



BY JOAN DIDION BASED ON HER MEMOIR

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This study guide is researched and designed by the Education Department at the Milwaukee Repertory Theater and is intended to prepare you for your visit. It contains information that will deepen your understanding of, and appreciation for, the production. We've also included questions and activities for you to explore before and after our performance of **THE YEAR OF MAGICAL THINKING.**

Synopsis by Zoe Cohen

Following the unexpected death of her husband, Joan Didion attempts to make sense of a world in which such things can and do happen. Complicating matters, and adding further devastation, is the unfathomable illness and sudden death of her adult daughter about a year later. In this adaptation of her bestselling book, Didion takes the audience on a journey through her own personal grieving process, telling her story with humor, compassion and poignancy.

***“Life changes fast.
Life changes in the
instant.”***

***You sit down to
dinner and life as
you know it ends.”***

About the Author

Joan Didion was born in Sacramento, California on December 5, 1934. Born into a military family that moved often, Didion did not attend school regularly until she was ten years old. A shy child, she wrote things down as early as the age of five and read constantly. The frequent moves, along with love of books caused Didion to consider herself an outsider. These formative childhood experiences inspired Didion’s 2003 book, *Where I Was From*.

In 1956, Didion graduated from the University of California, Berkeley with a Bachelor of Arts degree in English. Her first job as a promotional copywriter at *Vogue* magazine began her career as a writer. She worked there for eight years and wrote her first novel, *Run, River* during this time as well. After her time at *Vogue*, she and her husband moved back to California where they adopted a daughter. Together Joan and her husband wrote several screenplays, including an adaptation of her novel *Play it as it Lays* and *Up Close & Personal*.



After her husband’s sudden death in 2003, Didion began writing *The Year of Magical Thinking*. In it, she examined her own personal grieving process, including “magical thinking” as a coping mechanism. She also included notes from her daughter’s hospitalization in the book. She began writing on October 4, 2004 and finished the book 88 days later, only one year and one day after her husband’s death. The book received instant critical acclaim and in 2005, received the National Book Award. Tragedy struck Didion again when her daughter died during the promotion of the book. In 2007 Didion began working on an adaptation of the book into a one-woman show.

Have you ever experienced a time where you have done some magical thinking? Jot down your ideas and then in small groups, share your stories with each other. Do you think that magical thinking is an effective way of coping? Why or why not?

Magical thinking is a subject often touched upon in anthropology, psychology and cognitive science.

It is defined as the ability to change the physical world using only the mind. It is often referred to as “if thinking.” In the play, Didion tries to reverse her husband’s death by thinking to herself that it didn’t happen and that he will come home. For example she says, “If we sacrifice the virgin-- the rain will come back. If I keep his shoes--” [he will come back].

Dealing With Grief

In *THE YEAR OF MAGICAL THINKING*, Didion must deal with the death of her husband and the impending death of her daughter. This process is often referred to as the grieving process. Grief is a complex response to a loss, be it the loss of a job, a possession, a sense of safety, other possessions or a loved one. When you are grieving it is typical to feel anxious, sadness, despair, loneliness or even disbelief. Not only does grief cause an emotional response, but it can also cause physical, behavioral and social responses. You may become weak and tired. You may become angry towards others or you may isolate yourself. These are all common reactions, although responses to a loss vary widely.

Studies have shown that there are typically five stages to dealing with grief. They are:

- Denial (This isn't happening...)
- Anger (Why is this happening...)
- Bargaining (I promise)
- Depression (I don't care)
- Acceptance (I'm ready)

Not everyone may experience every stage or go through the stages in the same order or at the same rate. Grief is as individual as those who experience it. There is no set time period for grieving, it may take days or months. The trick is to understand that feelings occur and you need to take them day by day.

What stage of grief does magical thinking fit into? Why?

After seeing the show, do you think that Didion went through all five stages of grief? In small groups, discuss how she grieved for her husband. If she entered any of the stages, how did she deal with them?

What other emotions did Didion experience?

By yourself, write about a loss that you or someone you know has experienced. What was the experience like? Were the five stages of grief present and if so, how?

Nonlinear Storytelling by Zoe Cohen

All stories have a beginning, middle and an end. They do not, however, always appear in that order. When a storyteller starts their tale at the beginning, and proceeds to relate things in the order that they really happened, this is called a **linear** narrative. On the other hand, Joan Didion, both the author of, and the storyteller in *THE YEAR OF MAGICAL THINKING*, jumps around in the telling of her story, beginning in the middle, moving backward and forward in time as she goes. This is a **nonlinear** way of telling a story.

While this may seem like a confusing way to tell a story, nonlinear methods of storytelling are used more often than you might think. For example, you are probably familiar with the flashback, often used in television and film as a way to fill the viewer in on some information from the past. The flashback is also the most prominent nonlinear device used in *THE YEAR OF MAGICAL THINKING*. Didion uses flashbacks throughout the play, seamlessly interjecting her memories of the past into the events unfolding around her.

Didion chose to tell her story in a nonlinear fashion for a reason, and the text itself provides some clues. The story has to do with the unexpected deaths of the author's husband and daughter within two years of one another. The nonlinear way the story is told, full of flashbacks and memories, seems then to be a reflection of the grieving process. Perhaps it is meant to show us the thought process of someone in mourning. At times she finds her memories comforting, experiencing them as a safe place she can reside. Lost in a memory of a distant Christmas in Honolulu, she describes this feeling of safety:

I had a sense of well-being so profound that I did not want to go to sleep. Everyone was so safe that I could sit on a balcony overlooking the Waialae Country Club golf course and finish the wine we drank with dinner and watch neighborhood fireworks all over Honolulu. (56-7)

At other times however, memories serve as painful reminders of what has been lost, to be avoided at all costs. At one point she describes the danger posed by memory as something akin to a riptide:

I need to avoid noticing anything that might lead me back into the past.

Going back has trick currents, unrevealed eddies, you can be skimming along on what looks like clear water and suddenly go under.

Get sucked down.

Get caught in the vortex and let go of her hand. (36)

Whether memory is serving as a comfort or a danger, it plays a huge role in *THE YEAR OF MAGICAL THINKING*, and indeed in the grieving process. For this reason, Didion's nonlinear approach, specifically her use of the flashback, serves as an especially effective way to tell her story.

The Book Versus the Script

When Joan Didion decided to adapt her book into a play, she had many difficult decisions to make. Her book, which has 22 chapters, would be too long to act out completely. Didion had to cut out pieces of the novel and re-write in order to create a play that was only an hour and a half long. The next pages will provide an opportunity to compare and contrast part of the second chapter from the book with the corresponding scene from the play.

Excerpt from the Book

I got him a Scotch and gave it to him in the living room, where he was reading in the chair by the fire where he habitually sat.

The book he was reading was by David Fromkin, a bound galley of *Europe's Last Summer: Who Started the Great War in 1914?*

I finished getting dinner, I set the table in the living room where, when we were home alone, we could eat within sight of the fire. I find myself stressing the fire because fires were important to us. I grew up in California, John and I lived there together for twenty-four years, in California we heated our houses by building fires. We built fires even on summer evenings, because the fog came in. Fires said we were home, we had drawn the circle, we were safe through the night. I lit the candles. John asked for a second drink before sitting down. I gave it to him. We sat down. My attention was on mixing the salad.

John was talking, then he wasn't.

At one point in the seconds or minute before he stopped talking he had asked me if I had used single-malt Scotch for his second drink. I had said no, I used the same Scotch I had used for his first drink. "Good," he had said. "I don't know why but I don't think you should mix them." At another point in those seconds or that minute he had been talking about why World War One was the critical event from which the entire rest of the twentieth century flowed.

I have no idea which subject we were on, the Scotch or World War One, at the instant he stopped talking.

I only remember looking up. His left hand was raised and he was slumped motionless. At first I thought he was making a failed joke, an attempt to make the difficulty of the day seem manageable.

I remember saying *Don't do that.*

When he did not respond my first thought was that he had started to eat and choked. I remember trying to lift him far enough from the back of the chair to give him the Heimlich. I remember the sense of his weight as he fell forward, first against the table, then to the floor. In the kitchen by the

telephone I had taped a card with the New York—Presbyterian ambulance numbers. I had not taped the numbers by the telephone because I anticipated a moment like this. I had taped the numbers by the telephone in case someone in the building needed an ambulance.

Someone else.

I called one of the numbers. A dispatcher asked if he was breathing. I said *Just come.* When the paramedics came I tried to tell them what had happened but before I could finish they had transformed the part of the living room where John lay into an emergency department. One of them (there were three, maybe four, even an hour later I could not have said) was talking to the hospital about the electrocardiogram they seemed already to be transmitting. Another was opening the first or second of what would be many syringes for injection. (Epinephrine? Lidocaine? Procainamide? The names came to mind but I had no idea from where.) I remember saying that he might have choked. This was dismissed with a finger swipe: the airway was clear. They seemed now to be using defibrillating paddles, an attempt to restore a rhythm. They got something that could have been a normal heartbeat (or I thought they did, we had all been silent, there was a sharp jump), then lost it, and started again. "He's still fibbing," I remember the one on the telephone saying.

"V-fibbing," John's cardiologist said the next morning when he called from Nantucket. "They would have said 'V-fibbing,' V for ventricular."

Maybe they said "V-fibbing" and maybe they did not. Atrial fibrillation did not immediately or necessarily cause cardiac arrest. Ventricular did. Maybe ventricular was the given.

I remember trying to straighten out in my mind what would happen next. Since there was an ambulance crew in the living room, the next logical step would be going to the hospital. It occurred to me that the crew could decide very suddenly to go to the hospital and I would not be ready. I would not have in hand what I needed to take. I would waste time, get left behind. I found my handbag and a set of keys and a summary John's doctor had made of his medical history. When I got back to the living room the paramedics were watching the

computer monitor they had set up on the floor. I could not see the monitor so I watched their faces. I remember one glancing at the others. When the decision was made to move it happened very fast. I followed them to the elevator and asked if I could go with them. They said they were taking the gurney down first, I could go in the second ambulance. One of them waited with me for the elevator to come back up. By the time he and I got into the second ambulance the ambulance carrying the gurney was pulling away from the front of the building. The distance from our building to the

part of New York–Presbyterian that used to be New York Hospital is six crosstown blocks. I have no memory of sirens. I have no memory of traffic. When we arrived at the emergency entrance to the hospital the gurney was already disappearing into the building. A man was waiting in the driveway. Everyone else in sight was wearing scrubs. He was not. “Is this the wife,” he said to the driver, then turned to me. “I’m your social worker,” he said, and I guess that is when I must have known.

Excerpt from the Script

John was in his office. I got him a drink. He sat down by the fire to read. He was reading a bound galley of David Fromkin’s *Europe’s Last Summer: Who Started the Great War in 1914?* I set the table in the living room, where we could see the fire.

I must have noticed that later. The name of the book. I eventually read it myself, but found no clues.

Wait. I was telling you what happened.

He wanted a second drink. I got it. he asked if I had used single-malt scotch for the second drink. I said I had used whatever I used for the first drink. “Good,” he said. “I don’t know why but I don’t think you should mix them.”

I was at the table, making a salad. He was sitting across from me, talking. Either he was talking about why World War One was the event from which the entire rest of the twentieth century flowed or he was talking about the scotch, I have no idea which.

Then he wasn’t. Wasn’t talking.

I looked up. I said, “Don’t do that.” I thought he was making a joke.

Slumping over. Pretending to be dead. You’ve seen people make that kind of tiresome joke. Maybe you’ve done it yourself. Meaning “this was a hard day, we got through it, we’re having dinner, we’ve got a fire.”

After reading the excerpt from the book and the play, do you think it would be hard to create a play from a book? Why or why not? In small groups discuss the difficulties Didion may have had while tackling this project.

Take a moment in your life and write a monologue to it. What will happen? Will you opt to leave things out? In small groups discuss how you went about creating your monologue. Take some time to rehearse and then perform it for your class.

In fact neither of us had yet said out loud how hard that day had been.

My next thought was the he had started to eat and choked. I tried to move him so I could do the Heimlich.

He fell onto the gable, then to the floor. There was a dark liquid pooling beneath his face.

Within what *I now know* to have been exactly five minutes, two ambulances came. The crews worked on the living room floor for what *I now know* to have been exactly forty-five minutes.

I now know these facts because I obtained the documents. I obtained the Emergency Department Nursing Documentation Sheet. I obtained the Nursing Flow Chart. I obtained the Physician’s Record. I obtained the log kept by the doormen in our building. “Paramedics arrived at 9:20 PM for Mr. Dunne,” the log read. “Mr. Dunne was taken to the hospital at 10:05 PM.”

The distance from our apartment to the ambulance entrance of New York Cornell is six crosstown blocks. I do not remember traffic. I do not remember sirens. When I got out of the ambulance the gurney was already being pushed inside. Everyone was in scrubs. I noticed one man who was not in scrubs. “Is this the wife,” he said to the driver. Then he looked at me. “I’m your social worker.”

And I guess that was when I knew.

An Interview with Elizabeth Norment, Actor

What attracted you to doing this show?

Many things. I love working at The Rep. It's a place where I feel really safe doing this kind of material. I know the people; I've got history. I know I'll be treated well in the adventure of doing this kind of sensitive material. I've worked with John [Sipes, Director] before, so I knew that I would be in really, really good hands. But also, the most important thing, is that I'm always grateful for those opportunities to do a piece of work that helps fulfill my mission as an artist. None of us get in the business to do laxative commercials; we get into the business to do something that will move people and affect people and this is certainly that kind of piece. I feel that many of the good pieces of theater are sort of a preparation for life-- or a rehearsal for life. You're trying to bring people on board with an experience that they haven't had yet or maybe they have had and they need a new way of processing it. So this material is so personal and so rich that I feel it is an opportunity to reach out and have very direct contact with the audience and shake them by the shoulders.

How has it been being the only person in the cast? Is it more or less difficult that working with other cast members?

There's a lot of pluses and minuses about it. In the minus column, the effort of learning the lines is extreme. I spent a month before the first day of rehearsal, my choice, learning the lines. But that's the only way, I feel, that I can achieve the kind of mastery that the piece deserves. Of course the workload is intense: the month of learning lines, the fact that there aren't any rehearsals that I won't be called for and the fact that there isn't the ease of being able to interact with others. I do love that when it [interacting] happens, so of course I missed some of that when doing this show. In the plus column, there is something very pure about doing this. I only have my own work habits to worry about. I don't have to worry about whether my work process is going to be compatible with somebody else's work process because a lot of times you get thrown together with a lot of people you've never even met before and you have to figure out how they work and how to work compatibly with them. And you don't have to share a dressing room. When you're in an environment like this where you're supported and taken care of there is a wonderful sense that every ounce of effort I put into it I know I will be replenished and it will be repaid. I'm confident that through the course of the run I'll be able to stay on track. It's a less complicated process, but it is definitely a lonelier process.

You talked briefly about how you prepared for this play. Is this process different from other plays? How do you prepare for a role?

It really depends on the ratio of my line load. The first play that I ever decided consciously to learn every single line before rehearsal was WIT, which I did here at The Rep, in 2001. I just did the math on it and I thought, well, there's never a scene I'm not in. I'm onstage continuously for an hour and 40 minutes. I will be at every single rehearsal and I don't want to have to go home every single night and pound lines, lines, lines, lines, lines. I want to arrive in a place where without being encumbered by the script. I can begin immediately with the director and experiment and try stuff and be physically free and mentally free. So, starting with WIT, and then with several other pieces, if I have a huge proportion of the lines I just find it more valuable to know them beforehand. But, if it's a more average balance, if I'm in a cast of six or ten people, I wouldn't necessarily do that. In that situation it could be a handicap. When you arrive at the first day of rehearsal you might have already started to hear things in a particular way and expect them to go in that direction. So it's only if I'm doing a solo piece or a piece that has heavy, heavy monologues or a huge proportion of the scenes are lines, that's when I do it beforehand. Normally I do not.



"It's about accepting change. Change is everywhere. The only constant in life is change."

Have you been able to bring anything from your own life and apply it to the show and to your character?

It's all very, very personal stuff. My father died in 1983 and I was at his bedside when he died. There have been other deaths in my family, not quite as immediate, but ones that I felt very deeply the loss of. There have been pets. I'm a huge animal lover and sometimes the loss of any loved creature that you feel total responsibility for, you draw on those things that have such an emotional impact on you that you never really forget them. And I always look at those as opportunities to honor the people or the creatures in those events by taking from memories something that I can, in a sense, reprocess and give to other people as a gesture as our common humanity. We all have experienced these things or will experience these things so I feel that it's a way of completing a circle. By borrowing from the people who've moved on and left me with these memories and then I share them with other people. In a sense it's going back to honor the memory of those who have died. And in the course of us discussing things in rehearsal, lots of other happy memories [have come up]. The way we remember the past sometimes is a very happy thing. I draw heavily on my own life, it's part of my own process as an actor. I don't want to confuse myself with the character, but I certainly borrow things that I think are relevant to the character.

From what you've said, it sounds like this show will be relatable to the audience.

No question asked. It's all very simple. The story is told in a very simple way. I think it will be very accessible in an emotional way to people.

What do you think is going to hit home the hardest? What will the audience take away from the show?

That's a really good question because that is our purpose: why do you do a play like this? There is a wonderful message embedded in the play that has to do with acknowledging that we're all fallible. That we think we're going to see things really clearly, but when it happens to us we won't. That part of life is accepting death. That part of honoring people who have died, loved ones who have left us, is to let them go. There's a wonderful line in the play that says, "Let them become the photograph on the table. Let them become the name on the trust accounts." Let the dead have peace by, when the time is right, not clinging to them any longer. It's about accepting change. Change is everywhere. The only constant in our life is change. I hope that those themes can come through in a way that people will be able to relate to them in an everyday basis.

Anything else you would like to add?

I hope that people will accept the whole package of this piece. I know that it's going to be a very intimate journey-- very personal material. It's not the kind of thing that you can easily distance yourself from. And of course I'll be speaking directly to the audience. There's no screen there. I'm really hoping to convey to people not only the difficulties of the journey, but also the humor and the love and the joys of the journey that we all have to take.

Resources and Further Reading

The Year of Magical Thinking Discussion Questions. 2006. Lit Lovers. 31 Aug 2009. <<http://www.ccc.commnet.edu/mla/online.shtml>>.

Coping with Greif and Loss: Support for Grieving and Bereavement. 2008. Helpguide.org. 1 Sept 2009. <http://www.helpguide.org/mental/grief_loss.htm>.

Magical Thinking. 2009. Wordiq.com. 1 Sept 2009. <http://www.wordiq.com/definition/Magical_thinking>.

Didion, Joan. *The Year of Magical Thinking*. New York: Random House, Inc, 2005.

Felton, Sharon. *The Critical Response to Joan Didion*. Santa Barbara: Greenwood Press, 1993.

Woelfelt, Alan D. *Understanding Your Grief: Ten Essential Touchstones for Finding Hope and Healing Your Heart*. California: Companion Press, 2004.

Visiting The Rep

The Milwaukee Repertory Theater is housed in the Milwaukee Center at the corner of Wells and Water Streets, downtown. Our building was formerly the home of the Electric Railway and Light Company. This name is still carved on the wall outside.

You'll enter on the Wells Street side into a large, open space. Our box office will be visible on your left as you come through the front doors. The large space is the main hub for the businesses that share this building: a bank, an office tower, the Pabst Theater, and the Intercontinental Hotel. If you walk into the center of this area, you'll see a staircase on your left. You will take this staircase to the Powerhouse Theater lobby.

Inside the lobby are restrooms, water fountains, and a coat check. If you decide to bring a snack, please know that food and drink are NOT permitted in the theater. However, you can leave things (at your own risk) in the coat check room, and enjoy them outside the theater during intermission. Most plays have one intermission that is about 20 minutes long. You might also want to look for signs in the lobby which give the full "running time" of the play.

**For more information on our education programs and our productions,
please visit our website at www.milwaukeeep.com**

*You need three things in the theatre – the play, the actors and the audience,
and each must give something. – Kenneth Haigh*

Theater is described as a collaborative art form. The success of a production relies upon every member of the process: playwrights, directors, designers, technicians, actors and the audience. Plays require audiences to give a new life to performances through their careful attention and enthusiastic reactions. The audience has an active role to play and the actors rely on you to be respectful and attentive. Through your observation of sets, costumes, lighting and the work of the actors, you'll be better able to follow the story and enjoy its live presentation. You are important in the final performance and your participation is what makes this process worthwhile.

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THEATER ♦ TRAINING AT ITS BEST

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