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Didion, Joan

DAVID W. MADDEN

Joan Didion established her initial literary reputation as an avatar of the "new journalism," and the techniques she developed in her essays, particularly her elliptical, minimalist style, she applied to her fiction. Didion is known for her jaundiced eye, penetrating insights, and general dissatisfaction with the direction of modern American life and politics. She has been labeled a provincialist, existentialist, and arch-conservative, but she is first and foremost her own person, a writer with a distinctive style and vision.

Didion was born on December 5, 1934 in Sacramento, California to Frank and Eduene Didion. After graduating from the University of California, Berkeley in 1956, she moved to New York City and spent the next eight years working at *Vogue* magazine. During that time she wrote her first novel, *Run River* (1963), a chronicle of a disintegrating farm family in the Sacramento valley. The novel is reminiscent of Faulkner in its depiction of an insular world where longstanding traditions give way to a new, more commercial world order. A Southerner, Ryder Channing, is Didion's ironic version of a carpetbagger who arrives to establish real estate dealerships. He seduces, and then abandons, Martha McClellan and later turns his attention to her sister-in-law, Lily. Suicide, financial ruin, and murder follow and destroy the McClellans, who stand as symbols of a rapidly vanishing California.

Her second novel, *Play It As It Lays* (1970), is set in southern California and centers on Maria Wyeth, a minor film actress who suffers an abortion and mental collapse. When she is not aimlessly traveling the freeways, she wanders among lovers and memories that reveal a life of radical

instability. In the preface to her first collection of essays, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (1968), Didion reveals her unifying theme as that of "atomization," her coinage for a society rapidly fragmenting. Conditions of social chaos and disintegration run through her entire canon, in both fiction and non-fiction.

A Book of Common Prayer (1977) further develops the theme of atomization by concentrating on Charlotte Douglas, middle-aged mother of a would-be terrorist who has retired to a fictitious Central American country, where she sadly awaits the daughter who will never arrive. Douglas is another of what one critic has described as Didion's characteristic neurasthenic heroines who suffer disasters and typically participate in their own dissolution. The novel employs one of Didion's most ambitious experiments: it is told by a subjective narrator, Grace, another American expatriate, who does not know Charlotte intimately yet somehow divines her deepest thoughts and emotions.

Democracy (1984) features another female protagonist, Inez Christian Victor, wife of a senator ambitious to be president and lover to a man involved in counterintelligence and political intrigue. As her children drift off into the social unrest of the 1960s and her father is arrested for murder, the protagonist's world disintegrates, and the novel parallels America's misguided adventures in Vietnam. Unlike other Didion heroines, Victor eventually leaves her dysfunctional family with her lover, only to be abandoned when he dies, and she elects to reside in Kuala Lumpur, where she devotes herself to Vietnamese refugees.

Twelve years later, after more freelance journalism and three works of non-fiction, Didion published her fifth novel, *The Last Thing He Wanted* (1996), which deals once more with Central America (Didion had published *Salvador* in 1983, an excoriating view of a corrupt and vicious political regime) and a reporter, Elena McMahon, who abruptly quits her assignment covering the 1984 presidential campaign to visit her ailing father in Florida. The father is another of Didion's shadowy international figures who runs guns to Nicaragua and inveigles his daughter to accompany a shipment to Costa Rica and collect his fee. Soon she is enmeshed in a world of conspiracies, assassinations, and quasi-military

operations. McMahon is a now familiar Didion protagonist; however, the novel has a forced quality and is the least successful of her fictions.

After moving to New York in the late 1980s, Didion returned to native California in *Where I Was From* (2003), a book she had been working on for decades that traces her family ties to the Golden State (some ancestors were among the original Donner Party). Didion mourns, once again, the decay of the place that legends regard as Edenic but that to her is now a locale of greed and exploitation. Two years later, as her daughter lay gravely ill, her husband, the writer John Gregory Dunne, suddenly died of a heart attack. Didion coped with her grief by writing *The Year of Magical Thinking*, a powerful memoir of their extraordinarily close life (the two acted as each other's advisor and were collaborators on many film scripts). The work won a National Book Award in 2005.

Didion has generated mixed reviews from critics and scholars, but has also enjoyed considerable notoriety and honors. In addition to awards, she has been recognized with the Gold Medal, Belles Lettres and Criticism, by the American Academy of Arts and Letters in honor of her distinguished writing career (2005), and a National Book Award medal for her Distinguished Contribution to American Letters in 2007.

SEE ALSO: Faulkner, William (AF);
Historiographic Metafiction (AF);
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Dixon, Stephen

PATRICK O'DONNELL

Even though he did not publish his first volume of stories until he was 40, Stephen Dixon (b. 1936) is the prolific author of 14 novels and 13 collections of short stories; has been twice nominated for National Book Award; and is the recipient of Guggenheim Fellowship, three O. Henry Award and an American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters Prize for Fiction. Despite that he is not as well-known as comparable contemporary writers such as Grace Paley and Donald Barthelme, perhaps because much of his work requires readers invested in the complexities of Dixon's intricate monologues, often going on for hundreds of pages without breaks, as well as in the ironies and mordant humor of his work.

Dixon was born in New York City and graduated from the City College of New York in 1955 after several years spent as a radio reporter. He entered the creative writing program at Stanford University. Before becoming a teacher of creative writing, he served in a number of occupations (bartender, technical writer, artist's model, department store salesman, bus driver, and cab driver) that inform his work, especially its evocative patois and habits of speech. Dixon married the noted translator, Anne Frydman, and began