

The YEAR *of*
MAGICAL
THINKING

PLAY GUIDE | 2019



A Contemporary Theatre

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JOAN DIDION AND THE YEAR OF MAGICAL THINKING

The Life of Joan Didion



Joan Didion's first volume of essays, entitled *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, was published in 1968 and was a collection of her feelings about the counterculture of the 1960s. *The New York Times* referred to it as "a rich display of some of the best prose written today in this country." Her critically acclaimed second novel *Play It as It Lays* (1970) was about a fading starlet whose dissatisfaction with Hollywood leads her further and further away from reality. Engaging herself in the Hollywood lifestyle, Didion would go on to co-write four screenplays with her husband:

Panic in Needle Park (1971), *Play It as It Lays* (1972, based on her novel), *A Star Is Born* (1981), and *Up Close and Personal* (1996). A second book of essays, *The White Album*, was published in 1979 about life in the late 1960s and the 1970s.



Throughout the years Didion has written many more essay collections on subjects that have swayed her. Her fascination with America's relations with its southern neighbors could be seen in *Salvador* (1983) and *Miami* (1987). *Political Fictions* (2001) focuses on her thoughts on American politics and government. Didion and her family moved back to New York in the 1980s, and her observations of the city can be read in *After Henry* (1992). She reflects on California's past and present in her 2003 collection *Where I Was From*.

Didion's work, which has been associated with the "New Journalism" movement, has been recognized on many occasions. She received the American Academy of Arts & Letters Gold Medal in Criticism and Belles Letters in 2005 and won the National Book Foundation's Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters in 2007. She is a member of the Academy of Arts & Letters, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and The Berkeley Fellows. She received an honorary Doctor of Letters from Harvard University in 2009 and an honorary degree from Yale in 2011. In 2013, she was awarded a National Medal of Arts and Humanities by President Obama, and the PEN Center USA's Lifetime Achievement Award.

A History of *The Year of Magical Thinking*: From Memoir to Performance



In 2007, playwright David Hare (*Skylight*) was selected to direct the stage adaptation of *The Year of Magical Thinking*, written by Didion and starring Vanessa Redgrave. After 18 months of work on the script, the play opened to rave reviews at Broadway's Booth Theatre. Hare said of the process of creating the play, "Quintana had died at New York Cornell only six months before we began working—I made a conscious decision to behave as if this were a play like any other. Nothing, I thought, could be worse than to go into this project aiming to wrap the author in cotton wool. If she could face down the horror, then so could we.

This, then, is why, when I look back on our time in New York, nothing in it seems more significant than the moment at which, somewhat late in the process, we asked ourselves why the play had been written at all. The author and director had one of those psychic moments at which two people think the same thing. Joan pointed one of her spidery fingers, "Wouldn't this be better," she asked, "if it were less about me? And more about them?" Next day, she inserted the blazing admonishment with which the play opens."

This happened on December 30, 2003. That may seem a while ago, but it won't when it happens to you.

And it will happen to you. The details will be different, but it will happen to you.

That's what I'm here to tell you.

You see me on this stage, you sit next to me on a plane, you run into me at dinner, you know what happened to me.

You don't want to think it could happen to you.

"At a stroke, the play was turned from reminiscence into Lehrstück. By coming to the theatre, we could all begin to prepare ourselves for events that we hope to avoid but cannot. What had been a spectacle now became a warning. An inward-looking play turned out. From then on, it flew."

ACT's Production

"Grief comes in waves, paroxysms, sudden apprehensions that weaken the knees and blind the eyes." – Joan Didion

The image of water, beaches, and the ocean are used in *The Year of Magical Thinking* to describe the overwhelming feeling of grief that is both constant and fluid in Didion's life.



The ocean is also used to recall more joyous memories of Joan and Quintana throughout the play and serves as a reminder of her need to let go and ride the waves, to "go with the change."



Set designer Catherine Cornell has incorporated the feeling of the peaceful California coastline to invite the audience to also feel the pull and power of the waves.

The Year of Magical Thinking Team



Constanza Romero, Suzanne Bouchard, Victor Pappas, Catherine Cornell, and Rey Zane.
Costume Designer Actor Director Scenic Designer Director

The first table rehearsal for The Year of Magical Thinking



DEATH AND GRIEVING

Kübler-Ross

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, a Swiss-born American psychiatrist, pioneered the concept of providing psychological counseling to the dying. Within the medical community the topic of death had previously been avoided by many physicians who preferred to focus on patients' recovery rather than their death, even as their end of life was obvious and imminent, at times withholding from patients that their life was ending all together. In her first book, *On Death and Dying* (published in 1969), Kübler-Ross described five stages she believed were experienced by those nearing death—denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Kübler-Ross book quickly became a standard text for professionals working with terminally ill patients.



This model further developed to address the grief of those who have lost a loved one, as they seemed to follow a similar pattern in their experience of death and dying. While it is mostly commonly understood now that the five stages are not linear, one may find themselves re-experiencing certain stages or spending long periods of time in one stage but not the other, the framework that Kübler-Ross created has allowed for a more open dialogue about death and developed an emphasis on counseling for those who are experiencing grief of any kind.

In brief the stages are as follows:

Denial: The grieving person goes into shock, feels numb, and may struggle to accept the reality of the loss.

Anger: The grieving person becomes angry with himself or herself, with the person who was lost, or with others who are perceived as perhaps not understanding the magnitude of the loss.

Bargaining: This stage may also include feelings of guilt. The grieving person may try to negotiate with the universe or with God: "If this person comes back, I will [be a good person, spend more time with them, etc]."

Depression: As the grieving person starts to accept the loss, he or she often slips into a deep sadness and withdraws from life.

Acceptance: The grieving person may still feel grief, but he or she understands the loss and begins to move forward with life.

A grieving person does not necessarily go through these stages in sequential order. In *The Year of Magical Thinking* Joan Didion experiences all five stages. Didion clearly identifies times when she is in denial. She acknowledges she holds Dunne and Quintana responsible, although she is aware it is unreasonable. Didion repeatedly engages in bargaining-type thought processes (hoping to "fix" Dunne's death, for example), and she describes a level of withdrawal from the world that is entirely consistent with depression. By the end of the book she is attempting to move forward, modeling acceptance.

The Order of the Good Death

The Year of Magical Thinking is considered to be one of the first texts to dig into the experience of grief, of living with the reality of death, from a completely non-religious standpoint. With her background in journalism Didion dissects and examines, with remarkable detail, the journey of accepting the death of her husband and later her daughter. She uses medical textbooks, memories, and her love of writing to explore to her grief, but she never reaches for a higher power or belief in an afterlife to comfort her. With exquisite control and heart-breaking honesty, she walks us through the absurd nature of life. Didion's book was so widely adored because it was an offering to those who experience grief and death, which as we come to find, is all of us.

The Year of Magical Thinking remains one of the seminal texts on death and dying, and it has inspired some of the modern-day death positive movement, which invites more open, honest, and frequent conversations about death in our culture.

In January of 2011 Caitlin Doughty, a mortician located in California, created The Order of the Good Death. The Order is about making death a part of your life. Staring down your death fears—whether it be your own death, the death of those you love, the pain of dying, the afterlife (or lack thereof), grief, corpses, bodily decomposition, or all of the above. Accepting that death itself is natural, but the death anxiety of modern culture is not. Through blogs and videos, online resources, and policy advocacy, Doughty has created what she calls “A Death Revolution.” Learn more about The Order of the Good Death [here](#).

For more information and further learning

JOAN DIDION: SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Political Fictions (2001)

The Last Thing He Wanted (1996)

After Henry (1992)

Miami (1987)

Democracy: A Novel (1984)

Salvador (1983)

The White Album (1979)

A Book of Common Prayer (1977)

Play It as It Lays (1970)

Slouching Towards Bethlehem (1968)

Run River (1963)

About Joan Didion

Her lifetime achievements in writing

How she became a legend

Her Intoxicating allure

The Netflix special *The Center Will Not Hold*, about her life and legacy

About The Year of Magical Thinking

The lasting impact of the book

The process of developing the book into a play

The Modern Death Movement

Nora McNerny (of the “Hot Young Widows Club” and the “Terrible, Thanks for Asking” podcast) on how we move forward from grief

Michael Hebb’s revolutionary passion for discussing Death over Dinner

The WeCroak app that reminds you five times a day that you will die.

Mortician and death expert Caitlin Doughtey’s online community for the open and honest discussions about death