14. Joan Didion

Joan Didion, author of novels, essays, and screenplays, was born in Sacramento, California, on December 5, 1934. She majored in English literature at the University of California at Berkeley and edited its literary magazine. In 1956 her article on the architect William Wilson Wurster won *Vogue* magazine's Prix de Paris award for college seniors; as part of the prize she was invited to join *Vogue*'s editorial staff. Didion also contributed on a free-lance basis to *Mademoiselle* and the *National Review* before taking a leave of absence to complete her first novel.

The publication in 1963 of that novel, *Run River,* earned her an immediate reputation. The next year she married the novelist John Gregory Dunne, with whom she has written such screenplays as *Panic in Needle Park* (1971) and *A Star Is Born* (1976), in addition to the "Points West" column for the *Saturday Evening Post* (1967–69). She has also been a columnist for *Life* and *Esquire.*

Her other works include two collections of essays, *Slouching Toward Bethlehem* (1968) and the best-selling *The White Album* (1979), as well as the novels *Play It As It Lays* (1970), which was nominated for a National Book Award, and *A Book of Common Prayer* (1977).

Didion and her husband live in Los Angeles, California, with their teenage daughter, Quintana.

¶ You were both wrong but it's all the same in the end.

As a matter of fact Charlotte had told me that she and Marin once modeled matching tennis dresses in a fashion show at the Burlingame Country Club and that because she did not play tennis she had needed to ask Marin how to hold the racquet correctly.

"I'm quite sure your mother didn't play tennis," I said.

"She always wore a tennis dress," Marin Bogart said.

"More than once?"

"Always."

"Didn't you play tennis?"

"Tennie," Marin Bogart said, "is just one more a mode of teaching an elitest strategy. If you subject it to a revolutionary analysis you'll see that. Not that I think you will."

We sat facing each other in the bleak room.

We all remember what we need to remember.

Marin remembered Charlotte in a tennis dress and Charlotte remembered Marin in a straw hat for Easter. I remembered Edgar as I did not remember the man who financed the Tupamaros. ~~very clearly, but nothing I remembered would accommodate a meeting with Leonard Douglas in Bogota.~~ Charlotte remembered she bled. I remembered the light in Boca Grande. I sat in this

~~"Why did you bother agreeing to see me," I said finally.~~

room in Buffalo where I had no business being and I talked to this child who was not mine and I remembered the light in Boca Grande.

Another place I have no business being.

~~In the end I had dreamed my life as Charlotte had.~~

¶ It seems to me now.

A manuscript page from *A Book of Common Prayer.*

Mary Lloyd Estrin

Joan Didion

It is usual for the interviewer to write this paragraph about the circumstances in which the interview was conducted, but the interviewer in this case, Linda Kuehl, died not long after the tapes were transcribed. Linda and I talked on August 18 and August 24, 1977, from about ten in the morning until early afternoon. Both interviews took place in the living room of my husband's and my house on the sea north of Los Angeles, a house we no longer own. The walls in that room were white. The floors were of terra cotta tile, very highly polished. The glare off the sea was so pronounced in that room that corners of it seemed, by contrast, extremely dark, and everyone who sat in the room tended to gravitate toward these dark corners. Over the years the room had in fact evolved to the point where the only comfortable chairs were in the dark, away from the windows. I mention this because I remember my fears about being inter-

viewed, one of which was that I would be construed as the kind of loon who had maybe 300 degrees of sea view and kept all the chairs in a kind of sooty nook behind the fireplace. Linda's intelligence dispelled these fears immediately. Her interest in and acuity about the technical act of writing made me relaxed and even enthusiastic about talking, which I rarely am. As a matter of fact this enthusiasm for talking technically makes me seem to myself, as I read over the transcript, a kind of apprentice plumber of fiction, a Cluny Brown at the writer's trade, but there we were.

J.D.

INTERVIEWER: You have said that writing is a hostile act; I have always wanted to ask you why.

DIDION: It's hostile in that you're trying to make somebody see something the way you see it, trying to impose your idea, your picture. It's hostile to try to wrench around someone else's mind that way. Quite often you want to tell somebody your dream, your nightmare. Well, nobody wants to hear about someone else's dream, good or bad; nobody wants to walk around with it. The writer is always tricking the reader into listening to the dream.

INTERVIEWER: Are you conscious of the reader as you write? Do you write listening to the reader listening to you?

DIDION: Obviously I listen to a reader, but the only reader I hear is me. I am always writing to myself. So very possibly I'm committing an aggressive and hostile act toward myself.

INTERVIEWER: So when you ask, as you do in many nonfiction pieces, "Do you get the point?" you are really asking if you *yourself* get the point.

DIDION: Yes. Once in a while, when I first started to write pieces, I would try to write to a reader other than myself. I always failed. I would freeze up.

INTERVIEWER: When did you know you wanted to write?

DIDION: I wrote stories from the time I was a little girl, but

I didn't want to be a writer. I wanted to be an actress. I didn't realize then that it's the same impulse. It's make-believe. It's performance. The only difference being that a writer can do it all alone. I was struck a few years ago when a friend of ours —an actress—was having dinner here with us and a couple of other writers. It suddenly occurred to me that she was the only person in the room who couldn't plan what she was going to do. She had to wait for someone to ask her, which is a strange way to live.

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever have a writing teacher?

DIDION: Mark Schorer was teaching at Berkeley when I was an undergraduate there, and he helped me. I don't mean he helped me with sentences, or paragraphs—nobody has time for that with student papers; I mean that he gave me a sense of what writing was about, what it was for.

INTERVIEWER: Did any writer influence you more than others?

DIDION: I always say Hemingway, because he taught me how sentences worked. When I was fifteen or sixteen I would type out his stories to learn how the sentences worked. I taught myself to type at the same time. A few years ago when I was teaching a course at Berkeley I reread *A Farewell to Arms* and fell right back into those sentences. I mean they're perfect sentences. Very direct sentences, smooth rivers, clear water over granite, no sinkholes.

INTERVIEWER: You've called Henry James an influence.

DIDION: He wrote perfect sentences too, but very indirect, very complicated. Sentences *with* sinkholes. You could drown in them. I wouldn't dare to write one. I'm not even sure I'd dare to read James again. I loved those novels so much that I was paralyzed by them for a long time. All those possibilities. All that perfectly reconciled style. It made me afraid to put words down.

INTERVIEWER: I wonder if some of your nonfiction pieces aren't shaped as a single Jamesian sentence.

DIDION: That would be the ideal, wouldn't it. An entire piece —eight, ten, twenty pages—strung on a single sentence. Actually, the sentences in my nonfiction are far more complicated than the sentences in my fiction. More clauses. More semicolons. I don't seem to hear that many clauses when I'm writing a novel.

INTERVIEWER: You have said that once you have your first sentence you've got your piece. That's what Hemingway said. All he needed was his first sentence and he had his short story.

DIDION: What's so hard about that first sentence is that you're stuck with it. Everything else is going to flow out of that sentence. And by the time you've laid down the first *two* sentences, your options are all gone.

INTERVIEWER: The first is the gesture, the second is the commitment.

DIDION: Yes, and the last sentence in a piece is another adventure. It should open the piece up. It should make you go back and start reading from page one. That's how it *should* be, but it doesn't always work. I think of writing anything at all as a kind of high-wire act. The minute you start putting words on paper you're eliminating possibilities. Unless you're Henry James.

INTERVIEWER: I wonder if your ethic—what you call your "harsh Protestant ethic"—doesn't close things up for you, doesn't hinder your struggle to keep all the possibilities open.

DIDION: I suppose that's part of the dynamic. I start a book and I want to make it perfect, want it to turn every color, want it to *be the world.* Ten pages in, I've already blown it, limited it, made it less, marred it. That's very discouraging. I hate the book at that point. After a while I arrive at an accommodation: well, it's not the ideal, it's not the perfect object I wanted to make, but maybe—if I go ahead and finish it anyway—I can get it right next time. Maybe I can have another chance.

INTERVIEWER: Have any women writers been strong influences?

DIDION: I think only in the sense of being models for a life, not for a style. I think that the Brontës probably encouraged my own delusions of theatricality. Something about George Eliot attracted me a great deal. I think I was not temperamentally attuned to either Jane Austen or Virginia Woolf.

INTERVIEWER: What are the disadvantages, if any, of being a woman writer?

DIDION: When I was starting to write—in the late fifties, early sixties—there was a kind of social tradition in which male novelists could operate. Hard drinkers, bad livers. Wives, wars, big fish, Africa, Paris, no second acts. A man who wrote novels had a role in the world, and he could play that role and do whatever he wanted behind it. A woman who wrote novels had no particular role. Women who wrote novels were quite often perceived as invalids. Carson McCullers, Jane Bowles. Flannery O'Connor of course. Novels by women tended to be described, even by their publishers, as sensitive. I'm not sure this is so true anymore, but it certainly was at the time, and I didn't much like it. I dealt with it the same way I deal with everything. I just tended my own garden, didn't pay much attention, behaved—I suppose—deviously. I mean I didn't actually let too many people know what I was doing.

INTERVIEWER: Advantages?

DIDION: The advantages would probably be precisely the same as the disadvantages. A certain amount of resistance is good for anybody. It keeps you awake.

INTERVIEWER: Can you tell simply from the style of writing, or the sensibility, if the author is a woman?

DIDION: Well, if style is character—and I believe it is—then obviously your sexual identity is going to show up in your style. I don't want to differentiate between style and sensibility, by the way. Again, your style *is* your sensibility. But this whole question of sexual identity is very tricky. If I were to read, cold, something by Anaïs Nin, I would probably say that it was written by a man trying to write as a woman. I feel the same

way about Colette, and yet both those women are generally regarded as intensely "feminine" writers. I don't seem to recognize "feminine." On the other hand, *Victory* seems to me a profoundly female novel. So does *Nostromo,* so does *The Secret Agent.*

INTERVIEWER: Do you find it easy to write in depth about the opposite sex?

DIDION: *Run River* was partly from a man's point of view. Everett McClellan. I don't remember those parts as being any harder than the other parts. A lot of people thought Everett was "shadowy," though. He's the most distinct person in the book to me. I loved him. I loved Lily and Martha but I loved Everett more.

INTERVIEWER: Was *Run River* your first novel? It seems so finished for a first that I thought you might have shelved earlier ones.

DIDION: I've put away nonfiction things, but I've never put away a novel. I might throw out forty pages and write forty new ones, but it's all part of the same novel. I wrote the first half of *Run River* at night over a period of years. I was working at *Vogue* during the day, and at night I would work on these scenes for a novel. In no particular sequence. When I finished a scene I would tape the pages together and pin the long strips of pages on the wall of my apartment. Maybe I wouldn't touch it for a month or two, then I'd pick a scene off the wall and rewrite it. When I had about a hundred and fifty pages done I showed them to twelve publishers, all of whom passed. The thirteenth, Ivan Obolensky, gave me an advance, and with that thousand dollars or whatever it was I took a two-month leave of absence and wrote the last half of the book. That's why the last half is better than the first half. I kept trying to run the first half through again, but it was intractable. It was set. I'd worked on it for too many years in too many moods. Not that the last half is perfect. It's smoother, it moves faster, but there are a great many unresolved problems. I didn't know how to

do anything at all. I had wanted *Run River* to be very complicated chronologically, to somehow have the past and present operating simultaneously, but I wasn't accomplished enough to do that with any clarity. Everybody who read it said it wasn't working. So I straightened it out. Present time to flashback to present time. Very straight. I had no option, because I didn't know how to do it the other way. I just wasn't good enough.

INTERVIEWER: Did you or Jonathan Cape put the comma in the title of the English edition?

DIDION: It comes back to me that Cape put the comma in and Obolensky left the comma out, but it wasn't of very much interest to me because I hated it both ways. The working title was *In the Night Season,* which Obolensky didn't like. Actually, the working title during the first half was *Harvest Home,* which everybody dismissed out of hand as uncommercial, although later there was a big commercial book by Thomas Tryon called exactly that. Again, I was not very sure of myself then, or I never would have changed the title.

INTERVIEWER: Was the book autobiographical? I ask this for the obvious reason that first novels often are.

DIDION: It wasn't except that it took place in Sacramento. A lot of people there seemed to think that I had somehow maligned them and their families, but it was just a made-up story. The central incident came from a little one-inch story in *The New York Times* about a trial in the Carolinas. Someone was on trial for killing the foreman on his farm, that's all there was. I think I really put the novel in Sacramento because I was homesick. I wanted to remember the weather and the rivers.

INTERVIEWER: The heat on the rivers?

DIDION: The heat. I think that's the way the whole thing began. There's a lot of landscape which I never would have described if I hadn't been homesick. If I hadn't wanted to remember. The impulse was nostalgia. It's not an uncommon impulse among writers. I noticed it when I was reading *From Here to Eternity* in Honolulu just after James Jones died. I

could see exactly that kind of nostalgia, that yearning for a place, overriding all narrative considerations. The incredible amount of description. When Prewitt tries to get from the part of town where he's been wounded out to Alma's house, every street is named. Every street is described. You could take that passage and draw a map of Honolulu. None of those descriptions have any narrative meaning. They're just remembering. Obsessive remembering. I could see the impulse.

INTERVIEWER: But doesn't the impulse of nostalgia produce the eloquence in *Run River?*

DIDION: It's got a lot of sloppy stuff. Extraneous stuff. Words that don't work. Awkwardnesses. Scenes that should have been brought up, scenes that should have been played down. But then *Play It As It Lays* has a lot of sloppy stuff. I haven't reread *Common Prayer,* but I'm sure that does too.

INTERVIEWER: How did you come to terms with point of view in *Play It As It Lays?* Did you ever question your authority to do it in both first and third person?

DIDION: I wanted to make it all first person, but I wasn't good enough to maintain a first. There were tricks I didn't know. So I began playing with a close third person, just to get something down. By a "close third" I mean not an omniscient third but a third very close to the mind of the character. Suddenly one night I realized that I had some first person and some third person and that I was going to have to go with both, or just not write a book at all. I was scared. Actually, I don't mind the way it worked out. The juxtaposition of first and third turned out to be very useful toward the ending, when I wanted to accelerate the whole thing. I don't think I'd do it again, but it was a solution to that particular set of problems. There's a point when you go with what you've got. Or you don't go.

INTERVIEWER: How long, in all, did *Play It As It Lays* take to write?

DIDION: I made notes and wrote pages over several years, but the actual physical writing—sitting down at the typewriter and

working every day until it was finished—took me from January until November 1969. Then of course I had to run it through again—I never know quite what I'm doing when I'm writing a novel, and the actual line of it doesn't emerge until I'm finishing. Before I ran it through again I showed it to John and then I sent it to Henry Robbins, who was my editor then at Farrar, Straus. It was quite rough, with places marked "chapter to come." Henry was unalarmed by my working that way, and he and John and I sat down one night in New York and talked, for about an hour before dinner, about what it needed doing. We all knew what it needed. We all agreed. After that I took a couple of weeks and ran it through. It was just typing and pulling the line through.

INTERVIEWER: What do you mean exactly by "pulling through"?

DIDION: For example, I didn't know that BZ was an important character in *Play It As It Lays* until the last few weeks I was working on it. So those places I marked "chapter to come" were largely places where I was going to go back and pull BZ through, hit him harder, prepare for the way it finally went.

INTERVIEWER: How did you feel about BZ's suicide at the end?

DIDION: I didn't realize until after I'd written it that it was essentially the same ending as *Run River.* The women let the men commit suicide.

INTERVIEWER: I read that *Play It As It Lays* crystallized for you when you were sitting in the lobby of the Riviera Hotel in Las Vegas and saw a girl walk through.

DIDION: I had thought Maria lived in New York. Maybe she was a model. Anyway, she was getting a divorce, going through grief. When I saw this actress in the Riviera Hotel, it occurred to me that Maria could be an actress. In California.

INTERVIEWER: Was she always Maria Wyeth?

DIDION: She didn't even have a name. Sometimes I'll be fifty, sixty pages into something and I'll still be calling a character

"X." I don't have a very clear idea of who the characters are until they start talking. Then I start to love them. By the time I finish the book, I love them so much that I want to stay with them. I don't want to leave them ever.

INTERVIEWER: Do your characters talk to you?

DIDION: After a while. In a way. When I started *Common Prayer* all I knew about Charlotte was that she was a nervous talker and told pointless stories. A distracted kind of voice. Then one day I was writing the Christmas party at the American Embassy, and I had Charlotte telling these bizarre anecdotes with no point while Victor Strasser-Mendana keeps trying to find out who she is, what she's doing in Boca Grande, who her husband is, what her husband does. And suddenly Charlotte says, "He runs guns. I wish they had caviar." Well, when I heard Charlotte say this, I had a very clear fix on who she was. I went back and rewrote some early stuff.

INTERVIEWER: Did you reshuffle a lot and, if so, how? Did you use pins or tape or what?

DIDION: Toward the beginning of a novel I'll write a lot of sections that lead me nowhere. So I'll abandon them, pin them on a board with the idea of picking them up later. Quite early in *Common Prayer* I wrote a part about Charlotte Douglas going to airports, a couple of pages that I liked but couldn't seem to find a place for. I kept picking this part up and putting it in different places, but it kept stopping the narrative; it was wrong everywhere, but I was determined to use it. Finally I think I put it in the middle of the book. Sometimes you can get away with things in the middle of a book. The first hundred pages are very tricky, the first forty pages especially. You have to make sure you have the characters you want. That's really the most complicated part.

INTERVIEWER: Strategy would seem to be far more complicated in *Common Prayer* than in *Play It As It Lays* because it had so much more plot.

DIDION: *Common Prayer* had a lot of plot and an awful lot

of places and weather. I wanted a dense texture, and so I kept throwing stuff into it, making promises. For example, I promised a revolution. Finally, when I got within twenty pages of the end, I realized I still hadn't delivered this revolution. I had a lot of threads, and I'd overlooked this one. So then I had to go back and lay in the preparation for the revolution. Putting in that revolution was like setting in a sleeve. Do you know what I mean? Do you sew? I mean I had to work that revolution in on the bias, had to ease out the wrinkles with my fingers.

INTERVIEWER: So the process of writing the novel is for you the process of discovering the precise novel that you want to write.

DIDION: Exactly. At the beginning I don't have anything at all, don't have any people, any weather, any story. All I have is a technical sense of what I want to do. For example, I want sometime to write a very long novel, eight-hundred pages. I want to write an eight-hundred page novel precisely *because* I think a novel should be read at one sitting. If you read a novel over a period of days or weeks the threads get lost, the suspension breaks. So the problem is to write an eight-hundred-page novel in which all the filaments are so strong that nothing breaks or gets forgotten ever. I wonder if García Márquez didn't do that in *The Autumn of the Patriarch.* I don't want to read it because I'm afraid he might have done it, but I did look at it, and it seems to be written in a single paragraph. *One paragraph.* The whole novel. I love that idea.

INTERVIEWER: Do you have any writing rituals?

DIDION: The most important is that I need an hour alone before dinner, with a drink, to go over what I've done that day. I can't do it late in the afternoon because I'm too close to it. Also, the drink helps. It removes me from the pages. So I spend this hour taking things out and putting other things in. Then I start the next day by redoing all of what I did the day before, following these evening notes. When I'm really working I don't like to go out or have anybody to dinner, because then

I lose the hour. If I don't have the hour, and start the next day with just some bad pages and nowhere to go, I'm in low spirits. Another thing I need to do, when I'm near the end of the book, is sleep in the same room with it. That's one reason I go home to Sacramento to finish things. Somehow the book doesn't leave you when you're asleep right next to it. In Sacramento nobody cares if I appear or not. I can just get up and start typing.

INTERVIEWER: What's the main difference between the process of fiction and the process of nonfiction?

DIDION: The element of discovery takes place, in nonfiction, not during the writing but during the research. This makes writing a piece very tedious. You already know what it's about.

INTERVIEWER: Are the subject of pieces determined by editors or are you free to go your own way?

DIDION: I make them up. They reflect what I want to do at the time, where I want to be. When I worked for *Life* I did a great many Honolulu pieces—probably more than *Life* might have wanted—because that's where I wanted to be then. Last night I finished a piece for *Esquire* about the California Water Project. I had always wanted to see the room where they control the water, where they turn it on and off all over the state, and I also wanted to see my mother and father. The water and my mother and father were all in Sacramento, so I went to Sacramento. I like to do pieces because it forces me to make appointments and see people, but I never wanted to be a journalist or reporter. If I were doing a story and it turned into a big breaking story, all kinds of teams flying in from papers and magazines and the networks, I'd probably think of something else to do.

INTERVIEWER: You've said that when you were an editor at *Vogue*, Allene Talmey showed you how verbs worked.

DIDION: Every day I would go into her office with eight lines of copy or a caption or something. She would sit there and mark it up with a pencil and get very angry about extra words,

about verbs not working. Nobody has time to do that except on a magazine like *Vogue*. Nobody, no teacher. I've taught and I've tried to do it, but I didn't have that much time and neither did the students. In an eight-line caption everything had to work, every word, every comma. It would end up being a *Vogue* caption, but on its own terms it had to work perfectly.

INTERVIEWER: You say you treasure privacy, that "being left alone and leaving others alone is regarded by members of my family as the highest form of human endeavor." How does this mesh with writing personal essays, particularly the first column you did for *Life* where you felt it imperative to inform the reader that you were at the Royal Hawaiian Hotel in lieu of getting a divorce?

DIDION: I don't know. I could say that I was writing to myself, and of course I was, but it's a little more complicated than that. I mean the fact that eleven million people were going to see that page didn't exactly escape my attention. There's a lot of mystery to me about writing and performing and showing off in general. I know a singer who throws up every time she has to go onstage. But she still goes on.

INTERVIEWER: How did the "fragility of Joan Didion" myth start?

DIDION: Because I'm small, I suppose, and because I don't talk a great deal to people I don't know. Most of my sentences drift off, don't end. It's a habit I've fallen into. I don't deal well with people. I would think that this appearance of not being very much in touch was probably one of the reasons I started writing.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think some reviewers and readers have mistaken you for your characters?

DIDION: There was a certain tendency to read *Play It As It Lays* as an autobiographical novel, I suppose because I lived out here and looked skinny in photographs and nobody knew anything else about me. Actually, the only thing Maria and I have in common is an occasional inflection, which I picked up

from her—not vice versa—when I was writing the book. I like Maria a lot. Maria was very strong, very tough.

INTERVIEWER: That's where I have difficulty with what so many critics have said about your women. Your women hardly seem fragile to me.

DIDION: Did you read Diane Johnson's review of *Common Prayer* in *The New York Review of Books?* She suggested that the women were strong to the point of being figures in a romance, that they were romantic heroines rather than actual women in actual situations. I think that's probably true. I think I write romances.

INTERVIEWER: I'd like to ask you about things that recur in your work. There's the line about "dirty tulips" on Park Avenue in a short story and in a piece. Or how about the large, square emerald ring that Lily wears in *Run River* and Charlotte wears in *Common Prayer?*

DIDION: Does Lily wear one too? Maybe she does. I've always wanted one, but I'd never buy one. For one thing emeralds—when you look at them closely—are always disappointing. The green is never blue enough. Ideally, if the green were blue enough you could look into an emerald for the rest of your life. Sometimes I think about Katherine Anne Porter's emeralds, sometimes I wonder if they're blue enough. I hadn't planned that emerald in *Common Prayer* to recur the way it does. It was just something I thought Charlotte might have, but as I went along the emerald got very useful. I kept taking that emerald one step further. By the end of the novel the emerald is almost the narrative. I had a good time with that emerald.

INTERVIEWER: What about the death of a parent, which seems to recur as a motif?

DIDION: You know how doctors who work with children get the children to tell stories? And they figure out from the stories what's frightening the child, what's worrying the child, what the child thinks? Well, a novel is just a story. You work things out in the stories you tell.

INTERVIEWER: And the abortion or loss of a child?

DIDION: The death of children worries me all the time. It's on my mind. Even *I* know that, and I usually don't know what's on my mind. On the whole, I don't want to think too much about why I write what I write. If I know what I'm doing I don't do it, I can't do it. The abortion in *Play It As It Lays* didn't occur to me until I'd written quite a bit of the book. The book needed an active moment, a moment at which things changed for Maria, a moment in which—this was very, very important—Maria was center stage for a number of pages. Not at a party reacting to somebody else. Not just thinking about her lot in life, either. A long section in which she was the main player. The abortion was a narrative strategy.

INTERVIEWER: Was it a narrative strategy in *Run River?*

DIDION: Actually, it was the excuse for a digression, into landscape. Lily has an abortion in San Francisco and then she comes home on the Greyhound bus. I always think of the Greyhound bus and not the abortion. The bus part is very detailed about the look of the towns. It's something I wrote in New York; you can tell I was homesick.

INTERVIEWER: How about the freeways that reappear?

DIDION: Actually, I don't drive on the freeway. I'm afraid to. I freeze at the top of the entrance, at the instant when you have to let go and join it. Occasionally I *do* get on the freeway—usually because I'm shamed into it—and it's such an extraordinary experience that it sticks in my mind. So I use it.

INTERVIEWER: And the white space at the corner of Sunset and La Brea in Hollywood? You mention it in some piece and then in *Play It As It Lays.*

DIDION: I've never analyzed it, but one line of poetry I always have in mind is the line from *Four Quartets:* "at the still point of the turning world." I tend to move toward still points. I think of the equator as a still point. I suppose that's why I put Boca Grande on the equator.

INTERVIEWER: A narrative strategy.

DIDION: Well, this whole question of how you work out the narrative is very mysterious. It's a good deal more arbitrary than most people who don't do it would ever believe. When I started *Play It As It Lays* I gave Maria a child, a daughter, Kate, who was in kindergarten. I remember writing a passage in which Kate came home from school and showed Maria a lot of drawings, orange and blue crayon drawings, and when Maria asked her what they were, Kate said, "Pools on fire." You can see I wasn't having too much success writing this child. So I put her in a hospital. You never meet her. Now, it turned out to have a great deal of importance—Kate's being in the hospital is a very large element in *Play It As It Lays*—but it began because I couldn't write a child, no other reason. Again, in *Common Prayer,* Marin bombs the Transamerica Building because I *needed* her to. I needed a crisis in Charlotte's life. Well, at this very moment, right now, I can't think of the Transamerica Building without thinking of Marin and her pipe bomb and her gold bracelet, but it was all very arbitrary in the beginning.

INTERVIEWER: What misapprehensions, illusions and so forth have you had to struggle against in your life? In a commencement address you once said there were many.

DIDION: All kinds. I was one of those children who tended to perceive the world in terms of things read about it. I began with a literary idea of experience, and I still don't know where all the lies are. For example, it may not be true that people who try to fly always burst into flames and fall. That may not be true at all. In fact people *do fly,* and land safely. But I don't really believe that. I still see Icarus. I don't seem to have a set of physical facts at my disposal, don't seem to understand how things really work. I just have an *idea* of how they work, which is always trouble. As Henry James told us.

INTERVIEWER: You seem to live your life on the edge, or, at least, on the literary idea of the edge.

DIDION: Again, it's a literary idea, and it derives from what

engaged me imaginatively as a child. I can recall disapproving of the golden mean, always thinking there was more to be learned from the dark journey. The dark journey engaged me more. I once had in mind a very light novel, all surface, all conversations and memories and recollections of some people in Honolulu who were getting along fine, one or two misapprehensions about the past notwithstanding. Well, I'm working on that book now, but it's not running that way at all. Not at all.

INTERVIEWER: It always turns into danger and apocalypse.

DIDION: Well, I grew up in a dangerous landscape. I think people are more affected than they know by landscapes and weather. Sacramento was a very extreme place. It was very flat, flatter than most people can imagine, and I still favor flat horizons. The weather in Sacramento was as extreme as the landscape. There were two rivers, and these rivers would flood in the winter and run dry in the summer. Winter was cold rain and tulle fog. Summer was 100 degrees, 105 degrees, 110 degrees. Those extremes affect the way you deal with the world. It so happens that if you're a writer the extremes show up. They don't if you sell insurance.

LINDA KUEHL
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