The Year of Magical Thinking Study Guide

The Year of Magical Thinking by Joan Didion

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

This autobiographical memoir by noted author Joan Didion chronicles her experiences in the wake of the sudden death of her husband John Gregory Dunne, also a noted author. These experiences include the ongoing and life threatening, illness of their adopted daughter Quintana, sudden and almost crippling surges of feeling associated arising from lingering memories, and incomprehensible conversations with medical professionals. The book thematically explores the nature and manifestations of grief, as well as the inevitability of memory and the unexpected power of synchronicity.

The memoir opens with a narration of events on the night of the death of the author's husband—which she at first, in memoir as in life, can't bring herself to refer to as anything other than "the event". She describes how they were sitting down to dinner as they have always done, conversing as they have always done, when suddenly she became aware that he had stopped talking. She looked around, she writes, and watched as he collapsed without saying another word. She describes in terms both clinically objective and profoundly personal the events that followed—the arrival of paramedics, John being taken to the hospital, her own gathering of what she believed were necessary things (in particular, his medical history), and the circumstances of her arrival at the hospital, where she was almost immediately told that John was dead.

The main body of the book is taken up with the author's narration of her process of coming to terms with her husband's death, and the simultaneous near-fatal illness of their daughter Quintana. She (the author) writes of her increasing and multi-faceted determination to deny that John was even dead, a denial that co-existed with a deep seated longing for him to continue to be the companion in life and work that he had been for the last several decades. She also writes of how this sense of denial extended to Quintana's situation, as she (Quintana) was suddenly taken to a hospital in California following a sudden, massive brain hemorrhage.

Throughout the memoir, the author's determination to deny reality is challenged by her memory—specifically, the way memories of her life, work, and relationship with her husband (and daughter) continue to resurface in spite of her efforts to keep them at bay. She writes of the way those memories bring with them resonances of meaning that she believes she can, and sometimes even desperately wants, to apply to her current situation. After a while, she writes, she began to search those memories for meaning, hoping to find answers that the clinical, objective, fact-based responses of the medical profession seem unable to provide.

The narrative describes how Quintana eventually recovered enough to be sent back to her New York home, how the author accompanied her, and how upon her return the author found herself more willing and able to start getting on with her life—sorting out and putting away John's belongings, visiting places that were important to them, etc. At one point she returns to the church where she and John got married and where Quintana was married. But instead of feeling herself overwhelmed by memories and feelings, as she had been when she previously encountered meaningful

places/events/circumstances, the author is instead able to participate in a personal ritual of farewell and closure, a ritual that symbolizes her slowly strengthening ability to live her life on her own.

The book draws to a close with a final narration of a memory involving John—how he once told her that it was necessary and right for her to ride the tides and ways of life rather than struggling against them. This, the narrative suggests, is what the author has finally discovered she is able, and prepared, to do—drawing her "year of magical thinking" to a close.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary and Analysis

The first part of this introductory chapter describes the depth of shock the author felt from "the event".

Its been nine months since "the event"—a sudden, massive coronary suffered by her husband John. Their daughter, Quintana, was unconscious in the hospital from pneumonia. Didion wishes, instead of using words to define, explore, and organize meaning, that she could project her memories on a screen in the simultaneous, layered way in which she experiences them.

This first chapter establishes the facts of the author's situation (the death of her husband, her struggle with grief, and the simultaneous illness of her daughter), and establishes her multi-leveled purpose in telling this story. This chapter also sets the stage for the book by its narrative style—free flowing, almost stream of consciousness, from idea to memory to surge of emotion to action, all of which cross-reference and cross-trigger each other. This narrative style draws the reader into the mind and experience of the author. In addition, the memoir has something of the textbook about it, something instructional. "These," the author seems to be saying, "are the kinds of things you can expect".

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary and Analysis

The author details the sequence of events before, during, and after her husband's heart attack, and how she knew immediately that he was dead as soon as the social worker introduced himself.

Didion describes wanting to discuss her experience with John, sorting out his belongings, looking at his body in the hospital and seeing a chipped tooth he hadn't had before. She describes her determination to remain in control of her emotions and of events, and recalls thinking of Quintana, ill in the hospital.

Five months after "the event", she checked the entry/exit log of her apartment building, and discovered that the entry about the visit to the paramedics is juxtaposed with one about a burned out light bulb.

Didion needed to know the results of the autopsy so she could know how he died, thinking, irrationally, that if he'd still been alive when his body left the apartment, she could have saved him. She recalls him fondly recalling happy times in their marriage, unusual breakings of habits, a passing of one of his ideas to her, perhaps indications he knew his end was near.

The author describes her experiences of grief in telling family and friends of his death, of being unable to eat, and of how she came to realize that the blood on the floor probably came from John's mouth and was probably also the reason for the chipped tooth. She needed that first night alone in order to absorb the fact of John's death—the start, she writes, "of her year of magical thinking".

Facts are juxtaposed with feelings, action in the present with memory, and insight with wondering. This complex interweaving of experiences is, the author suggests, the central experience of grief—nothing is clear, straightforward, or secure.

In spite of still feeling somewhat lost in grief, Didio still writes with the skill and instinct of a storyteller. In this context, it's reasonable for the reader to consider just what her overall process was in terms of putting together the pieces of past and present, of memory and reaction.

Finally, this chapter includes the first and only reference to the author's title, the author's "year of magical thinking". While it's quite clear that the author sees herself as spending a great deal of time in the year following her husband's death in deep contemplation, it's never quite clear why she sees her thought processes as "magical".

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary and Analysis

Didion discusses how grief has never been treated as a mental illness, but instead as something that can be "gotten over". During the time after his death, she was ignoring the facts in the hope that an alternative reality, such as John not being dead, will prove true.

The author continues to explore this "magical thinking" by analyzing her thinking around the autopsy. She'd believed that the autopsy would find something simple that had gone wrong, something that would be easily fixed—in other words, the autopsy would fix the problem and John would come home.

As it specifically examines a particular aspect of the author's thought process, this chapter manifests her attempts to treat her mental and emotional circumstances with a kind of clinical detachment that resurfaces repeatedly throughout the book. On one level there is a certain jarring-ness to this juxtaposition, in that the author's clinical approach tends to be somewhat at odds with her obviously profound emotional trauma. On another level, however, because these attempts at objectivity seem so extreme they actually heighten the reader's potential for emotional empathy—there is the sense that if she's working this hard to be objective, the author must really be covering up something big.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary and Analysis

The author describes how she appeared to be dealing with John's death but in fact was still in a place of believing he would come back.

Didion points out how few books there are on firsthand experiences of grief. Analytical psychiatric literature gave her the most insight into the nature of grief. She learned of two different sorts of grief, the "uncomplicated", which is uncomplicated and easy to heal, and the "complicated", in which grief, mental/emotional disorientation, and denial seem to linger for an unusually long time. This, the books indicate, is a sign of over-dependence—an analysis that the author immediately turns onto her own marriage. The author then wonders whether faith and grief are the same.

Didion realizes that going into memory is the wrong way to move forward into life.

She writes briefly about the visit she and John paid to Quintana on the night John died. She notes other sorts of dependence than husband/wife, quotes at length from a study analyzing dependence, and then questions where the author of the study got his information—specifically referring to how he might have known her situation, which the accuracy of his study seems to suggest he did.

The author focuses here on comments about death and funeral etiquette made by Emily Post. She comments that Mrs. Post, of all the books she (the author) had read, seems to have the truest understanding of the grieving process, adding that society's ways of dealing with death have changed substantially since Mrs. Post's time. Death happened more frequently then, and in homes, not hospitals.

The key element to note about this section is the presence of irony. Didion seems to decide that her healing process is best served by going forward; however, this is ironic because throughout the rest of the book she continues to go into her past. Ultimately, by the end of the book she actually seems prepared to live what she thinks about here, but that point is a long way away.

The second element is the author's discovery that the writing of Emily Post is more relevant, more experience-based, and more humanistic than the writing in the seemingly more learned, more scientifically-based and more objective scientific literature. Rather than being superficial and unnecessary, etiquette is, in fact, based on what human beings need and respond to healthily.

There is the sense of the author's belief that while care of the physical body has seemingly evolved (i.e., placed in hospitals and in the care of "objective" doctors), ironically, care of the emotional/spiritual body has been left in the mostly uneducated, unenlightened, and inexperienced hands of friends and family.

Chapters 5 and 6

Chapters 5 and 6 Summary and Analysis

Didion details the process of Quintana's disease. She describes its beginnings on Christmas Eve, the medicine given, including one that cost twenty thousand dollars a dose, and the visit paid she and John paid Quintana the night of "the event". Quintana's doctor that night commented that he didn't know which way her illness would turn. The customary loving farewell John whispered to her would be repeated by Quintana at her father's funeral.

Didion recalls her wedding, and Quintana's, which had occurred only four months before Quintana became ill and five months before John's death. She author writes at length of memories that came flooding back to her when she looked at the photos of her and her family on the bedroom wall. She writes of the commonality of grief, analyses the Indian tradition of "suttee", comments that on the night John died they were a month away from their fortieth wedding anniversary, and concludes by writing "I wanted to scream. I wanted him back".

Before John's death, Didion experienced two moments in which she believed herself to understand what death was—an unexpected shower of golden light, and of a translucent ice island. She then again wonders why she was unable to accept the reality that John had died.

There had been several circumstances in which the health of John's heart was questionable, but they treated with a simple procedure at the hospital. There were also occasions where he became unusually upset and depressed about his work, but at the time Didion had put his worries down to concern over Quintana's health. Her recollections move back and forth between incidents that remind her of other incidents, concluding with a confession—she can't remember whether her last conversation with John about his doubts took place twenty-seven hours or three hours before his death.

Here, Didion's search for meaning in the present through exploring the past is perhaps at its most poignant. The juxtaposition of memories of events, words, and feelings is powerfully evocative of both her state of mind and the emotional context in which the juxtapositions, and their associated meaning, appear.

This section contains the rawest statement of her overall condition in the painful cry at the end of chapter five, part two—her statement that she wanted to scream. Here again, this raw emotion is placed contrastingly beside the highly clinical nature of her reporting of the doctors' commentary. This shows a specific evocation of a general state of being—nothing makes sense, nothing is as it should be, everything is bizarre and strange and disconcerting . . . what the world has been is no longer.

Chapters 7, 8 and 9

Chapters 7, 8 and 9 Summary and Analysis

A chronology of events after John's death follows: how Didion and Quintana's husband Gerry discussed how to break the news of John's death, how Quintana was at first unable to absorb the information, and how she managed to speak at her father's funeral. Quintana had to make another sudden emergency trip to the hospital shortly after the funeral, due to blood clots, for which she was prescribed blood thinners. Quintana and Gerry made plans to re-start their married life on a trip to California, and Quintana was typically nervous before their flight. Didion imagined all the things Quintana and Gerry were doing while there, but as she was getting ready to go out to dinner, a neighbor informed her that Quintana was undergoing emergency brain surgery.

As she and Gerry had been leaving the airport, Quintana collapsed and was immediately rushed to the hospital, having suffered a major and potentially deadly hemorrhage in her brain. Didion waited out the operation with friends.

Didion recalls her promise to Quintana to never leave her—and then recalls how she realized her promise was a lie. She also recalls how she "was born fearful", but masked that fear with an over-confidence in her ability to manage difficult situations. She worries if the anti-coagulants might have contributed to the hemorrhage, but realizes that it didn't matter, the damage must be repaired. She recounts how she spent time and money of the five weeks that she was in California reading however much she could about that condition, and how she learned to disguise her new knowledge so as not to offend the doctors. She also bought herself some climate-appropriate clothes, which were hospital scrubs, not realizing until later that wearing scrubs could "be viewed as a suspicious violation of boundaries".

Things seem to go from bad to worse here. Not only is

Didion forced to cope with the profound sense of loss associated with her husband's death—she is forced to cope with what she seems to think is an equally profound sense of loss associated with being able to care for her daughter. From this point on, the narrative seems to tie together both kinds of loss, with the author's attempts to make sense of one aspect of her life tying into similar attempts to make sense of the other.

Quintana seems throughout the book to lack a certain sense of individual identity outside Didion's experience of her. On one level, this is perhaps evocative of the way grief can insulate individuals from experiences other than their own immediate, unbearable ones. However, because Quintana is mentioned only in terms of Didion and not in terms of herself, Didion at times comes across as self-absorbed beyond the level that can reasonably be associated with grief.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary and Analysis

Didion introduces the idea of "the vortex effect" and defines it by example - the time when, at Beth Israel Hospital with Quintana during her first stay, how she avoided thinking about the situation by taking a trip back into memory but found that doing so she found a memory she didn't want to recall. She comments that in general, the memory vortex sucked her into a place where memories of those she loved lay waiting to catch her by surprise.

Didion realized early in her stay in California that Los Angeles was full of potentially dangerous triggers for "the vortex effect", and describes her determination to avoid those triggers, partially by steering clear of any potential reminders of her past and partially by immersing herself in routine. However, manifestations of "the vortex effect" were unavoidable. It is during a series of memories that Didion reveals that Quintana was adopted.

The vortex effect suggests that it is a manifestation of how memory works in general, not just when associated with grief. The sense here, however, is that vortex's effects, in terms of its emotional impact and sense of helplessness, are much more profound within the context of grief and loss.

Here Didion still seems to be in denial of both her feelings in the aftermath of John's death and her feelings in the current situation of Quintana's illness.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary and Analysis

Didion reveals that she and Quintana feel the same way about their loss of memory, and uses the term "mudgy", a word coined by Quintana to describe how vague and unclear everything felt. Some details, however, are vivid, such as when she resisted a tracheotomy for Quintana, realizing in hindsight that her resistance was from profound denial. In Quintanta's case, the denial was masked with increasingly informed questions which she admits also made her feel less helpless.

Didion provides further descriptions of the medical knowledge she acquired while Quintana was in the hospital and how she continued to question the doctors. She was eventually left with no alternative but to wait. While waiting one day, she noticed the swimming pool near the hospital. This noticing, she writes, made her remember a disastrous attempt at decorating a swimming pool, which in turn leads her into a chain of wondering about circumstances—if one decision had not led to another, would John be dead and Quintana so sick?

She wondered whether she was going to be forced to encounter all her memories of living in California, a process she likens to a process of self-excavation and analysis which she says she analyzed in psychoanalytic terms—terms which, she writes, sounded upon consideration a lot like the memory vortex.

As she describes the almost comically complicated process of transferring Quintana from UCLA to the Rusk Institute in New York for rehabilitation, Didion recalls several telling details, some being memories of her and John's experiences together, and others of the trip itself. One of these is an incident in which she and John were at a stop light at the moment that the driver of the car next to them suddenly died. Another memory is of when she and Quintana shared a McDonald's hamburger and how Quintana remembered which kind of burger it was when Didion couldn't.

The capricious nature of memory is the narrative focus of this section—the unpredictability of its surfacing, the way good memories suddenly take on dark, saddening, infuriating aspects, the way sudden searing memories cut through general "mudgy-ness" to create a powerful sense of time and place. Among the most interesting manifestations of memory here is the way the physically anesthetized Quintana remembers (the nature of the burger) what the emotionally anesthetized author cannot.

All that said, this chapter is threaded with images of potentially rich metaphoric meaning. The "trach", a surgical cutting through of superficial tissue designed to increase oxygen intake, can be seen as metaphorically similar to Quintana's anger with her mother, an emotional and verbal cutting through of superficial feeling designed to increase spiritual release. The juxtaposed descriptions of Quintana's frail body with a house formerly owned by the family destroyed right after they sold it can be seen as

metaphorically evoking both the frailty of memory and of actual physical experience—both the body and the house are, to varying degrees, irrevocably damaged by the process of life. The story of how she and John witnessed the sudden death of the nearby motorist and then moved on can be seen as a metaphoric representation of her experience in witnessing John's sudden death of her husband and having to eventually move on.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary and Analysis

As Quintana's rehabilitation progressed and as Quintana's health improved, Didion became less necessary to Quintana's recovery, leaving her with time get back to her own life. This, she writes, was "the beginning of the process of mourning. . . Grief was passive. Grief happened. Mourning, the act of dealing with grief, required attention . . ." and up to that point, she writes, she did everything she could to avoid paying that attention.

Didion describes discovering things about John that she hadn't known, and had no way of asking him about. She contemplates on how there was a definite line between alive and dead, a line a doctor once said wasn't there. "It's not black and white", she recalls him saying—yet to John or friends who have died, it was. In contemplating this realization, the author writes that she no longer believed in what her religion had once taught her to believe—that one day, the body would be resurrected. "but I still believed," she writes, "that given the right circumstances [John] would come back".

When Didion re-read the classical Greek play Alcestis, a play she read in high school, in which a young man destined to die convinces his stepmother to die in his place. When she does, the young man experiences intense remorse and pleads for her to be allowed to live. She returns to life, emotionally changed but alive. The author writes how her remembered version of the play differs from the actual version, with her version deepening her questions about the divide between being alive and being dead.

Didion comments here that "survivors look back and see omens, messages they missed". She describes omens not of John's death but of his life that she cherishes. She describes how she had not "sufficiently appreciated"—the apparent omen of John's death in another of his books, the way that death was described as "the eternal dark", and the narration of the terror experienced by the lead character in the book when told of his susceptibility for a "catastrophic cardiac event". She wonders whether John experienced similar terror in the moment of his own "catastrophic cardiac event", and contrasts what John wrote about the eternal dark with what she knows about medical conditions. Everything, she, writes, goes white when the brain is deprived of oxygen . . . which, she imagines, is what happens in the moment of death.

In the early 1990s, following the discovery of a pair of blocked arteries, John had undergone a series of tests and procedures. She writes that John felt that he had "a death sentence, temporarily suspended", while she felt that the potential problem had been solved and death had been averted. "I realize now," she writes, "that his was the more realistic view".

At this point, with John gone and Quintana's health crisis averted, Didion introduces a new element that to this point had received relatively little attention—lingering memories

of John's ill health and questions arising from those memories. This introduction brings back up the flattening narrative to an exciting level.

The act of writing is by its very nature an act of shape-giving, of meaning searching-and-finding, of interpretation as much as statements of fact. This is as much true of memoir as it is of fiction—the only difference is the writer's experiences of past, present, perspectives, and attitudes is perhaps less disguised.

Chapters 13 and 14

Chapters 13 and 14 Summary and Analysis

Here Didion discusses dreams that to her symbolize a sense of responsibility for John's death, anger at him for putting her in such a position, and guilt arising from both the responsibility and the anger.

Didion next describes her eating habits, how she moves from the kitchen to the dining room when the days lengthen, then back to the kitchen when the days shorten. She recalls her most cherished gift from him, given on her birthday—he read a section of one of her novels aloud to her, and fervently commented on how good her writing was. "That's my birthday present to you", she recalls him saying.

Various incidents in Didion's life made her think deeply about her state of being, including the way in which the fear that resulted from a non-hurtful physical stumble reminded her of her emotional fear, and how the failings of characters in a story she read reminded her of her own failings, including a fundamental aspect of her personality, one anchored in self-pity.

Didion's always believed she was a lucky person, but was instead told that her sense of "luck" amounted to good planning. As a child, Quintana had a sense of having more bad luck than many her age, and John had spoken about good and bad luck "even[ing] out in the end". She also writes that she did not believe that what happened to John and Quintana was "bad luck", but rather that she was in some way responsible. She admits that after contemplating her dreams, she realized that she was in fact holding John and Quintana responsible.

There is a sense in this section that Didion is trying to create meaning and understanding by giving shape to seemingly random events. She provides the sense here that everyone experiencing significant grief undergoes this process to some degree—loss of any kind feels, at its core, random and meaningless. This is the experience of simply being human—of trying to find meaning in what often seems like a random, meaningless series of events.

Part two of chapter thirteen contains a vivid image with potentially metaphoric meaning. The author's description of her movement from the kitchen (dark) into the dining room (light) and back into the kitchen (dark) again metaphorically suggests the recurring sequence of movement not only from past to present and back again, but from confusion to insight to confusion again.

Chapters 15 and 16

Chapters 15 and 16 Summary and Analysis

In 1994, in an attempt to avoid memories, Didion covers both the Democratic and Republican national conventions. However, she runs into an unexpected trigger when she realizes the first day of the convention is also Quintana's wedding anniversary. A panic attack is triggered by the memories, and other memories come back, one being of when she and John brought home three-day-old Quintana. One memory leads her to wonder whether mothers "always [tried] to press on their daughters the itineraries of which they themselves had dreamed?" Finally, she remembers how "the most beautiful things [she] had ever seen had all been seen from airplanes . . . with John" and wonders how she could ever travel anywhere without him.

Didion recalls how theoretical physicist Stephen Hawking states he's changed his mind: information (i.e., images of events traveling as light) sucked into black holes could, in fact, be retrieved. She juxtaposes this recollection with the realization that while she was remembering events of previous Democratic conventions, events associated with John, she was no longer trying to create a different ending to his story—she was simply trying to remember the life lived before death.

Didion recalls how much John admired their friends Joe and Gertrude Black, intellectual and geographical travelers whose searching minds and lives he had always admired. She then describes searching the computer at home for references to the Blacks, and discovering that he last made an entry juxtaposing their names with the phrase "the concept of service". She then juxtaposes that incident with a clue from the morning crossword—"fritter away"—to which the answer was "waste", and wonders not only whether she and John had "wasted" their lives, but also whether John believed they had. She concludes this chapter with the statement that the last time John had amended the file mentioning the Blacks was on the morning of his death.

There are several key points to note about these two chapters. The first is of the singular lack of description in Didion's memory of bringing Quintana home from the hospital. It is unclear whether this apparent omission is another example of Didion's grief-stricken self-absorption, or if the image itself is so emotionally potent that the author felt it redundant to offer any description at all. The second noteworthy element is Didion's questioning of her relationship with her mother, which by implication is a questioning of her own relationship with Quintana, left unexplored by Didion.

Another noteworthy element is the reference to black holes. A black hole is the term used to describe a start that has collapsed in on itself, and in the process has created an inescapable, intense, field of gravity from which nothing, not even light, escapes. The metaphoric suggestion here could be that death is like a black hole. Memory, and perhaps joy, are sucked into it, but where previously Didion had believed that they were irretrievable, she has come to believe that they can be recaptured.

The question Didion leaves unanswered here is if John had been contemplating their shared lack of curiosity and willingness to travel. There is the sense that in the aftermath of death, questions of "why" remain unanswered by or in the lives left behind.

Chapter 17

Chapter 17 Summary and Analysis

"Grief," the author writes, "turns out to be a place none of us know until we reach it." She then lists the differences between what we think grief is and what it actually is.

As a child, Didion had an awareness of meaninglessness, and how that awareness seemed to be replaced by rituals of meaning. The phrase from the Episcopalian Church, "as it was in the beginning is now and ever shall be, world without end", Didion connects with the inevitability and irresistibility of geological change. As a young mother and wife, she found comfort in household rituals, but always carried within her the belief that both forms of ritual would converge in her and John's simultaneous deaths.

Society considers self pity as a negative. Animals never exhibit it,but humans can't seem to function, in grief, without it. She attributes her own self-pity to how hard the habit of sharing life with John was so hard to break. She experiences now a silence that existed between she and John that she now realizes was similar to the silence when John was alive.

Didion writes here that she and John "were equally incapable of imagining the reality of life without the other. . ." but adds that for her, marriage was a way of avoiding the idea of aging. Because of this, she is led to believe that when someone mourns a beloved, they are also mourning themselves.

There is an implied criticism of religion in this section, specifically with Didion's comments about the now-emptiness of her previous, religiously associated beliefs suggesting a larger emptiness—a life empty of an awareness of God. There are mentions of church functions throughout the book, but no real discussion of the presence, absence, workings or ways of God.

Throughout the book Didion can be seen as self-absorbed, and for good reason. But this is the first time in the narrative that she's considered the question of self pity. Consideration of what's gone before suggests that there is a perhaps remarkable absence of such feelings here—she makes little effort to gain sympathy from the reader. The point is not made to suggest that the author doesn't feel self-pity at all, but rather to suggest that she focuses here on other aspects of her experience. Whether she did the same in life as in memoir is another question.

Chapter 18

Chapter 18 Summary and Analysis

Almost a year after John died, Didion finally received the autopsy report. Because of her grief, she'd written the address of their first home, and the report had been delayed.

The terminology here is almost exclusively medical. After reading the report several times, she comes to the conclusion that John was dead from the moment he had the initial event at the dining room table.

It was, she realizes finally, after so many months on being fixated on the exact cause, the heart condition that had been diagnosed so long before that killed him, and that all John's medical treatment had only postponed the event. She also realizes, there really was nothing she could have done.

This chapter marks the beginning of both an end and the end—an end to the first stage of the author's grieving process, and the end to the book. Didion is beginning to move on with her life, a process that continues in the following sections.

In this brief chapter is one of the most vivid manifestations of a narrative technique evident throughout the book—the juxtaposition of objectively defined medical fact and subjectively defined emotional experience.

Chapters 19, 20 and 21

Chapters 19, 20 and 21 Summary and Analysis

The author begins by commenting that she has trouble thinking of herself as a widow, adds that she had initially had difficulty thinking of herself as a wife and mother, and concludes by saying she spent the first years of wife/motherhood putting on external manifestations of what she believed to be her status. She also discusses how she has tended to live her life by improvisation more than by planning, adding that somehow it always worked out. "Why," she writes, "did [she] think that this improvisation could never end? If [she] had seen that it could, what would [she] have done differently? What would he?"

This chapter begins with the author's statement that she's writing it as the one year anniversary of John's death approaches. She describes how difficult it is for her to concentrate in social occasions, how startling it was when she realized, as she started a new piece of writing, that for the first time in most of her writing life, John was not going to be around to critique it. "Whatever I finally did to finish this piece was as close as I have ever come to imagining a message from him . . . you're a professional. Finish the piece". This realization, she writes, triggered another—that she was responsible for her own life. She comments on how many mistakes she had made, and how she wondered whether she could ever again trust herself not to be wrong.

The author writes here about the approaching Christmas season—how she does similar things in similar ways to what she did last year (the year of John's death), all the while aware that John is not there to help her, to react, or to wait for her. She then writes that for the first time she sorts through a stack of reading material beside John's favorite chair, which she had "deliberately left . . . untouched, not from any shrine-building impulse but because I did not believe that I could afford to think about what he read in the middle of the night". Her search through the pile of material, she writes, triggers a series of memories, all of which become associated with the number of hours he had left to live at the time he read this book, received that magazine in the mail, went to dinner with that friend. She concludes this chapter with a memory of how John, on the way home from a visit to Quintana in the hospital, said he didn't think he was "up for this". The author writes that she suggested he may not have a choice, but adds that she has since come to wonder whether he did.

The author writes here that Gerry, even while Quintana was lying in the hospital, still saw her as beautiful—and that John couldn't complete his thought when he started talking about what Gerry said. The author then writes that she's losing track of what happened when—whether John's comments were three hours, twenty-seven hours, or days before he died. She recalls how Quintana, when she was little, cried out to her parents after having a bad dream to not let "the Broken Man" get her, commenting that Quintana escaped the Broken Man but John did not.

The evident process of healing, of getting on with life in spite of still having many unanswered questions, continues in this chapter. There is the sense throughout that the author is starting to be more mentally and emotionally present in her life than she has been, acknowledging realities about herself and her situation as opposed to focusing on possibilities and wonderings. The latter still exist, particularly (as she herself suggests) when it comes to being certain of what happened when, and why. There is nevertheless a growing sense of peace here, that the author is learning to live with what happened, and how and why.

This sense is counter-pointed, however, and perhaps even undermined, but the author's comments at the beginning of this section—specifically, her comments about widowhood. In her narration of how she viewed herself as a wife and mother, there is almost the sense that she is looking to define herself as a widow in the same way — through externals. It seems as though she's not entirely sure what those externals are supposed to be—almost as though she doesn't seem to know how a widow is supposed to act/react. If this is the case, and the narrative isn't at all clear on the subject, it may be the result of three factors. These are lingering denial that she is in fact a widow, rejection of what she thinks she's supposed to have learned from all the textbooks she's read, and a growing sense that she, like any/every other individual, has a completely unique experience of grief. In other words, she's growing into an individual, independent understanding of her life and of her self—possibly the "upside" she earlier said she couldn't find.

Chapter 22

Chapter 22 Summary and Analysis

This section begins with an extensive quote from one of Didion's novels, Democracy, in which her character contemplates a belief in the changeability of nature similar to the author's own. She writes that she searched out the quotation following the tsunami that devastated large sections of the Indian Ocean coastline, and adds that she's unable (at the time of writing) to stop imagining the details of that event. At the close of this opening section, she again quotes the Episcopalian prayer.

Didion had the Christmas Eve dinner party she and John always had, able somehow to get through it. She then writes of visiting St. John the Divine, making her way through the crowds of Japanese tourists she says were always there, even at Quintana's wedding and John's funeral. There, she walked out at the specific angle that would enable to see sunlight through the large stained glass window, and recalls how she and John once set the climax of a screenplay in front of that window.

Didion realizes that she's been resisting the idea of letting John slip into the past, into memory. In the wake of the tsunami, she recalls how John had encouraged her into a cove, carefully timing their entrance with the tide. She'd been afraid, but John never was, telling her, "You had to feel the swell change. You had to go with the change".

There are several metaphorically evocative elements here, including the description of the likeness between the tidal wave of water that washed over much of the lands around the Indian Ocean on Boxing Day 2004 and the tide of grief that swept over the author in the aftermath of her husband's death. Also, metaphorical, is the realization that the islands visited by her and her husband are now gone forever.

In spite of her express desire to not bring the narrative to a close, Didion does so effectively in this section—a simultaneous ending (of the first stage of her grief) and a beginning (of the next stage of her life). The ending can be seen as possibly a genuine manifestation of her own state of being; or, perhaps it's the writer in her seeing a natural point at which to draw her narrative to a close. She has begun the process of integrating death into her life. In chronicling the process in the evocative and moving way that she has, it now seems a little less alien, frightening . . . and distant.

Characters

The Author (Joan Didion)

Joan Didion is a well known and critically respected novelist and screenwriter. Hers is the sole narrative voice in the book, hers is the core emotional perspective explored, and hers is the evident talent, experience and skill that draw the reader in, powerfully evoking images and experiences and emotions. It's important to note, however, that the professional aspect of her life is significantly downplayed throughout The Year of Magical Thinking; for the most part, references to her career are made in passing, with details being presented only when they are, in her mind, relevant to the central issue she's exploring, the nature and experience of grief.

The author portrays this experience as being simultaneously universal and unique. She writes eloquently, and with well researched detail, of how her experiences parallel, at least to some degree, those of any/everyone who's ever experienced grief and/or loss, citing as evidence a number of well-documented items of psycho-analytical research (which, she explains, she sought out in the hope of coming to some kind of understanding of her experience). At the same time, however, she details the completely personal and distinct ways these archetypal experiences manifested in her life. This narration of how those details affected her make the book equal parts textbook on grief and a deeply felt, profoundly personal memoir of a universal human experience.

There is, however, a third level of interest to the author's work, in that it offers insight into the way a writer's mind can work—how a writer gathers and recollects images and/or experiences, searches for meaning in both, and juxtaposes words to evoke it all. This is perhaps a key component in what makes the book so poignant, and also possibly an essential manifestation of one of its secondary themes—even in grief, the author can't help being the writer she is. In other words, her life and identity continue to exist, even as she's feeling it shouldn't . . . or can't.

John Gregory Dunne

John Dunne is the author's husband, himself a noted writer and screenwriter. Although the author writes that she and her husband collaborated both personally and professionally and both had considerable success, she downplays his professional accomplishments in the same way as she downplays her own, offering details about his work and career only when they're relevant to her story and themes. John's sudden death of a massive heart attack while having dinner triggers the author's experience of, exploration of, and eventual living with grief; in short, he is the reason the book exists. His truly is a haunting, haunted presence.

Quintana

Quintana is the daughter of Joan Didion and John Dunne who, at the time of her father's death, is in the hospital suffering from a severe form of pneumonia. It's important to note that throughout the entire book, the author gives very little attention to who Quintana is as a woman. She is a catalyst in her parents' lives, she is a focus of their worry and attention, but her identity as a human being is never really defined—events in her life (her marriage, her illness, her appearance at her father's funeral) are referred to only in terms of how they reflect on and/or effect either John or Joan. Also, the fact that she was adopted at three days of age is referred to only in passing—there is no deeper exploration of what to many might seem a central aspect not only of her life but the lives of her parents. In other words, for a character whose continued existence is such an important focus, the nature of that existence remains a somewhat troubling missing element.

Gerry

Gerry is Quintana's husband. He is portrayed as being loving, supporting and patient, but it must be noted that throughout the book he is referred to entirely in passing. His reaction to Quintana's illness is very lightly sketched in, while his reaction to John's death is barely mentioned at all. This lack of development in his character, like the similar lack of development in Quintana and many of the other secondary characters, contributes to the strong sense of self-centeredness that permeates the narrative.

Emily Post

Emily Post is the legendary, turn-of-the-nineteenth-century expert on etiquette and manners. The author writes in chapter four part fiveabout Mrs. Post's rules for being with those coping with grief, and comments that those rules were based in a more common sense understanding of what grief is than the "insight" displayed by some of the so-called "experts" she (the author) researched.

Medical Professionals

Throughout the book and whatever the illness, Quintana's or John's, medical professionals (doctors, nurses, ambulance attendants, surgeons) are for the most part portrayed as arrogant, touchy and insensitive. There are exceptions—in particular, the doctor who originally diagnoses John's heart condition and the family friend visited by the author late in the narrative are portrayed as being somewhat more compassionate.

Friends and Family

Numerous friends and family appear throughout the book, but for the most part do so only in passing. They are generally portrayed as compassionate, supportive, and generous, but like Quintana and Gerry, they are important to the author only in terms of how they relate to her and her experience.

Alcestis

Alcestis is a character in Classical Greek mythology, a woman who agreed to die in order that her selfish stepson might be allowed to live. She, in turn, is permitted by the gods to return to life, but comes back from the dead a changed woman. She appears here in chapter twelve part three, when the author decides to read the play "Alcestis" in the hopes of gaining insight into death and grieving.

Joe and Gertrude Black

These two individuals appear in chapter sixteen, recalled by Joan as living examples of the kind of intellectually and spiritually adventurous lives John, at times, wanted to live. They are vividly portrayed examples of how life can be lived, important touchstones for Joan at this stage of her life when she's learning how to deal with death.

The Broken Man

This character is referred to by the author in chapter twenty-one, where he is described as a figure appearing in Quintana's bad dreams—what that figure looks like and/or represents, however, is never defined. In one of the book's particularly poignant vignettes, the author comments that while Quintana escaped The Broken Man as a child (and perhaps metaphorically as an adult), John didn't.

Japanese Tourists

The author writes in the final chapter of the book how Japanese tourists were present and taking pictures in St. John's Cathedral on both Quintana's wedding day and the day of John's funeral. Their presence can perhaps be interpreted as a symbol of the way life goes on outside an immediate experience of an important event—how the world can sometimes seem to be insensitive or callous to what is profoundly significant in an individual life.

Objects/Places

Joan and John's Apartment

The apartment shared by Joan Didion and John Dunne in New York City is the scene of John's death and the setting for many of the author's encounters with memory and with grief.

New York Hospital

This is the hospital to which John was taken on the night he had his heart attack and died, a hospital with which he and his family were unfamiliar—a fact that made the author's experiences there in the aftermath of his heart attack and death that much more unsettling.

St. John the Divine Church

This church is the setting for several key events in the author's life and recollection—Quintana's wedding, John's funeral, and her encounter with the Japanese tourists in the book's final chapter. In contrast with the sense of displacement she finds in New York Hospital, the author seems to find comfort in the familiarity of the church.

California

California is the author's home state, and is where she and John had successful careers as screenwriters. As such, it's the setting for several happy memories, which jar and trouble her when she's there taking care of Quintana in the aftermath of John's death.

The Blood on the Floor

In the opening chapters of the book, the author writes that there was one fact about John's death that she couldn't bring herself to tell her friends, no matter how many times she told the story of John's death—the fact that John's blood had spilled on the floor. This is the first of several important images relating to the author's inability to accept the reality of her husband's death.

The Books on Grief

Throughout the book, the author refers to several books on grieving, death, and dying that she read in the hope of gaining some insight not only into the actual physical reasons for John's death but also her own emotional and spiritual experience. She

writes that they, each in their own ways, offered some comfort and/or understanding, but never seemed to cover the full range or intensity of her experiences.

Suttee

The process of "suttee" was a common practice in India for centuries. The wife of a dead man was herself burned to death on a flaming boat. The author comments in chapter five part two that the practice might not be as barbaric as it sounds—she suggests that for the women, the fire was "an accurate representation of the place to which their grief had taken them".

The Vortex Effect

This is the author's name for what she experiences when she becomes overwhelmed by memories and the feelings they evoke—she feels sucked into a "vortex" of image and emotion from which she's helpless to escape.

The Beverly Wilshire Hotel

This is the hotel where the author stays while Quintana is in the hospital. It is the setting for several encounters with "the vortex effect".

The UCLA Medical Centre

This is the hospital where Quintana is treated for the brain hemorrhage she experiences. The author writes that she stays there for several months, and that she (the author) stayed in California with her the entire time.

The Rusk Institute (New York)

This is the institution Quintana goes to after her stay at the UCLA Medical Center for physical therapy and rehabilitation.

Themes

The Nature and Effects of Grief

This is the book's central issue, the focus of, and reason for, the author's introspection, narrative commentary, and exploration of memory. As discussed in "Important People—The Author", the issue is explored from both the archetypal and personal perspectives—the author searches some of what has been written before about grief (a universal human experience) for insight into what is happening to her now (a uniquely personal and profound loss). As she chronicles this search, she also chronicles, through intense, stream-of-consciousness narrative, her own experiences with surging emotion, sudden flashes of memory, and unexpected juxtapositions between past and present that, in the author's mind, give both meaning to the past and insight into the present. These, the book suggests, are among the most profoundly troubling of the various effects of grief that she experiences.

A manifestation of grief that's never explicitly discussed in the book, but which seems to be implied by its very nature, is a sense of self-centeredness. The point must be immediately made that this is not necessarily a negative—individuals experiencing a loss are by the very nature of what they're going through isolated, overwhelmed by their own feelings, and unable to incorporate the lives and experiences of others in ways they might have been more able to do in the past. Manifestations of this particular aspect of the grieving experience in the book include a lack of detail about the lives, attitudes, and past experiences of several important individuals, Quintana and her husband Gerry being the most significant. A reader might be inclined to wonder whether Joan Didion the novelist would allow such relatively under-defined characters in her work as Joan Didion the memoirist seems to be willing to do—but then again, Joan Didion the memoirist seems, like many (most?) who experience grief, unable to move mentally and/or emotionally beyond the boundaries of her own feelings.

The book does come to some sort of conclusion about the nature of grief. In her final chapters, the author comes to realize that as much as she might not feel comfortable with the idea, yet, life is moving on, that it's up to her to move on with it, and that it's an essential component of the process of grieving.

The Inevitability of Memory

Two sub-themes emerge as key components of this principal theme. The first is the way in which memory proves inescapable. Several times throughout the narrative, the author states and/or recalls her intention to avoid places, people, or other experiences that might trigger painful memories of John and/or Quintana and/or their happy lives before John's death and Quintana's illness. Each time she proves unable to live up to that intention. Memory, in spite of her continued attempts to steer her mind in other directions, has its own agenda, takes its own course, and leads her where it will.

Eventually she lets go of her intention to not remember, realizing that in spite of the possibility it will cause her pain, remembering the past not only offers a degree of comfort in the face of unimaginable pain, it can also offer a certain amount of insight into her situation. The clearest example of this evolution in her thought process is the way in which she realizes that memories of John's medical history can, and do, lead to a desperately sought understanding of what happened that painful day he died.

Synchronicity

The second key sub-theme that functions as a core element in the primary theme and in relation to the first sub-theme relating to memory is the idea of synchronicity, of one event and/or experience connecting in an unexpected, and unexpectedly truth-inspiring, way, to another. Throughout the book, the author writes (without actually using the word) about the synchronicity between past and present, the meaning experiences in the one give experiences in the other—in other words, the connection between what was and what is. Most of these encounters with synchronicity come into existence because of the author's previously discussed experience with memory—what she recalls, no matter the quality of the recollection (happy, sad, neutral) is without fail given both emotional weight and meaning by the present, and vice versa.

At this point, it's useful to consider, as insensitive as it might appear to be, how much of what the author writes about is genuine synchronicity and how much is a writer doing what a writer does—creating meaning through juxtaposition of words, emotions, images, memories, and more. In other words, it is the job and/or function of an author, or for that matter any artist, to place events, feelings, themes and ideas into synchronicity, into a pattern that can create insight or meaning. It might not be unreasonable to wonder whether a person in the author's situation (simultaneously experiencing the death of a spouse and the near-fatal illness of another beloved) would be as aware, be as moved by, or be searching for synchronicity and meaning in the same way as the author both searches and finds. The point is not made to accuse the author of fictionalizing her life, but to raise the question of whether the author's professional capacity for creating and/or understanding meaning eased her passage through a personally traumatic time in a way that other individuals without that capacity might not be able to.

Style

Perspective

As previously discussed throughout this analysis, the author's perspective is that of someone living what she's writing about. This makes the book almost journal-like in its approach, with its stream of consciousness narrative style at times becoming difficult to follow and at other times being profoundly evocative of the state of emotional/mental dislocation experienced by those living through grief-inspiring loss. Her background as a writer gives her both a considerable advantage and a certain credibility problem. Because she is gifted and experienced, and on some level trained in searching for meaning in ways that other non-artistically inclined individuals might not be able to do, the author is able to see possibilities for meaning in the apparently meaningless, and therefore at least potentially find comfort. On the debit side, because she tells stories for a living, and because from all accounts she has a considerable professional reputation for doing it well, a reader might be justified in wondering how much of her apparent stream-of-consciousness writing is as much a product of raw memory and/or experience and how much is a product of skill and technique. All that said, however, the overall impact of the book on a reader is likely to be both thought-provoking and moving, with readers who have on some level shared her experience of grief and loss probably being the core of that intended audience and the readers most likely able to truly identify with the author's story.

Tone

The overall tone of the book is entirely subjective, as much as the author seems to be striving for objectivity—there is the sense that it's far too personal and profound an experience for it not to be. On the one hand, there is a certain clinical aspect to the writing throughout the book, almost as though the author is attempting to dissect and analyze her experience in the same way as a researcher might dissect and analyze the subject of a scientific experiment. But this attempt at what might be called clini-cism is juxtaposed, one might even say undermined, by the undeniably personal and intimate experiences she's attempting to simultaneously narrate and understand. This is not necessarily a bad thing, in that on one level the writing clearly embodies the subject matter—the author, in life and in art, strives to be clinical and objective towards an experience that for her cannot possibly be. On another level, however, these juxtapositions of tone can be occasionally jarring and interrupt the book's sense of narrative and emotional flow—is the reader paging through a memoir, or a medical textbook? This latter point relates particularly to how the author repeatedly injects into her narrative words, phrases, and explanations (jargon?) used by the medical profession. Again, the style of writing evokes the experience—as she lived through it, she must have encountered clinical dryness at the same time as, to put it bluntly, her heart was being ripped out. One detriment of this undeniably evocative aspect of the

book's tone, however, is that she never explains what the words mean. She never, for example, simply calls what happened to John at the dinner table "a heart attack".

Structure

The book is structured in twenty-two chapters of varying lengths, each divided into parts. Each chapter contains a different number of parts, and each part is of a different length. At this point, it's important to note that the narrative doesn't proceed entirely chronologically—it begins with the immediate aftermath of John's death and ends with the author's recollections a year after John's death, with the narrative in between roughly anchored by the secondary through-line involving Quintana's illness and treatment. That said, however, events in both narratives ("John's death" or "Quintana's ill") are never narrated in a purely, fully straightforward fashion. Throughout the entire piece, the narrative flows back and forth between past and present, between memory and analysis, between feeling and idea, between event and event, between John and Quintana. Structurally this is a highly effective evocation of how the human mind works and, more specifically, of how the human mind in the midst of a profound experience of grief works. It's also important to note that each chapter, and at times each part within the various chapters, doesn't explore just one idea, feeling, or experience—experience triggers idea triggers memory triggers idea leads to experience. Again, this is a vivid evocation of the experience of a traumatized life.

The final noteworthy element in terms of the piece's structure is its conclusion, which isn't in fact a conclusion but is more of a starting—as the pages of the book come to an end, the author comes to an acceptance that she has to begin to live in a new way. This can be seen as an evocation of an even more archetypal experience than death, perhaps the ultimate archetypal experience—in an end, there is also a beginning.

Quotes

"It was in fact the ordinary nature of everything preceding the event that prevented me from truly believing it had happened, absorbing it, incorporating it, getting past it . . . there was nothing unusual in this: confronted with sudden disaster we all focus on how unremarkable the circumstances were in which the unthinkable occurred . . ." p. 4

"This is my attempt to make sense of the period that followed, weeks and then months that cut loose any fixed idea I had ever had about death, about illness, about probability and luck, about good fortune and bad, about marriage and children and memory, about grief, about the ways in which people do and do not deal with the fact that life ends, about the shallowness of sanity, about life itself." p. 7

"I have been a writer my entire life . . . long before what I wrote began to be published, I developed a sense that meaning itself was resident in the rhythms of words and sentences and paragraphs . . ." p. 7

"When I walked into the apartment and saw John's jacket and scarf still lying on the chair . .. I wondered what an uncool customer would be allowed to do. Break down? Require sedation? Scream?" p. 16

"On most surface levels I seemed rational. To the average observer I would have appeared to fully understand that death was irreversible." p. 42

"Dolphins . . . had been observed refusing to eat after the death of a mate. Geese had been observed . . . flying and calling, searching until they themselves became disoriented and lost. Human beings, I read but did not need to learn, showed similar patterns of response." p. 46

"When someone dies, I was taught growing up in California, you bake a ham. You drop it by the house. You go to the funeral. If the family is Catholic you also go to the rosary but you do not wail or keen or in any other way demand the attention of the family." p. 61

"This seemed in some ways a positive prism through which to view the situation: Quintana was not the child who had been a deliriously happy bride five months before and whose chance of surviving the next day or two could now be calibrated at a point between 56 and 69 percent, she was "the sepsis market," suggesting that there was still a consumer choice to be made." p. 65

"People who have recently lost someone have a certain look, recognizable maybe only to those who have seen that look on their own faces . . . the look is one of extreme vulnerability, nakedness, openness . . . these people who have lost someone look naked because they think themselves invisible . . ." p. 74

"this had been . . . my basic promise to [Quintana]. I would not leave. I would take care of her. She would be all right. It also occurred to me that this was a promise I could not keep. I could not always take care of her. I could not never leave her. She was no longer a child . . . things happened in life that mothers could not prevent or fix." pp. 96-97

"If (Quintana) did not have a trach she could be fine in the morning, ready to eat, talk, go home. If she did not have a trach we could be on a plane by the weekend. Even if they did not want her to fly, I could take her with me to the Beverly Wilshire, we could have our nails done, sit by the pool . . ." p. 125

"Watching the empty swimming pool from the window at UCLA I could see the vortex coming but I could not deflect it." pp. 131-132

"John had been unable to get this image out of his mind. There he was, he had kept saying later. He was alive and then he was dead and we were watching. We saw him at the instant it happened. We knew he was dead before his family did." p. 136

"It was not the kind of sentence, if you had written it, you would want wrong, but neither was it the kind of sentence, if that was the way you had written it, you would want changed. How had [John] written it? What did he have in mind? How would he want it? . . . I left it as it was." p. 141

"What would I give to be able to discuss [Princeton] with John? What would I give to be able to discuss anything at all with John? What would I give to be able to say one small thing that made him happy? What would that one small thing be? If I had said it in time would it have worked?" p. 146

"If the dead were truly to come back, what would they come back knowing? Could we face them? We who allowed them to die? The clear light of day tells me that I did not allow John to die, that I did not have that power, but do I believe that? Does he?" p. 152

"I used to tell John my dreams, not to understand them but to get rid of them, clear my mind for the day . . . when he died I stopped having dreams . . . in the early summer I began to dream again, for the first time since it happened. Since I can no longer pass them off to John I find myself thinking about them." p. 159

"my impression of myself had been of someone who could look for, and find, the upside in any situation. I had believed in the logic of popular songs. I had looked for the silver lining. I had walked on through the storm . . . [these] were the songs, and the logic, of the generation or two that preceded my own." p. 171

"[we cannot] know ahead of the fact . . . the unending absence that follows, the void, the very opposite of meaning, the relentless succession of moments during which we will confront the experience of meaninglessness itself." p. 189

"We imagined we knew everything the other thought, even when we did not necessarily want to know it, but in fact, I have come to see, we knew not the smallest fraction of what there was to know." p. 196

"This year for the first time since I was twenty-nine I saw myself through the eyes of others. This year for the first time since I was twenty-nine I realized that my image of myself was of someone significantly younger." p. 197

"The trach at UCLA, I recognize now, was going to happen with or without me. Quintana resuming her life, I recognize now, was going to happen with or without me. Finishing [the piece on the Republican convention], which is to say resuming my own life, was not." p. 214.

"I know why we try to keep the dead alive: we try to keep them alive in order to keep them with us. I also know that if we are to live ourselves there comes a point at which we must relinquish the dead . . . let them become the photograph on the table . . ." p. 226

Topics for Discussion

Consider and describe the rituals, beliefs, and habits around death associated with your religion, your society, your family. In what ways do they express grief, restrain it, ignore it?

Describe your personal experience with death and with grieving. In what way is it similar to that of the author? In what way is it different?

What symbolic meaning can be gleaned from the repeated references to the blood on the floor? What kind of metaphorical blood has been spilled, or is spilled, as the result of his death? Consider the author's conclusion that the blood came from John's mouth when he chipped a tooth as he fell. What else has been metaphorically "chipped", or damaged, in the aftermath of his death?

What about the author's thought processes, experiences of memory/emotion, etc. might be described as "magical"? Is the kind of magic she experiences "good" magic, "bad" magic, or a combination of both?

Consider the author's contention in Part 1 of chapter three that grief is actually a form of mental illness. Is she right or wrong? Take into account her behavior throughout the book, and also the apparently self-absorbed nature of research and take into consideration definitions of other forms of mental illness (including, but not limited to, paranoia, schizophrenia, psychosis, neurosis). In what ways are symptoms similar? In what ways are they different?

Describe your own experiences with "the vortex effect". In what ways have chains of thought and memory led you to mental/emotional places you weren't expecting?

Several decades ago, a researcher named Elisabeth Kubler Ross developed an analysis on the emotional process an individual goes through when s/he discovers s/he is dying. Research this analysis, and compare the stages identified by Dr. Ross with the stages of grief experienced by the author; or, in fact, of anyone who has experienced loss and is experiencing grief. In what ways are the stages similar? In what ways are they different?

Consider the narrative in chapter eleven book five of the author's journey with Quintana across the country from California to New York. What are the potential metaphors for the author's experience that can be found in her description of her detailed memories of that trip?

What are the potential metaphoric meanings associated with the author's insistence upon only eating off the cracked family china (see chapter thirteen, part two)?

Consider the relative absence in the book of God—as an entity, as a concept, as a source of meaning. Discuss possible reasons why this absence exists. Consider what

you know of the author and/or her belief systems as portrayed in the book. What do you think her perspective on God might be? How do you think it might have changed as the result of her encounters with death and illness?

Consider this quote from chapter seventeen. "Grief," the author writes, "turns out to be a place none of us know until we reach it." In your own experience of grief and loss, what preconceptions and/or beliefs have proven correct? What ones have proven to be mistakes?

What is the metaphoric value of the description by the author of the light coming through the window of St. John's Cathedral (see chapter twenty-two) in relation to her overall journey through grief?