

QUESTIONS ABOUT
THE YEAR OF MAGICAL THINKING
Part 1

While her daughter is in a coma, Joan Didion's husband John dies of a heart attack. Joan explores the impact of this event with raw honesty and shows us no matter how privileged someone's life is, some things cannot be controlled. Part 1 covers chapters 1 through 10 (pages 1 to 122 in Vintage Books soft cover edition).

Chapter 1

1. "Life changes in the instant. The ordinary instant." What does this mean?
2. Which instant in Joan's life does she consider in this book?

Chapter 2

3. What are Joan's concerns as the ambulance crew works on her husband?
4. At the end of Chapter 2 she writes, "I guess that is when I must have known." What is it she "must have known"?
5. Joan acknowledges to the physician that her husband is dead. Does she truly believe this in her heart?
6. What had John been carrying in a silver clip when he died? What does Joan do with these items?
7. The death certificate lists 10:18 pm as the time of death. When does Joan believe he actually died?
8. Would you want to watch the autopsy of a loved one?
9. What is mourning? What is grief? How are they different?
10. If Joan is left alone, what does she imagine might happen?

Chapter 3

11. Why does she want to keep others from learning of her husband's death?
12. Why does she keep his shoes?
13. Why doesn't she want to donate his organs? Why is an organ donation impossible anyway?

Chapter 4

14. She has many religious rites performed for her husband. And yet, she writes, "it still didn't bring him back," which seems to be an accusation. Whom is she accusing? Is she justified?
15. What is "pathological bereavement"? Does Joan suffer from this? Do you believe that "pathological bereavement" is truly pathological or simply the normal reaction to the death of an intimate and beloved partner?
16. Are grief and bereavement purely emotional emotions?

Chapter 5

17. In this chapter Joan reconstructs the events leading to (or causing) her husband's death. Where does she start? What events does she include?

Chapter 6

18. She writes of past impressions she's had of death, and she examines the meaning of self-pity. How are these related to her husband's death?
19. What are the indications that her husband's health was deteriorating and that he might not have had long to live?

Chapter 7

20. With what sequence of events does this chapter deal?

Chapter 8

21. Joan's daughter Quintana suffers a hemorrhagic stroke in the Los Angeles airport. How long has it been since she was released from the hospital in New York? Do you believe it was safe for her to fly?
22. What does it mean when a person has fixed and dilated pupils?
23. Discuss whether a parent can always be available for his or her child.
24. Joan says she knows how to get things done in any situation: to whom to talk, what strings to pull. She is not someone who waits in line for her turn. This is a trait to be envied. Is it also a trait to be admired?
25. Joan attempts to guide her daughter's medical treatment and notices that she gets resistance from physicians if she appears too knowledgeable. So how does she proceed? How successful is she?

Chapter 10

26. A vortex is a mass of quickly spinning water or air such as a whirlpool or tornado. Joan writes about a "vortex effect." What is her personal vortex?
27. What does she do to avoid the "vortex effect"? How well does it work for her?