

santa  
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reads

20th Anniversary

Joan Didion

Where  
I Was  
From



"Compelling. . . . A love song to the place where her family has lived for generations, but a love song full of questions and doubts."  
—*The New York Times*

June 4  
through  
August 6,  
2022

**Welcome** to the twentieth year of Santa Monica Reads! Since 2002 we have been coming together as a community to share a book, discuss it, and hear from experts, often including the authors. Our choices have been current and classic novels and short story collections, often with an important social message or a local history connection.

This year we turn to a nonfiction work – Joan Didion’s *Where I Was From*. Didion, who died at 87 in December 2021, was one of the great California writers, a brilliant essayist, novelist, memoirist and screenwriter.

Published in 2003, *Where I Was From* uses Didion’s family history to bring together material from essays exploring the history and meaning of California, which were originally published in the *New York Review of Books*, *The New Yorker* and other magazines. Topics range from the Donner Party and the role of the railroads in the development of the state to the post-WWII aerospace boom and its role in the growth of suburbia.

This year’s Santa Monica Reads celebrates Didion’s career, from the early essays of *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* to her final works. Our programs feature established authors and rising stars talking about Didion’s influence on their writing and on California literature, but the most important programs center on you.

The heart of Santa Monica Reads is the book discussion, where we come together to talk about the book and its meaning to you. Most of our events will be in-person and outdoors, so we will be able to gather safely, but there will also be a virtual book group discussion. Beginning June 4, 2022, free copies of the book will be available, while supplies last, for those interested in participating in Santa Monica Reads. Circulating copies will also be available to borrow.

Happy reading!  
The Santa Monica Reads Team

## About the Book

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Joan Didion published five novels and eleven books of nonfiction between 1963 and 2021. *Where I Was From* was her last essay collection, barring *Let Me Tell You What I Mean*, her final volume, which assembled uncollected work from across her many decades of writing.

Throughout her career, she mixed the hard-boiled observation of journalism with the introspection of memoir. *Where I Was From* braids multiple narratives – California’s pioneers and rail barons, Didion’s ancestors, her childhood memories, and her contemporary reporting, ending with a reflection on her mother’s passing which unites the themes of family and place and anticipates *The Year of Magical Thinking* and *Blue Nights*.

Didion sees California history as a series of booms, from settlement to the building of the railroads, through aerospace and, beginning in the 1980s, prison construction. She asks what made these booms happen, who benefited, and what happens to people, communities, and future generations when a boom goes bust.

*Where I Was From* covers a lot of territory, literally and metaphorically, from Donner Pass to Lakewood, and the narrative can be as tricky as a mountain trail, but it will reward your attention.

## About the Author

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Photo by Brigitte Lacombe

Joan Didion was born in Sacramento in 1934. In her senior year studying English at UC Berkeley, she won a job at *Vogue* through a writing contest and stayed there seven years, eventually becoming an associate features editor. While at *Vogue* she also published in other magazines and wrote her first novel, *Run, River* (1963). In 1964 she married fellow writer John Gregory Dunne and they moved to Los Angeles. This location inspired her first two books of essays, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (1968) and *The White Album* (1979), which featured her observations on the 1960s counterculture, especially its darker corners. Los Angeles also provided the setting for her second novel, *Play It as It Lays* (1970), which is part of chain of ennui-soaked L.A. novels such as Nathaniel West's *The Day of the Locust* and Bret Easton Ellis' highly Didion-esque *Less than Zero*.

Didion and Dunne collaborated as screenwriters, including *The Panic in Needle Park* (1971), which was Al Pacino's first lead role, an adaptation of *Play It as It Lays* (1972) with Tuesday Weld, and their biggest hit, the Barbara Streisand/Kris Kristofferson version of *A Star is Born* (1976). Both also continued publishing fiction and nonfiction.

Didion experienced a late-career renaissance with *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005) and *Blue Nights* (2011), which examined her experiences of the deaths of Dunne and their daughter. In 2007 she adapted *The Year of Magical Thinking* into a one-woman show, which starred Vanessa Redgrave on Broadway. President Obama presented her with a National Humanities Medal in 2013. In his remarks, Obama said he was surprised she hadn't already received it.

## Special Events

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### David Ulin In Conversation with Laila Lalami

Wednesday, July 6 / 6:00 to 7:00 p.m.

📍 Main Library, Central Courtyard

David Ulin, editor of the Library of America's collected volumes *Joan Didion: The 1960s & 70s* and *Joan Didion: The 1980s & 90s*, and Laila Lalami, Pulitzer Prize (*The Moor's Account*) and National Book Award (*The Other Americans*) finalist, discuss the influence of Joan Didion on the literary landscape of the last seven decades.

### Slouching Towards Los Angeles

Saturday, August 6 / 3:00 to 4:00 p.m.

📍 Main Library, Central Courtyard

Editor Steffie Nelson and several contributors to *Slouching Towards Los Angeles: Living and Writing by Joan Didion's Light* discuss their collection of essays on California's literary "Muse of the West." A book sale and signing follows.

## Book Discussions

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Join the community discussion of the 2022 Santa Monica Reads book! Combining history and reportage, memoir and literary criticism, Didion explores California's romances with land and water; its unacknowledged debts to railroads, aerospace, and big government; the disjunction between its code of individualism and its fetish for prisons.

Thursday, June 30 / 6:00 to 7:00 p.m.

📍 Main Library, Central Courtyard

Thursday, July 7 / 6:00 to 7:00 p.m.

📍 Pico Branch Library, The Annex

Saturday, July 16 / 11:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m.

📍 Virtual - To register, email [library@santamonica.gov](mailto:library@santamonica.gov)

Thursday, July 21 / 6:00 to 7:00 p.m.

📍 Montana Avenue Branch Library, Patio

# Recommended Reads



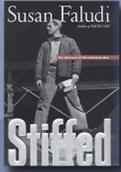
## *Hollywood's Eve: Eve Babitz and the Secret History of LA* by Lili Anolik

Babitz passed the same week as Didion, and obituaries presented her as the sexy id to Didion's severe superego. They moved in the same circles but, while Didion wrote a memorable essay on the Doors, Babitz bought Jim Morrison his first pair of leather pants. This biography of Babitz, by a popular *Vanity Fair* writer and podcaster, is a great introduction.



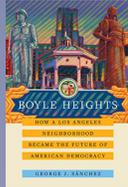
## *The Last Love Song: A Biography of Joan Didion* by Tracy Daugherty

While Didion's writing is always personal and often autobiographical, she also carefully managed her mystique. This biography respectfully unveils her life and work.



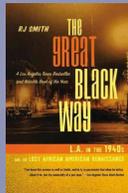
## *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man* by Susan Faludi

One component of *Where I Was From* is Didion's reporting on the Spur Posse, a group of Lakewood boys who became a tabloid TV scandal for keeping a scoreboard of their sexual exploits, some nonconsensual. Faludi also interviewed and interpreted them in this sequel to her influential *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*.



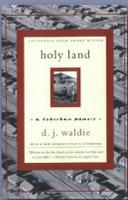
## *Boyle Heights: How a Los Angeles Neighborhood Became the Future of American Democracy* by George Sanchez

This history of Anglo-, Mexican-, Japanese-, Jewish-, and African-American communities in East LA gives additional context and perspectives to Didion's settler colonialist history of California.



## *The Great Black Way: LA in the 1940s and the Lost African-American Renaissance* by R. J. Smith

In this essential companion to Isabell Wilkerson's acclaimed *The Warmth of Other Suns*, Smith discusses the Great Migration of African-Americans from the South to California, drawn by opportunities created when Franklin Roosevelt desegregated the defense industry in the 1940s. Like Sanchez, Smith tells California history from the perspective of people outside of Didion's frame.



## *Holy Land: A Suburban Memoir* by D. J. Waldie

Waldie combines a poet's ear and a historian's eye in his memoir of growing up in Lakewood, which Didion read and endorsed. He later became Lakewood's Deputy City Manager and continues to write on the history and culture of Los Angeles.



## *The Best Land Under Heaven: The Donner Party in the Age of Manifest Destiny* by Michael Wallis

Didion's settler ancestors were nearly part of the Donner Party, and the choices which enabled them to avoid that grim fate are a motif throughout *Where I Was From*. Best-selling historian Wallis digs deep into archives to reconstruct the personal drama and historical context of the Donner family's trip west.

Thank you for supporting book discussions and programs.

And thanks to the Friends of the Santa Monica Public Library for their ongoing support for Santa Monica Reads.