

My work is available at MikeSheedy.com. “The Other Mike” is from the afterword to a story collection I wrote in 2021.

THE OTHER MIKE

There are stories about Mark Twain and Ernest Hemingway in this collection, and I was hoping to do one featuring Philip K. Dick. He was a famously paranoid sci-fi writer. The story would have been built around masks, because of the Covid stuff, and the mask motif would have helped highlight Dick's paranoia. I would also have used the motif to address something that's troubling me personally at the moment. A man with my name (same name, exactly) has recently begun publishing novels on platforms that I've been using for years. It's like he just appeared out of nowhere wearing a mask with my face on it. Normally this wouldn't bother me, but the newcomer's writing is awful. It reads like pig latin translated by a dyslexic. I put a lot of effort into polishing my work, but the other Mike doesn't. And I worry that people will mistake his books for mine. So I tell P.K. Dick about this when I meet him in my story, and he asks what I write about. “Politics, lately. Anti-government stuff.” “Then the other Mike is an agent,” he says. “He's a G-man who's been assigned the task of discrediting you.” He tells me we need to find the agent, and we set off through a Dickian world of swibble and flapples and autofacs. We question several of the masked inhabitants. None are who they claim to be, and quite a few are space aliens. Then we come across a downed surveillance drone. Dick prepares to stomp on it, but he withholds the boot when the drone tells us it has the information

we've been seeking. It says that the other Mike is the product of an artificial intelligence program. The government is using A.I. to churn out bad writing in my name and the names of thousands of other dissidents. The aim is to discredit us, like Dick surmised. He contacts some friends in "the resistance" and they release an artificial stupidity program, to counteract the A.I. The A.S. finds its way onto government computers and goes to work writing stupid legislation, stupid presidential speeches and so forth. And, surprisingly, the work it puts out is more intelligent than anything coming from our actual leaders. Our society begins to heal. People toss their masks, bad politicians are driven from office, and the other Mike's books disappear. Then at the end of the story Dick revisits some of the shrinks who treated him for paranoia. He doesn't go for therapy, he just wants to say, "I told you so."

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