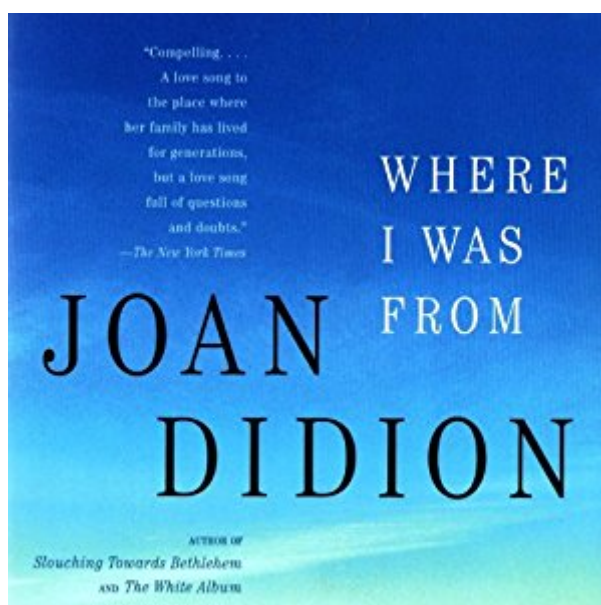


The book was found

# Where I Was From



## Synopsis

In her moving and insightful new book, Joan Didion reassesses parts of her life, her work, her history and ours. A native Californian, Didion applies her scalpel-like intelligence to the state's ethic of ruthless self-sufficiency in order to examine that ethic's often tenuous relationship to reality. Combining history and reportage, memoir and literary criticism, *Where I Was From* explores California's romances with land and water; its unacknowledged debts to railroads, aerospace, and big government; the disjunction between its code of individualism and its fetish for prisons. Whether she is writing about her pioneer ancestors or privileged sexual predators, robber barons or writers (not excluding herself), Didion is an unparalleled observer, and her book is at once intellectually provocative and deeply personal.

## Book Information

Audible Audio Edition

Listening Length: 6 hours and 28 minutes

Program Type: Audiobook

Version: Unabridged

Publisher: Audible Studios

Audible.com Release Date: March 9, 2013

Whispersync for Voice: Ready

Language: English

ASIN: B00BRNE3RA

Best Sellers Rank: #210 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > Fiction & Literature > Literary

Collections #355 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > Biographies & Memoirs > Artists, Writers &

Musicians #889 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > History > United States & Canada

## Customer Reviews

WHERE I WAS FROM is Joan Didion's meditation on her native state of California. Though much of the huge population of the state was not born there, Didion, like this reviewer, is the descendant of 19th century pioneers who established ranches that are long gone. Didion went looking for what makes California itself, what it imparts to its natives. Her findings, rendered in that elegant stingray voice like ice water splashed on the face on a scorching day in the Central Valley, may surprise a lot of readers. No one could possibly achieve a personal portrait of California and include every iconic landmark or quirk. The film industry does not figure into this, LA's waterworks is not here. This is not Steinbeck's California, or Kerouac's or Dashiell Hammett's. It is, however, the landscape of Frank

Norris's THE OCTOPUS, Jack London's VALLEY OF THE MOON, Faulkner's short story, "Golden Land," and Henry George's prescient essay, "What the Railroad Will Bring Us," to which Didion brings a close reading. The settling of California was made possible by the government and the sense of entitlement still resounds, as does the seemingly contradictory rugged pioneer individualism that claims the right to do as one pleases without strings attached. There is a pioneer code, "kill the rattlesnake," meaning to act in the interest of the greater good so others are not hurt, but there is also the overwhelming theme of development, the meaning of which Didion finds in the act of selling the family cemetery, along with the ranch.

Perhaps I should have read this book before The Year of Magical Thinking, because I have now completely reversed my opinion (in the positive direction) of Didion and her writing. In Where I Was From, Didion has written a book that makes my scalp tingle with admiration. I read the book over a period of one week, in supermarket lines, doctor's offices, every sort of place I could squeeze in another sentence, paragraph, or chapter. I read aloud sections of chapters to my beloved husband, and made a pest of myself - interrupting his morning read of the New York Times. "You MUST hear this!" I would announce, and indeed, he would always end up glad. The Crossing: Are you interested in the pioneers and the westward movement in the 1800s? This book brings intimate stories of particular families (including Didion's) to life, but in the CONTEXT of the larger move West, what it signifies, and how it has shaped the character of California and its residents TODAY. "The crossing" is the title Didion gives to what had to be chucked without a backward glance, to "make it to the pass in time before winter." California, she tells us, was flooded by people, not JUST the Donner party, who had to learn to let go and cast their pasts and cherished possessions and even faltering children and parents to the winds, the prairie, to unmarked graves, to the Dust Bowl - and move forward. Why is California what it is? Are you interested in the railroads, urban sprawl, the loss of wetland, the missing "old California" (which may have been an illusion to start with), the unemployed and homeless, the loss of funding for education, the millions occupying our prisons, the budget crisis in Sacramento, the water wars, agribusiness, and.... how all this ties together and links to the pioneers and the gold rush?

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