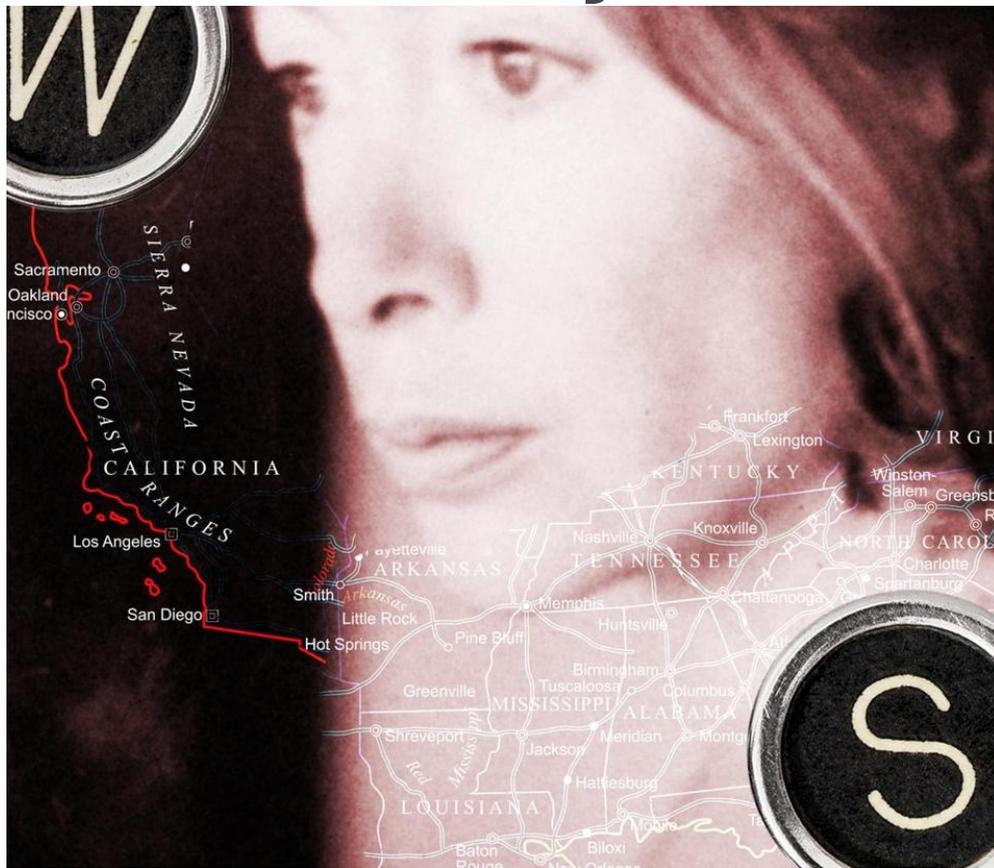


BOOK REVIEW

# In the South and in California, unmistakably Didion



DIDION FROM GETTY IMAGES; GREG KLEE/GLOBE STAFF PHOTO ILLUSTRATION

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Most writers have at least one piece that refuses to let itself be written. It can be consoling to know this happens to the best — for example, to Joan Didion, who in 1970 set out to write about the South, and failed.

“South and West” contains her notes, essentially a draft, on the project, along with a dozen pages on her home state of California. The latter were written in 1976, when Didion was assigned to report on the Patty Hearst trial for Rolling Stone but could not find her way into the story.

Some readers will doubt these materials add up to a book. But one line of Didion is worth 10 from almost any other writer. Now that Didion is in her 80s, admirers will appreciate the chance to fall, once more, under the spell of her prose.

The voice here is classic Didion: intimate, yet preternaturally detached, as though her matchless ear bears witness from the beyond. In Biloxi, Miss., at a broadcasters’ convention, she joins a group of women for brunch. Declining another’s invitation to visit, one says: “We’ll never get up there . . . I never been anyplace I wanted to go.”

Didion has come south for inchoate reasons. Nothing of particular interest has happened in the slivers of

Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama that make up her improvised itinerary.

But a lot has happened to Didion. The 1968 publication of her first essay collection, "Slouching Towards Bethlehem," has turned her into the bard of '60s anomie. Her novel "Play It As It Lays" would shortly seal the deal, helping to turn California into the era's most serviceable emblem. Born in 1934, Didion sprang from what has been called Sacramento landed gentry. She grew into a brainy ingenue who, after college at the University of California in Berkeley, moved to New York. She established herself in magazine journalism and published a first novel, "Run River," before returning, in 1964, to California.

In her search for a new subject, Didion muses that the South (and not, after all, California) is perhaps the nation's true "psychic center." Setting out in June, she is immediately engaged by the sultry climate. In New Orleans, she notes, "All motion slows into choreography, all people on the street move as if suspended in a precarious emulsion . . ."

Up close however, the people regard her as the outsider she is. As she travels from one steamy locale to another, she registers a polite distancing. Her sense of the South as

a feudal society offers solid narrative potential. But her meticulous observations are destined to lie fallow.

In the early 1940s, when she was still a child in California, military duty took Didion's father to Durham, N.C. The little girl's tearful pining may well have occasioned her first visit to the South: With Joan and her brother in tow, her mother embarked on a cross-country train trip.

The Didions were allowed to visit the base only on Thursdays. In the meantime they stayed with a "lay minister" who brought peach ice cream to his wife and children in the evenings (but not, we infer, to the Didions). They did, however, lend Joan a set of "Gone with the Wind" paper dolls to help pass the time.

Didion alludes in these memories to her father's "tension" and "aggressive privacy," but otherwise he is a remote figure.

Casting about for a foothold in the present, Didion is gradually defeated. She avoids making the contacts she knows she should make and languishes beside hotel pools. Always, she is tempted to flee.

Still, one evening, she is captivated by the sight of a child on a swing. "To be a white middle-class child in a small southern town" she writes, "must be on certain levels the most golden way for a child to live in the United States."

Didion returned to California after a month. She and husband John Gregory Dunne would move the next year to a house near Malibu and step up their fruitful collaboration as screenwriters. Didion would also continue to practice journalism and publish several more books.

It took 27 years for the peach ice cream and the paper dolls to find their rightful place — in a book not about the South, but about California. Both appear in Didion's 2003 reassessment of her origins, "Where I Was From." But now there is this difference: the paper dolls, Didion writes, were "off limits to me."

Memory notoriously plays tricks, but a shaping power such as Didion's admits few accidents. She had discovered a region impervious to her creative drive. Still, her inability to make much of the South exemplified one of her most persistent themes: In every place and time, reality constantly gives us the slip.

It would be wrong to declare California Didion's only subject. She has written about El Salvador, Miami, and American politics. In 1991, for *The New York Review of Books*, she wrote with devastating skepticism (presciently, it turned out) about the arrests in the Central Park jogging case. Two recent books, "The Year of Magical Thinking" (2005) and "Blue Nights" (2011), took on the successive deaths of her husband and her only child, Quintana Roo. Both were bestsellers.

But California animates her like nothing else, refracting her consciousness wherever she touches down. In "California Notes," part II of "South and West," she writes: the West "is simply what looks right . . . I am easy here in a way that I am not easy in other places."

Small wonder she was struck by the image of a Southern child on a swing. She had come seeking a child all along, but a child inescapably of the Golden State.

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