

A comment on American author Joan Didion (1934-2021)

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Joan Didion, born in 1934, who died two days before this past Christmas, was one of the best known and most talented American essayists and journalists of her generation.

In her lengthy career she produced five novels, 14 books of nonfiction, and seven plays and screenplays (as well as anonymously rewriting many others). She worked closely with her husband John Gregory Dunne, and won the Pulitzer Prize for Nonfiction in 2005 for her work *The Year of Magical Thinking*, about Dunne's death in 2003 and her grief in the following months and years.

There are various processes reflected in Didion's work. She came of age during the postwar and Cold War years. The reality and then the legacy of McCarthyism hung in the air and genuine left-wing thought was virtually criminalized or hidden from public view. These were decades when the best artists only went so far, to the limits of angry liberalism, in either understanding or depicting American life. Treating the foundations of society remained largely taboo. Didion was a year younger than novelist Philip Roth, for example, and despite their different cultural backgrounds, there is more than one similarity between their outlooks, for better or worse.

At the same time, the end of the Eisenhower years, the emergence of the mass civil rights movement and the breaking up of the Hollywood blacklist opened up new possibilities in the arts, in publishing and in the film world, a relative breath of fresh air.

Didion also belonged to the artistic intelligentsia shocked and to a certain extent set into motion by the end of the postwar economic boom in the US, the slaughter in Vietnam and the degeneration (and sharp shift to the right) of official American political life in the 1970s and beyond. She was an insightful and honest writer, a master prose stylist. Over the decades she and her husband were associated with a range of prominent artists, particularly in Hollywood but also on the East Coast, including writers Norman Mailer and Truman Capote, film director Roman Polanski, musician Jim Morrison and visual artists such as David Hockney and Robert Rauschenberg.

Didion was a native Californian, born to five generations of Sacramento ranchers in the period before the intense industrialization of the state. This certainly left a mark on her, and California was a subject to which she returned again and again. Her immediate family were upper middle-class Republicans, her father an army colonel and her mother a homemaker and supporter of the far-right John Birch Society.

She was educated at University of California, Berkeley, where her literary studies inclined toward the formalist New Criticism, which focused closely on text, under author and critic Mark Schorer. She won an essay contest to be a guest editor at *Mademoiselle* in New York City and returned there after graduation to work as a copy writer and later as an editor at *Vogue*. She lived in New York from 1956 to 1964. She wrote pieces for *Mademoiselle*, *Commonweal* and *The Nation*, as well as *Vogue*, and socialized with writers, people in the advertising industry, and various political figures such as right-wing editor William F. Buckley. She was

then a supporter of the arch-conservative Barry Goldwater. It was during this period that she published her first novel, *Run River* (1960), based largely on her experiences growing up in the Sacramento Valley.

By 1964 she and Dunne had married and moved to Los Angeles, both writing for magazines, particularly *the Saturday Evening Post*.

This is the period when she and Dunne became familiar with the Hollywood scene. Dunne's older brother, Nick, was a producer and introduced the couple to filmmakers and actors. They attempted writing their first film scripts. She became acquainted with Harrison Ford, then a young actor who did construction work on Hollywood houses, journalist Tom Wolfe, and more established figures such as Gene Kelly and writers Gore Vidal and Christopher Isherwood.

Between 1965 and 1968 she wrote the essays collected in *Slouching toward Bethlehem* (1968), a period she later characterized as "a time when I began to doubt the premises of all the stories I had ever told myself." She was moving toward the left, in other words, under the pressure of the radicalization of the times, and the growing disillusionment with the lies that American society told about itself.

The book was a literary success and exhibited what were to become her characteristic style and sensibility: beautifully and precisely written prose that consciously drew on the work of Ernest Hemingway, prose which was contrarian, well researched and often shed important light on the history of her subjects. The collection takes its title from one of its essays, originally published in the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1967, which in turn takes its name from a line in the famous poem by Irish writer W.B. Yeats, "The Second Coming" (1919), about the Christian end-times, and, metaphorically, the marring of the human psyche in the aftermath of World War I.

The lead essay concerns Didion's observations of life in Haight-Ashbury, the center of hippie culture in San Francisco. She was critical of what she saw, though also fair-minded. The essay begins:

It was not a country in open revolution. It was not a country under enemy siege. It was the United States of America in the cold late spring of 1967, and the market was steady and the G.N. P. high and a great many articulate people seemed to have a sense of high social purpose and it might have been a spring of brave hopes and national promise, but it was not, and more and more people had the uneasy apprehension that it was not. All that seemed clear was that at some point we had aborted ourselves and butchered the job, and because nothing else seemed so relevant I decided to go to San Francisco. San Francisco was where the social hemorrhaging was showing up.

Words like these struck a chord in the year of the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, the spring of the workers'

uprising in France and the unmitigated disaster for American military forces in Vietnam.

Another essay in the book, “Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream,” is about the murder of a dentist by his wife in a faked car accident, but more generally about the collapse of the dream of plenty and comfort in California (and by implication, the United States). It eloquently gives the history of the region where the murders took place, the San Bernardino Valley, and characterizes its official ignorance and philistinism, a place where, “it is routine to misplace the future and easy to start looking for it in bed.” Written in 1966, the essay resonates with contempt for much of what is still phony and self-deluding in American culture today.

The book was reviewed favorably and brought her into the literary establishment and is often considered one of the founding works of New Journalism, a phenomenon that tended to include more of a given journalist’s moods and feelings, as well as genuinely objective research and observation. Such work could dig more deeply into social realities, but also left the door open to extreme subjectivism and egoism.

Didion and Dunne began to have success as screenwriters. They adapted James Mills’s novel *Panic in Needle Park* (1966) for Jerry Schatzberg’s screen version (1971), starring Al Pacino in his first leading role, an unsentimental love story set under the shadow of drug abuse. Didion’s second novel *Play it as it Lays* (1970) was made into a film (1972), for which she and Dunne wrote the script. Directed by Frank Perry, the film starred Tuesday Weld as Maria Wyatt, a model and actress, and Anthony Perkins as a film producer.

Both the novel and film, about Maria’s emotional breakdown, are fragmented and convey an unmitigated sadness about life in the pretentious, unhappy, bitter Hollywood social set. The sense that comes across is of a world spinning out of control. No doubt the 1969 Tate-LaBianca murders, committed by the Manson Family, had an impact on Didion (Polanski and his eventually murdered wife Sharon Tate had been friends).

Certain of Didion’s observations in the material written in the 1970s and collected in *The White Album* (1979) remain startling, while others strike one as frankly dated and banal. The essay from which the title was taken describes a series of impressions of the year 1968, including an account of her life in Los Angles, a psychiatric report on her, a list of clothes for packing, but also details of meeting Linda Kasabian of the Manson family, watching a recording session with the Doors, meeting Black Panther leader Huey P. Newton while he was on trial for murder in 1968 and later encountering his fellow Panther leader Eldridge Cleaver at home, with whom she discussed the “commercial prospects” of his book, *Soul on Ice*.

In “On the morning after the sixties,” she discusses the social views that she embraced at Berkeley in the 1950s, that she maintained at the time she was writing, and that she seems to have kept for the rest of her life. She acknowledged “belonging to a generation distrustful of political highs” and “growing up convinced that the heart of darkness lay not in some error of social organization but in man’s own blood. ... If I could believe that going to a barricade would affect man’s fate in the slightest, I would go to that barricade, and quite often I wish that I could, but it would be less than honest to say that I expect to happen upon such a happy ending.”

This Cold War-influenced skepticism, with its implied anti-communism, lies behind an artistic and intellectual impasse that she would be less and less able to overcome as the decades went on.

Perhaps the best essay in *The White Album* is “In the Islands,” about Honolulu (a place she and her family visited frequently). Written from 1969 to 1977, it combines several essays into one, with powerful effect as it ranges from the history of the colonial settlement of the islands to the hotels to a funeral service for the Vietnam dead. It ends with her encomium for James Jones, the author of *From Here to Eternity*, a novel with a generally critical attitude about the US military on the eve of

America’s entry into World War II.

While she cannot find a copy of *From Here to Eternity* in any Honolulu bookstore, things are different when she visits Schofield Barracks, where Jones’s novel largely takes place. There, officers and enlisted men know the book. One soldier “volunteered a certain inchoate dissatisfaction with his six years in the 25th Division. ‘I read this book From Here to Eternity,’ he said, “and they still got the same little games around here.”” She adds, “James Jones had known a great simple truth: the Army was nothing more or less than life itself.”

Her third novel, *A Book of Common Prayer* (1977), is narrated by a sick aging American woman who sits on top of the social pyramid in a fictional Central American country. She has met another, younger American woman who has fled from her famous civil rights attorney husband because her daughter has been engaged in terrorism. The dramatic situation is reminiscent of Roth’s *American Pastoral*, and like that novel, doesn’t give us much more insight into the motivations of the daughter, who seems to be modeled on Patty Hearst, or lead us far into an understanding of the times.

By 1973 editor Robert Silvers, the editor of *The New York Review of Books*, had encouraged her to contribute to the magazine, writing not only about culture but about politics as well, new ground for Didion.

Some of her most admirable and honest journalism appeared there. “Salvador” (1983), is an excoriating look at the dirty war fought by American puppets in El Salvador, perhaps one of her best works for a glimpse into the sheer brutality of the American-backed regime. Such scenes have been repeated throughout the world since then, a fact worth remembering in the face of the Biden administration’s current anti-Russian hysteria. In “Miami” (1987), she gives valuable insight to the domination of the city by fascist Cuban exile groups, but also the anti-immigrant chauvinism of pro-Sandinista liberal protesters.

Didion had been registered as a Democrat since 1974 so that she could vote for Jerry Brown as California governor, and she supported Jesse Jackson in the 1988 Democratic primary. In 1992 her and Dunne’s Manhattan apartment became the unofficial headquarters for Brown’s efforts to secure the Democratic Party’s presidential nomination.

Nevertheless, she often continued to write honestly and reproachfully about the establishment. One admirable essay is 1992’s “Sentimental Journeys,” about the Central Park Five, the group of black and Latino youth falsely convicted of a brutal assault and rape, whom Didion strongly suspected had been framed. Unable to get a pass into the trial, she focused on the lying and hysteria of the media, not only in the context of racism but of the enrichment of the upper middle class and efforts to enforce that class divide in New York City. The city (she and Dunne had moved back there in 1988), she wrote, had “the essential criminality ... and its related absence of civility could become points of pride, evidence of ‘energy.’”

Nevertheless, it was difficult for her to go farther. She had experienced important decades of American cultural and political history, often providing sharp insights and with a sense—a vivid and evocative sense—that no one knew where the United States was going. At least no one in her circles did. But she never put her finger on the more fundamental causes of the difficulties. This of course was a feature common in one way or another to the entire postwar generation of American intellectuals and artists.

Her 1984 novel, *Democracy*, was an attempt to draw together and summarize some developments in American imperialism from the postwar period to the evacuation of Saigon in 1975, but the characters themselves—the wife of a senator, a CIA man—are unable to come to grips with the whole period.

She seems to have been largely impervious to the major social developments of the 1980s and after: the growth of vast social inequality in the United States and what it meant. No doubt, in the absence of a clearly worked out opposition to the existing order, her own personal

fortunes played a role. By the 1980s, she and Dunne were wealthy people. They had done well from Hollywood, including writing scripts for *A Star is Born* (1976) and *Up Close & Personal* (1996), about which experience her husband wrote in *Monster* (1997).

The vast growth of American militarism under Ronald Reagan and again after the 1991 dissolution of the USSR also elicited little protest from her. Her reportage on the 2004 Democratic Convention seems simply to take for granted John's Kerry's infamous militaristic display at his acceptance speech. Those same assumptions find expression in *Political Fictions* (2001), which collects many of her articles on official politics from *The New York Review of Books*. The terms "war criminal" and "inequality" do not appear.

Her valuable article on Vice President Dick Cheney, "Cheney: The Fatal Touch" (2006), indicted him for his role in the invasion of Iraq, but she could not, or chose not to, write on the deeper roots and implications of the war or its devastating impact on the Iraqi people.

Her last decades were struck by tragedy when her husband died suddenly in 2003 and her daughter, Quintana, whom she had adopted in 1966, died two years later. She wrote one of her best-known works, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, which explored grief and grieving. It was a mixed result. She was able to generalize about grief and find something common and human in it. At the same time, however, the autobiographical portions are alienating to anyone who does not understand or sympathize with the houses, the food, the clothes and the vacations of the top five percent of income earners in the United States.

Didion's best and most honest observations, her perceptive chronicling of certain symptoms of American capitalist society's decline and decay, will endure.



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