Death Walks Beside You

*The Uptown Local: Joy, Death, and Joan Didion*, Cory Leadbeter (Fleet)

A few weeks ago, I [reviewed](https://internationaltimes.it/self-obsession/) a book supposedly about Joni Mitchell and complained that it was all about the author not Mitchell. Cory Leadbeter's book is also about the author, but clearly flags that up, using his relationship with Joan Didion as a personal assistant, as part of the story (as well as a selling point).  
  
Really, it is a book about family dysfunction, abuse, self-harm and depression. Leadbeter's father – who spends much of the duration of this book in jail – is aggressive and self-deluded, prone to temper tantrums, lying, self-delusion and beating his kids. Desperate to get out of the situation and New Jersey, Leadbeter does. He rents a rundown apartment, signs up to college (university), is taken under the wing of poet James Fenton, and then gets offered a job working for an unnamed 'famous author' which he accepts.

It turns out to be Joan Didion, the witty, cynical, world famous fiction and non-fiction writer, who needs an assistant to help her now she is widowed and rapidly aging. Leadbeter ends up living in her apartment, spending the days ordering their food in, listening to Didion's choice of music, reading to her, and meeting her – sometimes rude and snotty – friends and associates over dinner. Once she has retired for the night he is free to head to Manhattan's bars or stay at home to drink Didion's alcohol and smoke her cigarettes.

It seems he has escaped his family and become something else, joined the creative strata he has always aspired to, but the looming sentencing of his father, who has been running some kind of scam business investing in real estate, which has been revealed due to a drop in the markets, and Leadbeter's inability to write the novels he wants to, are sending him into obsessive downward spirals of excessive drinking, casual relationships and self-angst. Even his writing has been sabotaged by a character called Billy Silvers, whose destructive and diversionary antics Leadebeter is unable to control, despite being the author.

*The Uptown Local* isn't a pretty story, is one without a happy or an almost-happy ending. Leadbeter's father serves his time but hasn't really changed, Leadbeter is married and has a child, but along the way his best friend has died, girlfriends have come and gone, he has lost his literary agent, remains unpublished, and his new family are back living in the New Jersey home he grew up with, sharing the house with his parents.

Nine years of working for Joan Didion has in many ways not changed his life. Yes, it opened doors, gave him a good wage and literary contacts, allowed him to live in Manhattan's Upper East Side, but monthly drives to visit his father in prison, constant worrying about his fiction writing, his old friends, his girlfriends, not to mention the ever-more-frail Didion, did little to fend off depression and worry. As the book goes on we are told how suicidal thoughts were constantly with him; how various obsessions – at the time of writing the book obsessive chess games – distract and divert him; how life has always been hard.

At times it feels like over-sharing, particularly towards the end of the book. Why did he not seek professional help for both his mental health and editing his unpublished fiction? Why not save some of the money he earned rather than drink it? Why inflict yourself with your abusive father rather than hold down a job, any job, and find your own place in a cheaper part of town? But it is always easy to sort everyone else's problems out; we all have allegiances, quirks, memories and relationships to deal with in our own way. And depression is not easy to live with.

Leadbeter cannot, for the moment, escape his parents or his new family, nor abandon his aspiration to be an author. He *is* an author, a published one, thanks in some ways to Joan Didion. It is her name that will lead readers to this confessional work about struggle, love, depression, class, expectations, aspirations, poverty, creativity and the state of America. It is not a perfect book, has none of the clinical detachment that Didion's writing was famed for, and is occasionally mawkish, sentimental and self-pitying, but it is moving and engaging, a book of struggle and resistance, of staying alive when one's instinct is to do otherwise.

Rupert Loydell

(750 words)