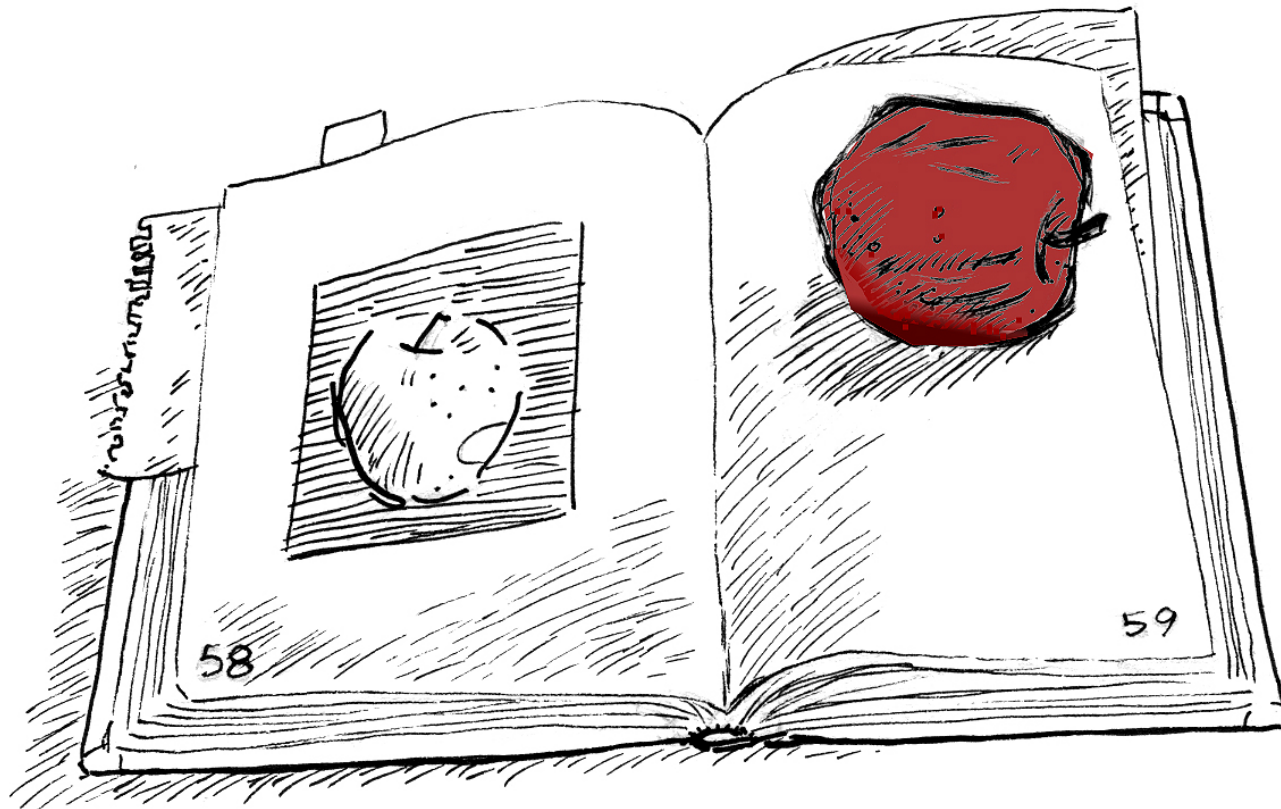


Joan Didion



On Keeping a Notebook

Joan Didion (born December 5, 1934)

Didion is best known for her personalized, painfully-honest, journalistic essays. Oftentimes she discusses themes which center around the sense of an individual seeking resolution or better comprehension of contemporary American culture and its transformation across the decades. Her narrative voice appears often disconnected from the social scenes she often depicts.

- frequent contributor to magazines and literary reviews
- published numerous fictional work
- best known for her non-fictional essays
- her style of writing fits with beliefs of the “New Journalism” approach

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New Journalism

Emerged as a cultural writing form during the Sixties and Seventies and utilized techniques once considered “off limits” for news-reporting.

- acknowledgment of the writer as witness to event
- presence of the writer influences the themes expressed
- heavily influenced by fictional, literary devices— but retained notions of journalistic facts and reporting
- however, it is less objective and more subjective in style
- other examples of this style:

Truman Capote, *In Cold Blood*

Tom Wolfe, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*

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This particular essay blurs between personal diary and essay.

Didion openly comments about a writer's relationship of keeping records of facts and statistics, while at the same time embellishing personal details within her own life through memory

- Critic Janis Stout has called Didion an “interpretive journalist” (“Joan Didion and the Presence of Absence”) in the sense Didion wants to become a part of a given news story in order to better comprehend its significance to the American scene as a whole
- another literary critic, Katherine Usher Anderson, states that the writer sees: herself as “American” as anyone, (and therefore) Didion is constantly testing her own illusions against reality.... Although brought up with the same illusions as many of the people she writes about, Didion, unlike most of them, is ultimately an antiromantic realist (“Joan Didion”).
- What results, she can pass judgment towards America, through herself.

Anderson, Katherine Usher. “Joan Didion.” *Joan Didion*. Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1981. Rpt. in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Ed. Jean C. Stine and Daniel G. Marowski. Vol. 32. Detroit: Gale Research, 1985. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 24 Jan. 2011.

Stout, Janis P. “Joan Didion and the Presence of Absence.” *The Critical Response to Joan Didion*. Ed. Sharon Felton. Greenwood Press, 1994. 147-187. Rpt. in *Novels for Students*. Ed. Diane Telgen and Kevin Hile. Vol. 3. Detroit: Gale, 1998. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 24 Jan. 2011.

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Read paragraphs 1 - 5

Judging from what we have covered already, how does a reader know this is not an academic essay?

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Didion's main purpose here is to answer the question "Why keep a notebook?"—and in the same manner she defends her own meandering writing style within her random collection of notes.

- The opening literary technique she uses is called *in medias res*.
In Latin, the phrase means "in the middle of things," which relates to the manner of presenting evidence without intense background information.

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Notice, she specifically chooses not to use the traditional journalistic opening.

- Newspaper and magazine writers will use a technique called the inverted pyramid in their opening paragraphs.
- In these cases, *the first sentence* contains the most important information and must answer all of the 5-w's and 1-h.
 - > who
 - > what
 - > when
 - > where
 - > why
 - > how
- The subsequent sentences are less important and can be later cut by the editor, if deemed necessary.

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The *in medias res* approach likewise builds an immediate intimate connection to her readers with a slight shock.

- readers gain an impression Didion is talking directly to them
- very casual, matter-of-fact tone; mirrors her speaking voice
- the reader questions the author's intentions, building curiosity

Paragraph four serves multiple purposes:

- quick litany of questions in conversational manner
- responds with personal histories for answers
- uses information regarding her daughter to contrast against her self
- it *appears* she is wandering off topic, but notice her daughter is a means to intensify the emotional theme regarding Didion's own personality and her own habits of keeping a notebook: what her daughter *is*, Didion *is not*.

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Notice Didion is not defending the use of a journal nor a diary.

Read paragraph six.

- Her specific form of justification excludes these forms of expression.
- Her notebook work is not for biographical records.
- These are a list of memories which could come into use at a later date.
- Another way of putting it, the accuracy of the memory is not important; rather she wants to connect to the past with creative words and phrases.
- Within her notebooks she does not seek out factual or formal records, instead these notes are a record of her thought process, a form of free-writing. These are building blocks towards something greater.

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Compare this essay with the entry from Sei Shōnagon

How are these two writers utilizing similar approaches?

Do they each have the same goals in mind?

Read paragraph eleven.

Why do you think she refers to the the pronoun “I” as implacable?

What does implacable mean?

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With this in mind, she creates a new level of psychological awareness to her work.

The “self,” the inner voice of the conscious self is very critical. A writer’s worse enemy is the inner editor.

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In this section therefore, Didion shifts to a secondary theme of a writer seeking self-acceptance.

- The writer defends her own work because she is placating her own critical nature towards her own work.
- Likewise she seems to be defending *to herself* why she keeps a notebook, as well as the reader.
- She eventually accepts the fact she may never remember the full details of some of her entries. Whereas sometimes, full memory is restored through close scrutiny of the past.

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Paragraph fifteen:

Here Didion shows the process for re-discovering her original intentions for keeping notes. Notice her strategy:

- paragraph fourteen and fifteen seem to ramble about personal life, reflecting on personal moments
- as she writes the essay she *appears* to be remembering the point behind the notes; her casual tone however reinforces her theme of memory in a strong strategy by demonstrating the process of remembering the past, as if the memory just happened, at the point of her writing the moment down
- subsequently she effectively reverses the traditional narrative sequence by providing in paragraph sixteen the declaration of the process, rather than placing it first.

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Read last paragraph on page.

What does she resolve about notebooks in this section?

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Didion's strongest skill is the art of observation, of being a witness. The essay's full material works towards the defense of keeping a *seemingly* random collection of writing for one's own sense of self worth. It offers a sense of security, of safety.

- She does not feel *safer*, just safe.

Through a public voice, Didion defends her private observations and opinions.

The closing phrase acknowledges the fact that memories themselves serve a limited function; she does not want a sentimental ending. Rather, realistically she closes with the future possibility of self-analysis.

- The essay explains the notebook entry, not the recollection itself.

That act would have to be another essay, another subject.

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A concluding point to consider:

Who is her audience in this case?

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Because she is using a technique which is called a “personal memory narrative” aside from talking to the average reader, she is also talking to herself.

- Her private thoughts are communicated to herself *and then* to the reader

One of her main points after all is the accuracy in memory.

She questions herself whether her memory is accurate or essential to her career as a writer.