



After Henry

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AFTER HENRY is Joan Didion's ninth book overall and fifth of journalism. Unlike SALVADOR (1983) and MIAMI (1988), AFTER HENRY is not a single book-length essay, but neither is it, as SLOUCHING TOWARDS BETHLEHEM (1968) and THE WHITE ALBUM (1980) are, simply a collection of previously published pieces. Least of all is it journalism of the expected kind: dashed off and at best of topical and wholly temporary interest. For one thing, all twelve essays were written after the death of Didion's longtime editor Henry Robbins after he had gone on to work at Dutton while she decided to stay behind at Simon & Schuster, and after Henry had told her that she could make it on her own, without his help—something she did not believe then and seems not to believe now. It is from that disbelief, born of much the same self-doubt that is at the very heart of Didion's four remarkable novels, that Didion crafts the eleven matchless essays which follow.

The eleven are divided into three parts: Washington, California, and New York. Behind the regional distinctions, one finds Didion's consistent interest in discovering and analyzing her native land in terms of its stories, chiefly its media myths. Her subjects are therefore never exactly what they appear to be: a Los Angeles murder case, Patty Hearst, the interconnected histories of Los Angeles and the TIMES MIRROR newspaper, the Reagan White House, the 1988 presidential campaign, and, in the last, longest, and perhaps best of the essays, the Central Park "wilding" that left a young woman raped and near death. "Sentimental Journeys" quickly moves past the familiar facts of the case to consider the ways those facts were presented as a "narrative," one which offered New Yorkers a story they could call their own: flattering but also dangerously delusive. Ultimately the delusions—whether those of New Yorkers or of Hollywood and Beltway insiders—are Didion's real target. AFTER HENRY is therefore not really reportage; it is revelation from a writer whose self-doubts protect her from the delusions to which so many succumb so readily.

Sources for Further Study

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After Henry: After Henry

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