

# Slouching Towards Bethlehem

by  
Joan Didion

## StoryLines California Discussion Guide No. 10

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### Discussion questions

Is Didion fair to Lucille Miller in "Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream" or is she using her to fit a stereotype of the disappointed, careless, and greedy immigrant to California?

Didion has sometimes been accused of extrapolating a fractured, frightening external world out of her own personal fears and neuroses. In these essays, is there any evidence for this claim? What image of herself does Didion create?

### Additional readings

Joan Didion. *Play It As It Lays*, 1970.

Joan Didion. *The White Album*, 1979.

Tom Wolfe. *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, 1968.

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# Slouching Towards Bethlehem

by Joan Didion

Joan Didion was born in 1934 in the Sacramento Valley, where her ancestors had settled almost a century earlier during the Gold Rush era. She attended the University of California, Berkeley, in the 1950s, and later lived in New York and wrote for various magazines. The 20 essays gathered in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* originally appeared in *The Saturday Evening Post*, *The American Scholar*, *Vogue* and others, and were published as a collection in 1968.

Didion describes her writing as “non-intellectual,” in that she is less concerned with ideas than with images and events she arranges and pastes like snapshots in a scrapbook. She experiences her subject matter very personally, mingling with the people she writes about, walking their streets, listening to them talk, monitoring their facial expressions—all the while attentively recording her own fears, confusion, joys, and insights. “All I knew was what I saw,” she writes, “flash pictures in variable sequence, images with no ‘meaning’ beyond their temporary arrangement, not a movie but a cutting room experience.” At the same time, as she says in “On Keeping a Notebook,” the value of what she records has less to do with the accuracy of facts than with the accuracy of her impressions. “Remember what it was to me: that is always the point.”

Didion’s essays are generally regarded as examples of “New Journalism,” a hybrid of memoir and reportage. In this type of journalism, the reporter is no longer faceless and objectivity is no longer sacrosanct. Although she has been praised for the precision, control, and accuracy of her prose, Didion has also been accused of misrepresenting the facts through the distorted lens of her personal struggles and biases.

The title of this collection is taken from the poem “The Second Coming” by W. B. Yeats, which warns that “things fall apart” because “the center cannot hold,” implying that humanity has strayed from its center—from civilizing forces—and faces an era of moral chaos and anarchy. For Didion, Yeats’s poem succinctly expresses the foreboding and existential angst she feels as a witness to the social upheaval of the 1960s, especially in California. Prior to writing these essays, she underwent a period of paralysis as a writer in which she felt that “...writing was an irrelevant act, that the world as I had understood it no longer existed.” American society

in the 1960s appeared to be ripping at the seams, especially in the Haight-Ashbury District of San Francisco, where anti-establishment rhetoric and the drug dependent lifestyles of the “Hippie” movement were centered. “If I was to work again at all,” Didion concluded, “it would be necessary for me to come to terms with disorder.”

By and large, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* is a collection of essays about disorder, about the way in which the center of American society was losing its hold, and things were falling apart:

***It was the United States of America in the cold late spring of 1967, and the market was steady and the GNP high and a great many articulate people seemed to have a sense of high social purpose and it might have been a spring of brave hopes and national promise, but it was not, and more and more people had the uneasy apprehension that it was not.***

In and around Haight-Ashbury, Didion tracked and recorded the “social hemorrhaging” indicated by drug dealers, revolutionaries and hordes of runaway teenagers—especially the teenagers, some of whom were already parents themselves, dangerously ill-equipped as caregivers, and living on the streets with their toddlers in tow. Watching this next generation wandering San Francisco in a haze of LSD and confused, inarticulate political rhetoric, she came to understand that, “These were children who grew up cut loose from the web of cousins and great-aunts and family doctors and lifelong neighbors who had traditionally suggested and enforced society’s values.”

Didion reminds us that the Hippie movement represented something darker and more foreboding than simple teenage rebellion: families were unraveling; the American Dream had lost its appeal; the center could no longer hold. “We were seeing something important,” she writes. “We were seeing the desperate attempt of a handful of pathetically unequipped children to create a community in a social vacuum.”

Other essays in the collection also record evidence of social decay. In “Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream,” Didion examines a San Bernardino case in which a wife murdered her

husband largely because he no longer provided her with the affluent lifestyle she had been promised in California. Didion interviews a professional radical in “Comrade Laski, C.P.U.S.A. (M.-L.),” exposing his political aspirations as obsessive and delusional, “doomed commitments” with which he filled the void. “7000 Romaine, Los Angeles” ruminates about the lifestyle of billionaire Howard Hughes, suggesting that our fascination with Hughes may stem from our own antisocial longings.

In sum, as critic Robert Dana has written, “Her prose is a literary seismograph on which are clearly registered the tremors and tremblers that increasingly shake the bedrock of the American social dream.”

## About the author

A second collection of Joan Didion’s essays, *The White Album*, was published in 1979. She has also written novels based in California and Latin America, often dealing with the shattered lives of disoriented women (*Run River*, 1963; *Play It As It Lays*, 1970; *A Book of Common Prayer*, 1977; and *Democracy*, 1984). Most recently she has composed thoughtful and intensely wrought investigations of El Salvador at war, the Cuban emigres of Miami, and U.S. national politics.