



## The Year of Magical Thinking

*Joan Didion*

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## **The Year of Magical Thinking** Joan Didion

'An act of consummate literary bravery, a writer known for her clarity allowing us to watch her mind as it becomes clouded with grief.'

From one of America's iconic writers, a stunning book of electric honesty and passion. Joan Didion explores an intensely personal yet universal experience: a portrait of a marriage—and a life, in good times and bad—that will speak to anyone who has ever loved a husband or wife or child.

Several days before Christmas 2003, John Gregory Dunne and Joan Didion saw their only daughter, Quintana, fall ill with what seemed at first flu, then pneumonia, then complete septic shock. She was put into an induced coma and placed on life support. Days later—the night before New Year's Eve—the Dunnes were just sitting down to dinner after visiting the hospital when John Gregory Dunne suffered a massive and fatal coronary. In a second, this close, symbiotic partnership of forty years was over. Four weeks later, their daughter pulled through. Two months after that, arriving at LAX, she collapsed and underwent six hours of brain surgery at UCLA Medical Center to relieve a massive hematoma.

This powerful book is Didion's attempt to make sense of the "weeks and then months that cut loose any fixed idea I ever had about death, about illness . . . about marriage and children and memory . . . about the shallowness of sanity, about life itself."

## **The Year of Magical Thinking Details**

Date : Published February 13th 2007 by Vintage (first published September 1st 2005)

ISBN : 9781400078431

Author : Joan Didion

Format : Paperback 227 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Autobiography, Memoir, Biography, Biography Memoir

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## From Reader Review The Year of Magical Thinking for online ebook

### noisy penguin says

I hated this book. It is the reason I instituted my "100 pages" policy (if it's not promising 100 pages in, I will no longer waste my time on it). So within the 100 pages I did read, all I got from Didion was that she and her husband used to live a fabulous life and they know a lot of famous people. She spoke of the '60s as a time when "everyone" was flying from LA to San Francisco for dinner. Um, no, actually, "everyone" wasn't doing that then and they're not doing it now. Instead of saying "our friend so and so gave the eulogy at my husband's funeral," she said, "The great essayist David Halberstam." What does that add to the story? I found only brief spots of actual grief for Didion's husband and daughter, but they weren't enough to overpower my loathing for the author and her self-importance.

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### Lynne King says

*Grief is different. Grief has no distance. Grief comes in waves, paroxysms, sudden apprehensions that weaken the knees and blind the eyes and obliterate the dailiness of life. Virtually everyone who has ever experienced grief mentions this phenomenon of "waves".*

I cannot remember when I was last so moved by a book. It covers a sad subject, that of death with the subsequent grief and mourning periods but it amazed me with its lucidity of a woman who wrote this book a year after her husband's death. In fact I was not going to bother writing a review but then my mind took over unfortunately.

I empathised with the author because my husband John died nearly two years ago. I kept a diary after his death and reading it now I realize that I was acting in a very strange way. I became very critical of couples who stayed together because they didn't love their spouse but they were terrified of a future on their own. I also found that I became more sensitive to people who were pained and probably in a way, John's death which was dreadful for me, was even more dreadful for him. He had gone. He could not return. And this is where Joan Didion magnificently displays her thoughts on how she felt when her husband John of nearly forty years died of a massive heart attack whilst they were having dinner in New York. Her writing is similar to a dream sequence. How could this have happened? Could she have prevented it? And then he was, as she believed, going to return to her. She refused to give her husband's shoes away. He would need them for the return. She could accept his going with the funeral but then she was asked whether she could donate his organs. She reflected on this but believed that as he was not hooked up to a life support system when he arrived at the hospital that was not possible; obviously they wanted John's eyes; the beautiful eyes of her husband.

In parallel with this dreadful situation, her daughter Quintana had fallen ill with what was initially believed to be flu, then pneumonia and then she went into complete septic shock. This happened a week or so before the unexpected death of Joan's husband. But then we gradually learn that he had continual cardiac problems and he appeared to be aware that his own death was imminent.

Nevertheless, with the aftermath of grief, one wonders, what is grief and I can only assume that it is the initial part of mourning. Joan, a year later, realises that her behaviour had been odd and I believe is coming

to terms with her loss. This book was published in 2005, a year after her husband's death and I hope that she has come to terms with this and is fine. Memories will always be there but life continues. What other choice is there? Suicide. So easy to do but it can nevertheless be brutal. I was always so fascinated with Seneca's suicide.

*After a brief interrogation, Seneca was told to end his own life, which he did only with great difficulty. He severed his arteries, but he was so old and emaciated that the blood hardly escaped; so he asked for the hemlock that he had stashed away for just that purpose, but that had little effect either. He died only when his slaves carried him into a hot bath and he suffocated in the steam.*

Joan's daughter Quintana recovered but then became seriously ill a few months afterwards and so life continued with its anguish. Joan was left with the thought that she was there during her daughter's illness but she would soon have to let go as Quintana had recently married. And what was Joan going to do with her life. I still have the same problem.

And the book ends beautifully:

*...You have to feel the swell change. You had to go with the change. He [John] told me that. No eye is on the sparrow but he did tell me that.*

I had to look this up about the sparrow. I had no idea that it was a hymn and that God continues to watch over us. I like that. It was an appropriate ending to an absolutely mesmerising and wonderful book, not read once but three times. Am I religious? Not in the past but my thoughts are indeed changing.

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## Greg says

Like Johnny Rotten said during their last (in the universe where they never would re-form again in the mid-90's) show, "Do you ever feel like you've been cheated?"

I do Johnny, I do.

I feel cheated by this book. I bought it because it cost me a dollar. I wasn't interested in it that much. I finally picked it up to read because I wanted to write a review about how pathetic and whiny it was. I thought I'd say something about how now that baby-boomers are starting to kick the bucket they want a fucking monopoly on death too, as if they invented grieving and no one before them could have possibly grieved like they do. Or maybe point out that we really don't need another memoir about someone dying and the way that the surviving family member found some shallow platitude to be true and now feels the need to share it. (i.e., "Everyone said life goes on, but I had to cry for awhile and then write a three hundred page book making it seem like I was the first person in the history of the whole world to have a parent die before realizing that 'hey it's true', and life does go on especially with the nice advance I got from the book deal. Thank you Random House!!")

But no, I don't get to attack Joan Didion. And part of me so wanted to. Instead of finding her whiny, or annoying, or exploitative or whatever I find that I have quite a bit of respect for her.

Other's apparently have had trouble with some of the name dropping that Didion does. Yes she does a lot of name dropping, her and her late husbands friends happen to be house-hold names (if you're household is bookish, maybe yours isn't, and there is nothing wrong with that). And maybe she does name drop the names of expensive hotels and restaurants she normally at in with her John Gregory Dunne, and maybe some people would rather have elaborate descriptions of the decor of these places then her just saying she ate there, or

details about what so-and-so said at her husband's funeral, and not just that he or she spoke at it. But that's missing the point and if she had done that I would have been or so happy because I'd be writing a review right now about the banality of memoirs and their narcissistic egoism that only serves to make the author and publisher some dollars.

Instead Didion is really investigating and putting to paper the way that memory and perception work under the duress of grief. The snapshots of memory of a loved one don't necessarily contain any details about the table clothes of a favorite restaurant, but the place itself, its name where it was located is a memory land mine of the deceased, waiting to go off and spiral out to other memories at its mere mention.

This book deals with the irrational element of grief so well. It captures the mundane little things that can emotionally paralyze a person, and it's written from that place which our society would rather not acknowledge and that people should 'just get over', and there is no happy ending to the book, there is no climactic cathartic moment.

I've lost where I was going I think. Oh well.

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## Kim says

You might think of me as a cynic.

If you're being kind, that is. I'm the one that says 'Seriously?' when being told of some tragic event--like someone would actually make up the horrific thing. I'm the one that views the whole process of death--the telling, the grieving, the service of any kind, the 'after'--as playing out like I'm in a soap opera bubble. Which camera should I look into when I break down again? Strike one against me.

Strike Two: I've never been much of a fan of Joan Didion... I think it began in college...being forced to read *Why I Write* and *On Keeping a Notebook*. I didn't enjoy being told, essay-like, how I should go about writing. It's not my thing. That didn't help that urge to rebel that goes along with college either. My Didion backlash was further proven when *Up Close and Personal* came out. Wait, you want to add Jessica Savitch to the list? Awww. Hell no. It just wasn't happening.

Strike Three (??): Maurice bought this for me a few Christmases ago. I winced, like I usually did when receiving a book from him. Must I relive the college debacle? I can't just NOT read it, because he WILL grill me on it. Buck up, Kim... read the damn thing already. This was 5 years ago and I just recently found it in the back of the bookshelf. I did end up reading it then... and I thanked Maurice time and again for giving me such a gift. Because, that's what it truly was. Words can hold such extraordinary power..

So, here's an enigma: Can cynics really believe in magical thinking? What is magical thinking anyway? I mean... yeah, I've read the Psychology Today articles, I've gone to freedictionary.com. Is it something that can actually be described or do you need to experience to fully get it? Talk to me.

See, because now I'm either going crazy or I'm seeing the signs. I'm remembering in distorted ways... did that really happen or is my head just trying to make me believe... am I replaying the events because I'm looking for clues?

Maurice is dead. I can type that. I can be matter-of-fact about it via keyboard. Hell, I can put it in a damn book review. But, you get me to actually SAY the words and I'm using the ol' 'Maurice has passed', 'Maurice is gone', anything but the 'D' word. Like it may make it less real.

“In the midst of life we are in death.” Not just some awesome Smiths lyrics... but a common graveside prayer--and the rest? “Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.” Still looking for clues. As I’m reading the first few pages of *TYOMT* again, I’m struck at how similar the process is:

*“Later I realized that I must have repeated the details of what happened to everyone who came to the house in those first weeks, all those friends and relatives who brought food and made drinks and laid out plates on the dining room table for however many people were around at lunch or dinner time, all those who picked up the plates and froze the leftovers and ran the dishwasher and filled our (I could not yet think ‘my’) otherwise empty house even after I had gone into the bedroom (our bedroom, the one in which still lay on a sofa a faded terrycloth XL robe bought in the 1970s at Richard Carroll in Beverly Hills) and shut the door. Those moments when I was abruptly overtaken by exhaustion are what I remember most clearly about the first days and weeks. I have no memory of telling anyone the details, but I must have done so, because everyone seemed to know them.”*

This book is full of this type of sameness. Two peas in a pod, Joan and I. I may not be keeping his shoes because when he comes home he might need them (like Joan) but I’m still hanging on to that bottle of Moxie in the fridge...I’m still wondering if him telling me that morning that he wanted to hear my voice because it soothed him was really him telling me that I should have... what? What could I have done?

Joan has other tragedies... memories that stretch out to before I was born. She is insightful in such creative, tenacious, concise ways that sometimes I just want to curse her for bringing me there... for making me believe and start to question every action/memory/event of the last 20 years looking for the damn signs... because they were there, right?

*In the midst of life we are in death.* Don’t fucking forget that.

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### **Darwin8u says**

*“It occurs to me that we allow ourselves to imagine only such messages as we need to survive.”*  
? Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*

In four days it will be one year since my father-in-law died in an accidental shooting. He had recently turned 60 and recently celebrated his 40th wedding anniversary. In 18 days it will be four years since my older brother died suddenly in a Black Hawk crash in Germany. He was closing in on his 40th birthday. He was preparing to land.

I had two father-figures in my life. I also had two brothers. I lost one of each pair suddenly - dramatically. I've watched my wife struggle with the loss of her father. I've watched my mother-in-law struggle with the sad death and absence of her husband. I've watched my sister-in-law and her kids struggle with the death of their husband and father. I've watched my parents, my siblings. I have grieved much myself for these two good men.

I was reading when they died. I know this. When my father-in-law died I was reading *Falconer*. When my brother died I was reading *This Is Water*. After their deaths I couldn't read for weeks, and struggled with reading for months. I was in prison. I was drowning in a water I could neither see nor understand.

Reading Didion's sharp, sometimes funny, but always clear and precise take on her husband's death and her daughter's illness ... my experience is reflected. Not exactly. I'm no Joan Didion and my relationship with both my father-in-law and my brother are mine. However, Didion captures in the net of her prose the essence of grief, tragedy, loss, coping, remembering. Her memoir makes me wonder how it is even possible that someone could both feel a semblance of what I feel and capture all the sad glitters, glints and mudgyness of mourning at the same time. It takes a helluva writer.

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## Orsodimondo says

### ANCHE PIÙ CHE UN GIORNO DI PIÙ

*Quando terminò la cerimonia ci recammo nella villetta di Pebble Beach. C'erano degli stuzzichini, dello champagne, una terrazza aperta sul Pacifico, una cosa molto semplice. Per la luna di miele passammo qualche notte in bungalow del ranch San Ysidro di Montecito e poi, annoiati, fuggimmo al Beverly Hills Hotel.*

Ce la farà una persona che scrive queste cose, con questo tono, ce la farà a trasmettere il suo dolore, il senso della sua perdita, a risultare empatica...?

**Joan Didion e il marito John Gregory Dunne, nato a Hartford; Connecticut, il 25 maggio 1932, morto a New York il 30 dicembre 2003.**

Oh, se ce la farà!

Ce la fa, senza alcun dubbio, ce l'ha fatta: il suo libro è un colpo alla parte più sensibile del lettore, senza trascurare quella più cognitiva. Joan Didion è probabilmente snob, forse anche insopportabilmente snob: ma ha rara intelligenza e sensibilità e scrive da dio.

Quaranta anni insieme, 24 ore al giorno: perché moglie e marito sono scrittori e sceneggiatori e giornalisti – a volte lavorano insieme allo stesso film, per lo più ciascuno porta avanti la sua scrittura – ma lui è il primo lettore di lei, e viceversa – il primo lettore di una nuova opera, ma anche semplicemente di un articolo di giornale, di un pensiero, un'annotazione. Tra John e Joan lo scambio è continuo, quotidiano, insistito, profondo. Lei non ha conservato lettere di lui: semplicemente perché non si sono mai scritti - stavano sempre insieme, non ce n'era motivo – durante le rare separazioni, le salate bollette del telefono sostituivano la corrispondenza.

Per quaranta anni, 24 ore al giorno.

**Didion e Dunne, moglie e marito, insieme scrissero la sceneggiatura di 'Panico a Needle Park', 'È nata una stella', 'L'assoluzione'.**

Poi, una sera, in un attimo, patatrac, lui se ne va: improvvisamente smette di parlare, non risponde a una domanda di lei, cade per terra ed è già morto.

[La figlia da qualche giorno è ricoverata in terapia intensiva, inizio di una lunga malattia che la vedrà in ospedale per mesi, morire un anno e mezzo dopo].

Joan inizia a leggere qualsiasi cosa che riesca a trovare sulla morte: medicina, psicanalisi, psichiatria, scienze naturali, storia delle culture, letteratura, mitologia...

Questo libro è ovviamente il tentativo di Didion di elaborare il suo lutto, di affrontare assenza e perdita del marito.

Ma, prima di tutto, è una dichiarazione d'amore, perché racconta una magnifica storia d'amore.

Didion racconta i fatti nei dettagli, attenta alla cronologia, ripercorrendola più e più volte; esamina il suo sentire come un anatomopatologo; cita opere sue e altrui; ma anche letteratura medica della quale diventa esperta; e referti, anamnesi, terapie; fa ricerche su Google, prende in mano poesie, ricorda canzoni, ripercorre la sua vita, rivive ricordi, ripassa la memoria...

La razionalità del suo raccontare, dell'uso dei dettagli, e della cronologia dei fatti, delle cose che bene o male compie, si conserva: questa razionalità si sovrappone all'irrazionalità dell'ostinato desiderio di chi non c'è più, di abolire la morte, cancellare la perdita, annullare l'assenza, fermare il tempo, riavvolgerlo, riviverlo, duplicarlo...

**Joan Didion e Vanessa Redgrave, che ha portato sul palcoscenico il monologo tratto da questo memoir.**

Questo è il pensiero magico (in realtà, il pensiero ipnotico) che dura un anno più un giorno, dal 30 dicembre 2003 fino al 31 dicembre 2004, quando Joan si accorge che un anno è già passato, per specchiare l'oggi nello ieri insieme a John deve usare un'agenda di più: e questo piccolo sforzo in più è già il segno dell'inizio dell'accettazione del cambiamento.

Quando Didion inizia a scrivere questo libro, John è morto da nove mesi.

Quando lo pubblica, nell'agosto del 2005, sua figlia è morta da due mesi.

Joan non cambia il racconto, l'anno del pensiero magico è finito, alla figlia dedica un libro che scriverà anni dopo, "Blue Nights".

È stata descritta come una personalità raffinata, sofisticata, tagliente: qui, Joan Didion sa mettersi a nudo con raro coraggio e sincerità, sa mostrare i tormenti della sua anima restando intelligente profonda elegante, dotata di una scrittura che spacca.

PS

*Ti amerò anche più che un giorno di più*, dice Audrey Hepburn-Marian a Sean Connery-Robin Hood in una delle scene più struggenti della mia personale storia del cinema. E così dice il padre, che di cinema si era sempre nutrito nel senso più letterale, alla figlia stesa sul letto della rianimazione lasciandola per tornare a casa. Poche ore prima di morire.

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**Julie Ehlers says**

I'm finding it surprisingly difficult to write about this book. This is, without a doubt, the perfect book about having your husband die suddenly of a massive heart attack while your daughter is in the hospital in a coma, about to begin her own death-defying medical struggle (one she eventually loses, although that's outside the scope of this particular book). I thought this memoir was so perfect that it's hard for me to understand any of the criticisms of it. Are the critics saying there's only one way to grieve, and Joan Didion is doing it wrong?

Or that there's only one way to write about grieving, and Joan Didion is doing *that* wrong?

If you've ever grieved the loss of anyone, I don't see how you can hold either of these opinions. Grief does not follow some straight line, where you're devastated and then day by day you're less devastated, until one day you're fine. As this book makes clear, grief is sporadic and unpredictable. It ebbs and flows. There's nothing logical about it, and trying to impose logic isn't going to help you at all. And so, Joan Didion takes a cab home from the hospital after the death of her husband John, and her first thought is that she really needs to discuss the situation with John. She initially doesn't want people to know about his death, because it might ruin his chances of coming back. With both her daughter and her husband, she goes over situations again and again, as if by doing so she could somehow change what has already happened. She moves back to Los Angeles to be with her daughter during her latest hospital stay, but finds the streets so full of memories that she must devise careful routes that don't lead her past any troubling locations that might leave her useless for the rest of the day. She cries to her doctor that she "just can't see the upside" to the situation. If all of this sounds grim, it is. Of course it is. But perfect.

There seem to be two main criticisms of this book. One is that Joan Didion is ice-cold, standoffish, and unfeeling. She certainly seems this way sometimes: At the time of her husband's death, the social worker assigned to her calls her "a pretty cool customer." Significantly, though, Joan wonders what an "uncool customer" would be allowed to do: "Break down? Require sedation? Scream?" Joan wonders this not with judgment, but clearly with a kind of envy: Just because she doesn't do these things doesn't mean she doesn't want to.

Fittingly, then, the other criticism I've seen is that Joan is too self-pitying. Joan addresses this in the book as well. We abhor self-pity in our culture, but, as she points out, if you've been through a traumatic experience over which you have no control, self-pity is a perfectly normal response. And it is! So I guess the truth is, in this book, Joan Didion is both self-pitying *and* a "cool customer." In this book you see quite clearly the struggle of someone who's kept things under control for years and now finds, late in life, that nothing at all is under her control. How it could be written any other way is beyond me.

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### **Sara says**

"you sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends. the question of self-pity."

i picked up this book and read it knowing nothing more than those two short lines. those two lines which become the refrain of the memoir.

i think i must have been drawn to it intuitively, i needed to read this book when i did. didion's memoir records her thoughts, feelings and actions during the year following her husband's death and her daughter's near-death hospitalizations (i learned later that after the book was published her daughter did die, a fact which is incorporated into the broadway play adaptation).

there is nothing sentimental about this memoir, though it easily could be. instead, the memoir feels like a combination of reading didion's diary and also following her every action. she tells us of every thing she does to try to understand her husband's death and daughter's illness, relying primarily on science for her answers, which she does not find.

this is not a self-help book. it did not teach me how to properly grieve. instead, it showed me how one woman, in her own particular circumstances, handled her grieving, which sometimes included not really handling it at all.

i needed to read this book when i did and i would recommend it to anyone who has ever experienced a profound loss from which you may not have fully healed. this won't teach you how to heal but it may make you feel less alone and less crazy when life as you know it ends and you begin that insane plunge into the question of self-pity.

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### **Michael Finocchiaro says**

I have only experienced the death of a few friends and my grandparents, so I cannot say that the grief that Joan Didion describes has ever been my own. However, her loss of her husband John from a sudden heart attack while simultaneously her daughter Quintana was fighting for her life talked to me very deeply. This is not a feel good, self-help book. It is a heartbreaking and yet cathartic reliving of her first year as a widow. I admit to wetting the pages with a few tears as I read the entire book in one sitting today. The loss of some of my friends hit me hard because I could still remember them when we had spent time together and I regretted that there had been so precisely little of that time. This, in a far more intimate and poignant manner is what Ms Didion describes as she picks up the pieces and moves on. The prose is splendid as many of the themes and images recur again and again as she processes and moves from grief to mourning. I think what moved me the most was the phrase her husband had said to his daughter, "I love you more than even one more say" that Audrey Hepburn says to Sean Connery in Robin and Marian.

For anyone dealing with loss and bereavement, this is a very cleansing read. For anyone coming out of physical or psychological trauma, I also thinking that this book hold valuable insight.

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### **Books Ring Mah Bell says**

Disclaimer: Being fresh into the grieving process myself, you may want to skip this review and head onto others. Undoubtedly I'll purge my grief in a review about a book on grief. You've been warned.

Right off the top I will say this for the book: raw, powerful, honest, amazing.  
If you have any interest in the grief process, **READ THIS BOOK.**

The only criticism that I *might* have is that there's a lot of name dropping. Insert famous names and some fancy locations (Beverly Hills, Malibu), talk about using fine china, fancy bathrobes from some store I'll never set foot in... Normally, that would drive me mad. (rich or poor, like that one book says, everybody poops!) However, I never felt with her that the name dropping was pretentious, or snobbish. The people and places she named were simply a part of her life, so who am I to hold that against her?

Wealth, while it may provide many a luxury, cannot insulate you from death, from grief. Who said death was the great equalizer? It is, truly.

Didion's husband died very suddenly of a heart attack. My mother died (weeks ago) slowly of cancer. Very different circumstances. The link is the loss. Didion writes this about death after a long illness (experienced

with others in her life): *In each of those cases the phrase, "after a long illness" would have seemed to apply, trailing its misleading suggestion of release, relief, resolution. Yet having seen the picture (impending death) in no way deflected, when it came, the swift empty loss of the actual event.*

I mostly agree with her. But in full disclosure, there was relief for me. I would not have to watch my mom waste away for weeks (MONTHS!) in a nursing home. Release? Yes and no. Resolution? No way.

After my mom died, I heard multiple times how very strong I was. What I was supposed to be doing, what should I be saying? Did they think I was callous for not weeping at the funeral? Did they think I was putting on a front? Truth be told, my grieving began 18 months prior, the minute the surgeon came out and told me she had small cell lung cancer. I knew what that meant for her - death. My grief began then, at that moment. It continued each time we'd go to chemo or when she needed a blood transfusion. It continued when she lost her hair. It continued when tumors spread onto the nerves of her arm and she could no longer use it; not to put on earrings, not to hold a cup, not to pick up her grandson. One night, after having dinner at her house, I wept the entire way home, realizing that the number of meals she'd make for me were limited. I knew what was coming. When she died, even though I saw it coming, it was there, just as Didion says, the swift empty loss.

She writes about her own personal grieving process, her struggles to resolve his death in her mind. She writes of how very unique it is to each situation, loss of a parent versus the loss of a spouse. These sentences ring very true:

*Grief, when it comes, is nothing we expect it to be.*

*Grief turns out to be a place none of us know until we reach it.*

Didion writes about the concept of grief crashing or rolling in like waves. Lots of psychologists speak of it. The coping information Hospice sent me also mentioned "waves" of grief. For me, waves isn't quite right. I'll call them grief grenades. Waves you can see, you can hear, you feel them building and you can tell when they'll break. My grief grenades have hit at moments when I least expect it. Examples: walking in the store and seeing my mom's favorite brand of cookies prominently displayed on the endcap. Hearing on the news that 58 year old so and so died after a battle with cancer. Deciding to purge out e-mail contacts, I see her name. Hospice calling on my birthday to see how I am holding up, instead of a call from her, singing "Happy Birthday" off key.

Swift empty loss.

In one part of the book Didion writes of getting rid of clothing that belonged to her husband. She cannot bring herself to part with his shoes, in case he needs them when he comes back. (magical thinking, indeed!)

There were things of my mom's I could not part with. Silly things. For instance, I kept a pair of her earrings that I had longed to throw away for the last few years. They were cheap, old clip-ons, so worn that the color had been rubbed off half the surface. I'd get so pissed when she wore them! Did she not see that they were worn out and looked tacky as hell? However, those earrings I have saved in a small box of other things that will remind me of her. Mind you, I'm certain she's not coming back. I saw her die. I dressed her body. Her cremated remains sit 3 feet away from me on a shelf until we have a beautiful summer day and I can place her ashes into the water at the lake. But I cannot bring myself to get rid of these things: those damn earrings. her favorite coffee cup (bright yellow sunshine cup purchased on a trip she took to Florida.), a potato masher from 1972, the nightgown she wore often in the weeks before she died. a pair of her jeans, ironed, of course, with the crease down the front.

Unlike Didion, who could live among the things that belonged to her husband, I had to empty my mom's apartment. After her death, I immersed myself in this task. Some of it was easy. Trash out. Food that I won't use to food bank. I set up boxes for her brothers, sisters and mom, things she wanted them to have, things I thought they'd like to have as mementos. Then it gets tricky. All the furniture, boxes of clothes, the toaster... I did not want to end up on an episode of *Hoarders*. I tried to be practical and donate what I could, but there is still a corner in my basement full of her things. (A friend of mine said her garage is still full of her mother's things 5 years later!)

When the last item of her furniture was lugged out of the apartment, I watched them load it into a truck and I sat in her empty apartment and wept.

I wept as I shut the door for the last time.

Didion on the other hand, comes home, sleeps in the same bed, sees his chair, his stuff, always there. A year after she dies, she goes to the chair where he took his last breath, and looks at the pile of books and magazines he'd been thumbing through prior to his death.

How does that mess with your grief process? Does it make it easier? Worse? In my mind as I moved things out I could say I was simply moving her into a new apartment. Magical thinking.

Didion kept her husband's shoes. Magical thinking.

For us, and for those we love who are grieving, it is so very important to recognize and appreciate the fact that we all grieve in a unique fashion. Didion points to literature on proper grieving etiquette, how our culture expects us to behave, even giving us time lines for the process. (be stoic! take a year and then get on with it, already!) Many "great" minds have discussed the process of grief leading to resolution, healing.

It's not that simple.

If I may quote another author, Anne Lamott: "You will lose someone you can't live without, and your heart will be badly broken, and the bad news is that you never completely get over the loss of your beloved. But this is also the good news. They live forever in your broken heart that doesn't seal back up. And you come through. It's like having a broken leg that never heals perfectly—that still hurts when the weather gets cold, but you learn to dance with the limp."

A year after she loses her husband, Didion has not found resolution. She worries about his memory fading in her mind, of not keeping him "alive". She writes: *I know why we try to keep the dead alive: we try to keep them alive in order to keep them with us. I also know that if we are to live ourselves there comes a point at which we must relinquish the dead., let them go, keep them dead. Let them become the photograph on the table. Let go of them in the water.*

In other words, resolution may never come, but we must learn to dance with the limp.

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### **Jason Koivu says**

To call Joan Didion cold or even heartless - true as it may be in the light of *The Year of Magical Thinking*,

this monument to the analytical dissection of grief - is itself a cold and heartless condemnation. We all grieve in our own way. This is hers.

After losing numerous family members suddenly and too soon, Didion then lost her husband and daughter within the span of a year. This book is her cathartic contemplation of that loss.

Heartrending, yes occasionally. Heartwarming, no never. Didion's demeanor is all too cerebral. It is as if she has educated herself above emotion. Certainly it can be said that some educate themselves beyond their own well-being. In this case, we see a mind so removed from the everyday reality of man as to answer "a motherless child" instead of "a nut" when asked to fill in the blank for "Sometimes you feel like \_\_\_\_." The result, when pushed to produce a book about grieving for loved ones, is an academic's deconstruction. No, it is not without feeling, she is still human after all, but stoicism is her strongest suit.

Beyond the almost biting cynicism you get beautiful language, great observations and insights to, let's call it, a different kind of emotion.

I assume, and sincerely hope, she never reads reviews like this. She shouldn't care what snarky assholes think of her work, not this work and not after the experiences she went through that brought it about. One who suffers so many visits from Death should not give two shits or even one single flying fuck what the rest of the world thinks.

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### **Kate says**

Joan Didion's daughter Quintana fell gravely ill and was hospitalized with a serious infection. She was placed in a medical coma and put on life support. Only weeks later, Joan's husband, John Dunne, was speaking with her from their living room after visiting their daughter in the hospital, stopped mid-sentence and keeled over dead on the floor of a massive coronary. Four weeks later, Quintana pulled through and revived, but only two months after that, she collapsed from a massive brain hematoma.

Joan Didion documented this year in this book, which I think I heard about on NPR or somewhere, I'm not entirely sure. I know you're all going to hate me for kicking the widow when she's down, but this book was a lot less than I expected. I got through it, but I really thought it would be more about her feelings. Instead, Didion did a lot of research on grief and puts many of her findings in the book. She spends a lot of time analyzing the way things are and trying to figure out if she's behaving in a way that seems "normal" for your "average widow."

I read a review on Amazon.com that calls Joan Didion's writing as "cool" and perhaps lacking emotion, and I felt that way about this book. The most moving passage in the whole book was one in which she states that she realized she was in denial when she cleaned out her husband's closets, but couldn't get rid of his shoes because he would need them when he got back. I thought to myself, "well, now we're getting somewhere", but perhaps she didn't want to share where those painful thoughts led, because there was no indication that she picked the shoes up and flung them at the walls while sobbing in rage. And I wanted her to. I wanted her to be angry at God and everyone for putting her in this terrible situation with her husband's death and her daughter's serious illnesses. But instead, she seemed rather detached. Maybe she didn't want to share those feelings, but if that were so, she shouldn't have written a book purporting to be about that very topic. I found this book to be tremendously disappointing.

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## TK421 says

I am not the type of person that cries at funerals. I find crying at a funeral as constructive as trying to stop a raging river with a few paper towels and a bag of sand, nothing is achieved. Find me not callous, for I am sensitive to the recently departed and their family. It's just that...I don't know...I know there is nothing that can be done to bring back that person. Rereading the above really makes me sound like an ass so let me try it another way: death is something we all have to accept; my acceptance of death comes more easily than it does for others.

Take Didion for example. Here we have a very educated woman who foggily ambles through the year following her husband's (John Gregory Dunne) death. John died of a severe infarction. He had a long history of heart issues. He knew this was the way he was going to die. But even with all this evidence, his personal testimony, Didion finds the death of her husband shocking, as if she were blindsided. (I'll grant that no one wants to be in mid-conversation with someone when they die.) Now stop cursing me, let me continue. John's death in-and-of-itself does not make this story compelling. Quintana, John and Didion's daughter, and her sickness is what makes this story compelling. You see, we are all going to die. Husbands will have to bury wives, and wives will have to bury husbands. That's life. But none of us ever want to experience having to bury a child. And the way that Didion structures her story allows her to think she is grieving for her husband, when, in reality, she is telling their story to mask the fact that she is scared shitless about losing her daughter.

You see, Didion does a great job of recounting the great love her and John shared for almost forty years. But some of the details that she gives the reader really only show that we (the readers) will never know what it was like to live a life with John. We'll never know what it feels like to get a free ticket on the Concorde; we'll never know what it's like to get free tickets from the NBA commissioner; basically, we'll never know what it was like to live a life of affluence and prestige. But, even without ever knowing this aspect of her life, we will all more than likely at some point fear for our child, which is the bridge that connects us to Didion. During the chaotic (brilliant narration, stylistic technique) timelines and temporal displacements via vortexes, Didion is unable to mask the fear she has of losing her only child. Unfortunately, Didion also realizes that this year of magical thinking is less about her husband and more about her daughter and closes the door for us readers over and over again just as we are about to get a real true glimpse into Didion's grief. You see, Didion was able to deal with her husband's death; what she was unable to deal with was the possibility of losing her child.

But even with the absence of these concrete feelings, and the insertion of insights from countless psychiatrists and research papers about grief, the story works. Didion understands that she might be able to hide from the reader, allow for what information is passed-along to us, as long as she is able to stay one step in front of her feelings. Fortunately for us, grief and confusion and frustration and anger and misery know no boundaries. What is never said on the written page is said with infinite detail in the between spaces of events and conversations within the story. The year of which Didion chronicles is truly heart-wrenching; I'm pretty sure I would not be able to cope as well as she did. But it is also full of promise, redemptions, and hope.

This is a beautiful and tragic story, one that is sure to become a classic concerning death and the grieving process.

HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

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### **Debbie "DJ" says**

This is a hard book for me to review, as I know my own personal experience will be foremost. A big thank you to a wonderful friend who sent this to me after the loss of my own partner three weeks ago. So yes, this book is about grief and loss. It is Didion's own personal journey after the loss of her husband. The first lines in her memoir begin...

"Life changes fast.

Life changes in an instant.

You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends.

The question of self-pity."

Those words resonated with me profoundly. She goes on to describe that grief is very different than loss. Loss can be the death of someone very close which causes sadness, pain, loneliness, etc., but still there is a distance. Still there is an ability to plan and remember things. Grief however is different, as it has no distance. She describes grief as the feeling of waves of distress, shortness of breath, and loss of memory, to name a few. I cannot say enough about how comforting that was for me. Not only did her words help me understand what was happening to me now, but also what I may experience in the future. While everyone responds to grief differently, there are some general "truisms." One's that Didion has found not only from personal experience, but research as well. I was reminded of Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, and her book on the five stages of death. What may seem the normal progression of feelings are often felt in no particular order or time.

I had never read Joan Didion before, so I did a little research on her writing. She was born way before social media, and the tell-all confessional types of writing seen today. When she wrote this in 2005, critics accused her of voyeurism. The experience of mourning was still believed to be private, and most thought it should remain that way. I find it interesting that this is the only piece I found missing from parts of her memoir.

In much of this book she has written more of the facts of her experience than her feelings. To think, 10 years ago this was seen as voyeurism? And yet, in keeping my own journal, I notice much of it is a recording of facts. Maybe in some ways one's emotions shut down as the shock to the body is foremost. I can only wonder in Didion's case, this coupled with the times in which she wrote, how explosive such details must have been.

I cannot help but feel Didion helped pave the way for many authors to reveal deeper emotions. For me, this sometimes factual account did not take away from the experience that is this book.

I highly recommend this to anyone who is going through a grieving process, or is interested in the affects grieving produces.

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### **Dawn says**

Hated it, hated it, hated it- but kept reading with the hope that all my pain and suffering would somehow be worth it in the end. It wasn't. The same self-pitying, whiney, depressing, self-important sentiments are basically repeated over and over again only with different words. Joan Didion can obviously write well, but she should have left this cathartic piece in her closet. And I'm not averse to reading novels that deal with grief. This one was just way too self-indulgent and redundant for me. And Didion's pervasive name-dropping

and repeated descriptions of her wealth and fame just made me hate the book even more.

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