

People & Places

Obit

'Peerless prose stylist'

Didion, revered author and essayist, dies at 87

NEW YORK, Dec 25, (AP): **Joan Didion**, the revered author and essayist whose precise social and personal commentary in such classics as "The White Album" and "The Year of Magical Thinking" made her a uniquely clear-eyed critic of turbulent times, has died. She was 87.

Didion's publisher Penguin Random House announced the author's death on Thursday. She died from complications from Parkinson's disease, the company said.

"Didion was one of the country's most trenchant writers and astute observers. Her best-selling works of fiction, commentary, and memoir have received numerous honors and are considered modern classics," Penguin Random House said in a statement.

Along with Tom Wolfe, Nora Ephron and Gay Talese, Didion reigned in the pantheon of "New Journalists" who emerged in the 1960s and wedded literary style to nonfiction reporting. Tiny and frail even as a young woman, with large, sad eyes often hidden behind sun glasses and a soft, deliberate style of speaking, she was a novelist, playwright and essayist who once observed that



Didion

"I am so physically small, so temperamentally unobtrusive, and so neurotically inarticulate that people tend to forget that my presence runs counter to their best interests."

Or, as she more famously put it: "Writers are always selling somebody out."

Didion received a National Humanities Medal in 2012, when she was praised for devoting "her life to noticing things other people strive not to see." For decades, she had engaged in the cool and ruthless dissection of politics and culture, from hippies to presidential campaigns to the kidnapping of Patty Hearst, and for her distrust of official stories.

"Slouching Towards Bethlehem," "The White Album" and other books became essential collections of literary journalism, with notable writings including her takedown of Hollywood politics in "Good Citizens" and a prophetic dissent against the consensus that in 1989 five young Black and Latino men had raped a white jogger in Central Park (the men's convictions were later overturned and they were freed from prison).

Struggles

Didion was equally unsparring about her own struggles. She was diagnosed in her 30s with multiple sclerosis and around the same time suffered a breakdown and checked into a psychiatric clinic in Santa Monica, California that diagnosed her worldview as "fundamentally pessimistic, fatalistic and depressive." In her 70s, she reported on personal tragedy in the heart-breaking 2005 work, "The Year of Magical Thinking," a narrative formed out of the chaos of grief that followed the death of her husband and writing partner, John Gregory Dunne. It won a National Book Award, and she adapted it as a one-woman Broadway play that starred Vanessa Redgrave.

Dunne had collapsed in 2003 at their table and died of a heart attack even as their daughter, Quintana Roo Dunne Michael, was gravely ill in a hospital. The memoir was a best-seller and a near-instant standard, the kind of work people would instinctively reach for after losing a loved one. Didion said she thought of the work as a testament of a specific time; tragically, "Magical Thinking" became dated shortly after it was published. Quintana died during the summer of 2005 at age 39 of acute pancreatitis. Didion wrote of her daughter's death in the 2011 publication "Blue Nights."

"We have kind of evolved into a society where grieving is totally hidden. It doesn't take place in our family. It takes place not at all," she told The Associated Press in 2005. Didion spent her later years in New York, but she was most strongly identified with her native state of California, "a hologram that dematerializes as I drive through it." It was the setting for her best known novel, the despairing "Play It As It Lays," and for many of her essays.

"California belongs to Joan Didion," wrote The New York Times critic Michiko Kakutani. "Not the California where everyone wears aviator sunglasses, owns a Jacuzzi and buys his clothes on Rodeo Drive. But California in the sense of the West. The old West where Manifest Destiny was an almost palpable notion that was somehow tied to the land and the climate and one's own family."

Didion's subjects also included earthquakes, movie stars and Cuban exiles, but common themes emerged: the need to impose order where order doesn't exist, the gap between accepted wisdom and real life, the way people deceive themselves - and others - into believing the world can be explained in a straight, narrative line. Much of her nonfiction was collected in the 2006 book "We Tell Ourselves Stories in Order to Live," named after the opening sentence of her famous title essay from "The White Album," a testament to one woman's search for the truth behind the truth.

Narrative (cross head)
"We look for the sermon in the suicide, for the social or moral lesson in the murder of five," she wrote. "We live entirely, especially if we are writers, by the imposition of a narrative line upon disparate images, by the 'ideas' with which we have learned to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria which is our actual experience."

She was a lifelong explorer, writing about a trip to war torn El Salvador in the nonfiction "Salvador," and completing "A Book of Common Prayer" after a disastrous trip to a film festival in Colombia in the early 1970s. "South and West: From a Notebook," observations made while driving around the American South, came out in 2017, the same year nephew Griffin Dunne's documentary "Joan Didion: The Center Will Not Hold" was released. In 2019, the Library of America began compiling her work in bound volumes.

Didion prided herself on being an outsider, more comfortable with gas station attendants than with celebrities. But she and her husband, whose brother was the author-journalist Dominick Dunne, were well placed in high society. In California, they socialized with Warren Beatty and Steven Spielberg among others and a young Harrison Ford worked as a carpenter on their house. They later lived in a spacious apartment on Manhattan's Upper East Side, knew all the right people and had a successful side career as screenwriters, collaborating on "The Panic in Needle Park," a remake of "A Star Is Born" and adaptations of "Play It As It Lays" and his "True Confessions."

Born in 1934 in Sacramento, California and descended from pioneers who had traveled with the notorious Donner Party, Didion was fascinated by books from an early age.



Sudanese camel keepers crown a victorious contestant at Al Dhafra Festival in Liwa desert area 120 kilometres (75 miles) southwest of Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, Wednesday, Dec. 22. Tens of thousands of camels from across the region have descended on the desert of the United Arab Emirates to compete for the title of most beautiful. (AP)

Heritage

Al Dhafra Festival draws over 40,000 beautiful camels

Camels vie for beauty crowns in UAE

LIWA, United Arab Emirates, Dec 25, (AP): Deep in the desert of the United Arab Emirates, the moment that camel breeders had been waiting for arrived.

Families hauled their camels through wind-carved sands. Servers poured tiny cups of Arabic coffee. Judges descended on desert lots.

A single question loomed over the grandstand: Which camels were most beautiful?

Even as the omicron variant rips through the world, legions of breeders from Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia and Qatar traveled to the UAE's southwestern desert this week with 40,000 of their most beautiful camels for the Al Dhafra Festival.

The five-man jury at the annual pageant insists beauty is not in the eye of the beholder. Camel aesthetics are evaluated according to precise categories determined generations ago. Only female camels participate because males fight too much, authorities said.

As hundreds of woolly black camels trotted through the dusty pastures, necks and humps bobbing, one of the organizers, Mohammed al-Muhari, outlined the platonic ideal.

Necks must be long and slim, cheeks broad and hooves large, he told The Associated Press on Wednesday. Lips must droop. They must walk tall with graceful posture.

"It's not so different from humans," al-Muhari said, his robe sparkling white amid clouds of dust.

The high standards have prompted many breeders to seek an advantage, using banned Botox injections to inflate the camel's lips, muscle relaxants to soften the face and silicone wax injections to expand the hump.

Festival spokesman Abdel Hadi Saleh declined to say how many participants had been disqualified over plastic surgery this week. All camels undergo rigorous medical exams to detect artificial touch-ups and hormones before entering Al Dhafra Festival.

Since Emirati investigators began employing X-rays and sonar systems a few years ago, Saleh said the number of cheaters has plummeted.

"We easily catch them, and they realize getting caught, it's not worth the cost to their reputation," he said.

A great deal is at stake. Al Dhafra Festival offers the top 10 winners in each category prizes ranging from \$1,300 to \$13,600. At the main Saudi contest, the most beautiful fetch \$66 million. Camels change hands in deals worth millions of dirhams.

But breeders insist it's not only about the money.

"It is a kind of our heritage and custom that the (Emirati rulers) revived," said 27-year-old camel owner Saleh al-Minhali from Abu Dhabi. He sported designer sunglasses over his traditional headdress and Balenciaga sneakers under his kandura, or Emirati tunic.

Traditions

Gone are the days when camels were integral to daily life in the federation of seven sheikhdoms, a chapter lost as oil wealth and global business transformed Dubai and Abu Dhabi into skyscraper-studded hubs with marbled malls, luxury hotels and throbbing nightclubs. Foreigners outnumber locals nearly nine to one in the country.

However, experts say Emiratis are increasingly searching for meaning in echoes of the past - Bedouin traditions that prevailed before the UAE became a nation 50 years ago.

"Younger Emiratis who have identity issues are going back to their heritage to find a sense of belonging," said Rima Sabban, a sociologist at Zayed University in Dubai. "The society developed and modernized so fast it creates a crisis inside."

Camels race at old-world racetracks in the Emirates, and still offer milk, meat and a historic touchstone to citizens. Festivals across the country celebrate the camel's significance. Al Dhafra also features falcon racing, dromedary dancing and a camel milking contest.

"People in Dubai may not even think about them, but young people here care deeply about camels," said Mahmoud Suboh, a festival coordina-

tor from Liwa Oasis at the northern edge of the desert's Empty Quarter. Since 2008, he has watched the fairgrounds transform from a remote desert outpost into an extravaganza that draws camel lovers from around the world.

In a sign of the contest's exploding popularity, about a dozen young Emirati men who call themselves "camel influencers" filmed and posed with the camels on Wednesday, broadcasting live to thousands of Instagram followers.

The digital likes have proven important this year, as the coronavirus pandemic curtailed tourism to the festival and dampened the mood. Police checked that visitors had received both vaccine doses and tested negative for the virus. Authorities nagged attendees to adjust their face masks, threatening fines. There were few foreigners or other spectators strolling the site Wednesday.

Each category in the 10-day pageant is divided into two types of camels: Mahaliyat, the tan breed that originates from the UAE and Oman, and Majaaheen, the darker breed from Saudi Arabia. Wednesday's showcase focused on 5-year-old black Majaaheen camels.

For hours, judges scrutinized each camel, scribbling lists of the animal's body parts for scoring purposes. Breeders shouted to startle camels so they'd look up and show off elongated necks.

As the sun set over the sands, the winning breeders were called to accept their gleaming trophies. Down below in the dirt rings, camels were crowned with gold and silver-lined shawls.

"Until now we are the first in the category ... We've received over 40 prizes (in various camel contests) this year alone," beamed Mohammed Saleh bin Migrin al-Amri as he juggled four trophies from the day, including two golds.

Then he jumped into his Toyota Land Cruiser. The victory parade of honking SUVs and grunting camels faded behind the desert dunes.



Author Joan Didion accepts the 2007 Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters at the 58th National Book Awards in New York, Wednesday, Nov. 14, 2007. Didion, the revered author and essayist whose provocative social commentary and detached, methodical literary voice made her a uniquely clear-eyed critic of a uniquely turbulent time, has died. She was 87. (AP)



Rita Jenrette



Nicolò

Variety

NEW YORK: YouTube TV began restoring access to Disney content after a dispute between the companies led to an interruption of service over the weekend.

YouTube told viewers they were restoring service so customers could once again watch networks provided by Disney such as ESPN, FX, National Geographic and local ABC stations.

During the outage, viewers lost access to all live Disney content including recordings they had saved to their libraries.

The outage stemmed from a breakdown in negotiations between YouTube and Disney over the contract between the companies, which expired. YouTube had wanted Disney to charge the company the same rate to carry its content that it charged other TV providers of similar size. The companies reached agreement.

YouTube apologized for the disruption and said it would provide a \$15 credit to impacted customers. (AP)

ROME: A villa in the heart of Rome that features the only known ceiling painted by Caravaggio is being put up for auction by court order after the home was restored by its last occupants: a Texas-born princess and her late husband, a member of one of Rome's aristocratic families.

The Casino dell'Aurora, also known as Villa Ludovisi, was built in 1570 and has been in the Ludovisi family since the early 1600s. After Prince Nicolò Boncompagni Ludovisi died in 2018, the villa became the subject of an inheritance dispute between the children from his first marriage and his third wife, Rita Jenrette Boncompagni Ludovisi.

A judge recently ordered the villa put up for auction, which is scheduled for Jan 18, with its value estimated at 471 million euros (\$533 million) and a starting bid set at 353 million euros (\$400 million).

The listing on the Rome tribunal's auction site highlights its many attributes, though it notes that 11 million euros (\$12.5 million) in renovations will be necessary to make it comply with current standards. A "monumental property" on six levels, the listing says it is "among the most prestigious architectural and landscape beauties of pre-unification Rome," with three garages, the Caravaggio, two roof terraces and a "splendid garden with arboreal essences

and tall trees, pedestrian paths, stairs and rest areas."

The American princess, who was formerly married to former US congressman John Jenrette, Jr, tears up as she contemplates leaving her home of nearly 20 years. When she married Boncompagni Ludovisi in 2009, the villa had fallen into disrepair, and her new husband only used it as an office.

"I started really trying to restore it as much as I could, within means," Mrs Boncompagni Ludovisi said during a tour

of the property. "Really, you need to be a billionaire, not a millionaire. You need to be a billionaire if you have a house like this, a historic home, because you want to do everything right. You don't want to get anything wrong."

In 2010, the couple decided to open the villa to the public for tour groups and dinners to help fund the continued upkeep and renovations. Aside from the Caravaggio ceiling and the lush gardens outside, the 2,800-square-meter (30,000-square-foot) home off the swank Via Veneto features

frescoes by Guercino. It also has - as Mrs Boncompagni Ludovisi likes to note - had a storied line of visitors over the centuries, including American-British author Henry James and Russian composer Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky.

"After a period of time, you'd think you get used to it. But I never did," she says.

The Caravaggio was commissioned in 1597 by a diplomat and patron of the arts who asked the young painter to decorate the ceiling of a small room he used as an alchemy workshop. The 2.75-meter (nine-foot) wide mural, which depicts Jupiter, Pluto and Neptune, is unusual: It's not a fresco, but rather oil on plaster, and represents the only ceiling mural that Caravaggio is known to have made.

"It is a rare image on the one hand, and on the other of great value, because it is by an outstanding artist," said Claudio Strinati, an art historian and Caravaggio expert. "The choice of the oil-on-wall technique probably stems from the fact that Caravaggio didn't know how to paint frescoes technically."

Mrs Boncompagni Ludovisi hopes eventually the Italian government will acquire the villa so it can remain in the public domain. As an historic site protected by the Culture Ministry, Italy can try to match the highest bid at the auction.

For now, she is enjoying her final moments with the treasures.

"Sometimes I go up there and I take my yoga mat and I do my yoga beneath the Caravaggio, because it's very relaxing," she said. "And now, knowing I'll be leaving I guess when that auction happens, I treasure every moment. I treasure every moment, every memory." (AP)



Victorious camel breeders accept a trophy for their camel at Al Dhafra Festival in Liwa desert area 120 kilometres (75 miles) southwest of Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, Wednesday, Dec. 22 (AP)