

A COOL CUSTOMER

Joan Didion's
The Year of Magical Thinking

Jacob Bacharach



FICTION ADVOCATE

New York • San Francisco • Providence

A Fiction Advocate Book

A Cool Customer:

Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking*

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CHAPTER 1

MAGICAL THINKING

The hardest part of writing about Didion is trying not to sound like her. Right now, I am trying to reconstruct the date and time—the moment—when I first read *The Year of Magical Thinking*. I am having trouble, and the uncertainty of the reconstruction is making me sound in my own ear like Joan Didion. I am reading through the correspondence I sent at the time—for example, emails to an ex-boyfriend with whom I was unadvisedly getting back together. I had remembered being single when I first read *The Year of Magical Thinking*, but there is the evidence in my inbox; there he is, calling me “honey” in a note about picking something up for him at the store. There are also, in those emails, that certain frisson between two people about to make the same mistake all over again. I am reading through other emails to my friend Heather,

who was at the time a curator at the Albright–Knox Gallery in Buffalo, New York, to see if I can find some mention of the visit I made in what must have been the late fall or early winter of 2009. *The Year of Magical Thinking* came out in 2005, but I was never an especially timely reader. Now that I'm a writer, a novelist, I'm critical of this part of my character; I should be better about reading books when they first appear. But with *The Year of Magical Thinking*, I waited. And the thing is, I didn't even start by reading it. I started by listening to it, or the first few hours of it anyway, on a drive from Pittsburgh to Buffalo to visit my friend Heather the year my younger brother died.

So for me, the act of reviewing this book by Joan Didion, perhaps her most celebrated in a long and generally celebrated writing life, is not just an effort to avoid the sort of pastiche that a decent writer tries to avoid when writing about a much better one. It is also a project of autobiography, one step farther along the dangerous path of authorial imitation, because my first encounters with the book that is the subject of this long review so closely correspond with a period in my life in which I, too, was engaged in some deep pretending, imagining that, among other things, there might be some kind of cure for what I felt.

I must have been just barely out of Pittsburgh when I got to this passage: “He’s dead, isn’t he?” I heard myself say to the doctor. The doctor looked at the social worker. ‘It’s okay,’ the social worker said. ‘She’s a pretty cool customer.’” I’d thought of myself as a pretty cool customer, too. I’d only cried once, really, in secret so my mother wouldn’t see or hear me, when I was in the basement of my parents’ house in Uniontown writing my brother’s obituary, which neither my mother nor my father could bear to do.

“The question of self-pity,” Didion wrote. They were among “the first words I wrote after it happened.” But it isn’t quite true; that isn’t quite the question. She is, as she’d said in *Where I Was From*, coming at it “obliquely.” The question is how to understand, amid the universality of death and sickness, the incredible peculiarity of *each* death and *each* sickness, and how then to reconstruct a general model of grief from the terrible and unrepeatable particulars. I intend to try to understand how *The Year of Magical Thinking* builds that model. There is a scene in the book, a memory, where John Gregory Dunne, Didion’s now late husband, stands in a swimming pool rereading *Sophie’s Choice* to figure out “how it worked.” I intend to reread *The Year of Magical Thinking* to figure out how it works.

CHAPTER 2

SADNESS AND HAPPINESS

*That they have no earthly measure
is well known—the surprise is
how often it becomes impossible
to tell one from the other in memory...*

—ROBERT PINSKY, “Sadness And Happiness”

I came to appreciate Joan Didion because I found a person who was very much like me, although that idea is superficially absurd. Didion isn't quite of my grandparents' generation, but she's very much of the generation preceding my parents'; they were only fifteen when *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* came out. She's a slight, painfully shy, lapsed Episcopalian Californian of pioneer stock, and I'm a loud, gangly Easterner (or Midwesterner—wherever you want to place Pittsburgh, which is neither exactly the one

nor the other) just a few generations down the line from a bunch of Ukrainian Jewish and Italian Catholic immigrants. I found, nevertheless, a reflection in her habits of skepticism, in the way she came at the proper opinions that people of good backgrounds and good education are supposed to hold, in the way this famously shy woman unashamedly made herself, like Montaigne, the subject matter of her own books, whatever their ostensible topics. I found someone who seemed at once conservative and anarchic in her ideological affiliations. I found a “cool customer.”

But the truth is complicated. I had actively avoided *The Year of Magical Thinking*. I was in my twenties then. The Didion I wanted to read was writing slim conspiracy novels about Iran-Contra. She was writing about how Reagan compared the presidency to a day on a movie set. She was being mean to Bob Woodward. She was skewering the self-involvement and grandiosity and delusions of her and my parents' generations, who had, in the intervening years leading to my own new adulthood, really royally fucked everything up for the rest of us: bequeathed to us a dry-drunk Bush *films* and Dick Cheney and climate change and the Iraq War and student debt and Enron and the mujahideen and the Saudis who destroyed the World Trade Center.

I wasn't especially interested in grief, and I wasn't especially interested in reading the memoir of an old woman who'd lost her husband. It seemed like the sort of book for your mother's book club.

There's an irony in this, because one of the repeated observations of *The Year of Magical Thinking* is the way that our image of ourselves and our image of the others in our lives become fixed, how jarring it is when, through force of circumstance, we're forced to look at how far the present reality has drifted from the fixed reference point of the past. Didion's daughter, Quintana Roo, is always a girl, barefoot, in a dress—even when she gets married, she remains in a sense that girl—until suddenly she is not: cracked, swollen, intubated in an induced coma in this hospital or that. Didion writes:

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. This year for the first time since I was twenty-nine I saw myself through the eyes of others. This year for the first time since I was twenty-nine I realized that my image of myself was of someone significantly younger. This year I realized that one reason I was so often sideswiped by memories of Quintana at