

## Why I Write

By Joan Didion

Of course I stole the title for this talk, from George Orwell. One reason I stole it was that I like the sound of the words: Why I Write. There you have three short unambiguous words that share a sound, and the sound they share is this:

*I*

*I*

*I*

In many ways writing is the act of saying *I*, of imposing oneself upon other people, of saying *listen to me, see it my way, change your mind*. It's an aggressive, even a hostile act. You can disguise its qualifiers and tentative subjunctives, with ellipses and evasions—with the whole manner of intimating rather than claiming, of alluding rather than stating—but there's no getting around the fact that setting words on paper is the tactic of a secret bully, an invasion, an imposition of the writer's sensibility on the reader's most private space.

I stole the title not only because the words sounded right but because they seemed to sum up, in a no-nonsense way, all I have to tell you. Like many writers I have only this one "subject," this one "area": the act of writing. I can bring you no reports from any other front. I may have other interests: I am "interested," for example, in marine biology, but I don't flatter myself that you would come out to hear me talk about it. I am not a scholar. I am not in the least an intellectual, which is not to say that when I hear the word "intellectual" I reach for my gun, but only to say that I do not think in abstracts. During the years when I was an undergraduate at Berkeley I tried, with a kind of hopeless late-adolescent energy, to buy some temporary visa into the world of ideas, to forge for myself a mind that could deal with the abstract.

In short I tried to think. I failed. My attention veered inexorably back to the specific, to the tangible, to what was generally considered, by everyone I knew then and for that matter have known since, the peripheral. I would try to contemplate the Hegelian dialectic and would find myself concentrating instead on a flowering pear tree outside my window and the particular way the petals fell on my floor. I would try to read linguistic theory and would find myself wondering instead if the lights were on in the bevatron up the hill. When I say that I was wondering if the lights were on in the bevatron you might immediately suspect, if you deal in ideas at all, that I was registering the bevatron as a political symbol, thinking in shorthand about the military-industrial complex and its role in the university community, but you would be wrong. I was only wondering if the lights were on in the bevatron, and how they looked. A physical fact.

I had trouble graduating from Berkeley, not because of this inability to deal with ideas—I was majoring in English, and I could locate the house-and-garden imagery in *The Portrait of a Lady* as well as the next person, "imagery" being by definition the kind of specific that got my attention—but simply because I had neglected to take a course in Milton. I did this. For reasons which now sound baroque I needed a degree by the end of that summer, and the English department finally agreed, if I would come down from Sacramento every Friday and talk about the cosmology of *Paradise Lost*, to certify me proficient in Milton. I did this. Some Fridays I took the Greyhound bus, other Fridays I caught the Southern Pacific's City of San Francisco on the last leg of its transcontinental trip. I can no longer tell you whether Milton put the sun or the earth at the center of his

universe in *Paradise Lost*, the central question of at least one century and a topic about which I wrote 10,000 words that summer, but I can still recall the exact rancidity of the butter in the City of San Francisco's dining car, and the way the tinted windows on the Greyhound bus cast the oil refineries around Carquinez Straits into a grayed and obscurely sinister light. In short my attention was always on the periphery, on what I could see and taste and touch, on the butter, and the Greyhound bus. During those years I was traveling on what I knew to be a very shaky passport, forged papers: I knew that I was no legitimate resident in any world of ideas. I knew I couldn't think. All I knew then was what I couldn't do. All I knew then was what I wasn't, and it took me some years to discover what I was.

Which was a writer.

By which I mean not a "good" writer or a "bad" writer but simply a writer, a person whose most absorbed and passionate hours are spent arranging words on pieces of paper. Had my credentials been in order I would never have become a writer. Had I been blessed with even limited access to my own mind there would have been no reason to write. I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means. What I want and what I fear. Why did the oil refineries around Carquinez Straits seem sinister to me in the summer of 1956? Why have the night lights in the bevatron burned in my mind for twenty years? *What is going on in these pictures in my mind?*

When I talk about pictures in my mind I am talking, quite specifically, about images that shimmer around the edges. There used to be an illustration in every elementary psychology book showing a cat drawn by a patient in varying stages of schizophrenia. This cat had a shimmer around it. You could see the molecular structure breaking down at the very edges of the cat: the cat became the background and the background the cat, everything interacting, exchanging ions. People on hallucinogens describe the same perception of objects. I'm not a schizophrenic, nor do I take hallucinogens, but certain images do shimmer for me. Look hard enough, and you can't miss the shimmer. It's there. You can't think too much about these pictures that shimmer. You just lie low and let them develop. You stay quiet. You don't talk to many people and you keep your nervous system from shorting out and you try to locate the cat in the shimmer, the grammar in the picture.

Just as I meant "shimmer" literally I mean "grammar" literally. Grammar is a piano I play by ear, since I seem to have been out of school the year the rules were mentioned. All I know about grammar is its infinite power. To shift the structure of a sentence alters the meaning of that sentence, as definitely and inflexibly as the position of a camera alters the meaning of the object photographed. Many people know about camera angles now, but not so many know about sentences. The arrangement of the words matters, and the arrangement you want can be found in the picture in your mind. The picture dictates the arrangement. The picture dictates whether this will be a sentence with or without clauses, a sentence that ends hard or a dying-fall sentence, long or short, active or passive. The picture tells you how to arrange the words and the arrangement of the words tells you, or tells me, what's going on in the picture. *Nota bene.*\*

It tells you.

You don't tell it.

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\* "Note well."

Let me show you what I mean by pictures in the mind. I began *Play It as It Lays* just as I have begun each of my novels, with no notion of “character” or “plot” or even “incident.” I had only two pictures in my mind, more about which later, and a technical intention, which was to write a novel so elliptical and fast that it would be over before you noticed it, a novel so fast that it would scarcely exist on the page at all. About the picture: the first was of white space. Empty space. This was clearly the picture that dictated the narrative intention of the book—a book in which anything that happened would happen off the page, a “white” book to which the reader would have to bring his or her own bad dreams—and yet this picture told me no “story,” suggested no situation. The second picture did. This second picture was of something actually witnessed. A young woman with long hair and a short white halter walks through the casino at the Riviera in Las Vegas at one in the morning. She crosses the casino alone and picks up a house telephone. I watch her because I have heard her paged, and recognize her name: she is a minor actress I see around Los Angeles from time to time, in places like Jax and once in a gynecologist’s office in the Beverly Hills Clinic, but have never met. I know nothing about her. Who is paging her? Why is she here to be paged? How exactly did she come to this? It was precisely this moment in Las Vegas that made *Play It as It Lays* begin to tell itself to me, but the moment appears in the novel only obliquely, in a chapter which begins:

“Maria made a list of things she would never do. She would never: walk through the Sands or Caesar’s alone after midnight. She would never: ball at a party, do S-M unless she wanted to, borrow furs from Abe Lipsey, deal. She would never: carry a Yorkshire in Beverly Hills.”

That is the beginning of the chapter and that is also the end of the chapter, which may suggest what I meant by “white space.”

I recall having a number of pictures in my mind when I began the novel I just finished, *A Book of Common Prayer*. As a matter of fact one of these pictures was of that bevatron I mentioned, although I would be hard put to tell you a story in which nuclear energy figures. Another was a newspaper photograph of a hijacked 707 burning on the desert in the Middle East. Another was the night view from a room in which I once spent a week with paratyphoid, a hotel room on the Colombian coast. My husband and I seemed to be on the Colombian coast representing the United States of America at a film festival (I recall invoking the name “Jack Valenti” a lot, as if its reiteration could make me well), and it was a bad place to have fever, not only because my indisposition offended our hosts but because every night in this hotel the generator failed. The lights went out. The elevator stopped. My husband would go to the event of the evening and make excuses for me and I would stay alone in this hotel room, in the dark. I remember standing at the window trying to call Bogotá (the telephone seemed to work on the same principle as the generator) and watching the night wind come up and wondering what I was doing eleven degrees off the equator with a fever of 103. The view from that window definitely figures in *A Book of Common Prayer*, as does the burning 707, and yet none of these pictures told me the story I needed.

The picture that did, the picture that shimmered and made these other images coalesce, was the Panama airport at 6 A.M. I was in this airport only once, on a plane to Bogotá that stopped for an hour to refuel, but the way it looked that morning remained superimposed on everything I saw until the day I finished *A Book of Common Prayer*. I

lived in that airport for several years. I can still feel the hot air when I step off the plane, can see the heat already rising off the tarmac at 6 A.M. I can feel my skirt damp and wrinkled on my legs. I can feel the asphalt stick to my sandals. I remember the big tail of a Pan American plane floating motionless down at the end of the tarmac. I remember the sound of a slot machine in the waiting room. I could tell you that I remember a particular woman in the airport, an American woman, a *norteamericana*, a think *norteamericana* about forty who wore a big square emerald in lieu of a wedding ring, but there was no such woman there.

I put this woman in the airport later. I made this woman up, just as I later made up a country to put the airport in, and a family to run the country. This woman in the airport is neither catching a plane nor meeting one. She is ordering tea in the airport coffee shop. In fact she is not simply "ordering" tea but insisting that the water be boiled, in front of her, for twenty minutes. Why is this woman in this airport? Why is she going nowhere, where has she been? Where did she get that big emerald? What derangement, or disassociation, makes her believe that her will to see the water boiled can possibly prevail?

"She had been going to one airport or another for four months, one could see it, looking at the visas on her passport. All those airports where Charlotte Douglas's passport had been stamped would have looked alike. Sometimes the sign on the tower would say "Bienvenidos" and sometimes the sign on the tower would say "Bienvenue," some places were wet and hot and others dry and hot, but at each of these airports the pastel concrete walls would rust and stain and the swamp off the runway would be littered with the fuselages of cannibalized Fairchild F-227's and the water would need boiling.

"I knew why Charlotte went to the airport even if Victor did not.

"I knew about airports."

These lines appear about halfway through *A Book of Common Prayer*, but I wrote them during the second week I worked on the book, long before I had any idea where Charlotte Douglas had been or why she went to airports. Until I wrote these lines I had no character called "Victor" in mind: the necessity for mentioning a name, and the name "Victor," occurred to me as I wrote the sentence. *I knew why Charlotte went to the airport* sounded incomplete. *I knew why Charlotte went to the airport even if Victor did not* carried a little more narrative drive. Most important of all, until I wrote these lines I did not know who "I" was, who was telling the story. I had intended until then that the "I" be no more than the voice of the author, a nineteenth-century omniscient narrator. But there it was:

"I knew why Charlotte went to the airport even if Victor did not.

"I knew about airports."

This "I" was the voice of no author in my house. This "I" was someone who not only knew why Charlotte went to the airport but also knew someone called "Victor." Who was Victor? Who was this narrator? Why was this narrator telling me this story? Let me tell you one thing about why writers write: had I known the answer to any of these questions I would never have needed to write a novel.

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## “Why I Write” Rick Moody

I abandoned two novels when I was in sixth grade. I got maybe 10 pages into each. One was about a kid who becomes vice president. I still have the weird little blank book that I used to attempt to write it. The itch to do my job goes at least that far back.

Why do I write? To do better for myself than I am capable of doing with language, out there, in real time. To repair inabilities, to restore confidences. And, at this point, because I don't know what else to do. I write just as I breathe and eat. Every day. Habitually.

It would be easier if I could say that one thing happens when I write, or, perhaps, that a number of predictable things happen. But the truth is that a great number of things have happened, over the years, when I have been writing, and that these things are unpredictable, hard to quantify, and mutable.

I guess I have now been writing, if I date my writing from the first time I ever rewrote anything, for about 33 years. Publishing books for about 20. Sometimes the writing is inspired or inspiring; sometimes it is destitute of anything but the need to keep working. I guess what I'm saying is that what happens to me is so variable that it would be kind of foolish to try to attach names to it. I do think, however, that just about whenever I am writing, or more accurately, whenever I have written, I feel better and more at peace as a human being. That doesn't mean, unfortunately, that the literary product is any good.

### Responding to George Orwell's “Four Great Motives for Writing”

1. *Sheer egoism. “To be talked about, to be remembered after death, to get your own back on grown-ups in childhood, etc.”*

Writing out of bile, e.g., or out of some personal desire for gain—that just doesn't square with what makes literature useful, profound, etc. My reason is mainly neurotic. I suspect: I am never really comfortable speaking, and writing allows me the time and serenity to make better what I cannot do in speech. It's a peaceful and cloistered space, the page, where I don't feel pressured the way I do in the world.

2. *Aesthetic enthusiasm. “To take pleasure in the impact of one sound on another, in the firmness of good prose or the rhythm of a good story.”*

Yes, this is a possible reason to write. I imagine I am trying to think about prose the way I think about music. I try to think of prose as a musical form, not just as a code we agree to use in order to advance a plot. Aesthetic enthusiasm is mainly what motivates me, because aesthetic enthusiasm has no particular narrative requirements.

3. *Historical impulse. “The desire to see things as they are, to find out true facts and store them up for the use of posterity.”*

I sure hope posterity is interested in me, but I figure I'll be dead by then, and you can't take posterity with you when you are gone.

4. *Political purposes. “The opinion that art should have nothing to do with politics is itself a political attitude.”*

A lovely sentence, really, and one I agree with. I think all art is political, but that some art, by being quiet about its politics, supports the status quo in a slightly sinister way. I have always tried to stake out political positions in what I do, but not in a manner, I hope, that is aesthetically dull (see No. 2), or too shrill, etc. I believe the two—aesthetics and politics—may go hand in hand. Even if that argument never sat well with the social realists or the art-for-art's-sake crowd.

### **Responding to Joan Didion**

*"Writing is the act of saying I, of imposing oneself upon other people, of saying listen to me, see it my way, change your mind."*

If it were just this, the first person, I would probably want to give up and do something else with my life. Although there's inevitability to "I," to a point of view that starts with self; it is not all there is. There is also "thou," as embodied in the reader. I see a real exchange with the reader, who is free to bring what she wants to the work. In this context, writing is not as expression of self, but as relief from self (T.S. Eliot, I believe).

### **Responding to Terry Tempest Williams**

*"I write to meet my ghosts."*

Sounds interesting, but might be too metaphorical and too hyperbolic for me.

### **Nomenclature**

I am never terribly comfortable with the word "writer."

I had a teacher, when young, who said the word "writer" was unimportant. He said that all that was important was the work itself. And I sort of agree with this approach. I think there's an instability that goes with writing, a lack of certainty, at least for me. This lack of certainty makes me more responsive to the world, more open to it. And so if I have to repel the word "writer" in order to maintain my openness and vulnerability to the world, then fine. I'll let go of the word. I do use it sometimes for the sake of simplicity, or so as to avoid confusing people, but I never feel totally comfortable about it.

### **First Break**

The first break I got was having my first novel published after 16 months or so of failing to get anyone interested in it. Seemed like a big break to me at the time.

I always sort of thought I'd be a failure. I still sort of think I might be a failure. So just having a book out in the world made me very happy. I didn't much think, at first, about whether I was going to sell a lot of copies. I didn't pay attention to that sort of thing. I still don't. I don't think I have ever, not even once, willingly checked to see how many copies anything by me has sold.

In the years since my "big break," I have mainly made a living by writing, but also by teaching and doing campus workshops and appearances.

It's really hard for me to carve off the writing part from the just being alive part, and so I don't imagine I can really find a "best time" that just refers to my writing life. I think maybe the best thing that ever happened to me was becoming a father in 2008, although a close second would be checking myself into the psychiatric hospital in 1987. That turned out to be a very good move. I am a better writer for having fewer demons, and I am more curious about the world and the people in it. So those of you thinking you might need your demons in order to be creative: I beg to differ.

### **Hard Time**

Writing is always hard. As we all know, there's a lot of rejection involved.

Even now I find the rejection part of the job pretty challenging. I am not a strong enough person, in some ways, to live this life. I try not to envy other writers. I think nothing is worse for me, and for literature and the literary world. And don't even get me started on reviews.

I don't solve personal problems for myself by writing. The writing is the escape from the personal. Sometimes I cause problems, writing first and only thinking later. Those can only be solved in the usual ways, through time, conversation, willingness to reconcile, etc.

I think the good for me comes in continuing to work and trying, a little bit, to believe in what I do.

### **Caution: Reading Can Lead to Writing**

I like books, the actual, physical things. I like to carry them around. I don't mind how heavy they are, and I don't need a lot of bells and whistles on my books.

Before I ever wrote, I was a voracious reader. Both my parents are people who always have a novel they're reading. A kind of object fetishism of book as a sacred object runs in my family and was imparted to me at a young age. I don't know exactly how long the book as we know it will exist, but I fully expect to make it to my death without having to give up on books.

### **Merciless**

My big ambition is to avoid doing the same thing twice. The process of composition, messing around with paragraphs and trying to make really good prose, is an essential part of my personality, and I judge myself very, very harshly. I am all but entirely merciless about myself and my work. Alas. Those who are otherwise are probably healthier.

### **My Wisdom for Writers**

Trying to fit your writing into conventional commercial forms in hopes of getting published is a losing proposition. Losing more interesting experimental work to the constraints of the publishing industry would be a great loss for us all.

Structure in a novel is something you discover, not something you superimpose. Don't sit at your keyboard and be a slave to an outline.

When you're writing a novel, you have to keep the whole thing in your head. So it's good to go somewhere quiet to work, and it's good if you can find the time to binge on the work for a few days without interruption.

From *Why We Write: 20 Acclaimed Authors On How and Why They Do What They Do*, edited by Meredith Maran.

In "Why I Write," originally published in the New York Times Book Review in December of 1976 and found in *The Writer on Her Work, Volume 1* (public library), Joan Didion "whose indelible insight on self-respect is a must-read for all" peels the curtain on one of the most celebrated and distinctive voices of American fiction and literary journalism. One reason I stole it was that I like the sound of the words: Why I Write. Why I Write, the essay of George Orwell. First published: summer 1946 by/in *Gangrel*, GB, London. From a very early age, perhaps the age of five or six, I knew that when I grew up I should be a writer. Between the ages of about seventeen and twenty-four I tried to abandon this idea, but I did so with the consciousness that I was outraging my true nature and that sooner or later I should have to settle down and write books. "Why I Write" (1946) is an essay by George Orwell detailing his personal journey to becoming a writer. It was first published in the Summer 1946 edition of *Gangrel*. The editors of this magazine, J.B. Pick and Charles Neil, had asked a selection of writers to explain why they write. The essay offers a type of mini-autobiography in which he writes of having first completed poems and tried his hand at short-stories, and carried on a continuous "story" about himself in his head