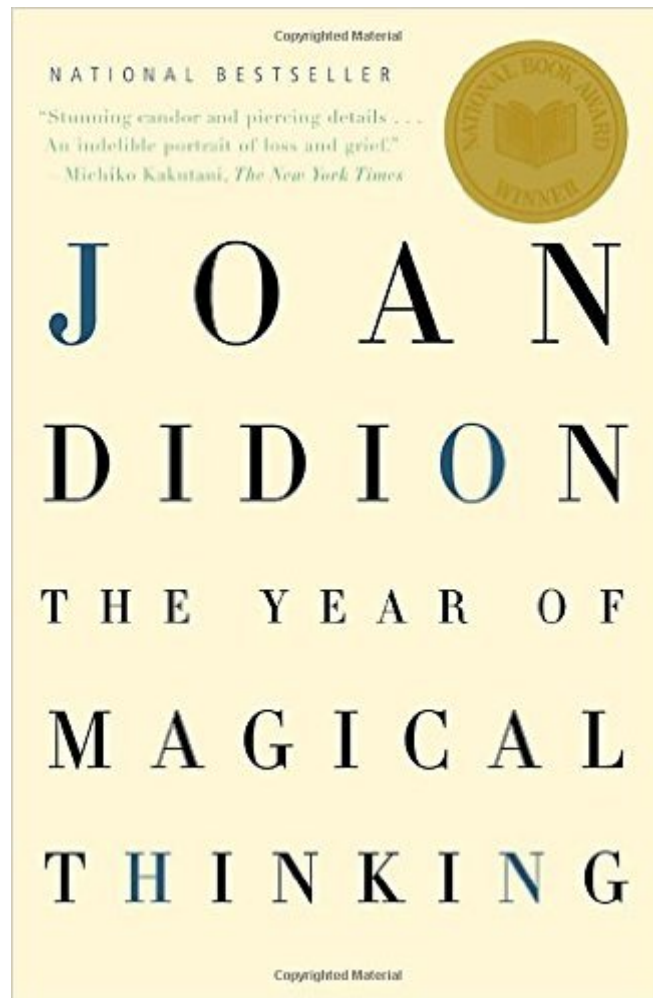


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The Year Of Magical Thinking



Synopsis

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.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Starred Review. Many will greet this taut, clear-eyed memoir of grief as a long-awaited return to the terrain of Didion's venerated, increasingly rare personal essays. The author of *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* and 11 other works chronicles the year following the death of her husband, fellow writer John Gregory Dunne, from a massive heart attack on December 30, 2003, while the couple's only daughter, Quintana, lay unconscious in a nearby hospital suffering from pneumonia and septic shock. Dunne and Didion had lived and worked side by side for nearly 40 years, and Dunne's death propelled Didion into a state she calls "magical thinking." "We might expect that we will be prostrate, inconsolable, crazy with loss," she writes. "We do not expect to be literally crazy, cool customers who believe that their husband is about to return and need his shoes." Didion's mourning follows a traditional arc "she describes just how precisely it cleaves to the medical descriptions of grief" but her elegant rendition of its stages leads to hard-won insight, particularly into the aftereffects of marriage. "Marriage is not only time: it is also, paradoxically, the denial of time. For forty years I saw myself through John's eyes. I did not age." In a sense, all of Didion's fiction, with its themes of loss and bereavement, served as preparation for the writing of this memoir, and there is occasionally a curious hint of repetition, despite the immediacy and intimacy of the subject matter. Still, this is an

indispensable addition to Didion's body of work and a lyrical, disciplined entry in the annals of mourning literature. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Didion's husband, the writer John Gregory Dunne, died of a heart attack, just after they had returned from the hospital where their only child, Quintana, was lying in a coma. This book is a memoir of Dunne's death, Quintana's illness, and Didion's efforts to make sense of a time when nothing made sense. "She's a pretty cool customer," one hospital worker says of her, and, certainly, coolness was always part of the addictive appeal of Didion's writing. The other part was the dark side of cool, the hyper-nervous awareness of the tendency of things to go bad. In 2004, Didion had her own disasters to deal with, and she did not, she feels, deal with them coolly, or even sanely. This book is about getting a grip and getting on; it's also a tribute to an extraordinary marriage. Copyright © 2005 The New Yorker --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

It wasn't what I expected. I lost my husband a year ago and I thought it would show coping methods. I guess it did, in a way, but it didn't help me. It was a very fast read though.

As a recent widow (8 months) I found it reassuring to read this journey. I too worked closely with my husband and understand the loss of a shared intellectual life.

Didion tells us "this is my 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 ways in which people do and do not deal with the fact that life ends, about the shallowness of sanity, about life itself." This book is a personal account of grief and the myriad of ways it showed up in Didion's life in the first year following the death of her husband, John, and around the life-threatening illnesses that concurrently and subsequently imperiled the life of their daughter, Quintana, during that same year. Dedicated to John and Quintana, it is by turns searing and poignant. True to the spirit of grief, there are some very funny moments and there are some very painful moments. Near the end of the book, Didion writes: "I realize as I write this that I do not want to finish this account." She laments for all of us who mourn the death of a loved one. For more information on loss and change, grief and bereavement, go to LeaningIntoLoss.com.

Life changes in an instant, and those left behind fumble through back into the realm of the normal.

That seems to be the key thread of Joan Didion's harrowing first person account of her husband's death and daughter's precarious hospitalizations. I won't 'review' this book, as it's been done by far better writers than myself. I would say that anyone touched by grief will find familiar ground here (not comfort; this book is FAR from comforting). I'll read and reread it for many years to come.

Joan Didion's husband suffered a fatal coronary on December 30, 2003, even as their recently married daughter lay critically ill in a NYC hospital. That is what this book is about. That is ALL it is about. Joan goes over the details incessantly and exhaustively in search of understanding what happened; at times, especially in the middle, the narrative gets bogged down. The author obviously has great love for both her husband, a fellow writer and her constant companion, as well as for her daughter Quintana, yet Ms. Didion never seems to veer off her path as dispassionate, though obsessive observer in this telling. You get a lot history of Joan and John's life over the whole course of their marriage as she is reminded of this event and that--and a lot of jet-setting and hobnobbing and name-dropping, but this is just part of her passion for detail. There isn't much about emotion or about magic, except for her observations of the ways that she was in denial about his death--such as not wanting the obituary, or not wanting to give away his shoes because he would need them. And there certainly isn't anything about faith or belief in an afterlife. The author makes certain that her readers understand that she doesn't go in for that kind of nonsense. What she does go in for is books. Not the self-help kind or inspirational kind--these she dismisses as "useless", but for the medical kind, for instance, and even the literary kind such as poetry. Her belief was that through reading and studying it out, death like all other aspects of life would yield to understanding and thus some kind of mastery. The book was worth reading, though not as good as I had hoped. She does pose "the question of self-pity", yet seems to answer that what seems to be self pity is the normal state of mind of the one who is "left behind" by the deceased. Also emphasized is that the state of mind of one who is grieving is anything but normal, but rather a sort of deranged condition from which, however, one is expected to recover. I gleaned a few insights, and a desire to read more about this topic, as well as to write about my own loss as my mother has recently passed away. Yet the book left me rather unsatisfied in terms of conclusions learned from the experience. I do not wonder that John had expressed their lack of "having fun" to her some months before the event, and I am glad that he did convince her to go to France so that he could see Paris for "one last time" the previous month. I am saddened to learn that Quintana did eventually die in the year after the book's publication. I will probably read some other works by this author, and I will be curious to know what she will write next.

This book is a difficult one to get into if you're not in the right frame of mind. Having had two false starts with it, I decided to give it one last go before I gave it away. This was the attempt that stuck. A memoir, this book examines grief and love in the face of death. Published two years after the death of Joan Didion's husband, Didion describes her life in the immediate aftermath. With her daughter in the hospital, Didion didn't need another tragedy. However, as she repeats often, "Life changes fast. Life changes in the instant. You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends." Her daughter is between life and death, but when death comes it takes her husband instead. Although about grief, this book isn't maudlin. Didion writes with an almost cool distance that allows the reader to see how disconnected she felt from her life. Everything is the facts as she remembers them, seen through her attempts to understand the change that life has thrust at her. She researches death and presents us her findings. She wracks her memories of the event and presents us only with her subjective point of view. Everywhere the memory of John and of their life together haunts her, and so haunts us. Simple, honest, and brave are the words I would use to describe this book. Didion bares herself to us in one of the hardest times of her life and I don't think many would have the guts to do that. The writing isn't showy, but boiled down to the bare necessities and strung together in a way that echoes the honesty of the events being told. I haven't lived through enough grief to truly understand what Didion feels, but this book allows me to sympathize. And I hope that it also gives me tools that will allow me to approach grief with dignity when the time comes. Didion says that she never wrote John letters because they were always together. This book is a love letter that could only be written now that they are apart.

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