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# **Death and individualism: Joan Didion's year of ruptured thinking**

## **Walking Grieved: a meditation on love, loss & memory**

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A thesis submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the Master  
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## ***Abstract***

In this thesis I explore the contemporary grief memoir, an increasingly popular subset within the autobiography genre, and one that primarily concerns authors' subjective recollections and responses to the rupture in the fabric of their lives caused by the death of an intimate other – typically a spouse, parent or child.

In my exegesis I examine Joan Didion's grief memoir – *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2011 [2005]) – written in the year following the sudden death of her husband of forty years and fellow writer, John Dunne, and the concurrent serious illness and hospitalisation of their adult daughter, Quintana, in 2004. In particular I analyse how Didion's memoir addresses the rupturing of her reflexive individuality and especially her dispositional orientation and idealization of an agentic, informed and progressive self as key components of her self-identity. In my creative non-fiction writing – *Walking Grieved: a mediation of love, loss & memory* – I explore the rupture and my responses occasioned by the death of my wife in 2003. I specifically reflect on how this has impacted on my romantic, familial and other self-identities and on my understandings of the constructs (social, historical and subjective) of intimate love, dying and death, memory, enduring grief, elective sociality and the narrations of self and other.

Contemporary grief narratives represent an emerging body of literary work and socio-psychological theorizing that contests the 'denial of death' (Ariès 2008 [1981]: 559) ethos prevalent in modern Western societies. They also contest the equally prevalent Freudian model of pathological grief that asserts survivors need to 'move on' from grieving to form new intimate attachments, ideally within months (Dennis 2008; Neimeyer et al 2001). These memoirs represent a contemporary, even post-modern, form of *ars moriendi* and promote varied forms of 'textured recovery' (Prodromou 2012: 57) that are based on subjective, nuanced and eclectic grieving processes and outcomes. These include highly personal searches for understanding and comprehension of the death, of rupture and grieving, and the fashioning of post-rupture identities, ideas, values and practices that frequently incorporate the deceased and which span a range of themes – restorative, evaluative, interpretive, affirmative, affective, transformative (Dennis 2008).

As a form of autobiography, grief memoirs also address issues of self-identity as a series of constantly evolving narratives or stories that individuals tell about themselves and which, in feedback loop, both generate and reflect the evolving modalities and ethics of autobiography (Eakin 1999, 2008). Narrated self-identity is always period and socio-culturally specific. For the middle-classes and higher social strata of post-industrial societies, self-identity therefore routinely coalesces around the hegemony and practices 'reflexive individuality' (Beck 2002: 3) – especially the ideals of agentic, knowledgeable,

reflective (self and social) and progressive individuality. Indeed authors of grief memoirs typically highlight their personal experiences of rupture and loss, and particularly their responses to first experiencing a 'death blow' (Rimmon-Kenan 2002:10) followed by an 'identity crisis' (Rimmon-Kenan 2002: 10).

Furthermore grief memoirs are subject to the norms and expectations generated within the 'autobiographical pact' (Lejeune 1989: 22) that exists between authors and readers. The autobiographical pact asserts that the text's narrator is the author (or that any connection to a 'ghost writer' is overt); secondly, that revelations about the author's identity, experiences, memories, beliefs, etc are truthful; and finally, that recollections are tactful, especially in terms of revelations concerning others. Clearly notions of tactfulness are a matter of evolving debate. Moreover, perceptions of truthfulness are framed within understandings of the limitations, inherent idiosyncratic biases and the selectiveness or justificatory character of personal memories. Issues of truthfulness are also framed by standards of 'emotional truth' (Williams quoted in Miller 2007: 543), in which recollections of the author are orientated toward producing verifiable, subjective truths that are not directly contradicted by historical or agreed fact.

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## *Contents*

<b>Abstract</b>	ii
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	iv
<b>Contents</b>	v
<b>Section 1:</b>	
Death and individualism: Joan Didion's year of ruptured thinking	1 – 37
<b>Section 2:</b>	
Walking Grieved: a mediation on love, loss & memory	1 - 95