

The
POP LIT BOOK CLUB



READING

Joan Didion

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READING JOAN DIDION

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The Pop Lit Book Club

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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

Joan Didion's novels and works of nonfiction are about people, usually women, whose lives are tangled and troubled. The books may be set in Haight-Ashbury, in Hollywood, or in an imaginary Central American republic. The women view their lives as a series of jump cuts, the variable sequence of juxtaposed images torn from personal experiences in no coherent pattern. Didion has learned the technique from movies. Didion's novels, however, are only superficially about the women or about the trouble; on a deeper level, they are about the making of meaning, and the writer's inability or unwillingness to do just that. For Didion is preoccupied, stylistically and thematically, with the concerns about interpretation and evaluation that Susan Sontag raises in "Against Interpretation." Like Sontag, Didion wants to promote a fiction with an illusive surface without a final meaning that is imposed by narrator or author.

From John Hollowell, "Against Interpretation: Narrative Strategy in A Book of Common Prayer," 164.

and others, Didion crafts many of her women characters in such a way as to question society's notions of sanity, mental illness, and emotional stability, especially as these are used to subjugate women. She explores women characters who have a fully evolved sense of self but who are nonetheless fragile, sometimes because they are lost in revolutionary times during which their moral ground has been pulled from underneath them and other times because they cling to the values of a previous era in a society that has dismissed this past.

CALIFORNIA AUTHORS

Perhaps the most appropriate category in which to situate Didion's writing is in her role as a California author. She was born and raised in Sacramento, California, in a household that was infinitely aware of its pioneer past. Her ancestors were anxious and restless overlayers who eventually had established themselves in the Sacramento Valley and who had become, very much in the Southern sense, landed gentry, seemingly separated from the machinations of the rest of the world by the geographic barrier of the Sierra Nevada Mountain Range. The substance of much of Didion's work reflects this early immersion in California history, geography, and literature and gives it a distinctly Californian "sense of place." Her referents may just as naturally and frequently be the

journals of the Donner Party, forced to resort to cannibalism in the winter of 1846, or the works of Jack London, Robinson Jeffers, and Carey McWilliams, as they are to be the late 1960s Los Angeles music scene, the back lots of Hollywood, or the Manson murders.

Didion's primary preoccupations echo the themes of many California authors and of Western literature in general, placing her squarely within its rich tradition. In *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, *Where I Was From*, and *The White Album*, for example, her purpose is to unearth the status of the American Dream, of which she claims the California Dream is the essence, and to examine it as it plays out in contemporary society. The dichotomy of savagery and civilization and California as a frontier relic whose ethos still affects the hopes and behaviors of its citizenry resonates across her work, either as subject or as the frame for a related

Didion's preoccupation with California and its relationship to the American Dream is overt in much of her writing, be it in a story of failed marriage ("Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream" in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*), the story of a failed family (*Run River*), or her own story (*Where I Was From*). She reveals her fascination for this topic in *Where I Was From* by quoting at length from California-born philosopher Josiah Royce's history, *California* (1886), which is subtitled "A Study of American Character." Didion's work is an attempt to extend Royce's examination. An equally intriguing assessment of the American Dream can be found in Kevin Starr's *Americans and the California Dream* (1973). Seemingly drawing his language from the final section of Didion's *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, Starr says:

Certainly an ideal California—a California of the mind—underwent composite definition: the elusive possibility of a new American alternative; the belief, the suggestion (or perhaps only the hope), that here on Pacific shores Americans might search out for themselves new values and ways of living. In this sense—as a concept and as an imaginative goal—California showed the beginnings of becoming the cutting edge of the American Dream. Geographically and psychologically, it was the ultimate frontier. No wonder it gripped the American imagination from the first! (Starr, 46)

Both Starr and Royce are excellent companions to a reader's understanding of Didion's work.

theme. Her work is directly relevant to contemporary discourses on the meaning of space and place in the West and how those spaces are inhabited. She is neither an urban author nor a rural one, and her sympathies are not so galvanizing or as direct as that of some of her peers. Hers is a sense of magic and loss predicated on her nostalgia, but these are nonetheless generative of nuanced social criticism. She challenges the American Dream and the myth-buster alike. That is her California spirit.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Critics often object to the cultural commentary in Didion's work. Do you find it objectionable?
- How would you characterize Didion's style? What other writers does she remind you of?
- What is the New Journalism and how does Didion fit into this movement?
- What is Didion's relationship with the feminist movement?
- How important is Didion's connection to California?