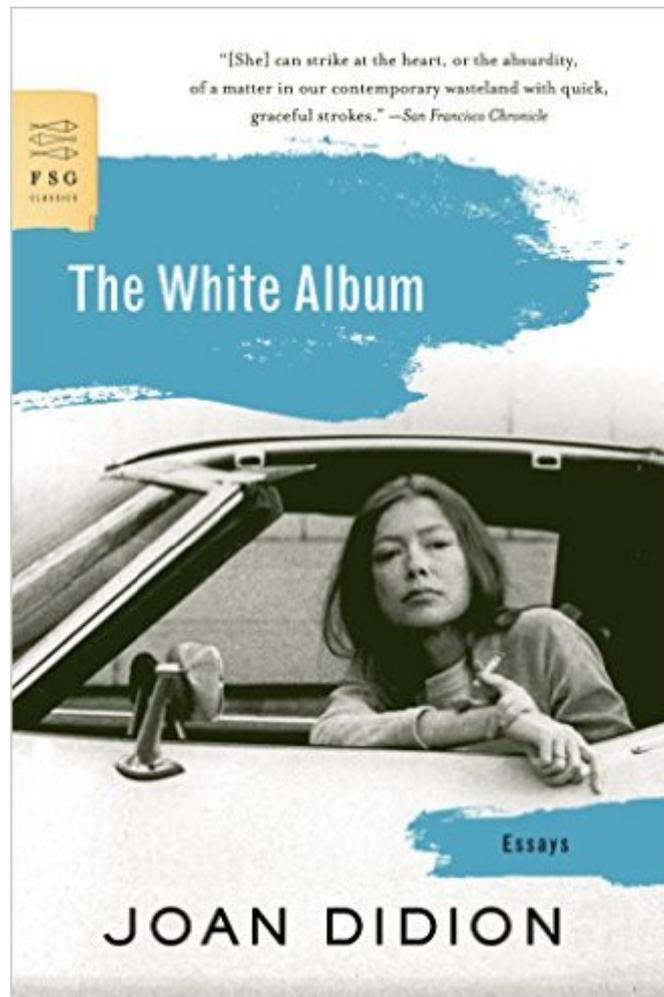


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The White Album: Essays (FSG Classics)



Synopsis

First published in 1979, *The White Album* records indelibly the upheavals and aftermaths of the 1960s. Examining key events, figures, and trends of the era—including Charles Manson, the Black Panthers, and the shopping mall—through the lens of her own spiritual confusion, Joan Didion helped to define mass culture as we now understand it. Written with a commanding sureness of tone and linguistic precision, *The White Album* is a central text of American reportage and a classic of American autobiography.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

The White Album was published in 1979, and most of the material here is from the 1970s. Even so, the book is at least as much about the 1960s as is *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*. Like that book, this is a collection of essays from various publications, plus some previously unpublished material. It's a mixed bag. The title piece is quite strong, as is "On The Morning After The Sixties," proving, perhaps, that the 1960s really were Didion's one true subject. There's other good stuff here, too, and the book is actually sort of underrated, since so many observers rate it a poor second to *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*. But the Didion style is actually quite strong in this volume, sharply observed, carefully written, personal without being confessional, and always flirting with detachment but not quite achieving it. Obviously some people just can't stand Didion's essays, and this book would hardly change their mind; but if you're open to her style, this is worth reading.

Joan Didion always seems to look out at you from her book jackets in a straightforward,

level-headed way, yet her readers will know she has a somewhat cockeyed view of life. Very Californian, as she quotes Bernard De Voto, "The West begins, where the average annual rainfall drops below twenty inches." But hardly sunny, she's dark, dark: she has made the literature of nervous breakdown her own. We saw it in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem: Essays* (FSG Classics); *Play It As It Lays: A Novel*; and *A Book of Common Prayer*; as in "The White Album," the book at hand here; essays first collected and published in 1979. She eyes the 1960s, and California, quite closely; she sketches the 1960's so well, in fact, she might almost have imaginatively invented them. It's all here, the Manson family, the Black Panthers, the historic doings at the University of California, Berkeley. She says "...there were odd things going on around town. There were rumors. There were stories. Everything was unmentionable, but nothing was unimaginable. This mystical flirtation with the idea of 'sin'-- this sense that it was possible to go 'too far,' and that many people were doing it-- was very much with us in Los Angeles in 1968 and 1969. A demented and seductive vortical tension was building in the community. The jitters were setting in. I recall a time when the dogs barked every night and the moon was always full. On August 9, 1969, I was sitting in the shallow end of my sister-in-law's swimming pool in Beverly Hills when she received a telephone call from a friend who had just heard about the murders at Sharon Tate Polanski's house on Cielo Drive. The phone rang many times during the next hour. These early reports were garbled and contradictory. One caller would say hoods, the next would say chains. There were twenty dead, no, twelve, ten, eighteen. Black masses were imagined, and bad trips blamed. I remember all of the day's misinformation very clearly, and I also remember this, and wish I did not: I remember that no one was surprised." She continues, "Many people I know in Los Angeles believe that the Sixties ended abruptly on August 9, 1969, at the exact moment when word of the murders on Cielo Drive traveled like brushfire through the community, and in a sense this is true. The tension broke that day. The paranoia was fulfilled." What an eye she has, what an ear, and what luck, too, right place at right time. And lucky us; she's given us so many reports from the front, wherever it may be, and of whatever it may consist. She continues to, still. I recently saw her speak at the Los Angeles Times Book Fair, on the UCLA campus, shortly after the death of her beloved husband, which she conveyed in such burning prose in *The Year of Magical Thinking*, her highly-recommended book on the subject. She was all there: her emotions, but also, her eye, and ear.

This book is definitely the "Part 2" of a series that begins with Didion's "Slouching Towards Bethlehem" and each time that I return to it I feel like I am sitting down with a dear friend that I

haven't talked to in a while. Other reviewers seem to have covered the title piece quite well, but I am intrigued that nobody seems to have mentioned my favorite -"Holy Water"- a fascinating look behind the scenes at the California Water Authority. I assign this essay again and again to my environmentalist students, both for the immediate content and for the intriguing window into the seductive nature of technology -one feels that Didion comes to be horrified and walks away enthralled. You will be too.

I feel very fortunate to have been turned on to this book and, more importantly, this writer! Many of the stories told have the feel of someone sitting on the edge of the scene, looking in on many of the interesting people and events of the late 1960s and into the 70s. It's a fun perspective. After reading lots of sixties memoir-type writings, I'd say this is a unique one. These essays seem to be covering topics she'd previously written on as a journalist.. so they're memoirs, in a way. With some familiar characters -- Jim Morrison, Eldridge Cleaver, Nancy Reagan, etc. -- and others I'm just coming to learn about, new and uncommon scenes are played out. In other words, they're mostly stories I haven't read yet from a subject that's maybe overly covered. It's a quick read, but an entertaining one from someone who knew how to describe her surroundings during an interesting time. I will now go looking for more Joan Didion books...

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