



Paycheck

Philip K. Dick

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Electronic engineer Jennings cannot remember the last two years working for Retherick Construction. His payment is a bag of clues and essential aids for his future quest for the truth: code key, ticket stub, receipt, wire, half a poker chip, green cloth scrap, and bus token. The Special Police pursue, and he is on the run for his life.

Paycheck Details

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From Reader Review Paycheck for online ebook

Austin Wright says

This short story is incredibly dense. It comes off as proto-cyberpunk in the sense that corporations or state-police are the character's only two options.

But, the thing that really resonated with me, aside from the haunting universe of contracting away years of your life with no memory, was the theme of the main character loving himself and being his own best friend. 5-stars, highly recommended.

Elizabeth says

Instead of a paycheck, you get trinkets and have to puzzle solve your way through the world. Most interesting is the police-state where corporations and big businesses have rights, but individuals do not. So, if you can get "in" with a business, you have found sanctuary. The idea of a business operation that is preparing a working class revolution against the status quo government is definitely timely.

Neil Cake says

I didn't realise this was a collection of short stories until I had a peek at the copyright page and saw that every chapter was copyrighted in a different year. But no, of course they were all individual works.

Short story collections, in an ideal world, would be thematically consistent and perhaps ultimately come together in some enlightening way. Let's take a look one story at a time then, and see what we can glean...

Paycheck

I actually thought there was going to be an ultimate twist in this story, where it is revealed at the end that everything has been manipulated by a villain character, and our protagonist has merely been a pawn in someone else's game – much like the film of Total Recall, which is of course based on another Dick story (that I haven't read). Alas, no. Despite dabbling with notions of time travel, the story is linear and simplistic. It's worth remembering then, that it was published in the mid-1950s, perhaps before these twists became so popular. I wonder what was the first ever story to rely on such a cheap device?

What I found most interesting was Dick's suggestion that in the near future government would have eroded ideas of individual rights and freedoms, yet would leave corporations unmolested – like how our political system is used to the benefit of the elite, with no concern for ordinary people – and how this would lead to a power struggle between government and business. Overall though, the story was brief and felt more like watching a film than reading a work of literature. It is worth mentioning that this is the first time I've read anything by Philip K Dick, though I've seen many films based on his work and, until now, avoided his books for that reason. I tend to prefer something more akin to hard sci-fi, but having discovered the joys of Vonnegut, I thought I might have been missing out by not giving Dick a try. The jury's still out on this one.

Nanny

I'm not sure what the point is here. Central is the idea that companies are building products that people need, but that are also programmed to destroy rival models – leading to customers buying bigger and more powerful models, rather than campaigning for legislation that prevents such cut-throat business practices. There are no signs of Asimov's three laws in respect of the robots here. Sure, companies probably would like to profit from the resulting perpetual market caused by the destruction of models by models, but the whole idea is so unrealistic – perhaps unless you think about computer viruses. Who's really creating all these computer viruses? Is it lone programmers with nothing to do, is it cyber-thieves and cyber-terrorists or is it the very companies who produce anti-virus software, so that we have a reason to buy their products? Or perhaps a combination of some or all the above? This also makes me think of the way our electronics products are so short-lived these days. Not only are they constantly trying to make better, more desirable models, but they all have a habit of breaking just as the warranty period expires. Yes, I suppose that's what Dick was getting at, but instead of waiting for products to expire, the various companies are making sure they do, and fast. An odd story then, and ahead of its time.

Jon's World

Back to the theme of time travel here. Again it's a bit too brief, though again there's the implication of corporate involvement in dodgy practices, but the core idea is rooted in the dangers of meddling with the past. It ends up being quite whimsical really.

Breakfast at Twilight

A family wakes up one day to find that their house has travelled forward in time to be in the midst of a global war. It seems they have a chance of going back to their own time – which they choose to do, because the future is so grisly – but they fail to consider that ultimately this is what their lives are going to become. So what are they going to do about it? Just wait until it happens? Have as much quality family time as possible? Try to make a difference? We never find out. All in all, an unsatisfying story.

Small Town

This story is just stupid, but would have made a good episode of The Twilight Zone or Eerie, Indiana. It probably did.

A little interlude now...

One thing I found very interesting was that, in every story (at least up to Small Town), at some point (usually more than once), someone lights a cigarette before doing something. It's obviously very much a product of its time – or at least you'd think so. The thing is, I've read lots of literature spanning the breadth of the 20th century, and smoking is not as prevalent as you might expect – or if it is, it isn't as conspicuous. Can you remember anyone sparking up in One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest, for example? In this collection of stories it is conspicuous by the sheer volume of cigarettes being consumed. It makes you wonder why it's so important to note that someone is lighting a cigarette. Does it represent moments when Dick is taking a break from the writing himself? Does he feel it adds anything? All he's really doing is adding a few words that aren't really necessary. Seriously, it's not like anyone's reading it and thinking, "I see; this is a character who smokes", then drawing any conclusions. It would be far better not to mention it at all, then we could just insert moments when characters light up ourselves – if we wanted to, which we probably wouldn't. In the next work of fiction I read, I'm going to intentionally imagine characters lighting cigarettes at random

moments. Then maybe I'll see if it adds anything. In autobiography, people who smoked never mention smoking at all. There's no, "we were offered a million dollar record contract. Before we signed it, we all lit cigarettes," for one thing because it's not important. For another; people who smoke, smoke a lot, so mentioning it would be a chore unto itself and they don't specifically remember all the cigarettes they smoked.

The Father-Thing

Funny that after that long discussion about smoking, we get to a story that doesn't have any smoking in it (the next one doesn't either, as far as I can remember). It's a pretty straight Bodysnatchers type story that again would make a decent Twilight Zone episode. I don't know whether this story was original at the time, and perhaps whether it has been ripped off many times since, but by now this type of story is old as dirt.

The Chromium Fence

This one's quite interesting. It's a story of a moderate caught between two political extremes. It strikes me that in this kind of story it would be more interesting though to give the perspective of one of the extremes, rather than the sane man, or one that is closest to our own perspective.

Autofac

It's man vs machine as a group of humans try to override a system that automatically collects resources and provides supplies even after the nuclear war is over, and they don't require it anymore. After two smoke-less stories, Dick gets right back on track with a character lighting up in the very first paragraph.

The Days of Perky Pat

This was my favourite of all the stories. It could have gone off in a number of directions but it probably went in the one that was most fun. I'm not sure whether Dick is trying to say anything about charity and human nature here, but I enjoyed it nevertheless.

Stand-by

A bit of a damp squib of a story that imagines what might happen if the USA were to devolve its presidential powers to a computer. I've been thinking some more about this one since writing that single sentence the other day. I think it's interesting that Dick chose to imagine what might happen if the computer was incapacitated and a human required to assume its duties for a while - when they could have just had a backup computer. I thought, if Asimov had written this story he would've tried to imagine all the different pressures on the computer, how it chose to legislate in favour of one group over another and all the various dilemmas and paradoxes that might involve. If Arthur C. Clarke had written it, it would have been about an idealistic genius trying to make the perfect legislating machine. Then some aliens would have taken it over and completed the work for the benefit of the whole universe. Stephen King would have made the computer evil, killing anyone who opposed it while creating an elite robot army to subdue and enslave human beings. Who else? Fitzgerald would have had the computer loafing around, attending the theatre and cocktail parties. I could go on, but it's just going to get more ridiculous.

A Little Something for us Tempunauts

I'm not too sure what to think about this one. I don't think its concept was really explained clearly enough,

nor what the lead character's intention was in acting contrary to available evidence.

The Pre-Persons

Dick discusses what might happen if a shortage of resources and a change in human morality led to the extension of legal abortion to children up to the age of twelve. I felt there was a lot more potential in this story and that it could have been developed into a novel. Instead Dick seems to get bored of it and doesn't explore the concept as fully as I would have liked.

In all this collection has made me keen to read a bit more fiction that I have been doing of late. The stories themselves were flawed but [on the verge of being] thought provoking, and I think it will turn out to be a good introduction to Dick's style and work. I've already got one of his novels to read at some point and, while I'll be hoping it's better than these stories, I think it bodes well. I'm not expecting to enjoy his work as much as I do that of Vonnegut, but I might yet turn into a fan.

Peter says

Read as a part of Minority Report and Other Stories

I have watched the movie of the same name that's based on the premise in this short story, but I only vaguely remember it now. It wasn't the best of movies and I think it might have been due to a similar issue as this story: it's hard to have tension when you know that every step the protagonist makes has already been planned for. While it was fun having the protagonist figure everything out, it was just hard to feel worried for him knowing from quite early on that his past-self set him up to succeed.

The core idea is once again very clever though and I can appreciate why this author is regarded as one of the best sci-fi writers ever. However, his execution of the story and especially the weak ending here were disappointing. The story otherwise was fun as we got to experience the solving of the puzzle of the trinkets, despite some plot holes and a lack of information behind the sci-fi elements.

Andy Hickman says

“Paycheck” (written on July 31, 1952 and first published in the June 1953)

Jennings, a talented electronic engineer, has accepted a secret contract with Rethrick Construction. The terms of the contract state that he will work for two years on a secret project after which he will have his memory of the time erased and will be paid an inordinate sum.

The trinkets that Jennings received as payment are as follows:

A length of fine wire (allows him to short out and open the door of a police car)

A bus token (allows him to quickly board a bus and escape the secret police)

A ticket stub (tells him where Rethrick's building is)

A green strip of cloth (a worker's armband, enabling him to enter Rethrick's building)

A code key (opens a rear exit from Rethrick's building)

Half a broken poker chip (permits entry to a gambling den where he hides from both the Company and the police)

A parcel receipt (permits access to material stored in a bank that allows him to blackmail Rethrick into protecting him from the government)

Alexis Rogers-Esparcia says

I needed something quick to listen to on the way home from work. I was so surprised by how awesome this was. I got wrapped up in the story immediately. It was a fun and exciting read. Great if you want something short and fun. I love science fiction so this was perfect!

Bill Kerwin says

First published in *Imagination* (June 1953), “Paycheck” is a science fiction classic. Although not strictly a tale of time travel (it is really a tale of time “retrieval”), it presents a genuinely original idea of how other time periods might be utilized to affect the present. What makes it such a classic story, however, is that it communicates a revolutionary concept (“time scooping”) through an exciting, straightforward narrative an almost fairy tale purity.

Computer “mechanic” Jennings returns from two years of working for Rethrick Construction with his two years of memory—as stipulated by contract—permanently erased. When he attempts to receive his paycheck of 50,000 credits, he receives instead an envelope containing: a piece of wire, a bus token, a ticket stub, a piece of cloth, half a poker chip, a code key, and a package receipt. It turns out that he himself requested that he receive the contents in lieu of payment. At first he is appalled, and angry, but, as soon as he exits the front door of Rethrick Construction, he begins to discover very good reasons to be thankful for his past self’s strange gift.

I wish I could give this story my highest praise, but unfortunately it concludes in a sappy, romantic fashion which, although perhaps suitable for the pulps, mars both its power and folktale simplicity. But still, it is a small blot in an otherwise fine story, and I heartily recommend it.

Alexandra says

Paycheck ist eine Reihe von 12 Kurzgeschichten von Philip K. Dick, von denen nur 8 wirklich gut sind.

Wenn Ihr das Buch bereits daheim habt, ist es durchaus mit 3,5 Sternen zu bewerten und lesesenswert, wenn nicht, gibt es eine weitaus bessere Alternative für Euch: Besorgt Euch "Der unmögliche Planet", eine Sammlung von 30 der besten Kurzgeschichten Dicks, denn bis auf zwei Geschichten sind alle guten Stories dieses Buches auch dort versammelt und noch viel mehr guter Stoff als Draufgabe. Aber nun die Übersicht, damit Ihr Euch selbst ein Bild machen könnt:

1. Paycheck - gut - nur in diesem Buch
2. Nanny - grandios - auch im unmöglichen Planeten

3. Johns Welt - mittelmäßig - nur in diesem Buch
4. Frühstück im Zwielicht - langweilig - nur in diesem Buch
5. Kleine Stadt - vorhersehbar, mittelmäßig - nur in diesem Buch
6. Das Vater Ding - grandios - auch im unmöglichen Planeten
7. Zwischen den Stühlen - grandios - nur in diesem Buch
8. Autofab - grandios - auch im unmöglichen Planeten
9. Zur Zeit der Perky Pat - grandios - auch im unmöglichen Planeten
10. Allzeit bereit - mittelmäßig das Ende passt gar nicht - nur in diesem Buch
11. Ein kleines Trostpflaster für uns Temponauten - sehr gut - auch im unmöglichen Planeten
12. Präpersonen - grandios und fürchterlich - auch im unmöglichen Planeten

Also wenn Ihr die Wahl habt, nehmt den unmöglichen Planeten.

Lediglich um Geschichte 7 wäre mir wirklich leid. Diese Story erinnert mich ganz frappant an unsere derzeitige Wahlsituation in Österreich. Zwei völlig verfeindete Lager stehen sich unversöhnlich gegenüber: Die Puristen und die Naturalisten. Das groteske an der politischen Situation ist, dass es vordergründig hauptsächlich um Achselschweiß und Mundgeruch geht, die Naturalisten (eher die Landbevölkerung) lehnen es ab, sich die Schweißdrüsen entfernen und sich die Zähne richten zu lassen. Don sitzt zwischen den Stühlen, denn er lebt nach dem Motto "Leben und leben lassen" und will Toleranz üben. Leider hat er nicht mit dem Fanatismus beider Parteien gerechnet.

Zum Cover möchte ich dieses Mal auch etwas schreiben. Selten ein so deplaziertes, schlechtes Bild gesehen. Auf der Vorderseite prangen doch tatsächlich wie bei einem Filmplakat die Gesichter der Hauptdarsteller von Paycheck: Ben Affleck, Uma Thurman und noch irgendein Schauspieler, den ich nicht kenne. In Anbetracht der Tatsache, dass Paycheck genau ein Zwölftel des Buchinhaltes ausmacht, weil sie einfach nur eine unter vielen anderen Kurzgeschichten ist, stellt somit dieses fürchterliche Cover nicht nur eine Beleidigung für mein Auge, sondern auch noch eine glatte Themenverfehlung dar. Da lobe ich mir die unifarbige Heyne Ausgabe der restlichen Dick'schen Romane (leider bereits vergriffen).

David says

Jennings goes in to collect his pay and is offered a cash amount or a collection of odds and ends that may be clues to something worth even more. His last two years working for a secretive company as their most talented engineer are a complete blank to him. This is even more disconcerting when he finds that the Secret Police are pursuing him to learn what goes on at his recent employer's company! Another short story page turner from one of my favorite authors, Philip K. Dick. As far as I know, this one has not been turned into a movie like some of his other works. But it was certainly entertaining in my opinion! Whether you're already a PKD fan or not, find a copy of this read!

Jeffery Moulton says

It always amuses me when I hear people talking about Philip K. Dick movies. They often assume, usually incorrectly, that he was able to foresee this amazing future and they stand in awe of his prescience. The

Minority Report was a good example. After seeing the movie, I heard several people talking about how amazing it was that Dick imagined such advanced computer technology way back in the 50s and 60s, never realizing that the computers in the original story actually generated punch-cards and were... well.. computers from the 50s and 60s. They were nothing like what viewers saw in the movie.

Paycheck, which is one of many short stories written by PKD, is similar. It is incredibly dated, especially its attitudes towards government and the sexes. PKD was very much a product of the 50s, and his bias and suspicion towards government in general comes through his stories. The one is no exception. Even more, his attitude toward genders is very apparent. It makes for some interesting reading from an historical perspective, but it can also be just a little uncomfortable when the male characters make overtly chauvinistic comments and references that just wouldn't fly in today's world. He's writing from his worldview in the context of the time, so you have to cut him some slack, but it made me glad that we've come a least a little further than that.

That being said, the story is interesting. Like every PKD adaptation I've ever seen, the movie is significantly different from the written story. While maintaining the core of the idea, it expands and goes places PKD never imagined. Also, like other PKD adaptations (notably The Minority Report), the ending flies directly in the face of the ending in the story. As if the filmmakers decided to do the exact opposite of what PKD wrote. Again, this is a product of the times. Dick's endings are often more forgiving of corporations and other entities that are not in vogue these days. Keeping the original endings just wouldn't work today, so the filmmakers have to make changes.

In the end, I thought the story was worth reading. It is rife with interesting tidbits that appear anachronistic in today's world but paint a fascinating picture of that time period. The 3-star rating was mostly because... well... I just didn't love the story. Like I said, it made me a little uncomfortable sometimes, but more than that, I got to the end and asked "so what?" without a good response.

I recommend the story to any PKD fan and to anyone interested in that time period and classic science fiction.

Tristram says

Ticket for a Ride

Paycheck is an early story by Philip K. Dick, written in 1952 and published one year later, and while it is clearly meant to entertain its readers with its Hitchcockian “innocent man on the run” motif, only to be slightly marred by its jarring pat ending, it also has a somewhat prophetic quality.

Our protagonist, an engineer called Jennings, has just finished a two-year employment with the mysterious company Rethrick Construction and instead of the huge payment he has been expecting he receives seven seemingly worthless little everyday objects. According to his contract, all his memories from the past two years have been erased from his mind, but he is told that it was actually he who wanted to be given these objects instead of monetary payment. At first, he is dismayed and does not know what to make of it all but he soon finds himself the target of the Secret Police – the U.S. has become an authoritarian state during those two years – who want to force him to disclose what he had been working on. He sees his only chance to find out what he worked on for his former employer, blackmailing Rethrick Construction into giving him permanent shelter from the police, and lo! suddenly those mundane trinkets he received prove of

immeasurable value.

Like *The Variable Man* the story spends a lot of energy on the chase of the protagonist (and I could almost picture Cary Grant in the role of Jennings), but the story is about more than just providing quick thrills. Dick pictures a future in which the individual has lost all his rights and finds himself jammed between an all-powerful state and big companies serving their own interests, the only ones to have resisted the state's claim to absolute power.

"When an individual person was defenceless, a business was not. The big economic forces had managed to remain free, although virtually everything else had been absorbed by the Government. Laws that had been eased away from the private person still protected property and industry."

Sounds familiar?

"[...] An individual has no place to turn to, anymore. No one to help him. He's caught between two ruthless forces, a pawn between political and economic powers. And I'm tired of being a pawn."

Ditto? One may have the impression that Dick's story is set in a society the writing of which is on the wall. Add to this Dick's concept of time scooping and a suspenseful "man on the run" plot, and you have a good example of intelligent and entertaining science fiction. I don't know whether the movie lives up to the story because Ben Affleck always makes me not to watch the movie.

Alice says

Some of these stories are a little dated and predictable now, but still a pleasure to read. Standouts were the title tale, *Paycheck*, a pacy time travel adventure; *The Days of Perky Pat*, in which adult survivors of a global crisis use the technology given them by kindly aliens not to rebuild their planet, but to re-enact the past with dolls; and *The Pre-Persons*, which I can recall from a collection I gave my dad years ago and impressed us both at the time.

Stephen Cagle says

This is a very short story, so it will be a short review.

Paycheck is clear, clean writing. It actually fits in quite comfortably with *The Minority Report* by PKD as both deal with the ability to see events that have not occurred yet. I suppose the technology in *Paycheck* exceeds that in *Minority* as they are also capable of "reaching" into the future, not just observing it from the

past.

The book was a little dry. Anachronisms littered the story like punchcards in a modern data center (terrible). It also suffers from the Deus Ex Machina problem of having a guy who knows the future providing you tools to deal with the present. Whatever. It is good, very short, and a fun read. Nothing profound, but fun.

Shhhhh Ahhhhh says

And, again, I'm left wondering if PKD defined a new trope/ subgenre with his work. The 'hey, I've seen the future, you'll need this ball of twine, this pin, and this pencil. You'll be fine. Trust me' style of story, told masterfully and seriously, tells me that this was one of the first, if not the very first of its kind.

Jacques Bezuidenhout says

Read as part of Minority Report and Other Stories.

Another short that had a movie based on it. First published in 1953.

I think one has to understand with these shorts that not a lot of time is spent on developing characters. There is a plot, and limit time to get through it.

With Paycheck (don't think I've actually seen the movie) there were quite a few twists, which was nice. The whole short reads like a puzzle. And that is exactly what it is.

Very enjoyable.
