

## The Power of Women's Voices

These authors share a habit of exploring the larger truths found in personal stories.



Author Morgan Jerkins

By Aurelia C. Scott

▶ Joan Didion and Morgan Jerkins's new audiobooks give us reason to celebrate the power of women's voices. The authors, both of whom have written novels, memoirs, and essay collections, are of different generations and races, yet they share wit, a tough analytical eye, and a habit of exploring the larger truths found in personal stories.

Morgan Jerkins teaches nonfiction at Columbia University's School for the Arts and is senior editor at Medium's *ZORA* magazine, which promotes Black women writers. Her 2018 essay collection, *This Will Be My Undoing*, was a *New York Times* bestseller that examined everything from Black history to the lived reality of young Black women in America today. Our reviewer loved the "compelling" mix of essay and memoir, and praised Jerkins's narration of her own work. The result remains the must-listen that it was three years ago.

Jerkins's mix of memoir and history, *Wandering in Strange Lands*, appeared just this past year. Again, she delivers her own work movingly and with clarity. The granddaughter of people who moved north during the Great Migration, Jerkins uses the engaging book to explore her place in the history of a migration that continues to affect Black America.

Happily for us, Jerkins is a prolific writer. Her first novel, *Caul Baby*, came out in April. Set in Harlem, where Jerkins herself lives, the story takes a medical fact—that about one in every 80,000 babies is born with the in-utero protective caul still attached—and creates a story that blends magical realism with the real-world concerns of Black women in rapidly gentrifying Harlem. Enticingly read by Earphones Award-winning narrator Joniece Abbott-Pratt, the audiobook brims with vivid characterizations, gothic elements, and an intense plot.

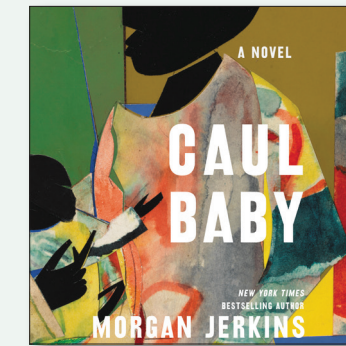


Author Joan Didion

Joan Didion photo by Brigitte Lacombe, Morgan Jerkins photo by Sylvie Rosoloff

### CAUL BABY

Morgan Jerkins  
Read by Joniece Abbott-Pratt



Narrator Joniece Abbot-Pratt's sweet voice and vibrant characterizations entice listeners into this first novel by bestselling writer Morgan Jerkins. Known for her memoirs and essays, Jerkins here blends magical realism and a story about the challenges faced by contemporary Black women. Harlem's Melancon women survive by selling pieces of their life-giving caul to white people who can pay well. A multigenerational crisis ensues when they refuse to help Laila, a local Black woman who has suffered numerous failed pregnancies. Abbott-Pratt changes her pitch atmospherically as she shifts between the Melancons' gothic domain, Laila's increasingly unhinged desperation, and the bright pace of Laila's niece, Amara, a law school student. Abbott-Pratt's melodic tone is an engrossing through line in this ambitious novel about gentrification, exploitation, generational trauma, and Black identity. A.C.S.

Harper Audio 11 hrs. Unabridged  
Trade Ed.: **DD** ISBN 9780063070431 \$26.99

*An ambitious novel about gentrification, exploitation, generational trauma, and Black identity.*

Joan Didion, who is 86 years old, has not written for publication since 2011. However, fans of the renowned journalist can rejoice that new audiobooks of her extensive oeuvre continue to appear. The newest, *Let Me Tell You What I Mean*, collects articles and personal essays published between 1968 and 2000. Displaying her signature precision and unflinching eye, they range from a visit to a Gamblers Anonymous meeting to a reconsideration of her rejection from Stanford University. Hilton Als wrote and reads an introduction, and the essays are given an Earphones Award-winning performance by Kimberly Farr.

The sudden death in 2003 of Didion's husband led to *The Year of Magical Thinking*, her remarkable, lapidary memoir about grief and survival. The original book was given an Earphones Award-winning narration by *AudioFile* Golden Voice Barbara Caruso. Still available, it remains a ravishing performance, the "perfect marriage of writing and narration" that it was when published in 2005. In 2007, Didion adapted the memoir into a highly regarded one-woman play starring Vanessa Redgrave. In 2020, Redgrave recorded that version of *The Year of Magical Thinking*. She won an Earphones Award for her fierce and memorable performance.

In *South and West*, Didion compared and contrasted her memories of a California childhood with her experiences during a Southern road trip in 1970. After a foreword written and read by Nathaniel Rich, Kimberly Farr again offers a stellar narration of Didion's writing, dissolving the barrier between author and listener.

Finally, let me also suggest *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, Didion's famous 1968 collection of short articles and essays. They capture America at a key point in modern history and, upon rereading, stand the test of time. Diane Keaton earned an Audie nomination for her 2013 reading of the book. Our reviewer applauded her "outstanding" performance and her "wonderfully consistent" delivery of Didion's unique writing voice.

### More Listening

**THIS WILL BE MY UNDOING: Living at the Intersection of Black, Female, and Feminist in (White) America**

Morgan Jerkins, read by Morgan Jerkins  
Harper Audio Unabridged  
Trade Ed.: **DD**

**WANDERING IN STRANGE LANDS: A Daughter of the Great Migration Reclaims Her Roots**

Morgan Jerkins, read by Morgan Jerkins  
Harper Audio Unabridged  
Trade Ed.: **DD**

**THE YEAR OF MAGICAL THINKING**  
Joan Didion, read by Barbara Caruso

HighBridge Audio Unabridged  
Trade Ed.: **CD, DD, PRE**

**THE YEAR OF MAGICAL THINKING**  
Joan Didion, performed by Vanessa Redgrave

Audible, Inc. Unabridged  
Trade Ed.: **DD**

**LET ME TELL YOU WHAT I MEAN**

Joan Didion, read by Kimberly Farr, Hilton Als

Random House Audio Unabridged  
Trade Ed.: **DD**  
Books on Tape  
Library Ed.: **DD**

