

BOOK CLUB TO GO!

The Year of Magical Thinking

By Joan Didion

Introduction

Joan Didion's memoir *The Year of Magical Thinking* is about grieving for her husband, fellow writer John Gregory Dunne. The couple had been married since 1964.

Dunne died of a heart attack at the end of 2003. His death came suddenly, just as the couple was sitting down to dinner after visiting their daughter in the hospital, who had fallen into a coma after being treated for pneumonia and septic shock.

In her memoir, Didion contemplates how the rituals of daily life are fundamentally altered when her life's companion is taken from her. Her impressions, both sharply observed and utterly reasonable, form a picture of an intelligent woman grappling with her past and future.

The year referred to in the title would take its toll on Didion in another way, as well: Despite showing signs of recovery, Didion's daughter died in August of this year, several weeks after Didion submitted her final manuscript.

(npr.org)

About the Author

Joan Didion was born in California and lives in New York City. She is the author of five novels and seven previous books of nonfiction.

Joan Didion's *Where I Was From*, *Political Fictions*, *The Last Thing He Wanted*, *After Henry*, *Miami*, *Democracy*, *Salvador*, *A Book of Common Prayer*, and *Run River* are available in Vintage paperback.

(randomhouse.com)

Reviews

“The Year of Magical Thinking is a searing portrayal of personal grief, a vividly documented case study in mourning rather than the kind of modern exercise in self-therapy that, however well-intentioned, is laced with narcissism.” –bookmarks magazine

*“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**

(amazon.com)

Further Reading

The Glass Castle: A Memoir by Jeannette Walls

A Grief Observed by C. S. Lewis

We Tell Ourselves Stories in Order to Live: Collected Nonfiction by Joan Didion

Slouching Towards Bethlehem: Essays by Joan Didion

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Possible Discussion Questions

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. 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?
4. 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?
5. How does Didion use humor? To express her grief, to deflect it, or for another purpose entirely?
6. To Didion, there is a clear distinction between grief and mourning. What differences do you see between the two?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. Is there a turning point in this book? If so, where would you place it and why?
10. The last sentence of the book is "No eye is on the sparrow but he did tell me that." What does this mean?

(litlovers.com)