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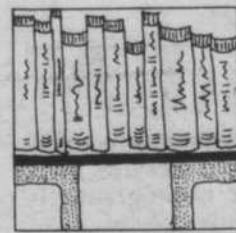
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In print

Askew in El Salvador

"Salvador"
By Joan Didion
Simon and Schuster
1983, 108 pages

To those who defer to the so-called experts, whether of the geopolitical right or the revolutionary left, luminary Joan Didion looms a touch askew on the horizon of war-ravaged El Salvador.

Certainly to the naked eye she seems, physically and emotionally, a somewhat precarious (and therefore, to one critic, all the more compelling) intruder.

Physically diminutive, of a sensibility vulnerable, even fragile, she is the southern Californian frozen by fear in "the White Album" — as many of her neighbors were — following the mania of the Charles Manson murders.

Riding Didion's undeserved reputation for knee-jerk depression, one critic from the right discounts the sustained aura of terror emanating throughout "Salvador," claiming Didion "would find something melancholy in the Resurrection."

From the other side, a leftist critic dubs her an issue-clouding eclectic, and lumps her with "the editorial hacks."

Despite being a highly successful and acclaimed *gringa* essayist, novelist, reporter and critic who has written with uncanny incisiveness on a vast array of subjects, Didion apparently fails to measure up to what many have come to demand of our commentator-experts — that they be *specialists*.

That is, she is not a political exile, a foreign service globetrotter, a Third World advocate veteran, or a grunt war correspondent in the Ernest Hemingway or even Michael Herr mold.

But Central America is not unfamiliar territory to Didion. Her novel "A Book of Common Prayer," published in 1978, was set in the fictional country of Boca Grande. Boca Grande resembled Nicaragua, and the events there prophesized the fall of the Somoza regime.

And rather than drawbacks, Didion's emotional, intellectual and experiential luggage — her sensitivity (combined with her toughness of mind), her alien perspective, her unerring eye for the ironic and the illuminating detail — make her a particularly sharp viewer and reviewer of what El Salvadorans refer rather obtusely and interchangeably to as "la situacion," "el problema," and "la verdad (the truth)."

Armed with these tools Didion unearths the subterranean realities.

In so doing, Didion unmasks Salvadoran culture and psychology, and on a level that traditional history and political science is impotent to match.

"Salvador" is not a history book. As if in defense Didion maintains and demonstrates, somewhat convincingly, that history of the traditional sort is almost impossible to discern — and is therefore inconsequential — in El Salvador.

Salvadorans shun facts and figures, those elements European culture often equate to the truth itself. Reality functions more on a mythic level there, and as Garcia-Marquez has also tried to show to North Americans, if they can understand this and other elements of the psychology of El Salvador and other Latin American countries, they might better manage their relationships down there.

Like much of what Didion writes, "Salvador" is sometimes more unabashedly about herself in the place than the place itself. And this new-journalistic or fictional technique works searingly well here. As a protagonist she is herself illuminating, functioning as a vehicle of identification that pulls the reader very quickly into the maelstrom of El Salvador.

From the outset, we see Didion as the tourist arriving at the El Salvador International Airport, and quickly learning "a special kind of practical information... the way visitors to other places acquire information about the currency rates, the hours for museums. In El Salvador one learns that vultures go first for the soft tissue, for the eyes, the exposed genitalia, the open mouth..."

From this start, Didion takes us on a backyard tour of El Salvador, leaving the big-picture geopoliticizing to the experts.

Brooks Dareff



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