

winter reading 2005-6

non-fiction/memoir

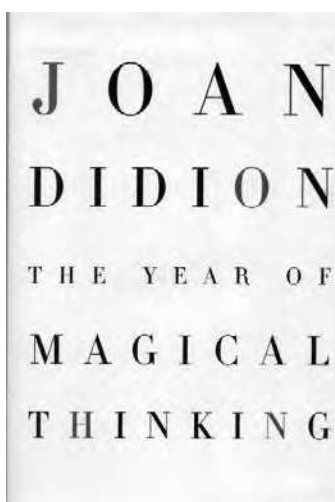
GRIEF

The Year of Magical Thinking by Joan Didion. Knopf, 2005. Hardcover. \$23.95. **2005 Winner: National Book Award for Nonfiction. One of the 10 Best Books of 2005, The New York Times.**

Joan Didion earned her reputation as an unflinching and deliberately nonobjective chronicler of modern day political and social society in the 1960s and 1970s. In the early 1980s she stared into and wrote about one of the darkest corners of the times, the grisly civil war between the Army and rebel guerrillas in El Salvador.

But her well-trained eye and fearless observations could not prepare her for the one event that would bring her to her knees, the unexpected death of her husband and long-time writing companion, John Gregory Dunne, on December 30, 2003. Dunne died of a massive coronary just hours after the couple had arrived home from visiting their daughter, Quintana Roo, who was in an intensive care unit recovering from septic shock.

A loving and wrenching meditation on memory, loss, grief and marriage, *The Year of Magical Thinking* revisits the days and months following her husband's death. What underscores the book's searingly painful jour-



punch.

Didion recreates the grieving process and in so doing gives its lurching, unpredictable and illogical grasping a massive dose of permission. Yes, certain places and scenes act as a slow fuse, igniting a devastating trail of memories that, when over, only made her loss that much more unbearable. But it was essential for Didion to travel those mazes, no matter how difficult. They were her life. Their life together.

It is the way of any great truth to defy verbal description and become more profound by repetition. Didion knows this, and she recreates rhythms and motifs throughout her book. This is one refrain she returns to, over and over:

"Life changes fast. Life changes in the instant. You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends. The question of self-pity."

Didion's book is difficult and heart-wrenching but brave and supremely

important. In her measured, literate way, she shows us that she too has feet of clay, that her tears are made of salt and water, that a high-profile literary life did not protect her from experiencing the numbness and nakedness that comes in the wake of a great loss. I don't know why it is that great writers give us such permission for what we already suspect to be true, but they do.

During an October '05 interview with "Fresh Air" host Terry Gross, Didion received the news that her book had been nominated for a National Book Award. Her

"I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means."

— Joan Didion, from "Why I Write," *The New York Times Magazine*, 12/05/76.

ney is that, when published in early 2005, Didion's daughter was expected to recover. However, she died this past August (2005).

Didion did not choose to make changes to the book following her daughter's death. Written to center on the loss of a husband, the book now includes, for readers, the loss of her daughter, doubling the pain and the

reaction was muted. This is what really meant something: When her husband, 25 days before he died, on December 5, 2004, Didion's birthday, re-read a scene from one of her novels. He closed the book and told her: "Don't ever tell me again you can't write. That's my birthday present to you." — *Alice Tallmadge*

FAMILY MATTERS

Burning Fence by Craig Lesley. St. Martin's Press, 2005. Hardcover, \$33.95.

Novelist Craig Lesley's memoir, *Burning Fence*, begins with a forest fire and ends with birthday candles. In between these contrasting flames, Lesley describes his many attempts to reconnect with his father. His heart-wrenching quest is a testament to the inescapable influence of family.

Rudell Lesley served with distinction during World War II. Back home, he seemed detached and soon abandoned his wife and infant son. Lesley's mother put food on the table and supplied "unconditional love." In spite of their hardscrabble life, she maintained that "better times are just around the corner" each time they moved to escape a situation turned sour.

Lesley recounts emblematic boyhood adventures, but his happy times are always cut short by the chaos that dogs the disenfranchised. When Lesley is mangled by a peppermint chopper, Rudell goes to see his son for the first time in 15 years. The visit puts the boy into shock, but not before Rudell observes that Lesley, who has had the fingertips of his right hand chopped off, is destined to be "a southpaw like your old man. Always stuck at first base."

Determined not to be "a loser" like his father, Lesley becomes a teacher, marries, and adopts a son, Wade, who is severely damaged from Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. The demands of raising Wade strain the marriage and weaken Lesley's conviction to be a better father than the one he had. He drives Wade to his father's trailer outside Monument, hoping that Rudell's life in the wilderness, where he builds fences, hunts elk and traps coyotes might suit Wade, and that the father who never helped him might finally lend a hand.

Lesley covers lots of gritty territory but never lapses into sensationalism. His sense

of fairness and his dry humor are evident in every chapter. *Burning Fence* is a fascinating book you'll want to share with friends — and maybe even family. — *Cecelia Hagen*

IN AMERICA

Teacher Man By Frank McCourt. Scribner, 2005. Hardcover, \$26.

Fans of Frank McCourt's miserable Irish childhood should tread cautiously on his third memoir, *Teacher Man*. It's not that it wants for Celtic gloom. And his self-flagellating, empathetic voice is as distinct as ever. It's just that *Teacher Man* is preempted by what *Angela's Ashes* (the book, the movie, the Happy Meal) lets us know: that Frankie left the wee green rock of poverty for New York, where want was still present but came in a much subtler different form.

Teacher Man chronicles McCourt's 30 years teaching high school in New York's public schools. From a vocational school in Staten Island through itinerant substituting to Manhattan's elite Stuyvesant School, McCourt taught writing and grammar to kids who would've preferred doing anything else.

When *Teacher Man* is not about teaching, it's a midlife crisis story about being caught between a childhood with no choices and an adulthood with many. As a working class immigrant, McCourt's decision to become a teacher instead of, say, a traditional Irish job like cop or fireman, is a transgression hard to fathom a half-century removed. And yet, it seems McCourt wasn't transgressive enough. Reconnoitering

with literary friends, he longed to scratch an itch he could barely admit he had.

A lot of words are drained on McCourt's naïve expectations of American life. "I wanted to be doing something adult and significant," McCourt writes. "Dictating to my secretary, sitting with glamorous people at long mahogany boardroom tables, flying to con-

