

REVIEW: Flow, My Tears, The Policeman Said by Philip K Dick

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Flow My Tears, The Policeman Said – Philip K. Dick

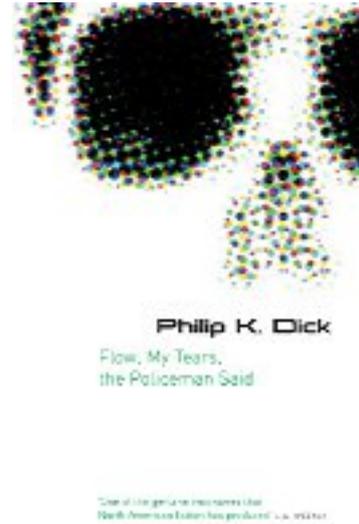
Hachette Livre Gollancz, 2007 (reprint)

247 pages

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Reviewed by Lev Lafayette



It is pleasing to see that Gollancz has released yet another reprint of Philip K. Dick's *Flow, My Tears, the Policeman Said*, one of his more famous and accessible short novels, receiving the Campbell Award in 1975, and being nominated for a Hugo and Nebula in the same year. One wonders given the adaptation of Dick's novels to film (*A Scanner Darkly*, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, *Minority Report* etc), whether this will also be the case – there is little doubt that it could make an excellent film, although the theatre adaptation in Boston apparently received mixed reviews.

The core themes are very familiar to any Dick aficionado; the protagonist is caught in an alternate or rather parallel reality setting where the physical location remains familiar but the social circumstances and their closest friends are completely changed. In this particular case an extremely famous television star (Jason Taverner) finds himself in a familiar world but where he is utterly unrecognised, even by his partner Heather Hart. In the new setting, a totalitarian and Stasi-like 1988, not only is he unrecognised, but also absent from the various governmental databases, which brings instant suspicion – possibly a member of the student underground – and not helped by his decision to attempt to procure false identification, a somewhat strange and impromptu plot device which sets the dynamic for the rest of the tale.

Fortunately being a genetically-enhanced “6” (shades of “Nexus-6” from *Blade Runner*!) gives him some advantages, not the least being a calculating intelligence and great looks which he uses to great effect to ensure his survival in the foreign world; to describe his relationship with women in the book as mercenary would be too kind. In this approach he encounters Alys Buckman, the sexually charged sister of Felix Buckman, the chief police officer tracking Taverner. Alys' preference for powerful hallucinogenic drugs, another extremely common motif in Dick's work, seems to significantly warp reality making her the only person who recognises Taverner as being from the “other world” and even having physical evidence such as LP records, of his famous existence.

Apart from the aforementioned plot device, the story is quite coherent with right changes occurring for the right reasons, even with the occasional flips between the different realities and their occasional merge. The setting however does show some of the limitations and improbabilities of Dick's vision; personal flying machines and tiny nuclear bombs for the latter, tape reels on computers for the former. One could argue that his suggestions of the power of hallucinatory drugs are somewhat correct at least from a subjective point of view; he certainly knew enough about the experience himself.

Overall, this is an excellent short novel, well worth the read, although for seasoned Dick readers it may come across as being a little overly familiar in terms of theme and perhaps even a little simple in terms of narrative development. As a matter of interest, the novel's title is derived from John Dowland, a luteist and composer of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century. It is believed to be the most well known tune of the time. The final lines seem most appropriate:

Hark! you shadows that in darkness dwell,
Learn to contemn light
Happy, happy they that in hell
Feel not the world's despite.