

Joan Didion: The Narcissism Never Dies

Nearly a year after her death, the author remains an elite icon.



Joan Didion

by Bruce Bawer

Some famous writers are forgotten the moment they kick off. Joan Didion, who passed away at age 87 two days before Christmas last year, isn't one of them.

It's not because her work is so monumental. Her screenplays for movies like the 1996 Robert Redford vehicle [*Up Close & Personal*](#) and the 1976 Barbra Streisand version of [*A Star Is Born*](#), all of them written in collaboration with her late husband, John Gregory Dunne, are absolute garbage and, by her own admission, hackwork – cynically churned out in exchange for whopping Hollywood checks. Her novels, including [*Play It*](#)

[*As It Lays*](#) (1970) and [*A Book of Common Prayer*](#) (1977), are slight, highly mannered attempts to seem cool, chic, and profound about the then zeitgeist. And her more ambitious works of nonfiction, which were never all that great shakes to begin with, now seem hopelessly dated. Does anyone still want to read [*Salvador*](#) (1983), her portentous account of a two-week stay in war-torn El Salvador in 1982, or [*Miami*](#) (1987), her snobbish sneer at Cuban Americans in southern Florida?

As pretty much everybody agrees, Didion's personal essays are where it's at. A few of them, such as "Goodbye to All That" (1967), are classics – finely tuned little masterpieces of self-absorption and self-dramatization. Apropos of which, to accuse her of navel-gazing is to miss the point: You read Didion in order to watch her watching herself. That's where the fun is. The *frisson*. She was always her only real subject – she, with her ever-present cigarettes and sunglasses and cocktails, her antique furniture and designer clothes, and her magnificently, incomparably delicate nervous system – and, in her personal essays, she didn't pretend otherwise. This is, after all, a woman whose last collection of essays was entitled [*Let Me Tell You What I Mean*](#). How many other writers have managed to put not one but two first-person singular pronouns in the title of a book?

All her life, Didion held herself, with her complex, fragile wiring, superior to those coarser, simpler souls who had faith, beliefs, convictions – who looked for meaning in something beyond themselves, beyond their own immediate material interests, beyond their own creature comforts. The Cubans whom she sneered at in *Miami* believed in liberty, anti-communism, Reagan. They believed in a free Cuba. They were willing to fight for these things. Didion knew better. The very title of her 1984 novel [*Democracy*](#) is a sneer. America a land of freedom? No, you peasant, it's an empire like any other. Her response to 9/11 was [*Fixed Ideas: America Since 9.11*](#) (2003), a slim, stunningly ugly little declaration of her

refusal to hoist the flag, to speak unironically of freedom or of heroes. Just as she scoffed at anti-communism without taking a serious look at communism, she sniggered at the idea of fighting jihadists in the name of American values without ever allowing Islam itself onto her radar.

Not that Didion didn't believe in something. She believed in *Vogue*, the glossy rag at which she started her career. She believed in her exclusive home turf: Malibu, the Upper East Side. Proust had his madeleines; as recorded in "Goodbye to All That," Didion had her own scents: "For a lot of the time I was in New York I used to use a perfume called *Fleurs de Rocaille*, and then *L'Air du Temps*, and now the slightest trace of either can short-circuit my connections for the rest of the day. Nor can I smell Henri Bendel jasmine soap without falling back into the past." In the staggeringly self-absorbed [*Blue Nights*](#) (2011), purportedly a memoir of her late daughter Quintana Roo (and what can you say about a woman who named her only child after a Mexican state on the Yucatán Peninsula?), Didion's equivalent of praying the rosary was to list all the high-end hotels at which the youngster "stayed before she was five or six or seven" – among them the Plaza Athénée in Paris, the Dorchester in London, and the St. Regis in New York. No Motel 6 for our Joan or her precious, pampered progeny.

And that's precisely why Didion hasn't fallen off the map: In an America more divided than ever between red and blue, between flyover deplorables and bicoastal elites, between the great unwashed and the purchasers of Henri Bendel soap, Didion, dead or alive, is a shining symbol of author as American aristocrat. And that means something. Think of it this way: If you're a card-carrying member of the silk-stocking set, you want to give most freelance writers a wide berth; they tend not to make a lot of money, they don't usually dress very well, and they probably only see the inside of a Michelin-starred restaurant on the rare occasion when an editor or agent takes pity on them and treats them to an

expense-accounted lunch.

Unlike most ink-smudged, landlord-dodging scribblers – that pathetic crew! – Didion was a writer whom upscale types could hold up as a lifestyle role model: a living totem of non-deplorableness, of upper-class taste and style, a woman who, in every photograph, looks as if she's just stepped out of the pages of, yes, *Vogue*. To the extent that her work itself figured into the equation, what appealed to the carriage trade was her exquisitely calibrated ennui, her jet-set world-weariness, her reflexive and comfortingly familiar parroting of leftist bromides, her matter-of-fact condescension to the lesser orders, and, not least, her unwavering egocentrism: For self-absorbed urban elites, Didion was – and remains – a mirror of their own colossal narcissism.

Which is why her 2007 stage adaptation of [The Year of Magical Thinking](#), her bestselling 2005 book about the aftermath of Dunne's death, is already being revived 15 years later. Writing recently in the *New York Times*, Laura Collins-Hughes [explains](#) that the only problem with the original Broadway hit – “a prestige cultural event: tasteful, literary, remote,” and, in my experience, the only literary work with a memento mori theme whose author seemed almost to think that she'd discovered the fact of mortality – was that the scale of the production “was all out of whack.” The new version resolves this problem in what Collins-Hughes considers a “thrilling” way: Instead of being put on in a theater, it's being mounted in boutique spaces around New York. Collins-Hughes herself attended a performance “in a private townhouse on the Upper East Side, about a dozen blocks from where Didion lived.” A private townhouse? Perfect. That'll keep the rabble at bay! (One unsurprising touch: In the photo accompanying the *Times* review, audience members were uniformly masked.)

Meanwhile, in Los Angeles, the Hammer Museum on Wilshire Boulevard is [hosting](#) an exhibition called “Joan Didion: What She Means.” As Adam Nagourney reported in the *Times*, the show

contains “nearly 215 separate items spread out over 10,000 square feet of galleries,” including pages from movie scripts, a *Star Is Born* poster, and Richard Avedon and Diane Arbus photographs from Didion’s own collection. Think of it! Relics of St. Joan!

And if you’re not content just to gaze upon timeless Didion talismans, then head on up to the uber-swank hamlet of Hudson, New York, on Nov. 16. That’s the day when Stair Galleries on Warren Street [will be holding](#) Didion’s estate auction. Yessirree, folks! Act now and you can acquire your very own piece of the true cross. And let’s just say that you couldn’t hope for a more appropriate setting for this clearance sale than Hudson, which these days is a favored weekend destination for precisely the kind of artsy, well-heeled, self-regarding Manhattanites who voted twice for Bill de Blasio, who proudly pulled the lever for Kathy Hochul on Tuesday, whose weekly act of worship is to peruse the Sunday *New York Times* over brunch, and for whom a Didion memento – *any* Didion memento – would be a cherished household icon.

The range of items up for grabs is remarkable – as, apparently, is the level of interest in them. On Oct. 28, Anna Kodé [reported](#) – again, in (where else?) the *Times* – that a pair of Didion’s Celine faux-tortoiseshell glasses was expected to go for somewhere in the mid-three figures. On the gallery [website](#), however, the latest bid, as of this writing, was \$3,200. (So much for those dastardly GOP lies about the tough economy under Joe Biden!) A silver print of a Julian Wasser photo of Didion, “effortlessly chic in a long dress and sandals, holding a cigarette,” is now going for \$3,500. There are books aplenty – by Naipaul, Baldwin, Oates, Hemingway, Julia Child, et al. – and artworks by, as Kodé puts it, “several blue-chip names – among them Richard Serra, Robert Rauschenberg and Annie Leibovitz.”

There’re loads of furniture, too, from a “Late Regency ebony inlaid mahogany Pembroke table” to a “Chinese export bamboo-

and-lacquer side table.” But the inventory also includes more modest items. You can actually pick up a bunch of [blank notebooks](#) (with “From the Library of Joan Didion” stickers in them) that were expected to sell for \$100–\$200 but that have drawn a high bid of \$2,000. You can even buy office supplies. “Some Didion enthusiasts,” writes Kodé, “were desperate to acquire even the smallest mementos of her personal life – including a single paper clip.” Of course they were: To own something – anything – of hers, and to be able to certify its provenance, is to provide the ultimate authentication of your membership in the cultural elite.

One item holds a very special meaning indeed. On the terrible night when Dunne died suddenly of a heart attack, and again I cite Kodé, “[h]e was sitting at their drop-leaf dining table, which is included in the sale.” Get that? You can own *the very table at which John Gregory Dunne kicked the bucket*. Now, what price would be too high for that? Plant that baby in your Turtle Bay townhouse and you’ll not only have a place at which you can, to quote a passage from *The Year of Magical Thinking*, “find ... meaning in the repeated rituals of domestic life. Setting the table. Lighting the candles. Building the fire. Cooking. All those soufflés, all that crème caramel, all those daubes and albóndigas and gumbos”; you’ll also have a key piece of Didion’s life – the *ultimate* piece, for heaven’s sake – that you’ll literally be able to dine out on for decades.

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