

TELLING IT AS SHE MEANS IT

J A S O N M O S S E R

Joan Didion, *Let Me Tell You What I Mean*

By Joan Didion

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THIS IS THE NINTH IN A SERIES OF DIDION'S COLLECTED ESSAYS. Roughly half of the entries were written and published in 1968, the year Didion came out with her first collection, *Slouching Toward Bethlehem*; the rest date through the 1980s to 2000. Readers like me who were unlikely to have encountered her writing in periodicals as diverse as *The Saturday Evening Post* and *New West* will find these essays as fresh and as surprising now as then.

Most of these essays are about art, artists, and the artistic process. In her widely anthologized essay "Why I Write," a standard reading assignment in college writing courses, Didion says that

In many ways, writing is the act of saying I, of imposing oneself on other people . . . It's an aggressive, even a hostile act. . . . You can disguise its aggressiveness all you want . . . with the whole manner of intimating rather than claiming, of alluding rather than stating, [but] setting words on paper is the tactic of a secret bully, an invasion, an imposition of says the writer's sensibility on the reader's most private space. (45–46)

The quotation reveals Didion's intense self-consciousness, her sense of the intimate relationship between writer and reader. Didion's one true subject, that of all writers, is writing itself, writing as art but also writing as a process

of discovery. “I write entirely to find out what I’m thinking. . . .” (57) Speaking of some lines which would become the genesis of her novel *The Book of Common Prayer*, she reveals that “until I wrote these lines I did not know who ‘I’ was, who was telling the story” (57).

In “Telling Stories,” in characteristically self-deprecating irony, Didion reflects on her experience as a student in a creative writing course at Berkeley, an intimidating, demoralizing ordeal for a young woman who felt that her sheltered life had offered her little to write about. A few years later, she reveals that what started out as a story about a man and a woman in New York became, without her conscious intention, a story about her homesickness for California, a fragment which she later developed into her first novel, *Run River*. She also recalls that her apprenticeship at *Vogue* taught her how to write concisely and expressively, sage advice for the aspiring writer.

Another piece which addresses the creative process is “Some Women,” one of those essays that begin with one subject, in this case *Vogue* pictorials, then transition into something related yet different, Didion’s relationship to controversial photographer Robert Mapplethorpe. What Didion says about Mapplethorpe she could just as easily say about herself: “people whose work it is to make something out of nothing do not much like to talk about what they do or how they do it” (81). She concludes with the observation that “This is the voice of someone whose subject was finally that very symmetry with which he himself had arranged things” (88). On a fundamental level, the subject of art is always art itself.

For me the most powerful of these essays is “Last Words,” both a critical appreciation of Ernest Hemingway and a critique of how his legacy has been commercialized. After performing a brilliant explication of the final paragraph of *A Farewell to Arms*, Didion praises Hemingway as “a writer who had in his time made the English language new, changed the rhythms of the way both his own and the next generations would speak and write and think” (103). Didion also raises the question of “what should be done with what a writer leaves unfinished” (119). She details Hemingway’s struggle to preserve his legacy by leaving letters and unfinished novels unpublished, as well as the efforts by his widow Mary Walsh Hemingway and biographers Carlos Baker and A.E. Hotchner to move forward with publication. The final insult came when a major furniture company introduced their “Ernest Hemingway Collection.” Didion’s disdain for this exploitation is palpable.

In two of these essays, a figure emerges who also shaped the way we speak and think and write, George Orwell. In “Why I Write,” Didion candidly remarks that she stole her title from an essay by Orwell published in 1946 in which he famously declares his intention to “turn political writing into an art” (314). Didion’s motivations for writing were more personal than political, but when she turned to politics, in a book like *Salvador*, she employed her suspended syntax and her presentation of “images that shimmer around the edges” (49–50) to paint a nightmarish canvas of authoritarian violence and repression. In the Hemingway essay, she registers her surprise at observing “how much of Hemingway could be heard in Orwell’s sentences” (104), and she provides some striking examples.

In “Alicia and the Underground Press,” Didion reveals that the only newspapers she reads are the *Wall Street Journal* and underground rags like the *Berkeley Free Press* and the *East Village Other*. In Didion’s view, the virtue of these far-right and far-left publications is that they speak to their readers directly, overcoming “the inability of all of us to speak to one another in any direct way,” unmediated by journalistic conventions of detachment and objectivity, which alienate readers and writers alike. The Underground Press, by contrast, is “devoid of conventional press postures, so many of which rest upon a quite factitious ‘objectivity’” (4). By 1968 Didion was already associated with The New Journalism, which presented a radical challenge to traditional journalism, breaking down the barrier between writer and reader. Didion writes that she finds the underground press “amateurish . . . badly written . . . silly” and states flatly that “I have never read anything I needed to know in an underground paper” (6). But as Didion recognizes, people don’t read the underground press for facts as conventionally understood, the Who, What, When, Where and Why of conventional newspaper journalism. As Tom Wolfe observed, New Journalists focused not on the facts as conventionally understood, but on the scene, the zeitgeist of a place like the L.A. Strip in 1968. By dropping the pretense of objectivity, both the *WSJ* and the underground press shared the “assumption of a shared language and a common ethic” (6). Like the New Journalists, the underground press rejected the adoption of an institutional perspective masking as objectivity and openly admitted their biases.

Not surprisingly, these essays reveal Didion’s satirical eye and edge. In “Getting Serenity,” she reports on her visit to a meeting of Gamblers Anonymous, a community in which members attribute their addiction to forces

beyond their control, a group to whom “*mea culpa* always turns out to be not entirely *mea*” (15). Her essay “Pretty Nancy” Reagan, a companion piece to essay “Many Mansions” from her collection *The White Album* about Governor Reagan’s Sacramento home, presents a brief portrait of the former first lady in which Didion reveals a former actress flashing “the smile of a woman who seems to be playing out some middle-class American woman’s day-dream, circa 1948” (34). Other portraits are more appreciative, like “The Long Distance Runner” on director Tony Richardson. Perhaps the most unusual piece is “Fathers and Sons, Screaming Eagles” in which Didion uncharacteristically places herself in the background to draw a poignant contrast between World War Two and the Vietnam War as echoed in the voices of a group of veterans of the Battle of the Bulge.

Another companion piece essay is “On Being Unchosen by the College of One’s Choice,” which recalls the beginning of her essay “On Self-Respect” in which she painfully recalls being denied admission into the Phi Beta Kappa sorority at UC—Berkeley. Prior to that humiliation, Didion recalls the day she received a letter from Stanford informing her that she was “unchosen” for admission (27). The word “unchosen” suggests a state of innocence in which she assumes her acceptance before learning otherwise. Of course, Didion, poor girl, did end up, after some community college work, at prestigious Berkeley, but in a way her narrative is less about her and more about the reaction of her parents who reacted to the news of her unchosenness with relative complacency, an attitude for which she now feels thankful as she thinks of today’s parents and the pressures they place on their children. “What makes me uneasy is the sense that they are merging their children’s chances with their own” (29). This essay is interesting to read in light of recent high-profile cheating scandals Hollywood. Finally, however, the insecure young woman who went on to become one of America’s greatest living writers closes with the blunt fact that “of course none of it matters very much at all, none of these early successes, early failures” (29). As this wonderful collection attests, talent and longevity are the great equalizers.