

The Year of Magical Thinking

A review by Stephen Gauer

For close to forty years now, Joan Didion has used her masterful skills as a non-fiction writer to conduct a subtle and persistent interrogation of American culture and political life. Her writing is at once intensely subjective and completely objective; free of any obvious bias or political loyalty, she's always searching for the truth, for the reality behind the image, for the mechanism behind the curtain, for the wizard at the controls.

Her first two collections of essays, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (1968), and *The White Album* (1979) are classics of social observation and inquiry. The more recent books, *Political Fictions* (2001) and *Where I Was From* (2003), stretch beyond the personal to tackle broader themes (Washington as media construct, California as historical myth).

Didion has always been the cool outsider looking in, a stance supported by a precise, analytical intelligence and a prose style as transparent and accomplished as Orwell's or Hemingway's. In her new book, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Didion sheds the outsider role and steps in front of the mirror to document the horrific year of grief and loss that followed the death of her husband, writer John Gregory Dunne, by a "massive coronary event" at the dinner table of their Manhattan apartment in December 2003.

For Didion, grief is a form of insanity, or derangement, what she calls “magical thinking”. Although Dunne had suffered serious heart problems since the 1980s, and had spent the last months of his life with a pacemaker in his chest, she’d convinced herself everything was fine. “He believed he was dying, he told me so, repeatedly,” she writes. “I dismissed this.”

She tried to dismiss his death, too, refusing to give away his shoes because he might come back. She felt fragile and unstable. She had trouble remembering things. She cried at unexpected moments. “Grief comes in waves,” she writes, “paroxysms, sudden apprehensions that weaken the knees and blind the eyes and obliterate the dailiness of life.” After 40 years of a highly entwined marriage to Dunne, she felt the terrible tug of memory every time she looked at his photograph or drove down a familiar street. Didion captures the banality of grief (“Life changes in the instant.”) and its nightmarish intensity (“If the house was dark, I would lie there immobilized, entertaining visions of household peril, the books that would slide from the shelf and knock me down.”)

Her pain is doubled by the serious illness of her daughter, Quintana, who went into hospital with complications from pneumonia and septic shock just five days before her father’s death. Quintana’s long and difficult recovery is the second, and weaker narrative strand of the book. Didion, a fierce mother who believes that “information is control”, reads medical manuals, interrogates doctors and brandishes her medical terminology with

a numbing single-mindedness. Quintana, unfortunately, comes across with little force and no dimension. She died of acute pancreatitis on August 26, 2005 at the age of 39.

Didion wrote the book in just three months, in the fall of 2004. It's a sad book, of course, but there's nothing gloomy or sentimental about it. Aware of the survivor's tendency to self-pity, Didion refuses to feel sorry for herself. She's too busy trying to figure out grief, to document it, to write a narrative that makes sense, to quote sources (Freud, CS Lewis, The Merck Manual, Emily Post, among others), like a diligent undergrad, that might lend meaning and context and corroboration to her own experience.

In her previous books Didion often used carefully controlled self-revelation to disarm readers; in this book she breaks through that artifice to reveal herself in full and contradictory complexity: a 70-year-old woman filled with dread and fear, yet also strong and confident, a manager, someone who, in the words of her husband "always has to be right", a believer in the simple-minded optimism of old pop songs, a "cool customer" (in the words of a social worker), a loving wife, a prize-winning and wealthy writer who questions her ability to write.

Three weeks after the World Trade Center attacks in 2001, I went to a reading Didion gave a reading at a bookstore in Manhattan. According to my notes, she attacked the "pernicious nostalgia" of American politics, and the "magical thinking" in the American media that denies the realities of race and social class.

When a young woman asked her why she'd stopped writing about herself, Didion replied, "There comes a time when focusing on yourself becomes really tedious."

Everyone smiled.

How very wrong she was.

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