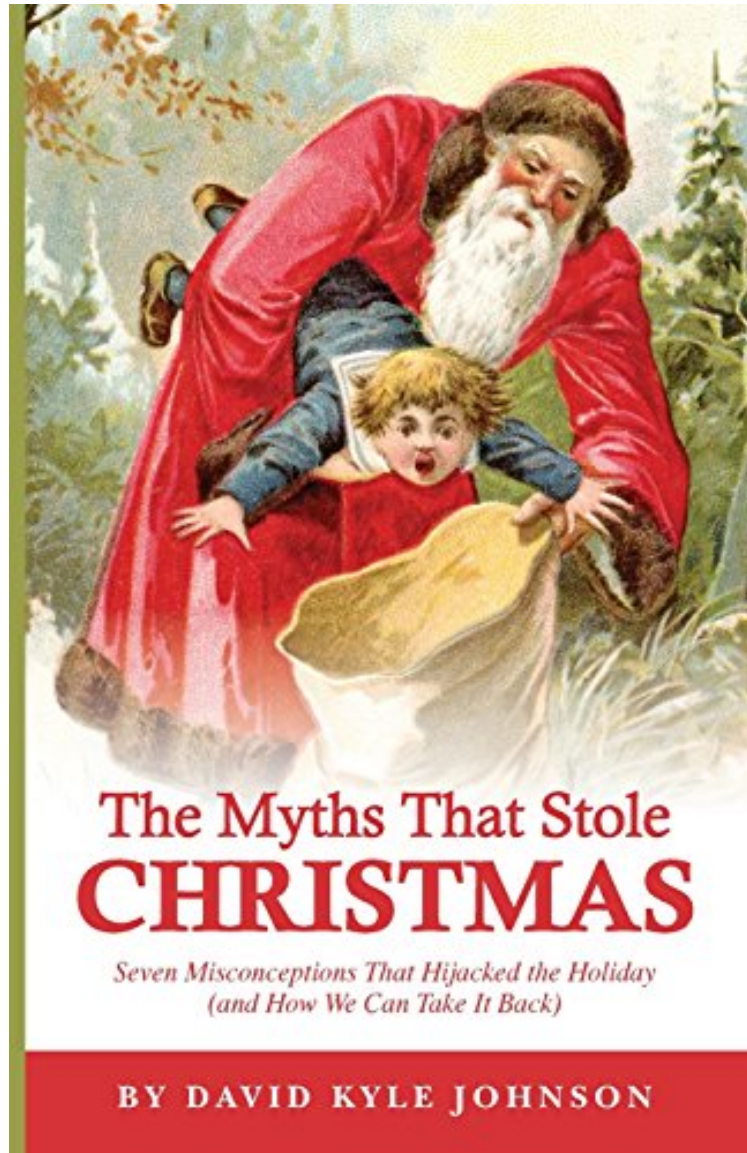


[Free read ebook] The Myths That Stole Christmas

The Myths That Stole Christmas

David Kyle Johnson

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David Kyle Johnson : The Myths That Stole Christmas before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Myths That Stole Christmas:

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Enjoyable and interestingBy C. D. VarnAn enjoyable read with quite a few interesting facts, and a perhaps a little bit too much speculation. The history around Christmas and its relationship to pre-Christian traditions is fascinating as well as the fact most Christmas traditions are less 150 years-old. There are several interesting historical facts in the book that I was unaware of, and the gentle but lightly sarcastic

tone Johnson employs makes it highly enjoyable. I do think he may over-conclude in the "Santa Claus" origins section, but he does admit that this was actually the hardest to do research on as many misconceptions are reported as fact. A good read.

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. This book was fantastic! I was generally familiar with a lot of ...

By hayley gardner This book was fantastic! I was generally familiar with a lot of these myths, but the detailed backstories were fascinating. I would highly recommend this book to any skeptic or atheist, or even a Christian who's interested to know how their religion hijacked an ancient holiday. It's also ammunition for atheists who want justification for celebrating Christmas (or Krismas).

3 of 4 people found the following review helpful. Good ideas, but some significant defects, too

By Peter Wall This book is worth reading and having around, but wasn't nearly so good as I hoped. The author, David Kyle Johnson, is an Associate Professor of Philosophy who put in a delightful appearance on the Rationally Speaking podcast to discuss this book; that probably raised my expectations too far. Things started to go south for me in the discussion of Myth No. 1 (Jesus is the Reason for the Season). Johnson begins with a rejoinder that I, too, have used: the tilt of the earth on its axis is the "reason for the season. But then he backs into some prehistorical speculation about the ancients, by which he appears to mean people who lived 4,000 years ago. Because these ancients didn't know about the tilt of the earth (fair enough, probably), they didn't know what caused the seasons (also fair, if we mean that ancient knowledge about the cause of the seasons would not be sufficient to modern standards). He continues: All they knew was that the sun kept getting lower in the sky and the days kept getting shorter. What if it never stopped? What if the sun kept getting lower until it disappeared? What if the daylight dwindled into nothing? What if winter lasted forever? It was a terrifying prospect indeed, and the ancients had no way of knowing this wouldn't happen. But that's a troublesome thing to say, unless you believe that the people living 4,000 years ago were idiots with no memories despite the fact that anatomically modern Homo sapiens (or people basically the same as we are, physiologically) had been around for probably almost 200,000 years before. Surely the people living 4,000 years ago, even if they lacked the wealth of data and theory that we enjoy today, were intelligent enough to recognize that the seasons were cyclical, that days did not shorten forever, and winter ultimately ended, over and over. (A more reasonable speculation, I should think, is that if some people were alarmist about their prospects for escaping winter, then there must have been some jaded elders rolling their eyes and reminding people, or saying to themselves, that they've seen this happen over and over.) Finally, Johnson slides deep into the speculative abyss: At some point in time, people were so worried about this that they started performing rituals that they thought would ensure the return of spring. Since spring did subsequently return, they fallaciously concluded (as humans are apt to do) that their rituals worked. Whoa! Does Johnson have any evidence for when this point in time occurred, or whether this is more than a secularist just-so story about the stupidity of these ancients and the birth of these unidentified rituals? An endnote number at the end of the sentence raises hopes. But flip to the back of the book and those hopes are dashed: it's not a citation to any archeological, anthropological, or historical scholarship on topic; it's just a note about how, [f]or those interested, the name of this fallacy is post hoc ergo propter hoc. Never mind whether the fallacy was actually committed as described, I guess. For a book about challenging myths, here is one that passes without a critical word. Fortunately, Johnson's weird speculations about the mental and social lives of these relatively recent ancients is not necessary to his (correct) argument that Jesus is not the reason for the season (as in, the singular historical origin of the Christmas holiday we know and love today). But that kind of sloppiness leaves a bad taste in my mouth, particularly when it comes from a smart, secular philosophy professor who really ought to know better. (As the saying goes, it's painful to see an argument you agree with badly made.)

Other chapters are better. The one on Myth No. 3 (Our Christmas Traditions Are Old-Fashioned) is pretty good. But I suspect that's because it's mostly a summary of Stephen Nissenbaum's excellent book, *The Battle for Christmas*. (Read it.) The chapter on Myth No. 4 (Christmas Spending is Good for the Economy) is okay for what it is. But throughout I kept wondering whether I have actually encountered that myth, and whether Johnson's discussion really gets to the heart of the issue. This economic myth has always struck me as not the real argument people are making, but a rationalization to cover a much more interesting phenomenon of building and maintaining social ties through gift-giving rituals. Johnson gives the impression in this chapter that if people have given up on a Christianized rationale for Christmastime gift-giving, then they have switched over to an economic its-good-for-GDP rationale. But I think he misdiagnoses the situation, and could have written a much stronger chapter by considering the work of anthropologists on gift-giving practices in various cultures, and how our modern Western Christmas fits into that.

The one on Myth No. 5 (Santa Claus is St. Nicholas) is also decent. It also happens to be the one I was most excited to read after hearing Johnson on Rationally Speaking. He gave the impression on that podcast of having delved into a wide range of historical sources, and I was looking forward not just to having the story in written form, but also a scholarly apparatus with some good citations. But I was disappointed to find that he is mostly just rehashing secondary sources that may or may not be reliable (I don't know, I guess I have to go find those books now, too). There is nothing wrong with that; plenty of books on that model are worth reading; but the author needs to have some credibility. And after his speculations about the ancients and their beliefs, Johnson's credibility for historical analysis is significantly tarnished for me. And there is another problem of credibility, at least for me. Johnson is an Associate Professor of Philosophy, so I expect more from him than I would from others. But this book lets me down. Consider this comparison. The last paragraph of the introduction begins with

this odd personification: Right now, Christmas owns us. We do what it expects, when it expects it. Then, in the discussion of Myth No. 6 (The Santa Clause Lie is Harmless), there is an objection (Its okay for kids to literally believe that Santa exists because he does!) to which Johnson responds with some brief remarks on really, a misreading of Eric Kaplans Does Santa Exist?: A Philosophical Investigation. He writes, in part: You should agree with [Kaplans] claim that Santa exists only if, by Santa exists, you mean what he (but seemingly no one else) means by that phrase: there is a gentle face of the limitless. And thats being generous; thats assuming that phrase actually means anything to begin with. In my opinion, a 43-year-old adult using his own variety of mystic pseudoscience to defend Santas existence only helps prove my point that literal belief in Santa promotes credulity. There are a couple problems here. First, Johnson plays bait-and-switch with Kaplan, holding him up as a champion of belief in a literal Santa Claus, then ridiculing a single phrase from what Kaplan actually wrote, even though that phrase is clearly not about belief in a literal Santa Claus. If exists can have the different meanings that Johnson implicates (and why not?), then uncritically applying a word like literal to a belief in whether something exists" is just sloppy. There is a lot more analysis of literal and exist that Johnson just rushes past without consideration he just lobs a couple of insults and scurries off to the next topic. Second, and more importantly for evaluating this book, the fact that Johnson is able to personify Christmas in his own introduction, but for reasons no more fully articulated than the epithet pseudoscience (which, when applied to Kaplans book, or philosophy in general, is probably a category error) Johnson cannot abide personification of the limitless in a later chapter, betrays a significant blind spot in his own thinking. Sure, there are significant differences between Christmas and the limitless, most importantly that the word Christmas, whatever it might mean, generally refers to discrete phenomena, while the limitless does not. But if we are poking around at the qualities of concepts, there is a much more interesting discussion to be had. To be fair, Johnson does provide a link in the endnotes to his review of Kaplans book. His discussion there is a little better, but still mostly just derisive without engaging Kaplans argument (which really just uses Santa Claus as an emblem to discuss much more interesting mental phenomena). More importantly, however, nowhere in that review does Johnson suggest that he understands Kaplan to be a champion of a belief in a literal Santa Claus. So why does he present Kaplan that way in The Myths that Stole Christmas? Like the speculations about the ancients, his argument would have done just fine without this part. I am happy to see a well-designed book that critiques some of the prevailing myths about Christmas. The book is worth reading and thinking about, and there are endnotes with plenty more to explore. But there are significant defects, so keep your eyes open.

In The Myths that Stole Christmas, Johnson argues that Christmas has been hijacked by seven different myths-seven myths that control how people conceive of and celebrate the holiday. Myth #1: Jesus Is the Reason for the Season Myth #2: There Is a War on Christmas Myth #3: Our Christmas Traditions Are Old-Fashioned Myth #4: Christmas Spending Is Good for the Economy Myth #5: Santa Claus Is Saint Nicholas Myth #6: The Santa Claus Lie Is Harmless Myth #7: Christmas Can't Change Historically, holiday celebrations served useful social functions; they smoothed tension between social classes; they helped us prepare for the long hard winter; they turned the literal darkest days into the "hap-happiest season of all." Modern Christmas celebrations, however, serve as a source of conflict-and can make us anxious, stressed, fat, poor and stupid. Christmas owns us; we do what it wants, when it wants. But, Johnson argues, taking a close look at the history of the holiday, and the social, political and economic issues that surround it, can turn the tables and allow us to own Christmas once again. Christmas is not a Christians-only holiday that can only be properly celebrated a certain way. Christmas belongs to us all and we can each simply make it what we need it to be.