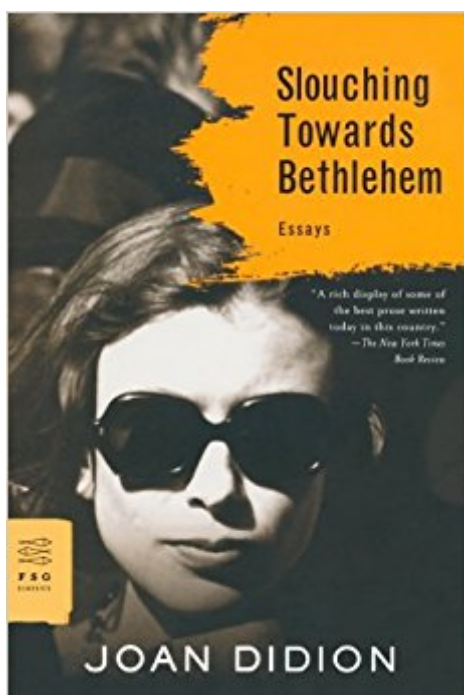


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Slouching Towards Bethlehem: Essays (FSG Classics)



Synopsis

The first nonfiction work by one of the most distinctive prose stylists of our era, Joan Didion's *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* remains, decades after its first publication, the essential portrait of America—particularly California—in the sixties. It focuses on such subjects as John Wayne and Howard Hughes, growing up a girl in California, ruminating on the nature of good and evil in a Death Valley motel room, and, especially, the essence of San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury, the heart of the counterculture.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

“In her portraits of people, Didion is not out to expose but to understand, and she shows us actors and millionaires, doomed brides and naive acid-trippers, left wing ideologues and snobs of the Hawaiian aristocracy in a way that makes them neither villainous nor glamorous, but alive and botched and often mournfully beautiful . . . A rich display of some of the best prose written today in this country.” —Dan Wakefield, *The New York Times Book Review*

Upon its publication in 1968, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* confirmed Joan Didion as one of the most prominent writers on the literary scene. Her unblinking vision and deadpan tone have influenced subsequent generations of reporters and essayists, changing our expectations of style, voice, and the artistic possibilities of nonfiction. "In her portraits of people," *The New York Times Book Review* wrote, "Didion is not out to expose but to understand, and she shows us actors and

millionaires, doomed brides and naive acid-trippers, left-wing ideologues and snobs of the Hawaiian aristocracy in a way that makes them neither villainous nor glamorous, but alive and botched and often mournfully beautiful. . . . A rare display of some of the best prose written today in this country." In essay after essay, Didion captures the dislocation of the 1960s, the disorientation of a country shredding itself apart with social change. Her essays not only describe the subject at hand--the murderous housewife, the little girl trailing the rock group, the millionaire bunkered in his mansion--but also offer a broader vision of America, one that is both terrifying and tender, ominous and uniquely her own. Joyce Carol Oates has written, "Joan Didion is one of the very few writers of our time who approaches her terrible subject with absolute seriousness, with fear and humility and awe. Her powerful irony is often sorrowful rather than clever. . . . She has been an articulate witness to the most stubborn and intractable truths of our time, a memorable voice, partly eulogistic, partly despairing; always in control."

This book of essays is a delight to read for anyone interested in invoking the 1960's in America. The writing is complex but flawless; Didion is a master observer. The words are carefully measured and impressively assembled. The choice and arrangement of the essays is not clear, but this is a book you can tuck into your travel bag or Kindle and read occasionally. Don't wait until the end of the book to read the Yeats poem that provides the title if you are unfamiliar with it.

A series of essays connected by location in California. Well written in a matter of fact way. First are interesting and then they become a bit tiresome and predictable. Not heavy going through and a fairly quick read. A worthwhile effort.

I would recommend this book to anyone who has a difficult time finding a modern or recently written novel to read or enjoys the Classics. Didion writes clearly while making one feel she or he is beside the author living and reliving experiences. As a native Californian my childhood memories returned of visiting Los Angeles as a child, sitting in the back of the Lincoln-Mercury station wagon while my mother drove for hours day and night on Highway 101 during the 1960's, and at night looking for the Firestone fire torches burning in front of the castle like factory. Didion's memories and writing stimulated my memories of California that once was and will never be again.

The book is a collection of articles/essays Didion published in various magazines. I read this book after reading an opinion that is it a classic of prose. I can't argue that. The writing is memorable and

a number of passages are haunting or insightful (or both). However, a reader does have to make a real commitment and I can understand if the book is not for everyone. Didion has an emotionally remote style that I found tiring by the end of the book. In addition, there is a tone I find an uneasy mixed of melancholy/cynicism/depression. Still, the style seemed to work, in at least some cases, when she moves to an evaluation of the subjects in that particular article. Especially noteworthy are the chapters on a Bay Area communist, John Wayne, and the people who populated the Haight-Ashbury in the 1960s. It's definitely not a 'pleasant' read, but is a worthwhile one. Maybe this was the author's intent. If so, she succeeded.

I was drawn to this because I am old enough to remember the Summer of Love and was curious to see how her experience compared with my memories. In general, it rang true. I am slowly reading my way through the remaining essays. Her work gives me much to ponder. Highly recommended if you can pause and reflect.

Joan Didion is one of my favorite writers. I haven't read much of her works of fiction but love her essays and memoirs. Her book "Where I Was From" is one of my all-time favorites but this book of essays was my first introduction to her writing. I'm probably at the end of my love affair with living in San Francisco so reading "Goodbye To All That" (an essay in this collection) resonates with me in a whole new way. These essays can seem a time capsule of the "at times" turbulent late 1960's, but to me it's a time capsule of a sensitive, young person just starting out in the world, chronicling her experiences with wisdom and editorial precision beyond her years.

This is my favorite collection of essays. Didion is a brilliant mind with a sharp eye for hypocrisy and irony in all scenarios, and every walk of life. "On Self Respect" is a must read for anyone-- but especially young women. There is no lesson more important in this life than learning how to own your actions and take responsibility for them. Didion sums up this lesson plainly within a few beautifully written pages, and reading it genuinely changed the way I live my life on a day to day basis.

This is the kind of essay that Truman Capote and E. B. White do better. It is roughly equal to Tom Wolfe's shorter work. Didion's mind is sea-level interesting, but her work doesn't hold you.

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