'Everything can change in a moment'

Joan Didion examines her grief in 'Year of Magical Thinking'

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NEW YORK (AP) -- Like the novels and essays that made her famous, Joan Didion is sad-eyed, even-voiced and pared to the bone, as if all excess had been burned off by her deep and doubting mind.

The author of "Slouching Towards Bethlehem," "Play It as It Lays" and other acclaimed books has always looked like someone for whom life was harder than expected, a weary soul endlessly under trial, but her burden has never been greater than over the past couple of years.

She need not leave home to be reminded.

The 70-year-old Didion sat for a recent interview in the same room, the living room, where her husband and writing partner, John Gregory Dunne, collapsed and died in 2003 of a heart attack. Their daughter, Quintana, was hospitalized at the time with pneumonia and septic shock.

It is all recorded, indelibly, in her new and most personal work, "The Year of Magical Thinking." Famous for her dissections of cultural matters ranging from hippies and politics to the kidnapping of Patty Hearst, Didion has now assembled a narrative out of the chaos of her own grief.

"You know what was odd about the book?" she says during the interview, wearing a long, cream-colored blouse and purple slacks, leaning forward in a small, wicker-backed armchair. "I didn't think of it as writing. I didn't think of it as written ... until I saw the copy-edited version."

"We tell ourselves stories in order to live," Didion wrote in her essay collection, "The White Album." But this story was at first untellable. For months, she wrote nothing. After agreeing to cover the 2004 Democratic National Convention, as an assignment for The New York Review of Books, she found herself in tears on the floor of Boston's Fleet Center and fled in panic, unable to console herself by pretending she was acting in a Hitchcock movie.

But once she could concentrate, she worked quickly. Her book about Dunne was a race against the deadline of her own emotions, she says. She finished it over the last three months of 2004, so as not lose a sense of "rawness."

"There was nothing between me and the page," she says.

Her risk has apparently triumphed. Reviewers have been deeply moved, with The New York Times' Michiko Kakutani

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BY JOAN DIDION

- "Slouching Towards Bethlehem" (1968)
- "Play It As It Lays" (1970)
- "A Book of Common Prayer" (1977)
- "The White Album" (1979)
- "Salvador" (1983)
- "Democracy" (1984)
- "Miami" (1987)
- "After Henry" (1992)
calling it "an utterly shattering book" and The Washington Post's Jonathan Yardley praising its "surpassing clarity and honesty." Within days of publication, Alfred A. Knopf reprinted "Magical Thinking" five times, for a total of 100,000 copies.

"On the first day it went on sale, it seemed like every third person who came into the store was buying her book," says Toby Cox, owner of the Three Lives & Company bookstore in New York.

'Don't do that'

"The Year of Magical Thinking" begins with the death itself, a December night when Dunne was in a living room chair by the fire, drinking Scotch, while Didion was preparing dinner. The two were discussing Scotch, or World War I -- Didion doesn't remember -- when he suddenly fell silent and slumped in his chair.

"At first I thought he was making a failed joke," she writes. "I remember saying, 'Don't do that.'"

She writes of dialing the emergency number she always thought she'd use for a neighbor in distress, not for herself, and learning as she entered the hospital that she had been assigned a social worker, an omen of Dunne's fate. Inside, she recalls asking if her husband has died, and hearing the social worker assure the doctor, "It's OK. She's a pretty cool customer."

She not only endured grief, but researched it. She read medical works, poetry, C.S. Lewis and Thomas Mann. In her book, she quotes Emily Post on the etiquette of funerals: "No one should ever be forced upon those in grief, and all over-emotional people, no matter how near and dear, should be barred absolutely."

And her own grief taught her how little understood it was.

"We have kind of evolved into a society where grieving is totally hidden. It doesn't take place in our family. It takes place not at all," she says.

"I remember a friend, whose wife had died, telling me to his surprise that six months seemed to be the official mourning period in New York. After six months, he started getting calls from the wife's friends, trying to invite him to dinner so he could meet someone."

She structured her story by giving it no structure. She wanted to show how the mind works in grief, and through grief. Obsessively, she circled back to that fatal moment, looking for signs, imagining a different ending, believing her husband could somehow return, a symptom of her "magical thinking."

She acknowledges that at times she was like a conspiracy theorist watching the Zapruder film of President Kennedy's assassination.

"It's the idea that everything can change in a moment," she says. "When you look at the film of Kennedy, there's this drama in the story. There's the king. There's the pretty young queen and there's her pink suit. And we know what's going to happen."

Good for each other

Didion has lived in this apartment just off Madison Avenue since she and Dunne moved from California in the late 1980s. Her home is spacious, white-walled and rich in details: family photographs on shelves and walls; works of abstract art, in splotches and geometric patterns; a row of glass kerosene lamps in the living room window, holdovers from the days of blackouts in California.

Born in 1934 in Sacramento, California, Didion was fascinated by books and writing from an early age and was especially
impressed by the prose of Ernest Hemingway, whose tense rhythms anticipated her own. She and Dunne met at a dinner party in the late 1950s, and were close friends ("we amused each other") before becoming romantically involved and marrying, in 1964. Two years later, they adopted a baby girl, Quintana Roo.

Author couples are notoriously combustible, whether the drunken brawl of Lillian Hellman and Dashiell Hammett or the infidelity and suicidal demons of Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath. But despite their own conflicts, Didion says she and Dunne grew and endured, never seeing each other as competitors.

"Whatever troubles we had were not derived from being writers. What was good for one was good for the other," she says.

Collaborators on "A Star Is Born," "Up Close and Personal" and other screenplays, Didion and Dunne were as one in the public's mind, but their books were easy to tell apart. Dunne's trademarks were the emotion and Irish fatalism of "True Confessions" and "Harp." Didion was cooler, a voice of detached pessimism, treating accepted truths as so much drapery to be parted.

"They understood who they were individually and they understood who they were as a couple," says author David Halberstam, a longtime friend whose many books include "The Best and the Brightest" and the upcoming "The Education of a Coach."

"They were marvelously locked in together. For my wife and myself, among the most cherished times were the four-person dinners, because you got these extraordinary intellectuals who were enormously respectful of each other."

Didion thinks of "The Year of Magical Thinking" as a testament of a specific time; tragically, the memoir has already dated. Their daughter, Quintana, died last summer at age 39 of acute pancreatitis. "Lunchtime. June 14," Didion says plainly during the interview, remembering the day she fell fatally ill.

She has no plans to update her book and, though still grieving for Quintana, will tour throughout the fall.

But she has not decided what to write about next.

"I'll think about it on the road," she says.

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