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**A Lifetime of Magical Thinking**

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By

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Abstract of the Thesis

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This project examines how the narrative structure of Joan Didion's two most recent works, *The Year of Magical Thinking* and *Blue Nights*, may be used to gain a better understanding of the author herself. Didion's use of the term "magical thinking" is accepted as a reasonable response to the grief she experiences following the deaths of her husband and daughter. An examination of her larger body of work indicates that magical thinking is a tactic of literary invention Didion has relied upon since childhood to restore order to her life when it becomes chaotic and unmanageable. Using Wayne Booth's *Rhetoric of Fiction* as a starting point for discussion, this project answers the following questions: How can one discern Didion the narrator from Didion the protagonist? How does knowledge of Booth's "implied author" illuminate the fictional format Didion works with in these two memoirs? And finally, how does the separation of Didion's identity into character and narrator create a rich description of Didion's grief?

## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
<i>The Year of Magical Thinking</i> .....	6
<i>Blue Nights</i> .....	18
Conclusion.....	29
Bibliography.....	32

## Introduction

Following the publishing of Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005), a great deal of critical attention was drawn to the belief that her practice of "magical thinking" was symptomatic of Didion's grief following the sudden death of her husband John Gregory Dunne. While this is certainly true, it tells only half of Didion's story. An examination of Didion's body of work, specifically *The Year of Magical Thinking* and *Blue Nights* (2011), indicates that Didion habitually uses magical thinking in times of personal turmoil or uncertainty in order to preserve or restore her sense of order. In the end, however, this practice affords Didion a limited agency when one compares her reality to the various narratives she creates for herself.

Magical thinking is defined by the American Psychological Association as "the belief that events or the behavior of others can be influenced by one's thoughts, wishes, or rituals" (281). The practice of magical thinking effectively creates two different worlds that run in opposition to one another – an inner world, made up of thoughts, wishes, actions, and various other beliefs which make up one's identity, and an outside or external world, the reality in which all persons live, which operates independent of the desires of individuals. From the reader's perspective, this separation creates two versions of Didion: Didion the

character, whose grief drives her to create safer and more stable realities for herself, at least in her own mind; and Didion the narrator, who is reliving and documenting the story from outside of the situation, and with a greater sense of clarity. Though both are Joan Didion, it is essential to note that Didion the character, and Didion the narrator, have very different ways of interpreting the same situation.

Didion the narrator and Didion the character each serve an important function, functions which are clearly delineated by the work of critic Wayne Booth. In both *The Year of Magical Thinking*, and *Blue Nights*, Didion exhibits the characteristics of both “implied author.” According to Wayne Booth, the “implied author can be defined as follows: “Even the novel in which no narrator is dramatized creates an implicit picture of an author who *stands behind the scenes*, whether as *stage manager*, as *puppeteer*, or as an indifferent God, silently pairing his fingernails. This *implied author* is always distinct from the ‘real man’ – whatever we may take him to be – who creates a *superior* version of himself, a ‘*second self*,’ as he creates his work” (151, italics mine). Like the “implied author” that Booth describes, Didion “stands behind the scenes” of her own literary creations and becomes part “stage manager,” part “puppeteer” in the narrative she crafts. This is done out of necessity, given the emotional trauma that Didion suffers following the deaths of her husband, John, and her only daughter, Quintana. Rather than become

beset by grief, Didion the narrator creates a “second self” in her two major works. This “second self,” Didion the character, adheres to the tenets of magical thinking in order to place structure upon – and thereby becoming “superior” to – the chaos and uncertainty that threaten to envelop her.

Examples of these ideas can be seen in a variety of circumstances. In a more drastic example, following in the wake of John’s death, Didion the character is surprised to find herself “literally crazy,” a “cool customer who believe[s] that [her] husband is about to return and need his shoes” (*The Year of Magical Thinking* 188). Didion the character does not have the clarity and distance necessary to document the months following John’s death, or to see the true reality of her new situation. This clarity is left up to the implied author or “stage manager,” who occasionally comes out from behind the curtain in order to prepare the reader for the seemingly illogical thoughts and actions of Didion the character. At the start of *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Didion the narrator states: “This is my attempt to make sense of the period that followed, weeks and then months that cut loose any fixed idea I ever had about death, about illness, about probability and luck, about good fortune and bad, about marriage and children and memory, about grief, *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*” (7, italics mine).



In this respect, Didion the character and Didion the narrator are co-dependent upon one another while also seeing the situation from two entirely different points of view.

And yet, at the same time, Didion the narrator is open about the fact that Didion the character cannot and should not be trusted. While this idea comes across in *The Year of Magical Thinking* and *Blue Nights*, such ideology is perhaps best articulated in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (1968). In this text, Didion the narrator is candid with her readers about what they should expect from her characters and the narratives that they inhabit and create for themselves. Didion the narrator states: “So the point of my keeping a notebook [i.e., writing] has never been, nor is it now, to have an accurate factual record of what I have been doing or thinking. That would be a different impulse entirely, an instinct for reality which I sometimes envy but do not possess.... *How it felt to me*: that is closer to the truth...” (115-116). In this instance, Didion the narrator acknowledges the inherent bias motivating her characters’ actions, thoughts and feelings at that time. This is in keeping with magical thinking, which focuses on how the “events or the behavior of others can be influenced by one’s thoughts, wishes, or rituals.” Ultimately, Didion the character is interested in illuminating her emotional experience. She is not interested in producing a truthful story for the sake of truthfulness

alone. Such ideas play a significant role in interpreting *The Year of Magical Thinking* and *Blue Nights*.

### *The Year of Magical Thinking*

Following the sudden death of her husband in December 2003, Joan Didion falls into a state of severe grief that, to her surprise, is more akin to a temporary mental illness than the sorrow she expected. Now late in life, Didion struggles to adapt to a new life story, one suddenly devoid of all the familiar connections she has enjoyed nearly all her adult life. In this text, Didion the character turns to magical thinking, using it as a tool to exert control over her suddenly directionless life.

In spite of the close bond Didion and John enjoyed during their marriage, Didion had a very difficult time adjusting to her role as a married partner, and allowing the narrative of her life to change. Therefore, the early years of their union were filled with “frequent” arguments about Didion’s role as a “wife” (208). “Given the value I placed on the rituals of domestic life,” she recalls, “the concept of ‘wife’ should not have seemed difficult, but it did” (208). As a young woman, Didion believed that a wife’s role is validated by her ability to uphold the various “rituals” of domesticity in order to create a new narrative for her new life. Most of these rituals depend on creating an image of married life that can be viewed and validated by others. By completing these rituals, which are by definition formulaic and generically applied to all married

persons, Didion the character believes she can compile the details of her life.

For example, the wearing of wedding rings is one such unhelpful ritual. She describes having “trouble” wearing her wedding band following their wedding (208). It was too loose to wear in the traditional way on her left ring finger, so for a time she wore it on her right ring finger. Some years later, Didion burns her right hand and is again forced to remove the ring, putting it on a chain and wearing it around her neck because “this seemed to work” (208). This explanation for wearing her ring is unavoidably strange: What does she mean by “work?” There are many ways to wear a ring, and all of them serve to keep a ring attached to one’s body. A simpler fix would have been to have the ring sized so Didion could wear it on her left hand, as she intended to, but Didion is not interested in the simple cure to this problem. The word “work” suggests that the ring is meant to perform by exhibiting her married status. The ring comes to represent Didion’s inability to define herself within her domestic sphere. Her continued attempts to display her wedding ring, a symbol of convention, in unconventional ways indicates that Didion is conscious of social morays regarding marriage but unwilling to allow convention to alter her personal narrative.

However, Didion is more willing to accept guidance from social influence during times of personal strife, when she cannot ignore the fact

that bad things can – and will – happen to her. The unspecified “domestic rituals” to which Didion refers affirm her sense of control over the often befuddling direction her life has taken. However, she neglects to describe these rituals in further detail, indicating that she accepts that there is a role for her to play at home, based on social pressure, but it is not clearly defined. “Planning meetings” are one such critical ritual. Didion and her husband held regular (or at least semi-regular) “planning meetings,” during which they would each put their writing aside and discuss whatever household problem was at hand; usually it was some sort of financial problem. These meetings consisted of “sitting down with legal pads, stating the day’s problem out loud, and then, with no further attempt to solve it, going out to lunch” (209). Didion and John spend far more energy trying to look productive than they spend actually producing results. Clearly, these meetings did not solve anything, and Didion the narrator has the paperwork to prove it – after John’s death she stumbles upon an overstuffed manila folder labeled “Planning” which dated back to the early years of their marriage – but the couple still felt obligated to make even a half-hearted attempt at solving domestic problems. The formality of these meetings indicates that both Didion and John felt as though they were following some sort of script and creating a performance that would be seen by others. Imagine Didion and John convening in his office, legal pads in hand, ready to examine the data in

the massive planning folder and work up a family budget. They *appear* prepared and determined to make important decisions, and they have all of the necessary information with which to make that decision. But because this is neither the first nor the last performance on this topic, we know they are not fully committed to resolving this problem. Instead they back out of it, congratulate one another on a job well done, and go out for soup and salad.

In fact, there was very much at stake on these occasions. In 1978, Didion and John nearly lost a \$50,000 deposit on a house they intended to buy after a mudslide halted the sale of the Malibu home in which they were then living. Didion and John proposed a “planning meeting” to work out the problem. Notes were made: “*Discuss: Abandon Brentwood Park? Eat the \$50,000?*” (210). Instead they flew to Honolulu, “thinking to escape the rain and sort out our options” (210). Lo and behold, the weather had cleared up during their vacation and a respectable offer was made on the house.

In retrospect, Didion the narrator is baffled by their joint decision. “What had encouraged us to think that a resort hotel in Honolulu was the place to solve a cash shortfall?” (211). Didion the narrator recognizes that she and John apparently had no sense of cause and effect. In order to solve a cash flow problem, they spent money they couldn’t afford to spend on a (certainly expensive) trip to Hawaii, a place she once

described as a land where “no one fails” (*Slouching Towards Bethlehem* 163). This is no coincidence. Didion the character was subconsciously running away from her problems to her own personal paradise, as she now acknowledges with rhetorical questions. However, Didion the narrator has not completely absorbed the full ramifications of this choice. She also asks of her younger self, “What lesson did we take from the fact it worked?” (211). In point of fact, ignoring the problem did not work even then, it merely appeared to: the situation worked *itself* out, purely by chance – the weather in Malibu improved enough so that potential buyers could take a look at the home -- and Didion the character chose to interpret this sudden improvement as a direct result of their actions. Though Didion the narrator has recognized that she and John took a risk, she cannot afford to see that the situation could have backfired just as easily causing financial ruin -- perhaps because she can’t bear the possibility that she is not in complete control of her own life, as she is with her work.

“I had myself for most of my life shared the same core belief in my ability to control events,” the narrator states, which explains Didion’s cognitive dissonance regarding these money problems (98). Because Didion the character believes that she can solve every problem, no matter what, even the most implausible solutions fill her with a sense of certainty. No situation is unfixable and everything always works out (or,

more accurately, everything always *appears* to work out) because the illusion of control keeps her fears at bay. In 1990, twenty years and another cash shortfall later, Didion and John flee New York for Paris (another favorite locale, much like Hawaii), a trip justified by having received one free ticket on the Concorde, confirming that Didion and John continued to evade problems at home by removing themselves from the site of conflict, just as they remove themselves mentally.

Didion and John take the writer's approach to conflict, examining a situation from the outside, and applying it to their own lives. As characters in their own story, they examine their lives as though they are both the subjects of their own narrative. These characters are also in control of their surroundings, and how they react to those surroundings. This creates two separate spheres: the life of Didion and John, literary characters, and Didion and John the authors, who supervise and mold their doppelgängers' narrative. In this way, the financial problems which the real Didion and John are experiencing become superficial. Nothing too terrible could befall them, because their life exists within the confines of their own narrative creation: nothing too tragic or pointless can happen to its characters because Didion holds a "core belief in [her] ability to control events" (98).

When asked about how she developed such misapprehensions, the narrator recalls, "I was one of those children who tended to perceive the



world in terms of things I read about it. I began with a literary idea of experience, and I still don't know where all the lies are" (Kuehl interview 12). Didion is aware that literature, not past experience, inspires her ideas about all things, and she doesn't know how to replace this mindset with a more realistic mentality. Further, Didion phrases this explanation in fluid terms: she states that she "began" with the idea that fictional tales could serve as a model narrative, as if this is merely a stage she will grow out of. The reader expects Didion to explain what conclusion (or "end") she came to on this topic. Didion the narrator reaches no such conclusion, because her narrative, and by extension her identity, is still developing. Her characterization of these misconceptions as "lies" underscores the deep sense of betrayal she feels when her life proves to be more complex and unpredictable than any storybook or novel.

Didion's marriage is similarly dependent on narrative structure, in which each partner plays a designated part. As John's brother Dominick Dunne explains:

They were ideally matched [...] They were almost never out of each other's sight. They finished each other's sentences. They started out each day with a walk in Central Park. They had breakfast at Three Guys Restaurant on weekdays and at the Carlyle Hotel on Sundays. Their offices were in adjoining rooms of their sprawling apartment [...] they were always in accord on their opinions, whatever subject was under discussion" ("A Death in the Family" 2).

What stands out the most in this passage is the unfailingly habitual nature of Didion and John's life. This description leaves no room for error or variation in their habits, down to the insignificant details of where they liked to eat and when and where they liked to vacation. Dunne believes that Didion and John's habit of finishing each other's sentences is proof of closeness in their marriage. Didion also notices their shared habit of finishing each other's sentences, and her surprise at how his input worked to change the meaning of any given statement. Without John, Didion realizes "I don't finish sentences" and when his absence forces her to do so, her responses unintentionally "make [her] sound quite cross and brisk" (Stamberg interview 2). Not only is she unable to accurately express herself without him, but she needed John to communicate through while he was alive -- he has been editing her for forty years.

With her communications skills hampered, Didion focuses her attention on deciphering John's narrative, something she feels very confident doing because of how intimately they knew each other. Didion is forced to consider how much – or how little – she and John knew about each other's inner world. "We imagined we knew everything the other thought... but in fact, I have come to see, we knew not the smallest fraction of what there was to know" (196). Didion recognizes John's differing views only once John has died, and regrets the blind confidence

she had in her ability to anticipate John's every thought. The key word here is "imagined": Didion's supreme knowledge of John is obtained through her own imagined view of him, which is by definition imprecise and inevitably prejudiced by her own sensibility. John's own thoughts, as he recorded them in his memoir, *Harp*, reflect a more troubled psyche than Didion recognized, as evidenced by his health concerns. Recalling an upsetting doctor's appointment in a conversation with Didion, John writes:

"What did the doctor say?" [...]  
"He scared the shit out of me, babe [...] He said I was a candidate for a major catastrophic cardiac event [...]"  
When I told my wife he scared the shit out of me, I started to cry. (*Harp* 113-114)

This account varies greatly from the conversation she remembers having back in 1987. Didion remembers the discussion, but is alarmed that she does not remember John crying in fear, assuming, "[e]ither I had not remembered this or I had determinedly chosen not to remember this," realizing that magical thinking is so powerful, it permanently altered the way she remembered one of the most significant conversations of their marriage (155). He was clearly afraid of dying from 1987 on – as he should have been, since a "major catastrophic cardiac event" is precisely what killed him, as well as his father – but Didion was too terrified to acknowledge this as a possibility, never mind an eventuality. In contrast

with John's practical and proactive response (he undergoes the first in a series of cardiac procedures in order to maintain his health) Didion not only discounts the validity of this near-guarantee, insisting to John "[y]ou know no more how you're going to die than I do or anyone else does," she erases John's emotional reaction from her memory almost entirely (158).

This experience indicates that John can only subscribe to a certain amount of magical thinking. Though he willingly took financial risks, and was susceptible to Didion's more harmless self-delusions, this brush with mortality brings John crashing down to earth. Not so for Didion. In a similar conversation about death, also in the not-too-distant past, Quintana and John have a serious discussion about organ donor-ship over dinner. Quintana had declared herself a donor through the Department of Motor Vehicles, John had not. Didion "changed the subject... unable to think of either of them dead" (39). Didion views John's death as part of her narrative, as opposed to part of his own. John's death becomes something that happened to *her*, not something that happened to him, because only she has to live with the aftermath. John's death brings his narrative to a conclusion.

Didion tries to reincorporate John into her narrative by asking for advice on some of Quintana's most precarious days. "There have been a few occasions [...] on which I asked John point blank what to do. I said I

needed his help. I said I could not do this alone. I said these things out loud, actually vocalized the words," Didion recalls, as if embarrassed by the obvious futility of the request (195-196). John's silence, his inability to take hold of the situation, confirms the physical separation between husband and wife. "Any answer he gave could exist only in my imagination, my edit," Didion realizes. There can be no "voice from beyond the grave," as there often is in novels and films. Any intuited instruction Didion might sense and attribute to John would simply be a product of her magical thinking. For the first time, Didion acknowledges magical thinking for what it is: a coping mechanism driven by self-deception. This time, Didion rejects it. "For me to imagine what he could say only in my edit would seem obscene, a violation" (196). Didion's use of writer's jargon is an implicit acknowledgment that her writing habits have invaded her personal life. By anticipating and reiterating John's thoughts, Didion is not so much speaking for John (as he often did for her) but speaking over him, steamrolling over his identity and all that she loved about him. The end result of magical thinking would be the complete transformation of John's identity and all that comes with it – their history, their bond, their family. In short, the emotional center of his life and hers would be disassembled and paved over as if it were insignificant. The ultimate casualty of magical thinking is Joan Didion.

Though the initial purpose of magical thinking was to grant Didion a sense of agency over her life, the result is just the opposite. Her desire to brush off the more trying experiences of her life serves to weaken her, and sets her up for disaster when reality ultimately breaks through upon her in the form of John's death. And yet, even after Didion realizes that she has been lying to herself, she is unable to see the true extent of her own problem. Though perhaps mature enough to label herself a "child" who tended to perceive the world in terms of things [she] read about it" Didion still had trouble understanding "where all the lies are" (Kuehl interview 12). This delusional behavior can be seen in how Didion copes with the death of another loved one, her daughter Quintana.

### *Blue Nights*

Following the death of her adult daughter Quintana, Joan Didion reflects on her life as a mother to a daughter she loved dearly but never quite understood. Didion is consumed by the worry that she was not a good enough parent to Quintana, believing she infantilized Quintana in a vain attempt to deny her daughter's emotional disturbances. In truth, Didion infantilized Quintana to assuage her own fears on motherhood and to give herself purpose. By refusing to see her daughter for what she was, and protect herself in the process, Didion again retreats into the realm of magical thinking.

Though Quintana could not have known it, she was the missing detail in Didion's long-held maternal fantasy. Prior to her marriage to John, Didion suffered a pregnancy scare. Once she discovered she was not pregnant, the relief she expected to feel was replaced with sadness and disappointment. "Until then pregnancy had been only a fear, an accident to be avoided at all costs" but after this "I saw babies wherever I went. I followed their carriages on the street. I cut their pictures from magazines and tacked them on the wall next to my bed. I put myself to sleep by imagining them: imagining holding them, imagining the down on their heads, imagining the soft spots at their temples, imagining the way their eyes dilated when you looked at them" (*Blue Nights* 80). The fear

and stigma of being an unwed mother living three thousand miles away from her own family quickly gives way to fantasy, and a very visual one at that. These babies are idealized and passive; they do not cry, become sick or refuse to eat, as real babies often do. They serve as eye candy for Didion, who does little more than look at them. They also do not age. These babies do not grow up to be children. In truth, they do not even grow into infants; Didion's fascination with their "down[y]" hair and the "soft" bones in their skulls indicate she is picturing newborns. In other words, Didion cannot imagine the reality of parenthood – the worries, the vigilance, or even the vulnerability both parents and children feel.

At the time, Didion believed she was disappointed because she no longer had an excuse to travel to revolution-era Havana, where her doctor "could help [her] get [an abortion]" (81). Didion later recognized that "the surge," the desire to have a child of her own, had suddenly overwhelmed her, and "what I was regretting was not having the baby, the still unmet baby, the baby I would eventually bring home from St. John's Hospital in Santa Monica" (*Blue Nights* 82). There is only one baby in this narrative, figuratively speaking: Didion conflates the baby she thought she conceived in New York in the mid-1950s with Quintana, born in 1966 to her biological mother in California. Both are "*the baby*" in Didion's life, as though there is a slot waiting to be filled. The repetition of "the baby" suggests that there is also an element of fate involved in



Quintana's adoption, one that is applied retroactively by Didion. Because she carried around a fantasy of motherhood for so long, the suddenness and smoothness of Quintana's adoption begins to seem almost predestined. The false pregnancy and the intervening decade of starry-eyed anticipation become part of the build-up, the necessary struggle that must be overcome to create a perfect narrative. Quintana's adoption seems meant to be, because it follows a formula.

Unfortunately, the formula is not all-encompassing, and does not take into account the circumstances of Quintana's birth. In order for Quintana to be raised by Didion, she thus had to be in a position to be raised by Didion. She had to be given up by her biological mother. Frustrated with herself, Didion reflects, "[I]f someone 'chose' you, what does that tell you? Doesn't it tell you that you were available to be 'chosen'? Doesn't it tell you, in the end, that there are only two people in the world? The one who 'chose' you? And the other who didn't? Are we beginning to see how the word 'abandonment' might enter the picture?" (60-61). In retrospect, Didion can identify the many questions Quintana was left with, questions that were neither answered nor acknowledged by Didion until after Quintana's death. Ultimately, the complicated, painful details peek through. Though Didion is unable to provide the answers to these queries, Quintana is fated to learn the truth for herself.

Quintana rejects her mother's faith in fate, instead interpreting her own narrative as the result of happenstance, proof that her "adopted" status leaves her forever subject to unpredictable, random acts of others. Such randomness ultimately takes its toll, as Quintana would eventually implore the following: "*What if you hadn't been home, what if you couldn't meet Dr. Watson [the obstetrician who delivered Quintana] at the hospital, what if there'd been an accident on the freeway, what would happen to me then?*" (82). In Quintana's view there were a number of variables and details left unaccounted for in the narrative of her life. Any of the seemingly insignificant "what ifs" Quintana mentioned could easily have changed her entire life: different parents, different environment, different influences would have shaped Quintana into a person she herself could not recognize. In contrast, children raised by their biological parents do not have these sorts of anomalies in their personal histories. Because they were raised by people to whom they are biologically connected, they are shaped by a limited number of biological (and therefore uncontrollable) factors. Quintana's narrative, on the other hand is shaped by a large number of controlled factors (like the home environment and the social environment) and a seemingly unlimited number of biological factors, in addition to the circumstantial details that guided Quintana into the Dunne household.

In short, Quintana realizes that who she is is more dependent on unidentifiable influences than identifiable ones. Thus, the narrative Didion and John created to give Quintana a sense of history within her family becomes less comforting and reliable as Quintana gets older. The above questions, asked over and over by Quintana while growing up, come to represent all of the unanswerable questions Quintana would have in her lifetime -- that Didion would be unable to answer.

Like many other aspects of Didion's own narrative, the narrative Didion creates for her daughter also has a performative basis, inadvertently objectifying Quintana and exacerbating her growing fear of abandonment. As a child Quintana would frequently ask her parents to "do" what she called "*that baby*," or what Didion refers to as the "recommended 'choice' narrative," a practice encouraged by child care professionals for parents of adopted children (56). In lieu of a birth story or some other explanation of how a child comes to be a part of a family, the recommended choice narrative gives parents a way to explain adoption to their child while emphasizing how much the child is wanted by his or her adoptive parents. In this narrative, Didion and John are depicted hand-selecting Quintana from the hospital nursery the way one would select a cake at a bakery. "Not *that baby*," John says, as if a mistake has been made, "*that baby. The baby with the ribbon*" (56). At first, the recommended choice narrative is so successful with Quintana it

is expanded to include a reenactment of John's telephone conversation with Dr. Watson, and Didion bursting into happy tears in the shower when John relays news of Quintana's birth. While the narrative pleases Quintana when she is a child, it is the details of this story and all they neglect to imply that become the roots of Quintana's questions later in life.

This story is carefully crafted to draw attention away from its holes, ambiguities, and harsh truths: There is no mention of how "that baby" arrived in the nursery, no mention of the "that baby's" identification bracelet, which sadly read "N.I." (No Information) instead of a name. The narrative does more to glorify the adult characters – Didion and John – than Quintana. Dr. Watson, in his prescience, is turned into a "folk hero," as are Didion and John, who take one look at Quintana and choose her over the many other babies in the nursery (56). In choosing Quintana they have ultimate power; in being available for the choosing and unable to consent to or reject the adoption, Quintana is defenseless, dependent, and doomed to gratitude. As much as Quintana was loved, and as much as she loved them, her identity depends – as per Didion's recollection – entirely on their decision to adopt her. In this respect, Didion continues to have authorship over her daughter's narrative – and her own image as well.

Didion continually uses Quintana as a counterpoint to a description of her own personality. Believing that her need to write is an outgrowth of her assertive personality, Didion contrasts this view of herself with her view of Quintana, who she believes is mellow and well-adjusted:

Although I have felt compelled to write things down since I was five years old, I doubt that my daughter ever will, for she is a singularly blessed and accepting child, delighted with life exactly as life presents itself to her, unafraid to go to sleep and unafraid to wake up. Keepers of private notebooks are a different breed altogether, lonely and resistant rearrangers of things, anxious malcontents, children afflicted apparently at birth with some presentiment of loss. (*Slouching Towards Bethlehem* 114)

Didion longs to be free of her obsessions. The description she gives of the “different breed”, the one to which she belongs, begins to seem quite dark. Didion’s absorbing passion for arranging and rearranging words on a piece of paper becomes, by comparison, an “affliction” from which she has always suffered. In contrast, Quintana’s free-spiritedness is a “blessing”, a mark of simple good fortune.

Quintana’s nature is no more a conscious choice than Didion’s is. The tiny details she typically enjoys focusing on, the “arranging of words on a piece of paper” become trivial, compulsive tics, indicative of a profound, unshakable sadness in Didion that cannot be purged. In contrast, Quintana’s whimsy makes her a much more active character than Didion. Quintana doesn’t have to slog through the chore of writing

to determine how to feel; her emotions are organic in that she responds to stimuli reflexively -- no second guessing, no note-taking or weighing of pros and cons.

Contributing to Quintana's feelings of vulnerability is the minor notoriety she receives in the press for being the daughter of famous parents. Throughout her childhood Quintana frequently appeared in her parents' work, and was the dedicatee of several of their books, thus attracting all kinds of attention. Quintana found herself making a cameo appearance in a scathing review of her mother's work in *The Nation*. Barbara Grizzuti Harrison states, "When I am asked why I do not find Joan Didion appealing, I am tempted to answer [...] that my charity does not naturally extend itself to someone whose lavender love seats match exactly the potted orchids on her mantle, someone who has porcelain elephant end tables, someone who has chosen to burden her adopted daughter with the name Quintana Roo..." (Harrison 277). If Harrison simply wanted to critique Didion professionally, writer to writer, she could have gone right to work proving her case. Quintana, in her early teen years at the time this review was published, need not be involved in such an endeavor. Harrison chooses to bring Quintana into the fray and use her as a pawn in the critique. It seems that Quintana's name provides Harrison with some sort of insight into some of the less "appealing" aspects of Didion's character. Harrison equates Didion's life-altering

decision to adopt Quintana with Didion's decision to decorate her living room in purple as though they are motivated by the same (apparently shallow) impulse.

Note how Quintana is referred to as the "adopted daughter" of Joan Didion. Harrison goes out of her way to make a distinction between biological and adopted children, implying that Quintana does not have as much emotional value or significance -- to Didion, to Harrison, or to society -- as a biological daughter would. This is a common misconception among those unfamiliar with adoption, and the root of Quintana's abandonment fears. Therefore, it is also the root of her narrative. If Quintana was abandoned by her "real" or biological parents, then what is to stop her "fake" parents from leaving her too? Such a charge indicates that biological ties between relations are more important and profound than emotional ties. Further, it means that Quintana's identity is "molded less by [her] personal interaction with [her] parents than by [her] genes, [her]biochemistry, and [her] historical time and place" (Henderson 3).

In order to fight off these elements and lay claim to her narrative, teenage Quintana writes a book insecurely titled "the novel I'm writing just to show you" (49). Quintana's novel is about a teenager, also named Quintana, who believes she is pregnant. "Quintana" curiously confirms her pregnancy with a visit to her pediatrician, who instructs her to notify her parents. "Quintana's parents" agree to provide an abortion "but

after that they did not even care about her anymore. She could live in their suburbia house in Brentwood, but they didn't even care what she did anymore'" (50). Here we see Quintana removing herself from her own narrative, as Didion often does, and creating a separate narrative.

While Didion removes herself from the picture mentally in order to manipulate it, Quintana removes herself physically, creating a tangibly separate narrative, doubling herself in the process. Both the fictional Quintana and the real Quintana are struggling to cope with difficult circumstances which stand to redefine their lives. The pregnancy plotline comes to represent the real Quintana's intention to incorporate the mysterious details of her adoption into a coherent narrative, one with meaning. The emphasis on parents no longer caring about their daughter anymore highlights the temporality of adoption in Quintana's mind. She worries that, just as she was given up for adoption, she can be given back if her parents so choose. Because being abandoned is something she cannot control, she gains agency by anticipating being abandoned, by avoiding being caught by surprise.

In her later years, Didion's health begins to fail and she begins to feel vulnerable, much as Quintana felt as a child. Suffering from a neuropathy followed closely by a case of shingles, Didion notices that she is, for the first time, having difficulty writing. For many years Didion wrote in a style she equated to composing music, using symbols,



abbreviations, and “x”s to represent specific dialogue or details which would be explained later on in the writing process. It seems an improbable system, but it worked for Didion, allowing her to write “easily” (103). After her illnesses Didion remarks dryly “I no longer write that way” (105). Alarmed by the failure of her old stand-by methods, Didion attempts to explain the problem away, chalking this up to “a certain weariness with my own style, an impatience, a wish to be more direct,” before eventually accepting it as proof that the physical frailty she feels has become a cognitive one (105). Didion finds herself in the very same position Quintana was in as a child: alone, worried and in need of a caregiver. When questioned on her health by her nephew Griffin, her response is to “change the subject,” as she did when Quintana and John discussed death, and tells Griffin a story told to her by a cab driver “just to prove that I can. That my frailty has not yet reached a point at which I can no longer tell a true story” (109). In this way Didion continues to work within the parameters of the “second self” motif. Rather than acknowledge discomfort or anxiety about her present state, Didion chooses to ignore the situation in the hopes that she can gain superiority over her predicament.

## Conclusion

So the point of my keeping a notebook [i.e., writing] has never been, nor is it now, to have an accurate factual record of what I have been doing or thinking. That would be a different impulse entirely, an instinct for reality which I sometimes envy but do not possess.... *How it felt to me: that is closer to the truth...* (*Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, 115-116, italics mine)

Truth can be defined in a variety of ways. It can be viewed as a factual account of events, fidelity to a cause, or the actuality of pure emotion. By paying attention to how Didion constructs her memoirs and writings, her definition of truth falls closer to the latter of these ideas. If one takes her at her word, as seen in the above quotation, Didion chooses to focus not on what she has experienced, or even on what she has thought, but on *how* she thinks. While she “env[ies]” writers who possess a mastery of factual record, Didion’s “impulse” is to document every scenario from the inside. Her emotions, beliefs, and identity are the prisms through which she views the world and through which she views any particular moment in time. “How it felt to me: that is closer to the truth....”

During one episode documented in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, Didion tries to recollect what she was doing on a particular Monday morning in Wilmington, Delaware based on a single quote in her notebook: “That woman Estelle... is partly the reason why George Sharp and I are separated today” (113). She cannot remember all of the

details, like the exact year, or even why she was there, but she has preserved a visual of that morning. Initially, Didion remembers the episode as a series of snapshot images: the woman in conversation with the bartender, the smell of “disinfectant and malt,” even “wish[ing] that she had a safety pin for the hem of the plaid silk dress,” which was coming down (114). Reflecting on this jumble, Didion asks herself, “Why did I write it down? In order to remember, of course, but exactly what was it I wanted to remember? How much of it actually happened? Did any of it? Why do I keep a notebook at all?” (114). Ultimately, the answers to these questions are meaningless, because all her reader has are Didion’s words. For better or worse, the reader’s interpretation of events is dependent upon Didion’s perspective. The true nature of writing leads one back to its source, the writer.

Not every writer is willing to sacrifice details, however. The critic John Lahr attacked Didion for her penchant to over-dramatize and dwell upon her own negative emotions. Demonizing Didion’s cultural commentary, Lahr scoffs, “Sent to get the pulse of the people, Didion ends up taking her own temperature” (Kachka 4). Lahr insinuates that temperature-taking, or reporting on her own feelings is something she cannot help, and he is correct: Didion believes that no writer can keep his or her identity out of his or her work. “But our [writings] give us away, for however dutifully we record what we see around us, the common

denominator of all we see is always, transparently, shamelessly, the implacable 'I' (117).

Didion chooses to use the memoir as her medium, a genre rooted in the moment, rather than autobiography which requires a linear timeline of events. Magical thinking, or "the belief that events or the behavior of others can be influenced by one's thoughts, wishes, or rituals" allows Didion to do just that by allowing her to recreate a moment with greater freedom. She can create a stronger narrative by focusing on her emotions, and how those emotions can be used for her own empowerment.

Ultimately, magical thinking is utilized by all writers, whether they can acknowledge it or, like Lahr, persistently continue to deny it. The "thoughts," "wishes," and "rituals" of every author will inevitably trickle down into his or her writing, making complete objectivity an impossibility. Those who refuse to acknowledge this fact, deceive themselves and offer their readers false promises of equitableness, just as they accuse Didion of bias and self-obsession. The ease with which Didion accepts and encourages magical thinking allows her to achieve a deeper level of honesty with her reader.

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