Superficial Consolations: The Life and Work of Joan

Joan Didion, who died on Thursday at the age of 87, was a California girl, born to an affluent family in Sacramento and educated at Berkeley. In her 20s, she spent seven years on the editorial staff of *Vogue* in New York, a period she recalled in her 1967 essay "Goodbye to All That" — a work that, like so many items in her *oeuvre*, was at once a terrific piece of prose, a display of world-class neurosis, and a study in monumental self-absorption.

During those early years, Didion wrote regularly for *National Review* and voted for Goldwater; in 1965, she contributed to the *Saturday Evening Post* an admiring profile of none other than John Wayne. Her first essay collection, *Slouching Towards*

Bethlehem (1968), made a massive splash, establishing her as a leading chronicler – and a rather conservative critic – of the Sixties counterculture. In 1964 she married the writer John Gregory Dunne (1932–2003), and for the next quarter century, comfortably installed at various chic addresses (Malibu, Brentwood Park) in the Los Angeles area, they became leading members of the Left Coast intelligentsia, regular contributors to the progressives' flagship rag, the *New York Review of Books*, and collaborators on a series of mediocre but highly remunerative screenplays, notably for the Barbra Streisand version of *A Star Is Born.*

For a while there, nobody appeared to ride the wave of the zeitgeist more brilliantly than Didion. Key word: "appeared." Her taut, glacial novels *Play It As It Lays* (1970) and *A Book of Common Prayer* (1977) did a top-notch job of making it seem as if she was saying something deeply meaningful about the 20th-century American experience. Then there were her highly praised books of nonfiction. A brief spin around the less war-torn parts of war-torn El Salvador resulted in *Salvador* (1983), which some readers regarded as a profound statement about American involvement in Central America. *Miami* (1987) was a condescending portrait of anti-Castro Cubans in that city.

Didion knew little about El Salvador or Miami. But somehow that didn't matter. Like her novels, these nonfiction books were tone poems, studies in atmosphere and mood: "Miami seemed not a city at all but a tale, a romance of the tropics, a kind of waking dream in which any possibility could and would be accommodated." Meaning what, exactly? Never mind. Readers felt they were reading something important and penetrating about the American century, the American dream, the American empire. The design of these volumes contributed greatly to that impression: on the covers, their one-word titles, in large type, stood starkly against plain backgrounds, as if to suggest that they were the contemporary equivalents of Thomas

Paine's urgent manifestos *Common Sense* and *The American Crisis.*

Didion was a genius at coming off as a committed political journalist. But as the feminist writer Barbara Grizzuti Harrison observed in a brilliant 1979 takedown, Didion's "subject is always herself." Indeed. In a review of *A Book of Common Prayer*, Joyce Carol Oates praised Didion's "passionate investigation of the atomization of contemporary society." In fact what the chronically neurasthenic Didion was probing so relentlessly was her own cherished personal anomie. Rarely if ever was a writer more self-absorbed, more inclined to self-romanticizing, more impressed with and fascinated by her own wonderfulness. And rarely, by the same token, was a writer so capable of breathtaking snobbery when writing about the kind of people whom Hillary Clinton would eventually refer to as deplorables.

In retrospect, it seems clear that at least one reason for Didion's exalted reputation was the fact that she was, in a very significant sense, the bard of America's self-regarding left-wing cultural elite – people who, like her, divided their lives between Manhattan and L.A., and who considered a place like, say, Miami (not Miami Beach) as exotic and alien as, well, El Salvador. For Didion, as for such readers, politics was, no less than clothing and interior decoration, supremely a matter of taste and style; one sneered at Ronald Reagan for the same reason that one rolled one's eyes at some poor rube's polyester outfit or garden apartment in Reseda.

It was 9/11 that brought Didion's signal attributes as a writer into the sharpest focus. She and Dunne had moved back to New York in 1988, but when her city was attacked by Islamic terrorists she seemed determined above all not to be emotional, not to be patriotic, not to be "Islamophobic," not to be angry – and this from a woman whose writings routinely registered the deep psychological perturbations she experienced as a result of what you or I would consider the

most trivial of upper-class First World inconveniences. In a chillingly ugly little book called *Fixed Ideas* (2003), Didion mocked the idea that firemen can be heroes and that the Al-Qaeda terrorists hated America for its freedom. Never were her knee-jerk snobbery and solipsism, and her long-since-hardened refusal to speak a kind word about her country, more unbearable.

And then came her big third-act success with *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005), an account of her life during the year after Dunne died on December 30, 2003. This piece of pulse-taking, which was later adapted into a one-woman Broadway play starring Didion's friend Vanessa Redgrave, is her best book because, finally, she wasn't pretending to be writing about anything other than herself, and because, at the same time, for once she actually displayed genuine interest in another human soul – which is to say that she was truly shocked by Dunne's sudden death, and that during the ensuing year she was every inch the truly grieving widow.

The follow-up, *Blue Nights* (2011), which records her reactions to the death of her daughter, Quintana Roo, on August 26, 2005, is a more uncomfortable read, marked by unseemly self-absorption and staggeringly inappropriate moments of utter shallowness, one of which I notedin a piece published earlier this year: "Didion … rattles off – as if they, with all their worldly splendor, held the key to salvation itself – the names of the hotels in which Quintana Roo 'stayed before she was five or six or seven' " – and of course they're all fancy-schmancy hostelries, from the Ritz in Paris to the Dorchester in London. Barbara Grizzuti Harrison again: "For Didion, only surfaces matter."

Yes, and yet. In her later years the occasional glimpse of Didion – receiving the National Humanities Medal from President Obama, for example, or talking with her nephew Griffin Dunne in his 2017 documentary about her, *The Center Will Not Hold* – could arouse great pity. She was always a tiny

woman, and after Dunne died she not only looked frightfully frail but exuded the wide-eyed pathos of a little girl in a Walter Keane – which is to say Margaret Keane – painting. For all the valedictory tributes, she looked terribly lost, terribly alone. All her adult life she'd embraced the totems of the leftist *beau monde*; the closest thing she had to a religion, it appeared, was an attitude that essentially amounted to "I'm a jet-setter, therefore I am." But in the end, I think, all her superficial consolations fell away. What else can explain that haunted look in those aged eyes?

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