



Reported lost, looking for America

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Joan Didion, the novelist and journalist, talks to Melinda Camber Porter about her life and work.

Joan Didion has become one of America's most trusted reporters. When *Sentimental Journeys*, her third collection of pieces, was published last year in the United States, it reached The New York Times best-seller list, a lonely masterpiece among the ghost-written autobiographies of baseball players and exploitative laments of recovering celebrity addicts.

It is not that Didion shuns the subject matter that makes America buy newspapers. In fact, in this and her other collections, she delves into popular topics such as Patti Hearst, Nancy Reagan and the case of the woman jogger who was raped in Central Park. What distinguishes Didion from most other reporters is her brilliantly wrought prose and her completely idiosyncratic and original vision. She always seems to get to the heart of the matter.

Her waif-like frame and whispering voice come as a surprise, even though she has often noted that being small has helped her reporting ("It was useful because people never noticed me"). She moved to New York City several years ago, after a lifetime spent in California: "I don't think New York is the avant-garde any more. I think it's just kind of whirling around, spitting out 'new' ideas and describing them for itself. It's just obsessed with the 'new' which doesn't exist. Nothing's really new."

Didion's lengthiest piece in *Sentimental Journeys* is about New York; her Manhattan is an interconnecting inferno of corruption, murder, racial hostility and numbing indifference. It is a city outside the reach of redemption. Does she really hate living in the city as much as her piece would suggest?

"When you write about something, you tend to get rid of it. After we'd been living here for about two years I decided I should really write about New York. I was travelling in and out of town and I still didn't feel at home here. I started a piece on New York, on the Central Park jogger, and it got longer and longer. By the time I finished it, I never wanted to write another word about New York. But I realised that all my irritation and anger and frustrations with New York came out and suddenly, the day I finished the piece, I loved being here."

But feeling at home does not appear to inspire Didion as much as the sensation of being an outsider. "I'm not sure I thought about it when I first started writing. But now I sense it as even more marginalising. And a woman writer is even more marginalised than a man.

"I'm not even sure of the importance of books, or of my books to people. However, I'd like to do something practical. I'd like people to pay more attention, and I don't mean have more readers or sell more copies. It seems to me that I'm always bringing something horrible to the attention of my readers and nobody does anything about it. So I sometimes think, well, perhaps I should stop expecting people to do something and get up and do it myself."

Didion's sense of her own lack of importance springs from a sense of humility which is apparent in her self-questioning stance. It is perhaps what makes her unflinching criticism of American society so convincing and ultimately sympathetic. Though she appears to underplay her own success as a writer, she is

true to herself and her themes in seeing alienation even in the relationship between herself and her readers.

In her non-fiction and her novels, be it *Play It As It Lays* or *Democracy*, she creates a world of loneliness and indifference. Didion's brand of alienation sums up and defines the American malaise: the sense of not belonging, of having no roots. And the world of possessions and success that Didion's characters often inhabit (they are wives of senators, or movie actresses) offers an illusory support that ends up imprisoning rather than freeing them.

Didion writes sympathetically of these high-flyers, as she does of their counterparts in reality. But she may be losing her fascination for a world that has long provided her with her material: New York City, Los Angeles and Washington, where *Sentimental Journeys* is set, no longer hold the key to her understanding of all America.

"I feel very disconnected now from what we think of as the real America. So I went to Mississippi, but I couldn't focus on what I was doing, so I abandoned the idea of writing a book about it. That wasn't the way to do it anyway.

"Then, we had to go to the Northwest to do some lectures in September. It wasn't a good time to go because I had the flu, so I had to drive from Seattle to Portland because I wasn't allowed to fly and it was astonishing. I couldn't get it out of my mind. It was small towns. Poverty's the wrong word to describe it, but you could see the absence of money that we associate with the coast. I wished I could be able to spend more time there and do a piece because the images I saw are still lingering in me."

In her more private moments, does Didion recognise that books like *Sentimental Journeys* and her novels hold greater sway over the culture than the potboilers and the celebrity autobiographies? She laughs shyly. "You know I went on tour for *A Book of Common Prayer* (one of her novels) and I don't usually agree to do book tours. I was on TV shows being interviewed all day, from one city to the next, and they asked me what was the meaning of the title. I didn't tell them. I made up some story.

"But the book was written as a prayer. It was written with that intention, with that wish that the book would have the power of a prayer. But I didn't want to discuss it with them. I didn't want them to know."

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