

# Not going gentle into the night

**BLUE NIGHTS**, by Joan Didion. Alfred A. Knopf, 188 pp., \$25.

BY MARION WINIK  
Special to *Newsday*

On the cover of Joan Didion's previous memoir, "The Year of Magical Thinking," four letters in the author's name and the title were colored differently than the rest. They spelled "JOHN," the name of her late husband.

On the cover of her new book, "Blue Nights," the colored letters in her name spell simply "NO." This is a book of resistance — a struggle against "the end of promise, the dwindling of the days, the inevitability of the fading, the dying of the brightness. Blue nights," Didion explains, "are the opposite of the dying of the brightness, but they are also its warning."

While powerless over death, particularly the death of her

daughter, Quintana Roo Dunne, who lay in a coma for 20 months and died in 2005 at the age of 39 — Didion is determined not to lose what she has left: the images, the words. "Blue Nights" tells almost nothing about Quintana's illness and the circumstances of her death — instead, it examines what is left.

The things she doesn't want to forget are murmured over and over in classic Didion one-sentence paragraphs: "The day she cut the peach-colored cake from Payard. . . . The day the plumeria tattoo showed through her veil." (Images from Quintana's wedding.) "Like when someone dies, don't dwell on it." (Quintana's advice to her mother on bereavement, repeated if not obeyed.)

She sifts through the memories and mementos of her daughter's early precocity — a call to 20th Century Fox to find out how to become a star; a box of "Sundries," containing areas for "My Passport," "My IRA" and

"Little Toys"; a list of "Mom's Sayings": "Brush your teeth, brush your hair, shush I'm working." Now these are viewed with suspicion — was Quintana so mature because her parents were not mature enough?

"It was a time of my life during which I actually believed that somewhere between frying the chicken to serve on Sara Mankiewicz's Minton dinner plates and buying the Porthault parasol to shade the beautiful baby girl in Saigon I had covered the main 'motherhood' points," Didion writes, recalling the lost days of expense accounts, innocence and privilege.

Leavening the darkest moments of this book are wonderful asides — an explanation of how she writes rough drafts using a notation that represents the rhythm of the text rather than its content (of course she does); reports from "Cafe Didion," the diners of takeout eaten backstage at the theater where

Vanessa Redgrave starred in the play of "Magical Thinking"; a passage where Didion is sent to physical therapy for her mysterious neuritis. She is surprised to find she likes PT, and is encouraged by the proficiency of the other patients — until she learns they are the New York Yankees.

"Blue Nights" is not "The Year of Magical Thinking," a book that stands alone and that everyone should read. But for the great many of us who cherish Joan Didion, who can never get enough of her voice and her brilliant, fragile, endearing, pitiless persona, it is a gift.

Joan Didion



PHOTO BY BRIGITTE LACOMBE

## this week

Readings & events on LI

### Sunday

Museum of Rockville Centre archivist **Marilyn Nunes Devlin** discusses her book, "A Brief History of Rockville Centre" (History Press). At 1 p.m., *Phillips House Museum, 28 Hempstead Rd., Rockville Centre; 516-764-7459, rvcny.us*

### Tuesday

New York Times sportswriter **George Vecsey** reads from his new book, "Stan Musial: An American Life" (Ballantine/ESPN Books). At 7:30 p.m., *Port Washington Public Library, 1 Library Dr., Port Washington; 516-883-4400, pwpl.org*



### Saturday

Rockville Centre resident **Larry McCoy** reads from his collection of humorous essays on aging, "Did I Really Change My Underwear Every Day?" (Sunstone Press). At 8 a.m., *Sportset Health & Fitness Club, 60 Maple Ave., Rockville Centre, 516-536-8700, sportsetrv.com*



Sag Harbor resident **Wafa Faith Hallam** reads from her self-published book, "The Road From Morocco," a memoir of her Moroccan mother and her own journey to the United States. At 1 p.m., *East Hampton Library, 159 Main St., East Hampton; easthamptonlibrary.org, call 631-324-0222, ext. 3, for reservations*

Poet **Marvin Bell** reads from his new collection, "Vertigo: The Living Dead Man Poems" (Copper Canyon Press). At 6 p.m., *Canio's Books, 290 Main St., Sag Harbor; 631-725-4926, caniosbooks.com*

# Giving Copernicus his place in the sun

**A MORE PERFECT HEAVEN: How Copernicus Revolutionized the Cosmos**, by Dava Sobel. Walker & Co., 273 pp., \$25.

BY PETER M. GIANOTTI  
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Copernicus knew what makes the world go round.

Philosopher and mathematician, physician and church canon, he calculated and theorized that the Earth moved around the sun. Nicolaus Copernicus "defied common sense and received wisdom" and "fathered an alternate universe," author Dava Sobel writes.

Sobel's "A More Perfect Heaven: How Copernicus Revolutionized the Cosmos" chronicles and dramatizes the story of the momentous discovery and how it came to be published.

Her account is generally lucid and engaging. But the problem for Sobel, a former reporter for The New York Times and an East Hampton resident, stems



PHOTO BY PAUL SCHNECK

Dava Sobel

from her effort to make the story even more accessible.

She sticks a two-act play in the middle of it. And this curiosity advances at the pace of Pluto. Imagining or adapting the dialogues of history is risky. The results often fall somewhere between high-school stagecraft and Hallmark Hall of Fame. Don't expect Tom Stoppard.

Sobel's play, titled "And the Sun Stood Still," gets your attention, beginning with a bishop retching and ending with an image of a head spinning. But more than anything else, it's a distraction, one that this adven-

ture doesn't need.

Sobel succeeds, however, in describing the details of a remarkable life and an Inquisitorial age — no time for free thinkers before, during or after Copernicus. Galileo Galilei would go to prison and Giordano Bruno to the stake.

The portrait of modern astronomy's framer shows a devoted, shrewd scientist and a sensible, adept church administrator who became a visionary. Yet, concerned about expected criticism, he didn't seek to have his theory published and hid it for 30 years.

Mathematician Georg Joachim Rheticus would change that. Drawn by talk about Copernicus' grand idea at a time when Martin Luther was sparking another revolution, Rheticus visited the elderly Copernicus, who taught him the details of the theory. Worried about ridicule, Copernicus welcomed Rheticus' enthusiasm for his thesis. And Rheticus would write "an informed summary" of it.

More important, he figured out a way to spur publication of "On the Revolutions of the Celestial Spheres" — in itself, a

tale of effective lobbying and marketing.

Copernicus suffered a stroke in November 1542. He died in 1543, moments after he was handed a copy of his printed book. Eventually, and predictably, "On the Revolutions" would be placed on the Index of Prohibited Books.

That was 1616. It stayed on the list for more than two centuries. "The condemnation of Copernicus' ideas by the Roman Church, which would have devastated the Catholic canon had he lived to hear of it, probably served to make his book more popular," Sobel writes. In 1617, a new edition was published in Amsterdam. In 2008, a copy sold for \$2.2 million.

Sobel says, "Copernicus strove to restore astronomy to a prior, purer simplicity — a geometric Garden of Eden. He sacrificed the Earth's stability to that vision, and pushed the stars out of his way."

Last year, on the "537th return of his birthday," scientists honored the patient Pole. They named super-heavy atomic element number 112 "copernicium."

