

The Piety of an Empty Heart —Joan Didion: *A Book of Common Prayer*

Few executives at Gulf & Western — whose subsidiary published the book — are apt to be caught by Joan Didion's novel, but their daughters and wives are likely to be entranced. For that reason, if for no other, it might pay businessmen to dip into this tale of life gone awry amid the wealthy leftwing. Didion is a star among liberated women writers, and her work epitomizes attitudes that regularly well from the pages of women's magazines, the women's sections in newspapers, and the literature of the ERA movement. Such perfect samples are hard to find, and executives at Gulf & Western would be particularly rewarded by reading Ms. Didion's book, for they are in the position of restaurant operators unaware that some of the cooks are poisoning the soup.

The plot is simple, once the reader unravels flashbacks and the folds of style. Mrs. Douglas, 40, a thin and wealthy Californian, married to an international lawyer whose clients are mostly Third World puppets, learns that her daughter has joined a revolutionary group that detonated a bomb in San Francisco; she then hijacked a PSA plane, set it afire in Utah, vanished — and is being sought by the authorities. The unknown fate of her "child" — as the daughters is always described — unhinges Mrs. Douglas who meets her misfortune in the *Zeitgeist* vein. She leaves her husband to join her ex-husband in a drunken and extended ramble through the southern states of the East, punctuated by innumerable copulations, nasty scenes, three-person sex and glimpses of various homes, motel rooms and country clubs. Mrs. Douglas is pregnant during this tour, but that does not distract her too much. Her amniotic fluid breaks on a plane ride to New Orleans, but she delivers her baby in a clinic. Learning her ex-husband has terminal cancer, she flees the clinic with her newborn infant, though she knows it was born encephalitic, with "no viable" liver function, and cannot survive. Later it dies — in her arms, of course — in the parking lot of a Coca-Cola bottling plant in Mexico, a refined touch of literary symbolism.

Mrs. Douglas then wafts into a mythical Central American republic called Boca Grande, where she is watched and her saga narrated in disjointed snippets out of sequence by a locally important landowner called Grace Strasser-Mendana, an American-born anthropologist and amateur biochemist. Boca Grande—or Big Mouth—is at first described as consisting mainly of corrugated huts beside a "lifeless" sea, but later develops neighborhoods where nurses push baby carriages. Still later it becomes clear that Big Mouth has a landscape whose features conveniently alter at the will of the author, like the scenery in the old Krazy Kat comic strip.

Sra. Strasser-Mendana (someone should tell the author that Latins do not hyphenate last names; that is an English custom), resident seer in the novel, is also dying of cancer. Her son Gerardo is depicted as a Latin lecher and politico; his wife as a fool. Her nephew, Antonio, is termed a "sociopath" and in turn he repeatedly calls Mrs. Douglas obscene names that in some books would be considered coarse, but amidst Ms. Didion's mock-litanies about pestilences, diseases, parasites, Parisian name dresses, limousines, emeralds, caviar with an Israeli general at Lod Airport and other *haut monde* references of the sort familiar to readers of *Vogue*, they merge into a style which successfully camouflages a moral and psychological vapidness of those who talk as well as the one who created the talking. In the end, Mrs. Douglas is shot to death during a Big Mouth revolution, just after learning her missing daughter's whereabouts—and refusing to leave.

Dramatic descriptions of settings and creations of mood are Ms. Didion's *forte*, but catharsis, that little philosophical gismo used for ages by writers who care about credibility when they unleash the forces of life and death, seems to be a word to which she has not yet been introduced.

As is usual in modern women's novels the men are uniformly weak and outclassed by

the women, but Ms. Didion is unusual in being remarkably hard on everyone. No group — whether Jewish, Islamic, Latin or American—is portrayed in other than withering sarcasms. In the aggregate this astonishes, for the author is considered a successful woman which should have entitled her to a bit of magnanimity. Apparently, the latter does not sell these days at Brentano's which somehow coincides with the circumstance that novels like this one do sell but remain alive only during their sojourn on the bestseller list.

Ms. Didion's novel conveys a sense of despair and a conviction that life is meaningless. It merits attention not for such unhappy views, but because the authoress is considered a leading light among a fashionable coterie. Her work is a good example of what major New York publishers consider a serious offering to this nation. Beyond that, there is an essential observation that must be made regarding

the judgment of both the author and the publisher. Whichever its metaphoric innuendo, to title this compendium of dreary and messy existences *A Book of Common Prayer* is to insult not only the members of the Episcopal Church. That the editors of Simon and Schuster could so openly reveal such an anti-Christian prejudice is another and very important subject the executives at Gulf & Western would do well to talk over at their family tables with their children who, after reading enthusiastic reviews in the liberal press, might consider Ms. Didion a spiritual and behavioral beacon — instead of a firefly — of our times.

—Otto J. Scott

Mr. Scott, a native New Yorker, published biographies of James I and Robespierre, and now writes from San Diego.

The Liberal Opinion

"Like her narrator, she (Didion) 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." — *The New York Times Book Review*.

"... Joan Didion has produced a remarkable modern variation on Henry James' *The Portrait of a Lady*." — *Time*.

"This is a remarkably good novel." — *Newsweek*.

"No one, I suppose, would be likely to accuse Didion of naivete. Her work is pungent with knowingness... Under her pared phrases one senses the quick of desire for something more noble, more tender, and more enduring than crass contemporary realism..." — *Saturday Review*.

"There is a nobility here, across the board. It is a sense of having hung around for the worst, and having taken the best when it unhid itself... A sense that the prominence of the unsavory (and the diminished and compressed and symbolic) exceeds its light, that to know anything whole and tell it whole, is to survive it." — *New Times*.

Fish Story—

Lois Gould: *A Sea-Change*

Lois Gould's latest novel, *A Sea-Change*, is pretentious, silly, and mostly plain dull. The story concerns two women, two young girls, and two men. Much of the action takes place during a hurricane, and in that crisis one of the women emerges as a resourceful leader, responsible for saving the lives of other characters. The novel in fact might have been a survival story, or an analysis of a personality under stress, but Miss Gould unfortunately has a cause to serve, and her dedication to that cause interferes with her art. She establishes symbolic connections with all the subtlety of a sledge hammer, but at the end even she gets confused about whether to deliver one more condemnation of the male-dominated world which has distorted her heroine, or sing praises of female ingenuity and toughness. Her uncertainty, however, does not quite rise to the level of that ambivalence which makes novels art.

There is, at least, no ambiguity about the basis for Miss Gould's message. One of the epigraphs of the novel is borrowed from D.R. Robertson's *Social Control of Sex Reversal in Coral-Reef Fish*, and the passage deserves to be quoted:

Males of *labroides dimidiatus* control the process of sex reversal in social groups. Each group consists of a male with a harem of females, among which larger individuals dominate smaller ones. The male in each harem suppresses the tendency of the females to change sex, by actively dominating them. Death of the male releases this suppression and the dominant female of the harem changes sex immediately.

Lest any one miss the relevance of ichthyology to events in the novel, the authoress generously adds a note explaining that *labroides dimidiatus* is related to certain cold water fish "native to the Atlantic Ocean, off New York." Thus the

reader can hardly be surprised when a short time later he finds himself off New York at a place called Andrea Island and in the company of a set of characters suspiciously resembling the social group of the fish. For good measure, in case anyone has suffered a lapse of memory between the epigraph and the concluding chapters, Miss Gould's heroine-become-hero removes at last with her/his harem to a nearby spot called Reef Island.

The same delicacy of touch governs the presentation of the human social group. Roy Waterman (!) is the king who dominates the harem. He is a moderately successful producer of animated television shows and is "no more of a sexual bully than most men of his time and place." During the hurricane Roy's position is temporarily filled by a wandering Coast Guardsman, Surfman Leo Bailey. (Miss Gould apparently finds name games irresistible.) The "harem" itself comprises the four female characters. Two of them are Roy's daughters, although the girls are only half-sisters, for old Roy has a number of ex-wives and a prodigious quantity of what he calls "ex-children" scattered abroad. The older girl, Diane, is fond of translating Latin poetry and masturbating; the younger, Robin, plays with a collection of dolls representing famous women in history and is the vehicle for little lectures on such topics as the unfairness of (male) historians toward Hatshepsut. The third member of the group is Roy's latest mistress, who happens also to be an old college chum of the dominant female of the harem, Roy's present wife. Poor Jessie Waterman, an erstwhile model and, at least when the novel opens, an "old" rather than a "new" woman, is the fish who undergoes the pronounced change, eventually coming to call herself — Miss Gould's way with names — B.G. Kilroy.