

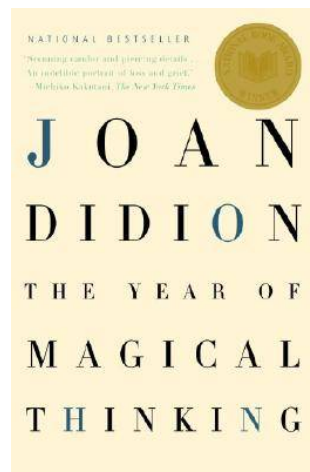


## WHAT REREADING THE YEAR OF MAGICAL THINKING TAUGHT ME ABOUT GRIEF AND LOVE



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The first time I tried getting into Joan Didion I was 17.



It was summer and life seemed *bleak*. Perhaps my state of mind explains my choice of book. Instead of gravitating toward one of Didion's well-known essay collections, I picked up *The Year of Magical Thinking*, a 2005 memoir about her husband John Gregory Dunne's sudden death by heart attack.

Or, as Didion herself puts it: "You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends."

Even as a teenager I lived in fear of the moments when "life as you know it ends." I counted exits in crowded rooms and imagined malicious shadows on my bedroom walls at night. I acted like the tragedies had already happened. This way, I reasoned, they couldn't catch me off guard. Maybe *The Year of Magical Thinking* would give me the tools I needed to prepare for life's harrowing eventualities.

I remember draping myself across the tan couch in our living room, air conditioner blasting the sticky July heat from my skin as I held the turquoise and cream softcover open in my lap, urging myself to feel serious and literary. But I was just *bored*. Didion's writing style was far more sparse, less descriptive than that of the authors I adored as a teenager. I never thought reading about such profound heartache could leave me feeling so uninspired. I tried imagining myself in Didion's shoes and substituted John for various family members and friends, imaginary love interests. *This isn't how I'd write about grief*, I couldn't help thinking. *Not at all*. I put the book on a shelf in my bedroom and forgot about it.

*The Year of Magical Thinking* came back to me ten years later on another summer day hot and thick as taffy. It sat on a crowded shelf in a used bookstore on Cape Cod, the price etched onto the title page in pencil: \$9. My husband and I had been working our way through Didion's catalog for the past few months. Sometime between *Slouching Toward Bethlehem* and *The White Album* I started to regret giving my copy of *The Year of Magical Thinking* during a particularly ruthless book purge. I paid the \$9.

*The Year of Magical Thinking* was an entirely different book the second time around. I now saw Didion's straightforward descriptions and repeated mantras as poignant, not dull. I no longer regarded her simplicity as a missed opportunity. Instead, I thought *yes, this is how it is*. I'd experienced real loss in the decade since I'd read the book last, and real romantic love. My grandmother died and I got married, all in the same year. Didion's sadness-tinged words about death and commitment rang true for me in a way they hadn't before.

Grief, like marriage, isn't always dramatic. The smallest things remind me of my grandma: fried eggplant, certain smells and words, a particular shade of deep red. The smallest things remind me of my husband: blonde hair, green street signs, that precise fall temperature that's an equal mix of warm and cool air. This is what Didion captures so beautifully in *The Year of Magical Thinking*, and what I didn't understand at 17—how a life accumulates in the small details.

I don't believe you need firsthand experience to *get* a book. Plenty of my favorite novels and memoirs bear no resemblance to my life. But I will always be a rereader. Nothing reflects the gulf between who you were and who you are like art. When I was 17 I thought myself mature enough, old enough, ready enough for *The Year of Magical Thinking*. "Joan Didion" was a name on the Serious Literature Checklist and I chose that book in particular almost as a challenge to myself—read this and prove that you are ready to be an adult. And maybe boredom while reading was the price you paid for reading like a grownup.

But when I returned to the book again, a decade older and hopefully a little wiser, I saw everything I missed the first time.

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#OUR READING LIVES #JOAN DIDION #THE YEAR OF MAGICAL THINKING

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