

Blue Nights

JOAN
DIDION
BLUE
NIGHTS

OK. I confess. This book sat for most of its check-out period on my night table. I had read Didion's excellent book The Year of Magical Thinking but I knew that this new memoir covered another territory of loss--not that of her husband, John Gregory Dunne, but of her daughter who had the wonderful name of Quintana Roo (a state in Mexico.)

And yes, Blue Nights is sad. As would be any book about losing your only child. But it's also amazingly human, full of insights and many questions, some of which go unanswered.

First the title. It comes from those late June, early July nights where twilight seems to linger for hours until darkness finally comes. The light is soft; the world is warm and alive. Didion speaks of them as occurring only in the north, not far south in LA where she spent much of her life as a screenwriter, essayist, and novelist and where Quintana grew up. No, the blue lights happen in New York City where Didion now lives now and where Quintana died young at the age of thirty-nine from a massive infection. To make matters even more tragic, she first got ill only five months after her wedding.

The book covers other things as well adoption, meeting with biological family for the first time as an adult, parenting, the failures of parenting, and, in particular, aging. Didion writes with brutal honesty especially about this last topic.

But it's Quintana Roo's presence that hovers over the book. She was a remarkably intelligent and perspicacious child. And no wonder, she traveled with her parents who were both screenwriters all over the world. She ordered caviar at top restaurants as a child. When only five she set up shop in her Malibu house selling "Sundries." But Quintana also suffered from depression, and Didion never understood how to help her with this.

Yes, this book is sad. But as Didion tells her stories, some jump-started by her daughter's mementoes and writings and drawings, you feel closer to life's incredible mysteries--for it's the sad times even more than the good ones that forge us, make us who we truly are. For another book about a mother-daughter connection--this one a memoir by a daughter about her dead mother try Meghan O'Rourke's The Last Goodbye ..

Posted by Dory L. on March 21, 2012

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