

INTRODUCTION



Joan Didion

(1934-)

In post-World War II American letters, Joan Didion has emerged as a prominent voice. She was born in Sacramento, California, on December 5, 1934, the elder child, to Frank Reese and Eduene Jerret Didion. As she has noted in various essays, Didion was a child who developed a strong sense of place, both in terms of heredity and landscape. Her ancestors were among the Donner-Reed party, and she represents a fifth generation of a family which has lived in the Sacramento Valley, a location which figures prominently in many of her works.

For two years, from 1942 to 1944, Didion's family followed her father on four moves to different Air Corps bases in Washington, North Carolina, and Colorado. Didion's sense of dislocation was acute, even after the family returned to Sacramento, and the ten-year-old girl began writing stories. A loner through junior high school, Didion spent much of her time reading writers such as Joseph Conrad and Ernest Hemingway, both of whom made lasting impressions on her. She matriculated to C. K. McClatchy Senior High School and later attended the University of California, Berkeley, from 1952 to 1956.

At Berkeley, Didion majored in English literature and has claimed that many of her adult attitudes were shaped by her experiences in college. In 1956, during her senior year, Didion won first place in a *Vogue* writing contest with an essay about William Wilson Wurster, a San Francisco architect, and took as her prize a job writing merchandizing and promotional copy with the magazine. Under the tutelage of her editor, Allene Talmey, Didion began writing feature pieces in 1961 for *Vogue* as well as other magazines.

Eventually homesick, Didion began writing her first novel, *Run River*, which was published in 1963, and resigned her full-time position with the magazine. In 1964, she was married to John Gregory Dunne, then a writer with *Time*, and later that year the couple moved to Los Angeles. In 1966, they adopted a daughter, Quintana Roo, and during this period, in spite of marital difficulties, Didion steadily wrote articles, a number of which she collected and published in 1968 as *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*.

Two years later, Didion published her critically well-received second novel, *Play It As It Lays*, which was nominated for a National Book Award. In 1971, she and her family moved to the beach community of Trancas, where they remained for the next seven years, a literally productive period for both Didion and her husband.

In 1977, *A Book of Common Prayer*, an instant best-seller, was published, and two years later, *The White Album*, a second collection of essays dealing with the late 1960's and early 1970's, was also published. In 1983 she published her first extended piece of nonfiction, *Salvador*, and followed that in the

next year with a fourth novel, *Democracy*, a tale of political and sexual intrigue. In 1987 she published her second work of nonfiction, *Miami*, and in 1988 she and her husband moved back to New York.

While Didion's works are highly individualistic, there are nevertheless themes and concerns that appear repeatedly. For example, in the preface to *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, Didion coins the term "atomization" to describe the sense of disruption and chaos that plagues contemporary American life. In essay after essay, Didion reveals a society cut off from tradition, ethics, and any coherent sense of the past. The subjects of various essays become living parallels for the metaphors from W. B. Yeats's poem "The Second Coming," which Didion offers as one of two revealing epigraphs for the collection.

In all Didion's work, fiction and nonfiction, there emerges a palpable sense of dread, often a free-floating anxiety which cannot be appeased or eradicated. In the beginning of *The White Album*, in a moment of uncomfortable candor, Didion shares a psychiatric report of her condition which reveals her pessimistic worldview, yet the ensuing essays stand as eloquent testimony for such oppressive feelings. While she never formally acknowledges it, this attitude is profoundly existential and forms the core of her literary and personal vision.

In her novels, the heroines are invariably of a certain type--thin, often frail, frequently neurasthenic, and usually victimized by their friends, lovers, and the world in general. They are characters for whom the ordinary promises of life--happiness, success, love--have somehow failed, and often, like Maria Wyeth in *Play It As It Lays*, they search desperately and unsuccessfully for the reasons for this failure. At the same time, though, these women reveal a gritty determination to continue with life. Maria, for example, refuses escape through suicide and continues her search for meaning and fulfillment.

While the vision Didion presents is an uncomfortable one, there is no questioning her honesty and determination. As she reveals in her essay "Why I Write," Didion is committed to writing itself, which for her, in the most literal sense, is a continuing act of discovery. Her prose is animated by a scrupulous honesty and a hard particularity. Much like her inspiration, Ernest Hemingway, Didion fills her works with carefully wrought sentences and clear, precise images. With each work, Didion reasserts her integral place in contemporary American literature and demonstrates a remarkably distinct talent.

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