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The Essential Joan Didion

Her distinctive prose and sharp eye were tuned to an outsider's frequency, telling us about ourselves in essays that are almost reflexively skeptical. Here's where to start.

By Alissa Wilkinson

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The Joan Didion many people know is constructed from a few artifacts the real writer left behind when she died in 2021. There's her much-imitated (and sometimes parodied) 1967 essay "Goodbye to All That," about leaving New York. There's the packing list enumerated in her essay "The White Album," written between 1968 and 1978, which is sometimes cited as aspirational, even instructional. There are the iconic photographs of Didion taken by Julian Wasser in 1968, commissioned for a profile in Time — particularly one in which she's smoking while leaning against her Stingray, cooler than anyone has ever been, a vibe echoed in the 2003 ad Didion shot for the fashion brand Celine. And, of course, there's her most famous line — "We tell ourselves stories in order to live" — which opens "The White Album" and is frequently invoked, wrongly, for inspiration.

Didion was not really out to inspire us. She was looking at us and telling us what she saw, including our compulsion to weave myths for survival. Her distinctive prose and sharp eye were always tuned to an outsider's frequency, even when she was actually an insider (as with most of her writing on Hollywood). Her essays are almost reflexively skeptical; she wrote with authority borne not so much from experience as from a refusal to give in to dogma.

And her work, which spanned well over a half-century, reads like an account of a country careering toward a cliff. Didion may be best known as the California writer who chronicled midcentury cultural decay, but her body of work is much wider and deeper. She wrote on Hollywood and Washington, New York and Sacramento, Terri

Schiavo and Martha Stewart, grief and hypocrisy and Latin American politics, and somehow it all drove toward the same point: Narratives are coping mechanisms. If we want to truly understand ourselves, we have to understand not just the stories we make up together, but the tales behind them.

In the years since her death, Didion's star has only risen, with a museum exhibit, revivals of her play, a buzzed-about estate sale and the New York Public Library's forthcoming unveiling of her joint archive with her husband, the writer John Gregory Dunne, who died in 2003. In the meantime, the state of the world has felt ever more confusing, and the line between reality and make-believe more blurred. So there's never been a better time to dip your toe — or plunge your whole self — into the work of one of the finest, most perceptive writers in American letters.

I want to start with the foundational text.

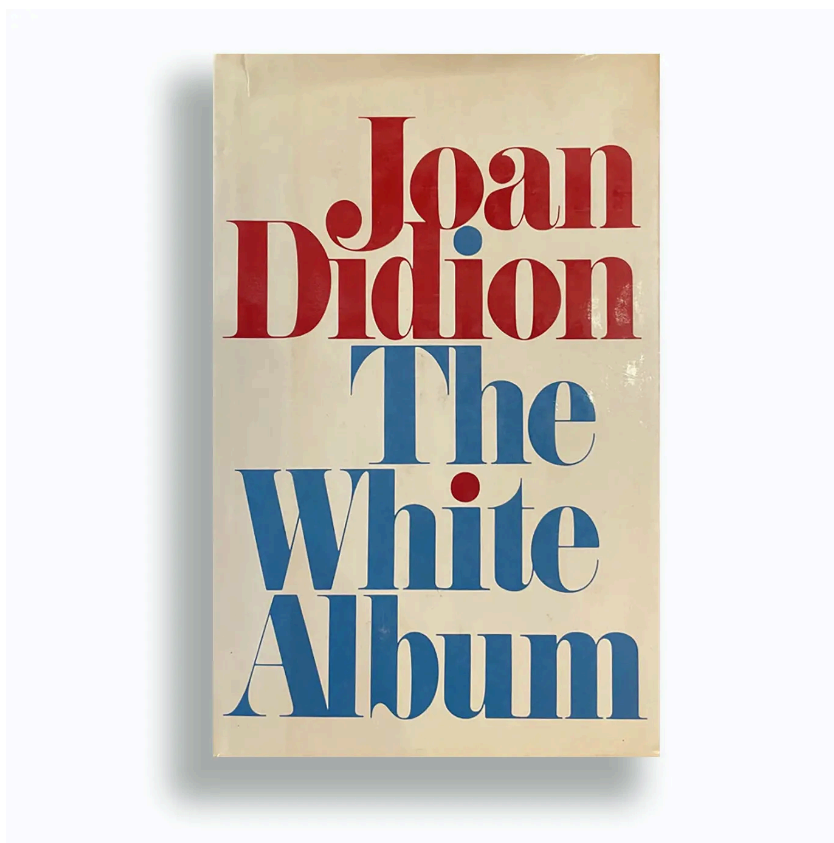
"Slouching Towards Bethlehem" (1968) was Didion's second book — her first was the 1963 novel "Run River," written in her 20s as a Vogue staffer in New York. But even though 13 books of nonfiction and four novels followed it, "Slouching," published when she was 33, remains fundamental to Didion's oeuvre, and helped establish her reputation as a practitioner of the New Journalism.

Like all of her collections, the book consists of essays written on assignment for a variety of outlets: The New York Times Magazine, The American Scholar, Holiday, Vogue and The Saturday Evening Post. Taken together, they start to convey a portrait of the cultural critic as a young woman, and especially her sense, nurtured from a very young age, that the world was coming apart at the seams.

The book's title comes from one of its essays, about the decaying vibes in late '60s Haight-Ashbury. That's in turn plucked from a Yeats poem, quoted as an epigraph. In the preface she writes that the essay was reported and drafted in an attempt to beat a despairing writer's block: "If I was to work again at all," she writes, "it would be necessary for me to come to terms with disorder."

Didion often spoke of writing as the way she figured out what she thought, which makes the title essay a must-read for understanding the author. But "Slouching Towards Bethlehem" is a jewel chest, and the shiniest gem inside it might be "Goodbye to All That," Didion's classic essay about falling in and out of love with New York City.

The often-quoted "On Self-Respect," which also appears in this collection, has a funny origin story: Didion wrote it as a Vogue staffer because the editors had put the headline on the cover without assigning a writer, and she happened to be around.

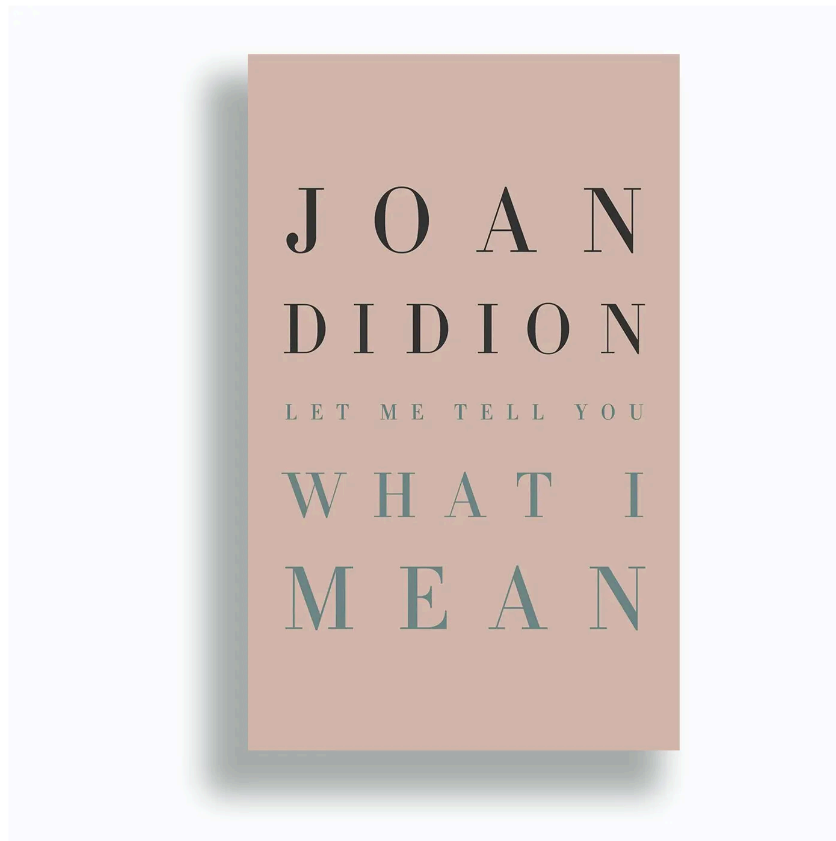


Was there a sequel?

Not exactly. But **"The White Album"** (1979) is kind of a follow-up to "Slouching Towards Bethlehem," though it also works all on its own. The book's title essay is somewhat autobiographical, an account of Didion's life in Los Angeles during the 1960s, when she and Dunne were raising their daughter, Quintana Roo, and spending a great deal of their time with movie stars and rockers. Written as a series of vignettes, the essay floats from Didion's psychological trouble to her encounters with familiar figures — the Black Panthers, the Doors, the Manson family. There's a sense in which the essay is responsible for the way many of us born later "remember" the late 1960s; you could spot its DNA, for instance, in certain seasons of "Mad Men," or in Quentin Tarantino's film "Once Upon a Time … in Hollywood."

On the whole, the essays in "The White Album" feel more descriptive of Didion's life than earlier writings, but she expertly toed a fine line that made her readers (especially women) feel they knew her, even though she never really revealed a lot about herself in her writing. Other standouts in the collection include "The

Women's Movement," which will give you a sense for Didion's reluctance to call herself a feminist, and "Holy Water," which becomes a personal history by way of California history.



I want to read Didion at her most vicious.

The cattiest (and thus maybe the funniest) essay Didion ever wrote was "Pretty Nancy," a portrait of Nancy Reagan when she was the first lady of California. Didion, part of the fifth generation of a well-off Sacramento family, had absolutely no use for either Reagan from the moment the Gipper stepped into politics. For her, the Reagans became the prevailing metaphor for everything that was wrong with the American political scene, because she believed they thought, acted, campaigned and governed like Hollywood figures. "She has told me that the governor never wore makeup even in motion pictures, and that politics is rougher than the picture business because you do not have the studio to protect you," Didion writes near the end of the profile, when the tone of irritated disdain is practically dripping off the page.

Despite inflicting a significant sting — Nancy Reagan mentions the essay in her own memoirs — "Pretty Nancy" wasn't collected in any of Didion's books until the final one, "Let Me Tell You What I Mean" (2021). It's a perfect glimpse into a young, irritated writer who knew exactly what she was doing.

Did she ever get swoony?

Words like "unsparing" and "cleareyed" are usually applied to Didion's cultural analysis, but if you want to see her in full weak-kneed mode, read the essay "John Wayne: A Love Story." (It's collected in "Slouching Towards Bethlehem.") In 1965, she finally landed a pitch she'd been longing for: The Saturday Evening Post commissioned Didion to travel to northern Mexico, where "The Sons of Katie Elder" — a western she'd later brush off in a paragraph-long review in Vogue — was shooting. The star was John Wayne, whom Didion had worshiped since watching him in a converted aircraft hangar on the Army base where her father was stationed during World War II. He became her idea of manhood, safety, strength.

Wayne-like characters pop up across Didion's fiction, as does her longing for the kind of security this line represented to her. But Wayne as an actual person was important to her, too. When she finally met her hero on set, he was just coming off a lung cancer scare; she mentions his "bad cold and a racking cough, so tired by late afternoon that he kept an oxygen inhalator on the set." Famously, he'd used his diagnosis, and his tough-guy stature, to encourage people in the smoke-filled era to get screened for the disease.

John Wayne is key to Didion's story for more than just entertainment reasons. Her political views, until well into adulthood, were sternly conservative, not as right wing as Wayne's but nearly so — she used to announce at Hollywood dinner parties, seemingly for shock value, that she had voted for Barry Goldwater. She switched affiliations after the California Republican Party embraced Richard Nixon, but as late as the 1990s she was still saying she'd have voted for Goldwater in every election since, had he run.

Didion also ended up working in the movie industry, in one way or another, for her entire life, and it's not hard to believe she was hooked on the business by her love of Wayne.

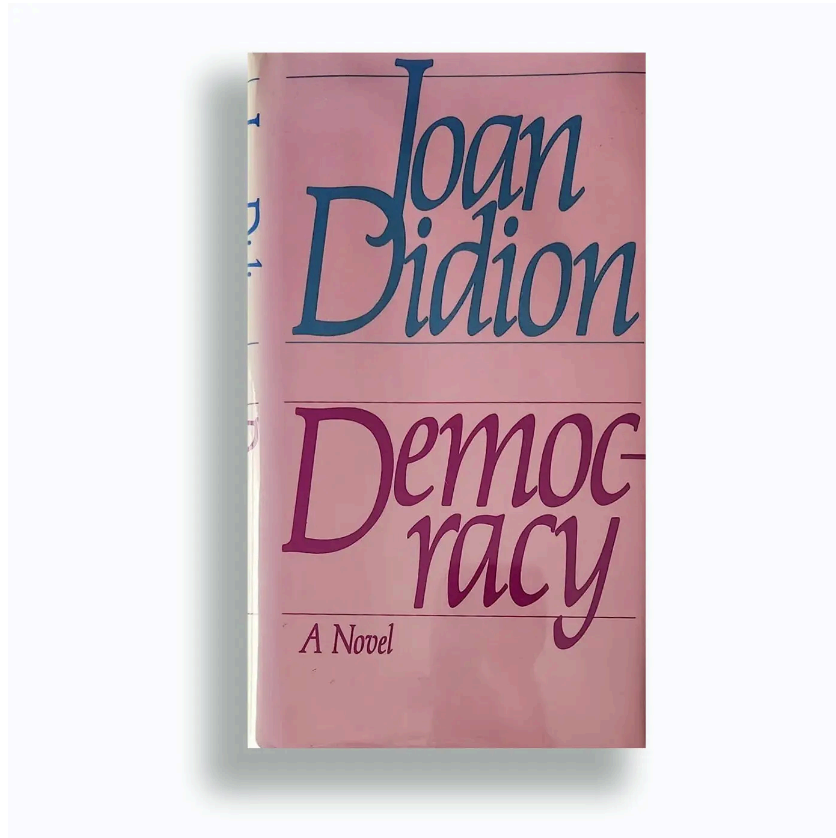
How much of a Hollywood insider was Didion, really?

Didion and Dunne considered themselves novelists first and journalists second, but they really paid their bills by writing and doctoring scripts. Their first produced movie was the 1971 addict drama "The Panic in Needle Park," starring Al Pacino in his first leading role, and Kitty Winn, who won Best Actress at Cannes for the role. The pair wrote a number of scripts together, including "Play It as It Lays," "A Star Is Born" (the Barbra Streisand one), "True Confessions," "Up Close and Personal" and the HBO short film "Hills Like White Elephants." If you really want a great overview of Hollywood through their eyes, you can't do better than two of Dunne's books: "The Studio" (1969), about life on the back lot at 20th Century Fox, and "Monster" (1997), about the travails they experienced getting "Up Close and Personal" made.

But Didion wrote about Hollywood, too. One of her most astute essays, "Hollywood: Having Fun," was first published in The New York Review of Books in 1973, then lightly revised and published as "In Hollywood" in "The White Album."

"Hollywood: Having Fun" is a careening tour through the wheeling and dealing of the movie business, and also a way for Didion to take out-of-touch East Coast movie critics to task. (She specifically names Pauline Kael of The New Yorker, with whom Didion had briefly shared a movie review column at Vogue. By 1973, Kael was arguably the most powerful movie critic in America; Didion airily suggests she's full of hogwash.) Didion believes that "much of what is written about pictures and about picture people approaches reality only occasionally and accidentally," because if you don't experience Hollywood directly then you can't possibly understand how the sausage gets made and, thus, understand what you're really seeing up on the screen.

What's clear is that, having worked as a movie critic herself for a while, she's not particularly interested in critics' thoughts anymore, which leads to this brilliant line: "Making judgments on films is in many ways so peculiarly vaporous an occupation that the only question is why, beyond the obvious opportunities for a few lecture fees and a little careerism at a dispiritingly self-limiting level, anyone does it in the first place." You said it, Joan.



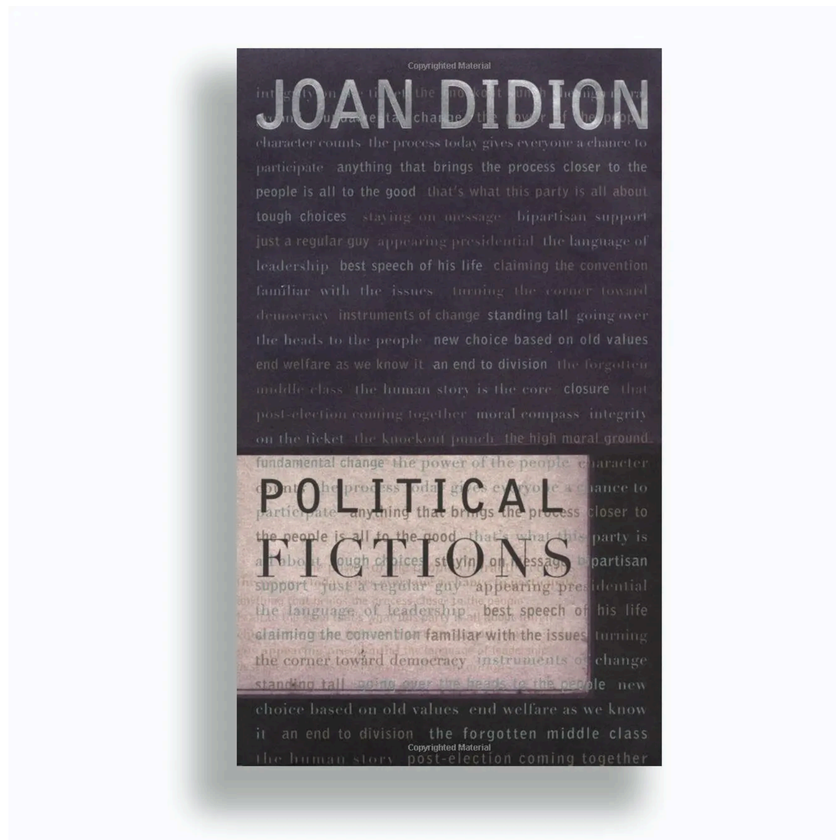
What about Didion's fiction?

Most people will tell you to read "Play It as It Lays" (1970), her second novel, and they're not wrong. Like the screenplay version she and Dunne later wrote, Didion's novel is a bleak tale of a melting-down actress in a tumultuous 1960s Hollywood.

But of her five novels, the best is **"Democracy"** (1984). Occasionally I think it might be the Great American Novel. Narrated by a journalist named Joan Didion, it's mostly the story of Inez Victor, the wife of a Kennedy-style senator who ran a failed campaign for president. But Inez has been in love since she was a teenager with a

man named Jack Lovett, whose occupation is unclear (C.I.A. agent? War profiteer?) but who, for her, represents safety. He is the John Wayne figure in the book. He can't keep bad things away, but he can fix them.

"Democracy" ends tragically — all of Didion's novels end tragically — yet with a note of romantic hope that turns the whole thing into a sweeping epic. You can almost hear the strings swelling.



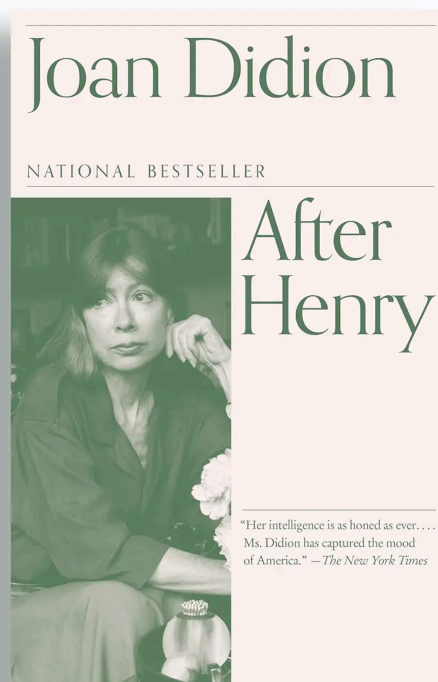
I want to understand Didion's politics.

Good luck. She did start out very conservative, and trended leftward into adulthood after getting fed up with Nixon and Reagan. Yet she remained very difficult to pin down. Her early work is full of takedowns of idealism on the right and the left, as if she is always looking at these matters through narrowed eyes.

But if you want to see, roughly, where she landed, then the place to go is her book **"Political Fictions,"** a collection of essays that had the misfortune to be published on Sept. 11, 2001. They're mostly reporting from campaigns of figures like Michael

Dukakis and Jesse Jackson, or the travails of an impeached Bill Clinton, and the eye she casts is clearly one that wears Hollywood-colored glasses. Everything in a campaign or a presidency, she writes, is carefully choreographed in much the same way as a movie set. This is a sign, to her, of political decline, a category error that renders politics as flat, useless and commodified. The candidate is a product being sold to the public, just like a movie star. Don't miss the review of Newt Gingrich's work in "Political Fictions," which she manages to take apart by simply listing his metaphors and references.

Once you're done with "Political Fictions," pick up "Where I Was From," published a few years later, in which Didion retreads her own work and life story. It's a re-evaluation, after both her parents' deaths, of the myths and ideas she absorbed as a young girl in California, and thus a re-evaluation more broadly of American myths and legends. (She does some of the same work in the slim book "Fixed Ideas: America Since 9/11," which fiercely questions dogma that arose in the wake of the attacks and, in particular, ideas and articles published by The New York Times.)

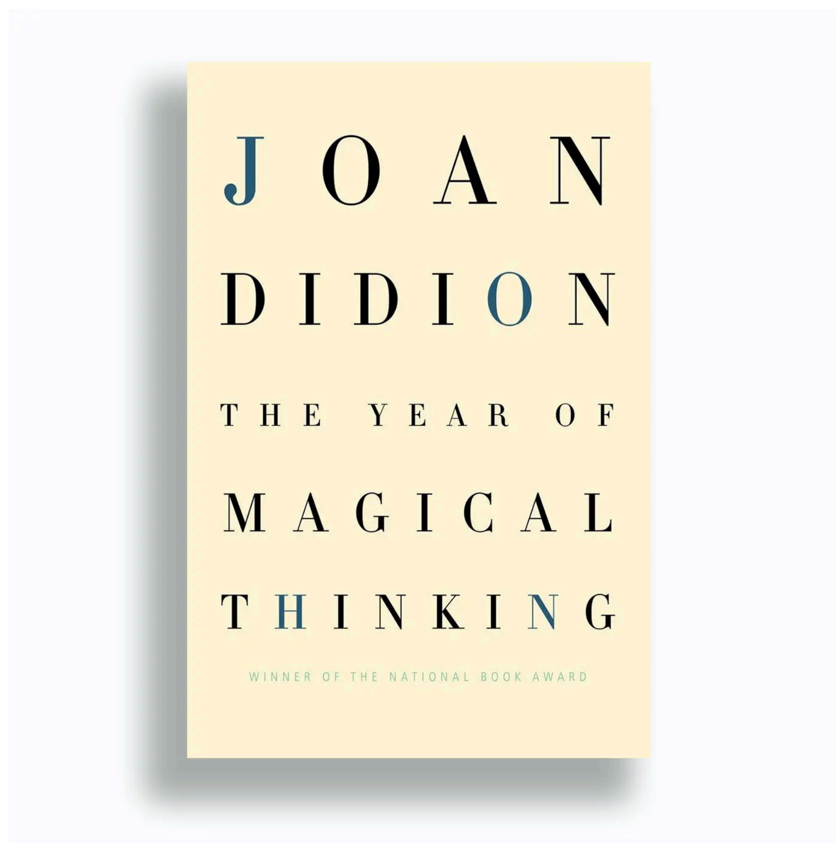


What is one Didion essay that can't be missed?

Didion's most consequential essay may be "Sentimental Journeys," first published in The New York Review of Books in 1991 and later collected in "After Henry" (1992). It concerns the infamous case of the Central Park jogger and the railroaded confessions of the so-called Central Park Five, five teenagers wrongfully accused of the crime and sent to prison. In a full-page ad he personally paid to place in four local papers, Donald J. Trump, then a local businessman, called for their execution. In 2002, their convictions were vacated. (One of them, Yusef Salaam, is now a New York City councilman.)

In "Sentimental Journeys," Didion comes at the case sideways, examining the stories that New Yorkers tell themselves about the city and its inhabitants. She writes about how racism distorts this story, and questions whether the jogger's name should have been released to the public. And she explores how a single case such as this one, though hardly the only of its kind, can be wound up by the news media, politicians and opportunists into representing something much bigger and much less logical.

Her diagnosis has aged breathtakingly well. "In a city in which grave and disrupting problems had become general — problems of not having, problems of not making it, problems that demonstrably existed, among the mad and the ill and the underequipped and the overwhelmed, with decreasing reference to color — the case of the Central Park jogger provided more than just a safe, or structured, setting in which various and sometimes only marginally related rages could be vented," she wrote. In typical Didion fashion, that could have been written yesterday.



What was she thinking about near the end of her life?

Didion's final two decades were filled with loss. On Dec. 30, 2003, Dunne and Didion returned home from visiting their daughter, Quintana Roo Dunne, in the hospital, where she was in a coma. Dunne suddenly dropped dead from a heart attack. Didion told the story of her year of grief in **"The Year of Magical Thinking"** (2005), which won the National Book Award. Just before the book was published, Quintana died. Didion toured in the midst of her grief, then wrote a theatrical adaptation, which opened on Broadway in March 2007, starring Didion's longtime friend Vanessa Redgrave as the author.

"The Year of Magical Thinking" is intense and cyclical, evoking the mind caught in a state of grief as much through its form as its content. Many who have read it in the middle of grief (including me) have found it profoundly cathartic. It's representative of a writer who has turned her famously perceptive gaze upon herself, something she continued in "Blue Nights" (2011), which reflects on her daughter's life.

It's often overlooked, but as a supplement to reading these late Didion books, don't miss her essay "The Case of Theresa Schiavo," published several months before Quintana died. In it she wrestles fervently with the fate of Schiavo, a woman on life support who had become a source of national political debate. Once you know from her books what she went through while Quintana was on life support, the essay takes on a whole new meaning. Didion made the personal both cultural and political — a practice she'd honed over a storied career.

***A correction was made on April 26, 2024**: An earlier version of this article referred incorrectly to the woman known as the Central Park jogger. She survived the attack; she was not murdered.*

***A correction was made on April 28, 2024**: An earlier version of this article misstated the title of a screenplay Joan Didion wrote with her husband. It was "The Panic in Needle Park," not "The Panic at Needle Park."*

When we learn of a mistake, we acknowledge it with a correction. If you spot an error, please let us know at nytnews@nytimes.com. Learn more

Alissa Wilkinson is a Times movie critic. She's been writing about movies since 2005. More about Alissa Wilkinson