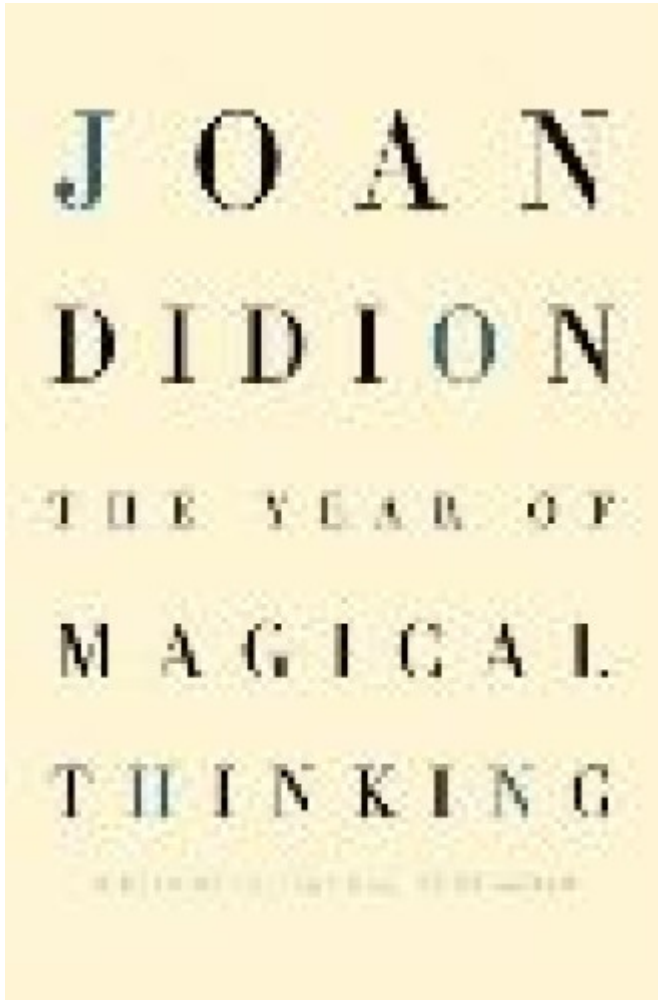


Stories of sorrow

By [David Heim](#)

April 6, 2011

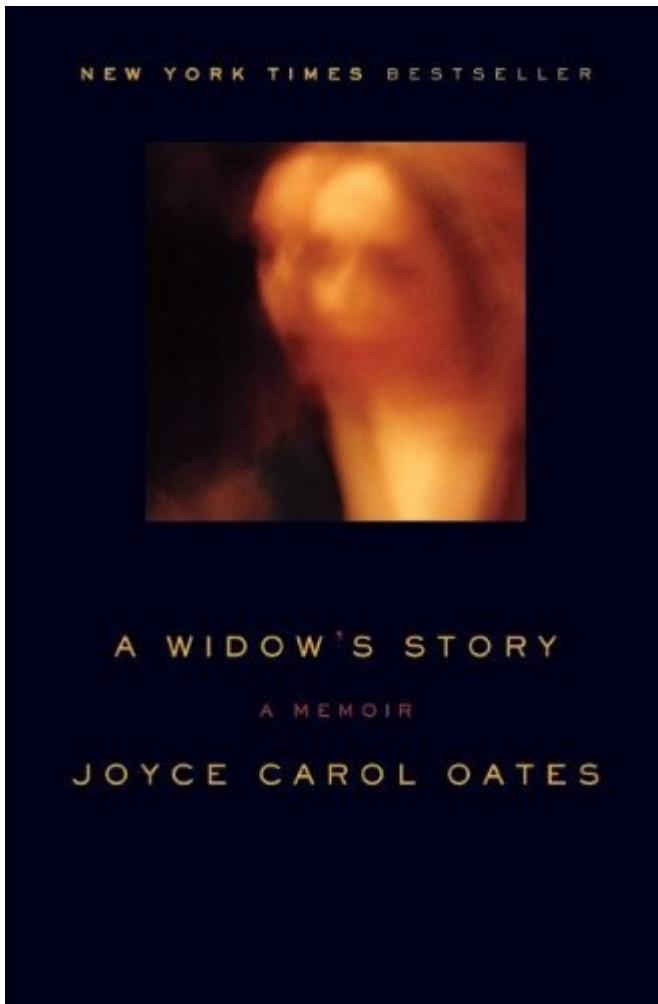
In Review



The Year of Magical Thinking

by Joan Didion

Knopf



A Widow's Story

by Joyce Carol Oates

Ecco

In

times of grief, "the very sun and moon seem taken from us," writes Oscar Wilde.

He continues:

*Outside, the day may be blue and gold,
but the light that creeps down through the thickly muffled glass of the small
iron-barred window beneath which one sits is grey and niggard. It is always
twilight in one's cell, as it is always twilight in one's heart.*

Wilde

writes in a late-19th-century idiom, but his experience will be recognizable to many people across the decades.

Two

brilliant contemporary writers have recently penned memoirs of grief: Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking* and Joyce Carol Oates's *A Widow's Story*.

In a lovely, humane review of Oates, British novelist Julian Barnes [manages](#) a deft comparison of the two books while keeping the focus not on literary achievement but on the peculiar terrors and dislocations of grief.

The appearance of these two grief memoirs so close together is perhaps itself noteworthy, for as Barnes notes, these days "there are fewer social forms to surround and support the grief-bearer" than there once were. "Very little is handed down from one generation to another about what it is like."

In that sense, grieving in our day may not be quite like it was for Wilde or people of earlier generations. People are on their own, many of them without ministers, or congregations, or rituals--or at least none that are deeply meaningful to them.

Perhaps it's now to books by writers like Didion and Oates that people turn to chart their course through the wilderness of sorrow. Christians can be grateful that these books exist, then, and can learn from them--even as they hope to offer people something more. Whatever they offer, it should be at least as honest as the writing of Didion, Oates and Barnes.