Grief Goods: Material Possessions and Meaning Reconstruction in Bereavement

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The publishing industry has witnessed a burgeoning in “pathographies” or personal accounts of dying or bereavement. One particularly powerful account is Joan Didion’s best-selling book, The Year of Magical Thinking, which offers a detailed forensic introspection of her emotional and cognitive journey through the first year of widowhood. The title’s reference to “magical thinking” captures how bereaved people attempt to function in a distressing, disorienting microclimate and struggle to create a meaningful narrative of death and loss. In such circumstances, normal cognitive and emotional functioning becomes arduous and tentative if not almost impossible. Through a close reading of Didion’s narrative, we explore the symbiotic relationship between goods and grieving and how material possessions are marshalled in the service of meaning reconstruction (Neimeyer, 2001).

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The death of a significant other can be one of the most traumatic and cataclysmic events for a consumer, shattering all sense of a meaningful order to life and the world. His or her world is literally torn asunder. Faced with the prospect of such “anomic implosion” (Berger 1967), the terror of life without order, bereaved people are compelled to make sense of a situation that threatens loss of control, meaningfulness, and loss of personal identity (Neimeyer 2001). A growing number of consumer researchers have begun to study the impact of both dying and its aftermath on consumer behaviour. Their interests have ranged from the effects of impending death on consumers to the daunting and harrowing task for the survivors as they begin life anew without those who were dear to them. Death of a loved one inaugurates a surreal, emotionally draining micro-climate. In the immediate and medium-term phases of bereavement both decision-making and psychological resources are severely impaired or depleted (Gentry et al. 1995a). Hand in hand with this functional impairment comes a powerful urge to restore meaning and sense in the face of what is perceived to be a meaningless and senseless loss (Neimeyer 2001). The emergence of interest among consumer researchers in death and dying comes at a time when a major debate is taking place among thanatologists regarding the purpose and process of grieving. The traditional Freudian model of grief that advocates withdrawal and detachment from the deceased is being increasingly problematised in favour of an approach that advocates continuing bonds with them.

In recent years the publishing industry has witnessed a burgeoning in “pathographies” or personal accounts of dying or bereavement. Their popularity suggests that contemporary consumers may not be as averse to confronting their impending mortality as is sometimes claimed. The value of popular literature as a source of insight into consumption is being recognised increasingly (Belk 1986; 1987; Holbrook 1991; Brown 2005). Such works “provide new paths to thick description. They refresh the parts that other research procedures cannot reach” (Brown 2005, p.232) however their potential to shed light on the behaviour of bereaved consumers remains untapped.

The focus of this paper is Joan Didion’s best-selling book The Year of Magical Thinking (2006), a particularly powerful account of the death of her husband John and her life without him over the following twelve months. It provides a forensic introspection of her emotional and cognitive journey through this first year of widowhood. The title’s reference to “magical thinking” captures how bereaved people attempt to function in a distressing, disorienting microclimate and struggle to create a meaningful narrative of both death itself and the loss that follows. Indeed, a critical part of meaning-making after bereavement is the construction of a ‘durable biography’ of the departed. The fact that Didion was already an established popular author and that this book was a best-seller on both sides of the Atlantic lends support to the choice of The Year of Magical Thinking for such an undertaking.

Through a close reading of Didion’s story we explore the array of roles and functions possessions can play as consumers negotiate the process of grieving for a loved one as well as their ongoing attempts at meaning reconstruction (Neimeyer 2001). Our analysis is grounded in a strand of consumer culture theory (Arnould and Thompson 2005) that focuses on how consumers use goods and services as symbolic resources to negotiate and give meaning to their identities and relationships. We aim to use this lens to further understanding of the relationship between material culture and bereavement (Hallam and Hockey 2001) and, in so doing, to explore the nexus between consumer behaviour and the emerging continuing bonds approach to grieving (Klass et al. 1996; Walter 1999; Mitchell 2007).

Themes emerging from our analysis include retrospective perceptions of purchases by the deceased as portents, the role of products as facilitators/prohibitors of return, the power of possessions and places to serve as talismans of time-reversal, the relationship between goods and continuing bonds, the role of marketing stimuli as pitfalls during the grieving process, and the privileging of certain possessions in the post-mortem period.