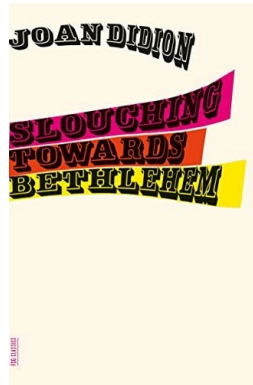


Finalist, High School Category



Essayist: Tess, age 17, School Without Walls High School

Advocating for: *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* by Joan Didion

For my fourteenth birthday, my dad gave me Joan Didion's *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*. This collection gave me an obsession: sentences. I don't just mean engaging content— I mean the grammar. I love to play with words, to see how syntax can color a page.

My love for color extends to paintings, especially action abstractions. They're energetic. I can imagine Pollock or De Kooning running across the raw canvas, paint falling in their wake. This is how I see Joan Didion typing. She runs and runs and sentences fall where she steps – that's how dynamic her writing is.

Didion's grammar ignites a genuine hunger for me to learn and improve. I desperately want to write like her. I want to write better essays, naturally, but also stronger lab reports and clearer emails. Didion would say none of these are insignificant. I've taken her sentences apart, dissected them. I've found the adverbs and the prepositional phrases and why she used a semicolon there, why that sentence was cut short. I've read and reread, trying to figure out how she reached such crisp diction.

Diving into her grammar has made it inescapable. I recently got so wrapped up in the first sentence of *Song of Solomon* that I fell asleep before chapter three. When "The North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Agent promised to fly from Mercy to the other side of Lake Superior at three o'clock," I immediately saw the picture, but I wanted to know what made it shimmer. So I analyzed the sentence's pivot on the verb "fly" and let my eyes dart from Mutual to Mercy until I understood how it worked. When my dad gifted me that book, he inadvertently gave me a nagging urge to break down sentences to find what makes them tick.

Like Didion, I see the figure in the shimmer, but I'm still trying to find the grammar. And that's exciting.