

*The Dance of Time: The Origins of the Calendar*, by Michael Judge, Arcade Publishing, 141 5th Ave., FL 8, New York, NY 10010, 2004, ISBN 1-55970-746-1, US\$23.00.

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On the cover, *The Dance of Time* advertises itself as “A Miscellany of History and Myth, Religion and Astronomy, Festivals and Feast Days,” which just about says it all. Michael Judge’s book meanders through many topics, never straying far from Western culture and never getting bogged down in specifics, but offering many illuminating tidbits along the way.

For someone unacquainted with the night sky, *The Dance of Time* will not help clarify diurnal motion or the annual changing of the constellation guard. Nor will it give the reader a very detailed understanding of the origins of our calendar system—or other calendars for that matter. Its objective instead lies in offering the reader a sense (often numinous) of the rhythm of the year, of seasonal change and cyclic time. A strong focus on holidays and celebrations that mark annual transitions roots the book more in folklore and culture than in science, and the author brings together a charming and enlightening collection of ideas.

Judge’s science gets sloppy (at one point, he suggests that Saturn rises more often in winter months), but his history stays spot on, and his writing remains robust throughout, occasionally managing a brilliant and succinct turn of phrase. Take, for example, his brief summation of solar versus lunar calendars: “If the sun measured out working time, the moon became the mistress of ritual time.” Who can argue with that? Pithy, accurate, and a tad poetic. In fact, Judge pulls off several feats of description that would fit nicely into a planetarium script or add a bit of color to a popular article (please do not interpret the preceding as encouragement to plagiarize). Furthermore, he contextualizes Western

timekeeping in interlocking Classical and Celtic traditions: the familiar solstices and equinoxes from the former, the less known “cross-quarter days” from the latter. The European calendar of days and holidays has its foundation in these two systems, and Judge structures his entire book around the relationship between the two.

Once in a while, the book also provides a deep sense of the origins of specific holidays, and Judge finds connections between many seemingly disparate celebrations. For example, he relates a brief history of Valentine’s Day that links it to the Roman Lupercal, a violent fertility rite that embodied the anxieties of an enduring winter and the anticipation of a seemingly distant spring.

*The Dance of Time* supplements a bookshelf filled with constellation lore and astronomical histories, but it comes nowhere near replacing other fine tomes on the topic of calendars (Duncan Steel’s exhaustive *Marking Time*, for example). The greatest failing of the book perhaps lies in its myopically Western focus: occasional references to Chinese or Indian culture feel almost out of place. Greek, Roman, and Celtic influences run deep through the book, however, and in terms of contextualizing European holidays and seasonal concepts, Judge performs respectably. His brief biography on the dust cover claims experience as “actor, playwright, screenwriter, folklorist, and congressional historian and guide.” Indeed, the reader can imagine Judge as a tour guide through the calendar, offering one person’s enthusiastic and well-articulated insights into the way Westerners count off the days of the year. So enjoy the tour! Read *The Dance of Time* for pleasure, and take a few notes along the way for the next star show you give.