

Slouching towards Bethlehem
Joan Didion

The breakout work by a fantastic writer. Fifty years on we can see how prescient she was, and how timeless her talent.

Joan Didion is a pleasure to read. She is not the kind of author who appealed to me in my youth. Although I knew of her, the first book that I read was *Blue Nights*, which I reviewed very favorably in 2011.

An Internet article recently piqued my interest in *Slouching Toward Bethlehem*. It is a collection of essays written in the 1960s, all of the more than 50 years old. This is before most readers were born, talking about a time and place that they did not experience.

I am only eight years younger than Didion, and from California. I lived in the Haight-Ashbury when she reported when she wrote the most famous piece here, *slouching toward Bethlehem*. Reading it makes me acutely aware of how blind I was to what was going on around.

She writes also about Sacramento, Los Angeles, New York, and other places Las Vegas, and other places that have certainly changed a lot since. It's one of those "you had to be there" sensations.

One of the things that strikes me is how grounded, how sensible Didion was in seeing exactly what was going on. Her prose is exquisite. She not only comes up with the right word, the note just, but she often makes it up. Her writing is as fresh after 50 years, as it was back then. As it must've been back then. It is no wonder to me that she burst on the scene so explosively in the 1960s.

Hers was a generation of great writers. Tom Wolfe did the same kind of thing. Hunter S. Thompson wasn't far off. It was a generation of both readers and writers. If this kind of talent is out there today, I am not seeing it.

I include a table of contents, and offer my own comments on some of the some of the articles on some of the pieces that she's done.

===Life Styles in the Golden Land =====
=====Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream =====

Walmart was just a dream and Sam Walton's eyes, but the Walmart style had evolved in full glory in the deserts of California east of Los Angeles. A spectacularly trashy murder trial.

=====John Wayne: A Love Song =====

Appreciation for a real man, who knew what he was and didn't pretend to be anything more.

=====Where the Kissing Never Stops =====

A touching, affectionate portrait of Joan Baez. She is a woman from a highly intellectual background who could simply accept her gift and not be spoiled by it.

=====Comrade Laski, C.P.U.S.A. (M.-L.) =====

A true believer. The other Communists were all sellouts except for the Communist Party USA (Marxist-Leninist)

=====7000 Romaine, Los Angeles 38 =====

A paean to Howard Hughes, who represented America's real values and aspirations despite our pretentious claims to the contrary.

=====California Dreaming =====

A think tank on the Santa Barbara coast; the opposite of all things John Birch.

=====Marrying Absurd =====

Las Vegas, the most phony, plastic city on earth, and the home of the quickie marriage.

=====Slouching Towards Bethlehem =====

The centerpiece of the book. An extended journalistic tour through the Haight-Ashbury of 1966 – 67. The title comes from the Yeats poem.

This single essay did more than anything else to cement Didion's reputation as a journalist who could see beneath the surface and around the corners, and had a gift for portraying visual concept, a mood, or a sense of anomie so vividly that it brought the reader immediately to the scene of the action.

I was a young man living at 340 Carl St., San Francisco, five blocks from the Haight, as she wrote this. I missed 90% of it. Her powers of perception were incredible, and her sense of the terrible portent was equally prescient.

The hippie scene devastated our family. My two girl cousins, born in the 50s, disappeared into the San Francisco scene about this time. Both dead now, brain dead long before their bodies collapsed, they bore between them five children by five men.

Sex drugs and rock 'n' roll devastated my El Cerrito California high school class. The only two who became famous were Roy Jacuzzi, who coasted on a family connection, and Barr Rosenberg, whose astronomical intelligence gave him the freedom to pursue whatever lifestyle he chose. Most of my class tried drugs, and a large number lost direction. Cartoonist Joel Beck, sought by Playboy and every publisher around, drugged himself to death. Others simply wandered aimlessly through life. Didion expressed her foreboding extremely well.

=== II Personals =====

=====On Keeping a Notebook =====

However chaotic it may have been, Didion's notebook was a useful tool in her literary success.

=====On Self-Respect =====

Self-respect is essential. It was amazingly detached from reality. Sometimes the least worthy people have the greatest sense of self respect. And it serves them well, in general.

=====I Can't Get That Monster out of My Mind =====

A musing on Hollywood, the destroyer. Didion wryly notes that Hollywood can't destroy what was not there in the first place, but it offers a very convenient excuse.

=====On Morality =====

There is real morality and sham morality, the morale the of political poseurs.

Quote: " And of course it is all right to do that; that is how, immemorially, things have gotten done. But I think it is all right only so long as we do not delude ourselves about what we are doing, and why. It is all right only so long as we remember that all the ad hoc committees, all the picket lines, all the brave signatures in The New York Times, all the tools of agitprop straight across the spectrum, do not confer upon anyone any ipso facto virtue. It is all right only so long as we recognize that the end may or may not be expedient, may or may not be a good idea, but in any case has nothing to do with "morality." Because when we start deceiving ourselves into thinking not that we want something or need something, not that it is a pragmatic necessity for us to have it, but that it is a moral imperative that we have it, then is when we join the fashionable madmen, and then is when the thin whine of hysteria is heard in the land, and then is when we are in bad trouble. And I suspect we are already there."

=====On Going Home=====

This is a short piece about daughter Quintana Roo's first birthday. A touching story, and a lovely introduction to the much fuller picture that she offers in Blue Nights.

Quote: " Or perhaps it is not any more. Sometimes I think that those of us who are now in our thirties were born into the last generation to carry the burden of "home," to find in family life the source of all tension and drama. I had by all objective accounts a "normal" and a "happy" family situation, and yet I was almost thirty years old before I could talk to my family on the telephone without crying after I had hung up. We did not fight. Nothing was wrong. And yet some nameless anxiety colored the emotional charges between me and the place that I came from. The question of whether or not you could go home again was a very real part of the sentimental and largely literary baggage with which we left home in the fifties; I suspect that it is irrelevant to the children born of the fragmentation after World War II."

" It is time for the baby's birthday party: a white cake, strawberry-marshmallow ice cream, a bottle of champagne saved from another party. In the evening, after she has gone to sleep, I kneel beside the crib and touch her face, where it is pressed against the slats, with mine. She is an open and trusting child, unprepared for and unaccustomed to the ambushes of family life, and perhaps it is just as well that I can offer her little of that life. I would like to give her more. I would like to promise her that she will grow up with a sense of her cousins and of rivers and of her great-grandmother's teacups, would like to pledge her a picnic on a river with fried chicken and her hair uncombed, would like to give her home for her birthday, but we live differently now and I can promise her nothing like that. I give her a xylophone and a sundress from Madeira, and promise to tell her a funny story."

===III Seven Places of the Mind =====

=====Notes from a Native Daughter =====

Didion is fourth generation Californian. Her forebears came even before the gold rush. She has a marvelous sense of place, and expresses it in this piece.

=====Letter from Paradise, 21° 19' N., 157° 52' W =====

Notes about Hawaii, devastated in the Second World War and staging ground for the war in Vietnam as she wrote this piece. Rings true with me – I spent time there flying to and from Vietnam.

=====Rock of Ages =====

A visit to Alcatraz three years after it was decommissioned.

=====The Seacoast of Despair =====

The ghost mansions of Newport Rhode Island, and musings on the great wealth and perhaps spiritual poverty of those who built them.

=====Guaymas, Sonora =====

The Mexican high desert but

=====Los Angeles Notebook =====

A portrait in words of Los Angeles, where Didion spent most of her career.

=====Goodbye to All That =====

Reminiscences of the first years of her career in New York City. It goes from everything being fresh, wonderful and exciting to "seen that, done that" after five years, very happily moving back to the West Coast with her husband.