



Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking*
By Trey Wood

RECOMMENDED READING

Let's begin with this. Joan Didion is a master essayist. So much so, now, that it is only clichéd to express such an opinion.

For decades, Didion has written with meticulous observation on a wide array of topics – John Wayne, Nancy Reagan, Georgia O'Keefe, a murder trial, the 1960s, the '70s and, more recently, the vanishing of a California she once was convinced would last much longer than any of us living today, if not forever, like the geological forms she often paints with her words.

She is, perhaps, most widely known for her Hollywood work. With her late husband, the highly accomplished writer John Gregory Dunne, she adapted screenplays for "Play It as It Lays" (1972) and "True Confessions" (1981). They also wrote "The Panic in Needle Park" (1971) and "Up Close and Personal" (1996). Many critics have been quick to point out that Didion's screenwork is unremarkable and even detracts from the quality and standing of her more important work. She dismissed such criticism by simply noting that movie-making is fun, easy and lucrative.

But, indeed, it is unlikely that 50 years from now Didion will be remembered for her occasional romance with the studios or even for five critically successful novels. Instead, it is likely that her nonfiction work (seven in book form, as of today) will still be read because in it she concisely and unsentimentally captures the feeling, as well as the facts, surrounding many events and ideas that are at the center of our times. She does all of this with a style that is rich in layers, describing many subtleties at once, as few writers, even gifted ones, have ever done.

In her most recent work, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Didion gives the reader an uncompromising and penetrating account of personal terror and loss as we learn of the events surrounding the sudden death of her husband and the surprising and painful progress of her daughter's ultimately fatal illness. Didion's book is powerful and absorbing. It also can be funny, mostly in flashbacks to an earlier, happier time. And what of the book's happy-go-lucky title? Forget it. The magic is all in our heads, as Didion's most prevalent theme makes itself known: grief literally drives us crazy.

The writer's story begins in December 2003, when her only child fell into septic shock following a runaway pneumonia infection that refused to be tamed. Quintana Roo Dunne, 39, had married only five months earlier. On the evening of Dec. 30, Didion and her husband returned from New York's Beth Israel North to their apartment after doctors had placed Quintana in an induced coma. While the couple was talking and Didion prepared supper, Dunne slumped in his chair with one hand raised, dying so suddenly that for a moment his wife mistook his motions for a joke.

This is how she begins. The crisis of mortality revealed.

Didion's writings are almost always restrained. She is not a show-off. She does not overuse adjectives. She pulls the reader forward like a crime novelist, laying out the facts and dissecting what she sees. Her creativity is most expressed in the insights she shares with the reader and then, when the timing is perfect, in the turn of a phrase.

Some reviewers have likened her style to Hemingway's staccato rhythms. But Didion's writings – in content, perspective and style – have always been difficult to categorize. Certainly her manner and subject matter express a Western point-of-view, as in the admiration for the independent, strong and self-reliant spirit. And while her earliest sensibilities were shaped by her reviews and commentary for William F. Buckley's *National Review*, during the last 45 years Didion has done what the best artists always do – she has evolved in both stylistic approach and subject matter.

In *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Didion takes us on her journey. A painful and detailed description of how one person, self-assured, successful and seemingly happy, is suddenly confronted with Shakespearean tragedy in a way that could befall any of us.

We are immediately absorbed into her story. How will she survive? Indeed, how will she make it through the day? The answers are a combination of several partial solutions, one of which is the ability to conjure up the magical, the ridiculous.

We find that for months following her husband's death Didion believes that in some miraculous way her beloved spouse will be allowed to return to the living if only she does the right things and avoids the wrong things. In other words, God may give him back.

Didion often writes by placing herself in the story at hand and, obviously, that is the perspective of this new book. But she is not what we now call a confessional writer. Again, she is restrained, always leaving some words off the page. Consequently, we are not completely sure how she survives these terrible events even at the conclusion of the book. However, she does hint at the idea of “memory” as not only a catharsis but also a key to human meaning. During the course of her storytelling, Didion describes a brief recollection, an occasion when Dunne said, in the familiar way of spousal conversation, “You were right about Hawaii.” She remembers those words and writes:

“He may have meant that I had been right a day or so before when I said that when Quintana got better (this was our code for ‘if she lives’) we could rent a house on the Kailua beach and she could recuperate there. Or he may have meant that I had been right in the 1970s when I wanted to buy a house in Honolulu. I preferred at the time to think the former but the past tense suggested the latter. He said these things in the taxi between Beth Israel North and our apartment either three hours before he died or 27 hours before he died, I try to remember which and cannot.”

The book is peppered with these types of descriptions to remind us how gray memory can be and how very important it can be, as well.

Many of those who know of the 40-year relationship between Didion and Dunne, have greatly admired, even envied, the overwhelming bond between these two artists. Most days they spent reading and writing near each other. They sometimes worked together. They often traveled the world side-by-side. They did not always agree, but they always supported each other in a way that is generally only on display for most of us in books and movies. And, now, Didion is left to remember these things and to cope with her grief. She writes:

“Nor can we know ahead of the fact (and here lies the heart of the difference between grief as we imagine it and grief as it is) the unending absence that follows, the void, the very opposite of meaning, the relentless succession of moments during which we will confront the experience of meaninglessness itself.”

Readers of Didion's work have noted that she often addresses the concept of loss or at least the idea of *difficult change*. In her recent books, Didion admits seeing the world, her world, differently than she once perceived it. She has appeared to lose faith in certain institutions and movements, in California as a place to break out the truly new idea, and even in the power and success of her forbears, whom she once held in the highest esteem. Now, in this new book, through the power of Didion's voice, the reader is confronted with so much. With grief, with anger, with loneliness, with fear and, in the end, with a strange combination of hope and despair.

We note Didion's faltering religious faith along with a reassuring memory from years before:

"I think about swimming with him into the cave at Portuguese Bend, about the swell of clear water, the way it changed, the swiftness and power it gained as it narrowed through the rocks at the base of the point. The tide had to be just right. We had to be in the water at the very moment the tide was right. We could only have done this a half dozen times at most during the two years we lived there but it is what I remember. Each time we did it I was afraid of missing the swell, hanging back, timing it wrong. John never was. You had to feel the swell change. You had to go with the change. He told me that. No eye is on the sparrow but he did tell me that."

Didion references the Gospels. Specifically, Matthew 10: 29-31 and Luke 12: 6-7 where Jesus directs his followers not to worry about tomorrow. "Are not five sparrows sold for two farthings, and not one of them is forgotten before God? But even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not therefore: ye are of more value than many sparrows."

Now, husband and child gone, Didion's eyes seem to turn more stoic, more to Marcus Aurelius than the New Testament, as she tries to take some comfort in her young Catholic husband's perspective out there in Portuguese Bend. We might find ourselves in the middle of something we can't control, he might have explained, but one can't be afraid of the swell change. You have to go with it. John Gregory Dunne would be proud of his dear bride because she, against all odds, has pressed forward and risen with the swell.