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Joan Didion in her essay, "On Keeping a Notebook", stresses that keeping a notebook is not like keeping a journal. Didion supports her claim by describing entries that are in her notebook. The author's purpose is to enlighten the reader as to what a notebook is. The author writes in a nostalgic tone for those who are reading the essay, so that they can relate to her. She uses rhetorical appeals; such as flashback, pathos, and imagery to name a few. By using these devices she helps capture the reader's attention. Didion opens up her essay by using an entry from her notebook. When writing in her notebook, she writes down things that interest her and refers back to them. The reference of a memory or event is called flashback...show more content... Continuously through her essay Didion uses this device (Ex: Paragraph 1, 2, 4, etc.). While using flashback in her essay, she is bolstering her other rhetorical devices, which are pathos and imagery. An example of Didion using flashback is in her second paragraph where she talks about a time in the 1960s where she recalled seeing a woman walking away from a man. As she continues through the essay she also refers back to 1945, the use of flashback in the essay really helps the reader to become involved in the story. Related to the previous rhetorical device, is pathos. Pathos is a rhetorical appeal that evokes emotion inside of the reader. When the reader is reading the essay they feel empathic when they can relate to the same thing that the author is attributing to the essay. The previously stated rhetorical device (flashback) helps set up pathos by telling the reader of the experience going on around them. When Didion mentions that; [The impulse to write things down] begins in the cradle, she's using pathos. The reader can orientate when the urge to write started for them. When the reader can relate, it lends a hand in keeping an interactive reader. Every good writer knows that in order to keep the reader invested; you have to have good imagery. Imagery is when the author presents a mental image through descriptive words. One prime example of imagery that the author uses is in paragraph 3; where she tells of a moment between a man and a woman. In this narration she states the time, year, outfit of each character described, and what the female character was doing. These details might come across as irrelevant, or unnecessary, but this is Didion's way of showing what the blueprint of notebook it. Using imagery reinforces the foundation of the essay, and what the essay's mission was. "On Keeping a Notebook", used many different types of rhetorical devices and although many of them weren't mentioned, they still played an imperative role in the formation of the essay. The three mentioned previously were; flashback, pathos, and imagery. Individually, each played a paramount part in the formation of the essay. Of the three, the one that laid the cornerstone was pathos. Pathos was what every other device alluded to. In conclusion to this, Joan Didion's essay had a sufficient amount of rhetorical devices and each had an important role in the often when we keep a diary we seem to predict that we write about our daily life, but it is not true with all the cases. Joan Didion the author of "On Keeping a Notebook" explains her idea of writing in a diary, which is distinctive as her writing style. At the age of five, Joan receives a notebook from her mother to write about her daily life and to get amused by writing. However, this five-year-old mind writes an "ironic" and "exotic" story of a woman who was freezing in Arctic and finds herself in Sahara when the day breaks. Writing for Didion is like solving a mystery and preserving what wanders in her mind. However, Didion also explains the ethics of our society outlining others as more interesting than us. In such society, only the oldest Joan Didion explains exactly how she thinks it is important to keep a notebook in her essay titled, "On Keeping a Notebook." She starts off her piece with personal anecdotes and states a notebook's importance in her life and how she views the world. She is able to access a direct link to her past because of the random events and accounts she writes down throughout her day. Didion knows that her writing can seem frantic, unfinished, or unpolished, but that is the nature of a notebook. It is not supposed to be perfect or pretty, it represents her and therefore serves its purpose. The notebook has no other reason for existing except for writing things down to remember. Didion uses the notebook to remember the simplest of details, but also the vaguest and widest range of emotions she could be feeling that day. The interpretation of these strange anecdotes does not matter, because, at the end of the day, it's personal. Joan Didion does an exceptional job at exploring identity in her essay because keeping a notebook is a direct way to access memories and past experiences that accumulate into parts of our identities. Memories have an extreme impact on our self-esteem and perception which are important details in our identity as a whole. Joan explains how these memories impact her, "We forget all too soon the things we thought we could never forget. We forget the loves and the betrayals alike, forget what we whispered and what we screamed, forget who we were. I have already lost touch with a couple of people I used to be." These defining moments become part of one's soul and influence values, morals, personality, voice, tone, and so much more that make someone who they are. Joan exemplifies loving and learning from one's past self which is the best and only way to grow. Her method of keeping a notebook is the perfect way to explore and reflect on one's identity. In "Slouching Toward Bethlehem" by Joan Didion, we find the brilliant and prolific writer's essay On Keeping A Notebook. As an avid notebook keeper, I find her observations and self-awareness about the process and results of this obsessive habit both humorous and inciteful. Written over 50 years ago, her words still ring true today, whether it's observations in a notebook or posts on social media and blogs. The events we write about and our recollections of them are merely our interpretation of them, and more about experiencing them than accurately documenting them. Here are a few of my favorite excerpts... You can find a copy of the entire essay here. "But our notebooks give us away, for however dutifully we record what we see around us, the common denominator of all we see is always, transparently, shamelessly, the implacable "I." We are not talking here about the kind of notebook that is patently for public consumption, a structural conceit for binding together a series of graceful pensées; we are talking about something private, about bits of the mind's string too short to use, an indiscriminate and erratic assemblage with meaning only for its maker." "I always had trouble distinguishing between what happened and what merely might have happened, but I remain unconvinced that the distinction, for my purposes, matters." "How it felt to me: that is getting closer to the truth about a notebook. I sometimes delude myself about why I keep a notebook, imagine that some thrifty virtue derives from preserving everything observed. See enough and write it down, I tell myself, and then some morning when the world seems drained of wonder, some day when I am only going through the motions of doing what I am supposed to do, which is write — on that bankrupt morning I will simply open my notebook and there it will all be, a forgotten account with accumulated interest, paid passage back to the world out there: dialogue overheard in hotels and elevators and at the hat-check counter in Pavillon (one middle-aged man shows his hat check to another and says, 'That's my old football number'); impressions of Bettina Aptheker and Benjamin Sonnenberg and Teddy ('Mr. Acapulco') Stauffer; careful aperçus about tennis bums and failed fashion models and Greek shipping heiressees, one of whom taught me a significant lesson (a lesson I could have learned from F. Scott Fitzgerald, but perhaps we all must meet the very rich for ourselves) by asking, when I arrived to interview her in her orchid-filled sitting room on the second day of a paralyzing New York blizzard, whether it was snowing outside. I imagine, in other words, that the notebook is about other people. But of course it is not. I have no real business with what one stranger said to another at the hat-check counter in Pavillon; in fact I suspect that the line 'That's my old football number' touched not my own imagination at all, but merely some memory of something once read, probably 'The Eighty-Yard Run.' Nor is my concern with a woman in a dirty crepe-de-Chine wrapper in a Wilmington bar. My stake is always, of course, in the unmentioned girl in the plaid silk dress. Remember what it was to be me: that is always the point." "Why did I write it down? In order to remember, of course, but exactly what was it I wanted to remember? How much of it actually happened? Did any of it? Why do I keep a notebook at all? It is easy to deceive oneself on all those scores. The impulse to write things down is a peculiarly compulsive one, inexplicable to those who do not share it, useful only accidentally, only secondarily, in the way that any compulsion tries to justify itself. I suppose that it begins or does not begin in the cradle. Although I have felt compelled to write things down since I was five years old, I doubt that my daughter ever will, for she is a singularly blessed and accepting child, delighted with life exactly as life presents itself to her, unafraid to go to sleep and unafraid to wake up. Keepers of private notebooks are a different breed altogether, lonely and resistant rearrangers of things, anxious malcontents, children afflicted apparently at birth with some presentiment of loss." Randon Billings Noble In her essay "On Keeping a Notebook," Joan Didion writes about the odd notes she has taken over the years — on conversations she has overheard ("That woman Estelle is partly the reason why George Sharp and I are separated today"), facts she has learned ("during 1964, 720 tons of soot fell on every square mile of New York City"), and observations she has made ("Redhead getting out of car in front of Beverly Wilshire Hotel, chinchilla stole, Vuition bags with tags reading: MRS LOU FOX / HOTEL SAHARA / VEGAS). She writes that each note "presumably has some meaning to me..." but admits that she can't always recall what it is. For her the point is to "[r]emember what it was to be me." That's what I use a journal for — not a notebook. Perhaps these classifications are splitting hairs, but Didion sees a difference, too. She claims that at no point have I ever been able successfully to keep a diary: my approach to daily life ranges from the grossly negligent to the merely absent, and on those few occasions when I have tried dutifully to record a day's events, boredom has so overcome me that the results are mysterious at best. What is this business about "shopping, typing piece, dinner with E, depressed?" Shopping for what? Typing what piece? Who is E? Was this "E" depressed, or was I depressed? I would split the hair again and claim that there's a difference between a diary and a journal — that it's sort of like the difference between an autobiography and a memoir: in a diary you record each day's events and in a journal you write whatever you want about your day whenever you want to write about it. For Didion, though, it's all about the notebook. I, too, keep a notebook — a writing notebook — and when I mentioned this during a presentation I gave on research in creative nonfiction, a hand in the audience immediately shot up: What did I write in my writing notebook? Some writers are dismissive of these kinds of questions — do you write in a notebook or on a computer, what kind of pen do you use, what kind of paper? But I'm happy to talk about the physical practicalities of craft — I want to know about your Pilot G-2 and your Clairefontaines. And I'm happy to talk about the content, too. When I answered the question many people took notes — perhaps in their writing notebooks. Here's a version of what I said: I keep three versions of a writing notebook: a journal, a writing notebook, and a writing planner. In my journal I write down what happens to me, what I'm thinking about, occasional random observations, lists — the usual stuff you'd write in a journal. But I include this under "writing notebooks" because (especially as a writer of creative nonfiction) I often look back on journals to remember a certain time or place or person or line of thought — although I never write in my journal with this in mind. I write here solely as a person — not a writer. Here is a journal entry I made on May 11, 2015, after walking through an Elaine de Kooning exhibit at the National Portrait Gallery: In my "official" writing notebook I jot down ideas for writing projects, and write sketches of writing projects. Often I'll start writing towards a draft but without any sense of where I'm headed. Writing by hand takes the pressure off: I don't send ripped-out notebook pages to The New Yorker. But when a piece moves from my notebook to my computer and eventually (sometimes) to publication, I can see that long passages are often exactly the same as when I wrote them by hand the first time. This is what I wrote in my writing notebook soon after the journal entry above: There's my writing planner, the newest addition to my series of writing notebooks. It's a Moleskine "weekly notebook" that has a calendar page laying out the days of the week on the left side and plain lined pages on the right side. I use this for short- and long-term planning. When I hear of a submission, contest, or application deadline I write it down on the calendar side; then I flip back a few weeks (or months) and write a reminder on the notebook side. On Sundays, a day I usually have a long swath of time to myself, I flip to the next week and write some plans. Then, during the week, when I have an hour or two to myself, I open my writing planner and do what it tells me this is especially useful when the demands of everyday life are so crushing I can't think straight). If I find that I can't manage much I flip ahead a week or two and write "don't forget about idea!" and try again then. Every so often I flip back to look for unchecked boxes. It's a lovely tool for preservation — and for looking and planning ahead to, say, a retreat or residency. Here is a not-so-productive week in my writing planner (with only a deadline reminder for my piece about The Folded Clock): And here is a very productive week at the glorious Virginia Center for the Creative Arts: What would Joan Didion think of all these notebooks? I smile/shudder to think. But my writing notebooks keep me writing — through rejection, triumph, inspiration, and disenchantment, in the face of preschooler twins, tantrums, field trips, and snow days; on the crests and in the troughs; at home and away — all the months of the year. ___ Randon Billings Noble is an essayist. Her work has appeared in the Modern Love column of The New York Times, The Georgia Review, The Rumpus, Shenandoah, Brevity, Fourth Genre and elsewhere. She is a nonfiction editor at r.k.r.v quarterly, Reviews Editor at Tinderbox Poetry Journal, and a reviews for The A.V. Club. You can read more of her work at www.randonbillingsnoble.com. "Joan Didion - On Keeping A Notebook" is an essay written by Joan Didion, a renowned American writer. In this essay, Didion reflects on the importance and significance of keeping a notebook as a means of preserving one's thoughts, observations, and experiences. On Keeping A Notebook Essays Summary By Joan Didion-She explores the ways in which a notebook becomes an extension of the self, a tool for introspection, and a record of the world around us. Through her personal anecdotes and observations, Didion highlights the various purposes and benefits of maintaining a notebook, emphasizing its role in capturing the fleeting moments of life and serving as a source of inspiration for writing. Also Read- On Keeping A Notebook Essays Summary By Joan Didion-Didion begins her essay by recounting her own experience with notebooks, stating that she has been keeping them since she was a child. She describes her notebooks as a form of "impulse control," a way of making sense of the chaos of life. According to her, a notebook serves as a place to record random thoughts, feelings, and observations that would otherwise be lost to memory. On Keeping A Notebook Essays Summary By Joan Didion-It acts as a repository of the self, allowing one to document their own personal history and engage in a process of self-discovery. The author also addresses the idea of "keeping" a notebook, suggesting that it is not merely a passive act of recording, but an active engagement with the world. She argues that the act of writing in a notebook forces one to pay attention to the details of life, to observe and analyze their surroundings. On Keeping A Notebook Essays Summary By Joan Didion-By documenting these observations, the writer gains a deeper understanding of their own experiences and the world at large. Didion suggests that a notebook becomes an instrument of curiosity, encouraging us to engage with the present moment and find meaning in the seemingly mundane. Throughout the essay, Didion intertwines personal anecdotes with broader reflections on the nature of writing and memory. She discusses the relationship between the past and the present, emphasizing how a notebook allows us to bridge the gap between the two. On Keeping A Notebook Essays Summary By Joan Didion-Throughout her career, Didion has received numerous awards and accolades for her writing, including the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize for her book "The Year of Magical Thinking." Her works continue to be highly regarded for their incisive observations, elegant prose, and introspective exploration of the human condition. Joan Didion's writing has had a significant impact on American literature and continues to resonate with readers today. Her unique perspective and insightful observations make her one of the most influential writers of her generation. On Keeping A Notebook Essays Summary By Joan Didion-Didion - On Keeping A Notebook" is an essay that emphasizes the importance of keeping a personal notebook as a tool for self-reflection, capturing fleeting moments, and making sense of the world. On Keeping A Notebook Essays Summary By Joan Didion-Didion's own experiences demonstrate how writing in a notebook helps preserve memories and shape one's perception of the world. The essay highlights the power of writing as a means of creating order and control in a chaotic world, while also serving as a personal artifact that reflects the writer's inner life. On Keeping A Notebook Essays Summary By Joan Didion-Overall, Didion's essay encourages the practice of keeping a notebook as a way to engage with the world and better understand oneself. A: The main theme of "Joan Didion - On Keeping A Notebook" is the significance of keeping a personal notebook as a tool for self-reflection, capturing moments, and making sense of the world. Q: What is the purpose of keeping a notebook according to Joan Didion? A: According to Joan Didion, the purpose of keeping a notebook is to record observations, thoughts, and experiences as a way of understanding oneself and the world. It serves as an extended memory and a means of shaping and interpreting one's experiences. Q: How does writing in a notebook help with self-reflection? A: Writing in a notebook helps with self-reflection by allowing individuals to record their thoughts and emotions. By putting thoughts into words, individuals can gain a better understanding of their own inner life and the complexities of their thoughts and feelings. Q: What does Joan Didion say about the act of writing in a notebook? A: Joan Didion suggests that writing in a notebook is a way of creating order and control in a chaotic world. It allows individuals to shape and interpret their experiences and gives them a sense of agency. The act of writing in a notebook also requires observation and attention to detail, which can help preserve memories and capture the essence of a particular time and place. Q: What does "Joan Didion - On Keeping A Notebook" teach us about the power of writing? A: "Joan Didion - On Keeping A Notebook" teaches us that writing has the power to shape our perception of the world and to create a sense of order and control in our lives. It is a means of self-expression and self-discovery, helping us make sense of our thoughts and emotions. Additionally, writing in a notebook allows us to preserve memories and capture the fleeting moments that often go unnoticed. We tell ourselves stories in order to live. — Joan Didion/Joan Didion in NYC circa 1960 | via Midjourney + Mejean Didion, an American writer and journalist, wrote about the importance of keeping a notebook in her essay "On Keeping a Notebook," which was first published in 1968. In the essay, Didion reflects on the various reasons why she keeps a notebook and the role it plays in her writing process. "And so we do. But our notebooks give us away, for however dutifully we record what we see around us, the common denominator of all we see is always, transparently, shamelessly, the implacable "I." We are not talking here about the kind of notebook that is patently for public consumption, a structural conceit for binding together a series of graceful pensées; we are talking about something private, about bits of the mind's string too short to use, an indiscriminate and erratic assemblage with meaning only for its maker." "Didion finds the purpose of keeping a notebook not to record events or to capture thoughts and ideas to use later, but to "jot down what I see, what I hear, what I remember, what I think." She believes the act of writing things down helps her clarify thoughts and discover connections between seemingly unrelated things. Didion also notes that her notebook serves as a kind of "arbitrary" or "random" record of her life and experiences. She writes, "I think we are well advised to keep on nodding terms with the people we used to be, whether we find them attractive company or not. Otherwise they turn up unannounced and surprise us, come hammering on the mind's door at 4 a.m. of a bad night and demand to know who deserted them, who betrayed them, who is going to make amends." For Didion, the notebook serves as a "holding place" for the various fragments of experience and memory that make up our lives. It allows us to hold onto these things, to reflect on them, and to understand them more deeply. "It is a good idea, then, to keep in touch, and I suppose that keeping in touch is what notebooks are all about. And we are all on our own when it comes to keeping those lines open to ourselves; your notebook will never help me, nor mine you." I used to hoard journals. They were beautiful; crisp lined pages on eggshell paper, leather-bound covers, the promise to hold something interesting and utterly unique to the person writing in it. The grittiness of the raw word, the aesthetically pleasing way black ink seeped and curved across the page, even the very concept that somebody's most intimate possession could be created with only paper and pen and preserved forever...it all spoke to me on an artistic level beyond my own comprehension. I didn't begin writing in my own journal until 7th grade, when the world seemingly had one motive: to make me feel as self-conscious, awkward, and out of place as possible. I'd envisioned getting older as a magic potion that would...show more content... I have lost somebody who didn't love me, but they have lost somebody who loved them." "When I read Joan Didion's piece, "On Keeping a Notebook", I knew that I could use my writing as a device that would enable me to see the world more clearly, to "remember what it was to be me: that is always the point." My journal became a place of self-discovery; it was no longer just a collection of adolescent thoughts, but a volume of emotional and intellectual curiosity that was deeply personal. Sometimes, I'd write pages about an argument with a friend that left me wounded; other times, I'd question American policy, religion, and social justice issues: November 8th, 2014, "Went out with Lucy last night and her dad said that wearing skirts in the city is like driving without a seatbelt. There is no 'female privilege'; this is survival of the fittestest." My interest in When Eric Garner was pronounced dead after being choked by a police officer, I grappled with my faith in the New York Police Department, wondering desperately why some of the very people enlisted to protect civilians were doing exactly the...show more content... I think that the worst loneliness is to be uncomfortable with yourself; by creating an environment in which my thoughts and beliefs never had to be standardized, I stomped on that discomfort and turned it into something beautiful and creative and authentic and meaningful. When an obscure online magazine published a journal entry I'd written detailing my struggle to maintain a positive body image, my friends wrote me to tell me it moved them, lessening the shame I felt. By junior year, after filling 10+ journals, I found myself thinking, "If people resonate with my writing, it has to be important. It has to mean Joan Didion's essay "On Keeping a Notebook" explores the practice of journaling and its significance in the author's life. In this essay, Didion reflects on the act of writing and the personal insights that can be gained through the process of keeping a notebook. Didion begins by explaining the motivation behind her journaling, highlighting the importance of capturing fleeting moments and preserving memories. She notes that her notebooks serve as a repository for observations, experiences, and thoughts that might otherwise be forgotten. For Didion, writing in her notebook becomes a way of establishing a sense of continuity and holding onto the past. Save your time! We can take care of your essay Proper editing and formatting Free revision, title page, and bibliography Flexible prices and money-back guarantee Place an order The author emphasizes the raw and unfiltered nature of her notebook entries. She views the act of writing as a means of exploring her own mind and gaining self-awareness. Didion describes her notebooks as a form of self-interrogation, where she delves into her thoughts and emotions, attempting to make sense of them. She recognizes that the act of writing itself shapes her thoughts, allowing her to discover insights that might have otherwise remained hidden. In addition to personal reflection, Didion sees her notebook as a tool for capturing external observations and details. She emphasizes the importance of paying attention to the world around her and recording even the smallest details. By carefully observing her surroundings and jotting down notes, Didion acknowledges that the act of keeping a notebook is not without its challenges. She grapples with the inherent subjectivity of memory and the limitations of language in capturing the full essence of an experience. She recognizes that the act of writing inherently involves a selection and interpretation of events, which can shape the narrative of her own life. In summary, Joan Didion's "On Keeping a Notebook" is a contemplative essay that explores the significance of journaling in the author's life. Didion views her notebook as a repository of memories, a tool for self-reflection, and a means of capturing the world around her. Through her personal insights and reflections, she highlights the power of writing to shape our understanding of ourselves and the world we inhabit. Ultimately, Didion's essay serves as a reminder of the importance of introspection and the value of documenting our thoughts and experiences. Did you like this example? Joan Didion "On Keeping a Notebook" Summary Essay, (2023, September 22). Edubirdie. Retrieved June 18, 2025, from "Joan Didion 'On Keeping a Notebook' Summary Essay." Edubirdie, 22 Sept. 2023, hub.edubirdie.com/examples/joan-didion-on-keeping-a-notebook-summary-essay/Joan Didion "On Keeping a Notebook" Summary Essay. [online]. Available at: < [Accessed 18 Jun. 2025]. Joan Didion "On Keeping a Notebook" Summary Essay [Internet]. Edubirdie. 2023 Sept 22 [cited 2025 Jun 18]. Available from: Get original paper written according to your instructions Save time for what matters most Place an order Fair Use Policy EduBirdie considers academic integrity to be the essential part of the learning process and does not support any violation of the academic standards. Should you have any questions regarding our Fair Use Policy or become aware of any violations, please do not hesitate to contact us via support@edubirdie.com. As a lover — and keeper — of diaries and notebooks, I find myself returning again and again to the question of what compels us — what propels us — to record our impressions of the present moment in all their fragile subjectivity. From Joan Didion's 1968 anthology Slouching Towards Bethlehem (public library) — the same volume that gave us her timeless meditation on self-respect — comes a wonderful essay titled "On Keeping a Notebook," in which Didion considers precisely that. Though the essay was originally written nearly half a century ago, the insights at its heart apply to much of our modern record-keeping, from blogging to Twitter to Instagram. Portrait of Joan Didion by Mary Lloyd Estrin, 1977 After citing a seemingly arbitrary vignette she had found scribbled in an old notebook, Didion asks: Why did I write it down? In order to remember, of course, but exactly what was it I wanted to remember? How much of it actually happened? Did any of it? Why do I keep a notebook at all? It is easy to deceive oneself on all those scores. The impulse to write things down is a peculiarly compulsive one, inexplicable to those who do not share it, useful only accidentally, only secondarily, in the way that any compulsion tries to justify itself. I suppose that it begins or does not begin in the cradle. Although I have felt compelled to write things down since I was five years old, I doubt that my daughter ever will, for she is a singularly blessed and accepting child, delighted with life exactly as life presents itself to her, unafraid to go to sleep and unafraid to wake up. Keepers of private notebooks are a different breed altogether, lonely and resistant rearrangers of things, anxious malcontents, children afflicted apparently at birth with some presentiment of loss. [...] The point of my keeping a notebook has never been, nor is it now, to have an accurate factual record of what I have been doing or thinking. That would be a different impulse entirely, an instinct for reality which I sometimes envy but do not possess. To that end, she confesses a lifelong failure at keeping a diary: I always had trouble distinguishing between what happened and what merely might have happened, but I remain unconvinced that the distinction, for my purposes, matters. What, then, does matter? How it felt to me: that is getting closer to the truth about a notebook. I sometimes delude myself about why I keep a notebook, imagine that some thrifty virtue derives from preserving everything observed. See enough and write it down, I tell myself, and then some morning when the world seems drained of wonder, some day when I am only going through the motions of doing what I am supposed to do, which is write — on that bankrupt morning I will simply open my notebook and there it will all be, a forgotten account with accumulated interest, paid passage back to the world out there: dialogue overheard in hotels and elevators and at the hat-check counter in Pavillon (one middle-aged man shows his hat check to another and says, 'That's my old football number'); impressions of Bettina Aptheker and Benjamin Sonnenberg and Teddy ('Mr. Acapulco') Stauffer; careful aperçus about tennis bums and failed fashion models and Greek shipping heiressees, one of whom taught me a significant lesson (a lesson I could have learned from F. Scott Fitzgerald, but perhaps we all must meet the very rich for ourselves) by asking, when I arrived to interview her in her orchid-filled sitting room on the second day of a paralyzing New York blizzard, whether it was snowing outside. I imagine, in other words, that the notebook is about other people. But of course it is not. I have no real business with what one stranger said to another at the hat-check counter in Pavillon; in fact I suspect that the line "That's my old football number" touched not my own imagination at all, but merely some memory of something once read, probably "The Eighty-Yard Run." Nor is my concern with a woman in a dirty crepe-de-Chine wrapper in a Wilmington bar. My stake is always, of course, in the unmentioned girl in the plaid silk dress. Remember what it was to be me: that is always the point. It is a difficult point to admit. We are brought up in the ethic that others, any others, are by definition more interesting than ourselves; taught to be diffident, just this side of self-effacing. ('You're the least important person in the room and don't forget it,' Jessica Mitford's governess would hiss in her ear on the advent of any social occasion: I copied that into my notebook because it is only recently that I have been able to enter a room without hearing some such phrase in my inner ear.) Only the very young and the very old may recount their dreams at breakfast, dwell upon self, interrupt with memories of beach picnics and favorite Liberty lawn dresses and the rainbow trout in a creek near Colorado Springs. The rest of us are expected, rightly, to affect absorption in other people's favorite dresses, other people's trout. Once again, Didion returns to the egoic driver of the motive to write: And so we do. But our notebooks give us away, for however dutifully we record what we see around us, the common denominator of all we see is always, transparently, shamelessly, the implacable "I." We are not talking here about the kind of notebook that is patently for public consumption, a structural conceit for binding together a series of graceful pensées; we are talking about something private, about bits of the mind's string too short to use, an indiscriminate and erratic assemblage with meaning only for its maker. Ultimately, Didion sees the deepest value of the notebook as a reconciliation tool for the self and all of its iterations: I think we are well advised to keep on nodding terms with the people we used to be, whether we find them attractive company or not. Otherwise they turn up unannounced and surprise us, come hammering on the mind's door at 4 a.m. of a bad night and demand to know who deserted them, who betrayed them, who is going to make amends. We forget all too soon the things we thought we could never forget. We forget the loves and the betrayals alike, forget what we whispered and what we screamed, forget who we were. [...] It is a good idea, then, to keep in touch, and I suppose that keeping in touch is what notebooks are all about. And we are all on our own when it comes to keeping those lines open to ourselves: your notebook will never help me, nor mine you. The rest of Slouching Towards Bethlehem is brimming with the same kind of uncompromising insight, sharp and soft at the same time, on everything from morality to marriage to self-respect. Complement this particular portion with celebrated writers on the creative benefits of keeping a diary.