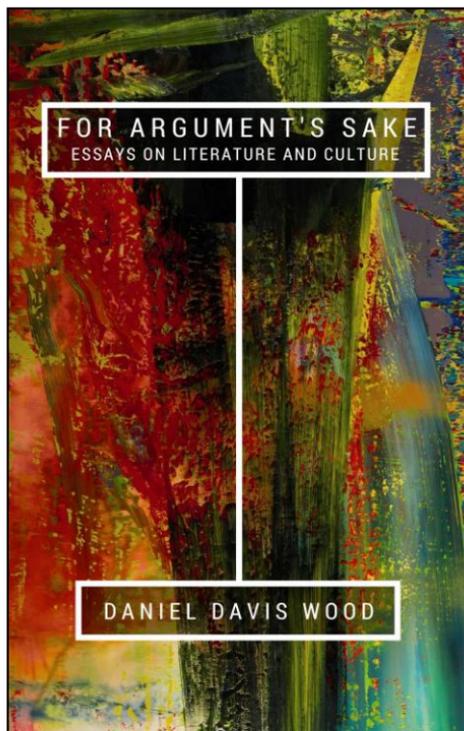


The following document is an extract from *For Argument's Sake: Essays on Literature and Culture* by Daniel Davis Wood, pages 401-405.

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EDITOR? EDITOR?

This note originally appeared online at *Infinite Patience* (28 November 2011).

UPON PUBLICATION IN LATE 2011, JOAN DIDION'S *BLUE NIGHTS* received some stellar and remarkably intelligent media coverage, most notably from Mary-Kay Wilmers ('What If'), Cathleen Schine ('Elegy to the Void'), and Matthew Specktor ('Positions of Privilege'). But then, to spoil the party, there was the coverage it received in Australia, and particularly in a review by Andrew Reimer which appeared in both the *Sydney Morning Herald* and Melbourne's *The Age* ('Constant Sorrow'). Those two publications aspire to be Australia's newspapers of record, each one offering a snapshot of the best local analysis of current events and public discourse, and Reimer, usually a reliably good essayist, is their chief book reviewer. Yet what Reimer wrote, and what those two papers published, was a report of *Blue Nights* which was labelled as a review but was so poorly written — so evasive, repetitive, and unspecific — that it has led me to suspect that Reimer didn't actually read the book under consideration.

The review in question runs to nine hundred words. The first three hundred words comprise a summary of Didion's previous book, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, a precursor to *Blue Nights*. The next one hundred and fifty words comprise a summary of the circumstances in which Didion published *Magical Thinking*, in the aftermath of the death of her daughter Quintana — circumstances that now occupy the foreground of *Blue Nights*. At this halfway point of the review, however, Reimer still hasn't mentioned *Blue Nights* itself but has folded Quintana's death into his coverage of *Magical Thinking*. Only after some five hundred and fifty words does he mention that *Blue Nights* is "an account of the illness and death of Quintana" ('Constant Sorrow') — that's after he expresses moral misgivings about *The Year of Magical Thinking* and after he discusses its stage adaptation — and then, almost two-thirds of the way into his review, he devotes only one paragraph to a description and evaluation of the book he is reviewing. At one hundred and fifty-four words, it makes up just seventeen per cent of the entire review:

Didion's skill is as evident in her new book as it was six years ago when she was working on *The Year of Magical Thinking*. The form and style are identical. This account of Quintana's death, coming as it did at a time when [her husband's] sudden death was still raw and immediate, is surrounded by Didion's memories: her marriage; the years during which the couple worked on screenplays; Quintana's childhood; the fate of relatives, friends and their children. A few details glossed over in the earlier book are highlighted here, particularly the fact that Quintana was an adopted child — this is only hinted at in *The Year of Magical Thinking*. There is, in addition, a new note sounded here: the panic of old age, the suspicion that both body and mind are decaying, the awareness that the familiar life — the people you had known and loved — has come to an end. ('Constant Sorrow')

In my experience with book reviews, there are three key flaws which suggest that a writer hasn't actually read the book they're writing about.

First: a total absence of quotes from the book. Despite his remarks on "Didion's skill" and on the "form and style" of *Blue Nights* ('Constant Sorrow'), Reimer relies entirely on paraphrasing and summarisation and does not use even one of his nine hundred words to quote Didion so that she might speak for herself.

Second: a disproportionate focus on authorial biography and historical context, combined with a tendency towards contextual repetition, at the expense of a focus on the book. One third of Reimer's review of *Blue Nights* is a summary of *The Year of Magical Thinking*. One third of the review is a summary of the context in which that book was published and adapted. Of the remaining one third, half consists of the paragraph quoted above and half consists of Reimer's repeated misgivings about Didion's work combined with his repeated acknowledgement of her stylistic gifts. "[S]peaking here personally," he says, "I think [her] choice" — to write publicly about the death of her husband in *The Year of Magical Thinking* — "was questionable." "As I have said," he continues, "Didion's skill, sensitivity and intelligence go some way towards redeeming [*Blue Nights*]. ... I cannot, however, banish my sense of uneasiness" ('Constant Sorrow'). Not once, not twice, but three times over, Reimer

acknowledges that Didion is a brave and stylistically skillful writer before he admits that her choice of subject matter makes him feel uneasy. Whether the stirring of such uneasiness might be part of Didion's aesthetic project in *Blue Nights* — whether she is carefully preying on some innate voyeurism in her readers in a way that calls attention to it — doesn't seem to occur to Reimer, much less to add complexity to his existing moral misgivings.

Third: brazen factual errors which suggest that the writer has relied on his or her memory of an event rather than consulting a record of it. Reimer, as quoted above, has this to say of the adoption of Quintana: "A few details glossed over in the earlier book are highlighted here, particularly the fact that Quintana was an adopted child — this is only hinted at in *The Year of Magical Thinking*." But here's how Didion "hint[s] at" Quintana's adoption in *The Year of Magical Thinking*, although I'd call these words something more than just hints:

In 1964 and 1965, when we were living in the gate house with the beach and the peacocks but could not afford even to tip the parking boys at restaurants, let alone eat in them, John and I used to park on the street on Canon and charge dinner at The Bistro. We took Quintana there on the day of her adoption, when she was not quite seven months old. They had given us Sidney Korshak's corner banquette and placed her carrier on the table, a centerpiece. At the courthouse that morning she had been the only baby, even the only child; all the other adoptions that day had seemed to involve adults adopting one another for tax reasons. (120)

Other flaws are added spice. Didion's career as an esteemed essayist and political analyst falls by the wayside — you'd never know from Reimer's review that she has written anything other than screenplays and *The Year of Magical Thinking* — and the last word goes not to Didion, nor even to anyone writing about Didion, but to Ludwig Wittgenstein, half-heartedly invoked. Reimer's review of *Blue Nights* conveys nothing of *Blue Nights* beyond its subject and the fact that Reimer is unsettled by it. It offers no taste of Didion's own words; it offers only an overlong survey of *The Year of Magical Thinking* and a factually

erroneous one at that. The whole review smacks of the sense that this writer has written about a book that he has only read about, rather than a book that he has read with care.

It's possible that Reimer wrote something closer to 1,500 words before some senseless editor axed the better part of his review and ripped out a fistful of Didion quotes for good measure. For Reimer's sake, I certainly hope that's the case because, as it stands, the review does a disservice to everyone associated with it: Didion's work isn't respected with careful consideration, readers who may or may not turn to it are not given any sense of it, Reimer looks a fool for attaching his name to an appraisal so underdeveloped, and the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age* tarnish their own prestige by pretending that this sort of writing deserves publication in newspapers of record. Can't Australia do better than this?

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