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READING JOAN DIDION

**LYNN MARIE HOUSTON AND
WILLIAM V. LOMBARDI**

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READING JOAN DIDION

Lynn Marie Houston and William V. Lombardi

The Pop Lit Book Club

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PREFACE

Joan Didion's work can be deceptively complex. While she has perfected a signature style that often involves a rather sparse sentence structure, her words pack verbal punches. Unpacking those "verbal punches," the emotional weight they carry, and the historical and cultural artifacts that they reference was a harder task than either of us imagined. We learned that although a writer like Didion pares down her verbiage, this does not mean that her writing lacks sophistication; in fact, "less is more" when it comes to Didion's writing style. Despite the challenges that her work presented, we both are glad to have had this opportunity to lay out for readers of all backgrounds the trajectory of Didion's career and her contributions to American literature. What thrills us the most is being able to educate those readers who may be too easily swayed by Didion's critics. Many of the criticisms leveled against her work reveal a failure to understand that her writing documents national identity by conjuring up bold outlines of sentiments that are only selectively colored in. Because she does not finish "coloring in" some of these images, her writing is deemed lacking. However, Didion's style relies on the reader to bring something to her work. Her focus is the twentieth-century ennui that results from our disenchantment with grand narratives; she purposefully structures the masterful lacunae in her writing. To truly see the contribution Didion makes through her literature, one must have an appreciation for what is not there; one must see the beauty in what is left unsaid. Her style captures the disappointment of those who have reluctantly relinquished their desire for control over a disordered universe. Her work repeatedly suggests the darker sides of the social and economic revolutions of twentieth-century America by showing the negative consequences that ensue from the decline of the family unit, from

an increase in the importance attributed to material excess, and from the maintenance of a naive religious view inherited from the Puritans that is hopeful about salvation and the good intentions of our national agenda yet fraught with guilt over, and too accepting of, moral decay.

Few book-length guides to Didion's work are available, and none yet take into account her 2005 award-winning nonfiction work *The Year of Magical Thinking*. We include an analysis of that work. Also, because the bulk of reader's guides on Joan Didion's work appeared in the 1980s, they are missing Didion's 2003 autobiographical work *Where I Was From*. These previous reference works are rather outdated given the amount of work she has continued to produce and the amount of scholarship on her work that has appeared since then, especially materials that have appeared on the Internet. We hope that we have achieved a certain historical perspective in our summaries and analyses that will help readers understand Didion's legacy and her place in American arts and letters.

We begin with a short biographical essay about the major events in Didion's life. Then, we outline the major genres and literary movements into which her writing falls. Next, we move on to summarize and analyze some of the most important of her major works. After that, we discuss how her work is relevant to contemporary issues in society, as well as the role popular culture plays in her work. We subsequently explore the information that is available about Didion on the Internet, along with her presence in the media. Finally, we provide a reading list of other works and authors that readers might like if they enjoyed Didion, along with a compilation of various resources available for further information.

We thank Joan Didion (or J. Diddy as she is called by some blogging fans) for her work and for accomplishing, with a relentless bravado, the hard task she has given herself as a writer: baring her soul in the struggle to make sense of experience and history with the aim of rendering life meaningful to herself and to her readers. We also thank all of the reading groups, teachers, and scholars who bring her work to the attention of a greater reading audience and place her work in dialogue with the rest of American literature.

On a personal note, we thank our contacts at Greenwood Press, our colleagues in the English department of California State University, Chico, and our friends and family members for their support.

Will's note: I thank my wife Jenny and son Hawk for their constant support of my studies and their inspiration and encouragement during the research of this book. Their love is always precious to my heart and I cherish them both beyond words. I also thank my co-author, professor,

and graduate advisor, Dr. Lynn Houston, for introducing me to so many professional opportunities, not the least of which is this book. As a guide, her insight is thoughtful and provocative; as a mentor, her generosity is profound.

Lynn's note: For their love and support, I thank my parents, my brother, and Mark Adam Hammond. I express gratitude to my co-author, Will, for his dedication to this project. He not only was tenacious in bringing the project to completion, but I also could count on him for work of the highest quality. His natural talents as a gifted literary scholar and writer have been further honed by the eagerness with which he has pursued his education. In the four years that I have worked with Will, I have seen him take his passion for the landscape of the Golden State and develop it into a specialty in the literature of California and the Western frontier. I especially enjoyed working with Will on this project because mentoring such a capable student became like a dance in which I forgot who was leading and who was following, and I was able to just lose myself in the music of Didion's prose. I wish for him the same delightful experience in the future when he will mentor his own students as he further develops into the brilliant and dynamic teacher he is already well on his way to becoming.

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JOAN DIDION: A WRITER'S LIFE

Joan Didion was born on December 5, 1934, in Sacramento, California. During her childhood, her family lived in many different U.S. cities because her father held an administrative position in the U.S. Army and was required to travel. After finishing high school, she graduated from the University of California–Berkeley, with a degree in English, having taken a creative writing course from Mark Schorer, which represents some of the only formal training in writing that Didion received. Having inadvertently missed a required course in Milton she spent a summer writing papers on Milton and traveling weekly to Berkeley's campus to deliver a lecture on his work. Although Didion had been writing since she was a young girl (she wrote her first short story at the age of five), her first published short story appeared in a student literary magazine named the *Occident* in 1956. It was awarded *Vogue's* "Prix de Paris," which entitled Didion to work as an assistant for *Vogue* magazine.

For the next ten years, she lived in New York and wrote for various magazines, including *Vogue*, *Mademoiselle*, and *The National Review*, until she married fellow writer John Gregory Dunne in 1964 and they moved back to California. In the year prior to her marriage, her first novel, *Run River*, was published to much critical acclaim. Didion would continue to write for various publications, including *Vogue* (where in the late 1960s she had her own movie column), the *Saturday Evening Post* (which included a co-authored column with her husband, also in the late 1960s), *Holiday*, the *New York Times Magazine*, *Harper's*

Bazaar, *Denver Quarterly*, the *American Scholar*, *Life*, the *New York Times Book Review*, the *New York Review of Books*, *Esquire* (which involved a co-authored column with her husband in the mid to late 1970s), and *Michigan Quarterly Review*.

In 1966, she and her husband adopted a daughter who they named Quintana Roo, after a Mexican state on the Yucatan peninsula. Two years later, her collection of essays *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* was published. In 1968, the *Los Angeles Times* named her “Woman of the Year.” In 1970, her bestselling novel *Play It As It Lays* was published and nominated for a National Book Award. It is listed on *Time* magazine’s list of 100 best books in the English language.

Didion and her husband John Gregory Dunne often collaborated not only on columns and on editing each other’s work, but also on co-writing screenplays. They co-authored screenplays for *Panic in Needle Park* (1971), the movie that launched Al Pacino; the film adaption of Didion’s novel *Play It As It Lays* (1972); *A Star Is Born* (1976), starring Barbra Streisand and Kris Kristofferson; *True Confessions* (1981), which was based on Dunne’s novel of the same name; and *Up Close and Personal* (1996).

Despite suffering from debilitating migraines and a sun sensitivity that requires her to wear large sunglasses when outdoors, Didion’s output has been prodigious. From 1977 to 1979, she produced a book a year: *A Book of Common Prayer* (1977), *Telling Stories* (1978), and *The White Album* (1979). From 1983 to 1987, she produced three books in five years: *Salvador* (1983), *Democracy* (1984), and *Miami* (1987). She has lectured at numerous universities, including her alma mater, the University of California–Berkeley, in 1975.

During the mid-1980s, Didion and her husband moved back to New York City. She discusses the move and her relationship to New York City in her collection of essays entitled *After Henry* (1992). In 1996, her novel *The Last Thing He Wanted* was published and, in 2001, she tapped into her experiences in journalism to produce *Political Fictions*, which analyzed the news coverage of the presidential elections from 1980–1992. In 2003, she published a collection of essays about California culture entitled *Where I Was From*. In the same year, Didion’s daughter Quintana was hospitalized with a grave illness. Coming home one night from visiting her, Didion’s husband John suffered a heart attack and died. She wrote *The Year of Magical Thinking* to explore her suffering and grief after his death. Just as she finished that book in 2005, her daughter Quintana also passed away. *The Year of Magical Thinking* won the National Book Award in 2005. Didion also adapted it into a play for Broadway starring Vanessa Redgrave and directed by

It is popular among readers of Joan Didion's work to associate Didion herself with her female characters. However, she has often commented in interviews that the women characters she develops in her writing are only tangentially connected to her own life. Certain works that draw heavily from her own life are the exception, such as *Where I Was From* and *The Year of Magical Thinking*. Joyce Carol Oates has this to say about Didion's female characters:

Joan Didion has never been easy on her heroines. Suicide always threatens them. In *Run River* the heroine drowns herself; in *Play It As It Lays* the heroine shares a bed with a man who happens to be committing suicide—after a breakdown she manages to survive, barely, minimally. In *A Book of Common Prayer* Charlotte Douglas suffers not only the loss of her daughter (whom she never sees again after the airplane hijacking), but the loss of her former husband (with whom she has desperately eloped, or re-eloped) and the loss of an infant born prematurely, after an unwise pregnancy. (Oates, 139).

David Hare. In 2006, a collection of her first seven nonfiction works was published under the title *We Tell Ourselves Stories in Order to Live*. In that same year, she received the Lifetime Achievement Award from the National Book Foundation. As of 2009, she was working on the screenplay for an HBO film about the life of *Washington Post* journalist and publisher Katharine Graham.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How do Didion's works accurately reflect the common advice given to writers to "write what you know"?
- Does Didion's involvement with Hollywood movie culture lend credibility to her stories that are set in Hollywood or involve characters in the film industry?
- How might it be limiting to talk about Didion's characters only in terms of her life?

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JOAN DIDION AND THE GENRE

Didion has been successful over her career in the genres of fiction and nonfiction. Her best-known fiction works are the novels *Run River* and *Play It As It Lays*, and among her more influential essay collections are *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* and *The White Album*. *Where I Was From* and *The Year of Magical Thinking* can be categorized in the genre of the memoir and have received considerable attention in the early twenty-first century. She and her husband also wrote many successful screenplays.

During the 1980s, a significant amount of Didion's literary output was focused on the issues of Central America in fiction (*A Book of Common Prayer*) and nonfiction (*Salvador*), but first and foremost she is considered a California author. Her works with international settings can be read as further explorations into Didion's understanding of frontier ideologies, and indeed, this is when she is at her best. Her cultural commentary has garnered her as much disdain by critics for what they construe as her elitism and conservatism as it has garnered her acclaim by fans for her sharp eye, intelligence, and clever turns of phrase. Beyond that, Didion escapes categorizing, but following are brief discussions of the three literary movements with which Didion can be most closely associated.

Didion's writing reveals that she comprehended the zeitgeist of the 1960s and 1970s so well because she was an outsider among outsiders. This is also what makes it so hard to group her with her contemporaries in New Journalism. In her essay "On the Morning after the Sixties" from *The White Album*, she writes about the significance of being a child of one's time, and she expresses that she did not come of age in a revolutionary time, but just before it, in the 1950s. Didion makes continuous reference to Allen Ginsberg, who was also a child of the 1950s, in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*. Arguably, figures like Ginsberg underscore the notion that revolution is where people find it, making him an interesting foil to what is often perceived as Didion's conservatism. In Didion's writing, Ginsberg appears not as her subject, but indirectly, on a poster in a Haight-Ashbury apartment, for example, or invoked as a young student's model for nonviolence at Joan Baez's institute. To those involved, Ginsberg seems infinitely relevant to the revolution Didion reports on, even while she herself does not. At one point in "Slouching" she is made to understand that she is too old to "get it," while Ginsberg, nearly ten years older than her, is lionized. For her own part, Didion reveals a subtle, unacknowledged curiosity in him, which might also be her way of situating herself as a journalist: part of the story, but not *a part of* the story. This makes her point of view unique to New Journalism.

Interestingly, Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, and Jack Kerouac were living together in Berkeley near the university the same year Didion graduated from the University of California–Berkeley. Although her character Lily Knight brings a radical Jewish boyfriend home to Sacramento from Berkeley in *Run River*, ironically, Didion does not seem to have been as aware of the portents of the flood of change that burst on California and the country, as many like Ginsberg had been.

THE NEW JOURNALISM

Didion has long been associated with the New Journalism movement spawned during the cultural upheaval of the 1960s. Writers like Tom Wolfe, Hunter S. Thompson, and Jimmy Breslin, along with Didion, defined the genre. These writers were the people who explained the disorder they saw in the world at the same time they were living it, making

their personal experiences emblematic of their generation. New Journalism asserted itself almost as a new documentary form, and in Didion's case her style is "the camera eye," with her lens constantly zooming into the minutest details, and then panning out to expose the vast panorama of her cultural landscape, exposing the intricate web of influence exerted on her subjects. Her essays are montages or mosaics representing her not-quite-completed thoughts, or her personal confusion and sense of loss. Other New Journalists portrayed themselves as active participants in the action they depicted, and in Didion's reportage she is no less visible in her work than these other New Journalists; however, she is far more representative of the core culture as an outsider. Her sense of loss is too great to fall wholesale into the arms of the new society being born.

New Journalists recognized the inability of traditional journalism to capture the spirit and the social disarray of the 1960s and early 1970s. Furthermore, traditional journalism seemed to represent the institutional authority regularly and popularly being called into question at that time. New Journalists chose the disenfranchised—what Didion called the inhabitants of the "invisible city" in "Notes Toward a Dreampolitick" in *The White Album*—as their subjects. In that sense, the New Journalists were intentionally programmatic and deliberately iconoclastic because their sympathies were largely with the minor character in society. The articles these authors produced approach ethnographies in form and content; they have a foundational relationship to realism, often by way of thinly veiled memoir, making them equal parts art and fiction. Ultimately, New Journalism is the manifestation of a cultural phenomenon. Whereas traditional literature and journalism forms were ill-suited to the spirit of the age, these writers were attempting to find its rightful voice. The upshot is a hybrid form of journalism with literary merit.

WOMEN'S WRITING

Didion has a conflicted relationship with the feminist movement. While her work fits most definitions of "women's writing" because it examines problems that women experience in their daily lives, she is critical of the feminist movement in some of her essays. Didion's work may present strong women characters as role models, or even present the ways in which women are discriminated against in a patriarchal system, but she is not wholly reconciled to applying the term feminist to her own political viewpoints. *Play It As It Lays* is perhaps one of her most "feminist" works in that it reveals an undercurrent of violence against women that risks destroying the main woman character. In this work