

or not – reflects the wider concerns of the society and the times within which they write. Other famous men and women might be examined in the same way with great benefit.

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A POETRY OF THE MUNDANE

The year of magical thinking. Joan Didion, 2005. London: Fourth Estate; ISBN 000721684X, 227 pp., £12.99, paper.

This is a fluid and moving book about the sudden death of the writer Joan Didion's partner of 40 years, John Gregory Dunne, aged 71, who was also a writer. It is also about her attempt 'to make sense of the period that followed, weeks and then months that cut loose any fixed idea I had ever had about death, about illness, about probability and luck, about good fortune and bad, about marriage and children and memory, about grief, about the ways in which people do and do not deal with the fact that life ends, about the shallowness of sanity, about life itself' (p. 7). This happened as they were both coping with the re-occurrence of a life-threatening illness of their adopted daughter Quintana Roo Michael, which eventually caused her death at the age of 39. A tragic episode for Didion in what might otherwise be considered an enormously productive and satisfying life.

The elegance of the prose is unmistakable, as is the ability to write poetically about mundane events. For though painful, what could be more mundane than facing the death and illness of loved ones? It is a certainly something that Didion must have expected in the case of her husband since he had over a decade's medical history of heart disease (labelled by a doctor 'the widowmaker'), and had a pacemaker implanted only six months before his death. The response of Didion is to go into denial and the 'magical thinking' refers to her reluctance to accept that he will not return. The achievement of the book is that a seemingly transparent narrative plus the strategic employment of bits of factual information (on heart disease, psychological theories of grief and so on), together convince the reader that this is how it really happened and this is how it really is.

Didion herself promises truthfulness – 'The way I write is who I am' – and this promise is reiterated over and over again, by Didion herself in her manner of telling, and by reviewers on the back cover who draw attention to her 'desperate honesty' (Colm Tóibín), and her precision which is 'as a diamond drilled bit' (Nick Laird). Truthfulness in autobiography was also

promised by the professional Victorian writer, Harriet Martineau, who has been an object of fascination for me for over 20 years. I was sceptical of her claims and have to admit scepticism about Didion's, despite (or because of) the evident quality of the writing.

Thus, what I am interested in exploring in this review is the notion of autobiographical truthfulness, and to what extent the reader can be sure that the text is as truthful as it seems. In particular, I am interested in those questions when it comes to the texts of successful professional writers. Professional writers learn and employ the tricks of the trade. Didion, for example, keeps back certain important information, perhaps to retain a sense of drama. Only on p. 157 do we hear about Dunne's medical history, and we are never told that Dunne's father was a renowned heart surgeon. As another reviewer of the book surmises (Dickinson, 2005), what else isn't she telling us?

Rather than attack the person, however, I want to suggest that honed writing skills might actually be a disadvantage in autobiographical writing. For example, it could be argued that the less skilled the writer, the more raw and 'authentic' his or her text might be. Hannah Cullwick, a 'maid of all work' who wrote a diary for her upper-class husband in the late nineteenth century, certainly produced texts that persuade (see Stanley, 1984), as does a short personal memoir written in 1963 which recently appeared among my family papers (Hamilton, 1963). However, for me, Joan Didion, like Harriet Martineau, knows her audience and market perhaps a little too well, and there is a sense that she is able to manipulate her readership a little too easily. She certainly knows her stuff in terms of shifts in mood, level of emotional engagement and even the appropriate length of book and chapters. She knows where to tug the heartstrings and where to limit the pathos. Less experienced writers might struggle more to find the words that best express what they went through, but suggest more credibility because of their inability to smooth out the fissures and inconsistencies. Thus, autobiography perhaps might be a form of writing (perhaps the only form) where to know less is better than to know more.

The Year of Magical Thinking is not just a memoir about bereavement, however. It also offers a gripping, page-turning narrative about a year of high drama and terrible grief: and an almost voyeuristic insight into the lives of American writers and intellectuals: their manner of living, working and even dying. It offers a poetry of the mundane which, in its very lucidity and clarity, provides a glimpse of the art (or artifice, the work that it is necessary to do) that lies behind the art of writing. For those interested in autobiography as a craft it is a 'must', though as much for the disquiet it engenders as for the tale itself.

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