is he departing from the norms of the science fiction novel altogether as he did in the mysterious final books, *Valis*, *The Divine Invasion*, and *The Transmigration of Timothy Archer*. Readers who go to *Jones* or his other early novels will not find the manic strangeness of the 1960s books in them or the challenging philosophical intensity of the later ones, and they will be disappointed if that is what they are looking for. But, taken on their own terms, they are superb examples of science fiction in the classic mode, building on the work of such 1940s pulp-magazine stalwarts as A.E. van Vogt and Henry Kuttner and Robert A. Heinlein to give us something new and strange and wonderful.

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