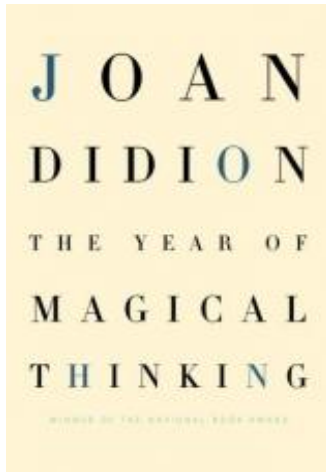


# The Year of Magical Thinking

by Joan Didion

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## About the Book

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 Dunes 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 Judges' Citation for the 2005 National Book Award for Nonfiction:**

**The Year of Magical Thinking** is a masterpiece in two genres: memoir and investigative journalism. The subject of the memoir is the year after the sudden death of the writer's husband. The target of the investigation, though, is the nature of folly and time. The writer attends to details, assembles a chronology, and asks hard questions of the witnesses, most notably herself. But she imagines that the story she tells can be revised, the world righted, her husband returned, alive. What she offers is an unflinching journey into intimacy and grief."

## Discussion Guide

1. Consider the four sentences in italics that begin chapter one. What did you think when you read them for the first time? What do you think now?
2. In particular, address "The question of self-pity." Does Didion pity herself? In what ways does she indulge that impulse, and in what ways does she deny it?
3. Read the Judges' Citation for the National Book Award, above. Why do you suppose they deemed the book a masterpiece of investigative journalism?
4. Discuss the notion of "magical thinking." Have you ever experienced anything like this, after a loss or some other life-changing occurrence? How did it help, or hinder, your healing?
5. Do you think Didion's "year of magical thinking" ended after one year, or did it likely continue?
6. Consider the tone Didion uses throughout the book, one of relatively cool detachment. Clearly she is in mourning, and yet her anguish is quite muted. How did this detached tone affect your reading experience?
7. How does Didion use humor? To express her grief, to deflect it, or for another purpose entirely?
8. Over the course of the book, Didion excerpts a variety of poems. Which resonated for you most deeply, and why?
9. To Didion, there is a clear distinction between grief and mourning. What differences do you see between the two?
10. One word critics have used again and again in describing this book is "exhilarating." Did you find it to be so? Why, or why not?
11. Discuss Didion's repetition of sentences like "For once in your life just let it go" "We call it the widowmaker" "I tell you that I shall not live two days" and "Life changes in the instant." What purpose does the repetition serve? How did your understanding of her grief change each time you reread one of these sentences?
12. The lifestyle described in this book is quite different from the way most people live, with glamorous friends, expensive homes, and trips to Hawaii, Paris, South America, etc., and yet none of that spared Didion from experiencing profound grief. Did her seemingly privileged life color your feelings about the book at all? Did that change after reading it?
13. At several points in the book Didion describes her need for knowledge, whether it's from reading medical journals or grilling the doctors at her daughter's bedside. How do you think this helped her to cope?
14. Reread the "gilded-boy story" on pages 105-6. How would you answer the questions it raised for Didion?
15. Is there a turning point in this book? If so, where would you place it and why?
16. The last sentence of the book is "No eye is on the sparrow but he did tell me that." What does this mean?
17. Didion is adapting **The Year of Magical Thinking** into a play bound for Broadway. How do you imagine its

transition from page to stage? Would you want to see the play?

**18.** Before **The Year of Magical Thinking**, had you ever read any of Joan Didion's work? Do you see any similar themes or motifs?

## Author Bio

Joan Didion was the author of five novels and 10 books of nonfiction, including *THE YEAR OF MAGICAL THINKING* and *BLUE NIGHTS*. Her collected nonfiction, *WE TELL OURSELVES STORIES IN ORDER TO LIVE*, was published by Everyman's Library in 2006. Born in Sacramento, California, Didion lived in New York City. She died in 2021.

## Critical Praise

"Her book is thrilling . . . a living, sharp, memorable book . . . An exact, candid, and penetrating account of personal terror and bereavement . . . sometimes quite funny because it dares to tell the truth."

—Robert Pinsky, *The New York Times Book Review* (cover)

"An act of consummate literary bravery, a writer known for her clarity allowing us to watch her mind as it becomes clouded with grief . . . It also skips backward in time [to] call up a shimmering portrait of her unique marriage . . . To make her grief real, Didion shows us what she has lost."

—Lev Grossman, *Time*

"I can't think of a book we need more than hers . . . I can't imagine dying without this book."

—John Leonard, *New York Review of Books*

"Achingly beautiful . . . We have come to admire and love Didion for her preternatural poise, unrivaled eye for absurdity, and Orwellian distaste for cant. It is thus a difficult, moving, and extraordinarily poignant experience to watch her direct such scrutiny inward."

—Gideon Lewis-Kraus, *Los Angeles Times*

"Stunning candor and piercing details . . . An indelible portrait of loss and grief . . . [A] haunting portrait of a four-decade-long marriage."

—Michiko Kakutani, *The New York Times*

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