

Creating Fictional Holidays

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Vision: A Resource for Writers

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Holly Lisle's Vision

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The easiest and simplest way to create fictional holidays for fantasy and SF worldbuilding is to draw them from real holidays and integrate them with your fictional world's cultures.

A light treatment is to just change the name, keep the date comparable in your world's calendar, and then base your holidays on the root traditions you've created. Many fantasy writers use the eight European pagan holidays and may rename them to local pantheons. They are described in depth in almost all pagan and New Age sites and books. That's solid ground, because those are seasonal holidays whose meanings reflect daily life in a medieval agrarian world. They are so sound that most of them still show up in the Christian calendar, with a saint attached and slightly different festivities.

If you follow the example of the unknown clerics who Christianized the pagan calendar, you'll find that they kept the meanings and added new religious interpretations to blend the new and old cultures. Modern pagans are reversing the process with historical research and discovering ancient traditions kept intact by those Christians. The archetypes and stories remain the same. Root stories give depth to your fictional holidays, and you can just change the trimmings. Your details will come from the historical events of your fictional world, its religions and any magical qualities you've already invented.

For instance, the root story of a midwinter birth may change, if your world has a sun goddess, to a Madonna figure holding her daughter. If you're at a loss for what to call the holiday, the name of the sacred infant can be worked into what it's called. Christmas breaks down to Christ's Mass, meaning that it's the mass celebrating that birth. Midwinter is a good useful default, but if your sun-child has a name and a legend, a local word for the celebration or rite, fused with the god's name, creates a unique title for the holiday.

The same process can be applied in science fiction, and can include a good many secular holidays. July 4 (the United States' Independence Day) or any 'founding' holiday you're familiar with can translate rapidly to Landing Day on a colony world. Historical events, such as contact with natives, will emerge as something apocryphal, much like the American holiday Thanksgiving.

Studying the history celebrated by the American Thanksgiving, you'll find that it actually progressed from propaganda to folktale and could be considered slanted, synopsized history. In the traditional folktale version the celebration began as a minor incident when some local natives held a feast and gave gifts to the new European colonists. The bloodier history, that many of the colonial groups aggressively attacked various native tribes, is usually glossed over in favor of a generic friendly native group greeting generic Puritans. Archaic costume that was common only to one group of colonists, the Puritans, became ceremonial costume for modern Thanksgiving cards, pageants and table decorations. The modern interpretation the holiday went from thanking God for food to a day set aside to thank the people you know for what they've done for you. The culture changed, and even though people think of the holiday as part of history, it represents an idealized, very vague history.

Don't discount propaganda and advertising as a source of holidays! Somewhere in your SF world's history are plenty of secular holidays made up by someone for the purpose of selling products or ideas. Mother's Day, Father's Day, Valentine's Day and many others were created by greeting card companies. Later they might become social customs with enormous emotional importance. Ask your fictional people what's important to *them*.

You may have to look outside Western culture for your template holidays, particularly in a world with a variety of climates and cultures. Please do. Nothing lifts a reader out of his or her chair so well as a relatively unfamiliar foreign holiday given a good localizing treatment when set on another world. India feels like another world to many travelers. Indonesia is another universe. Africa is another reality entirely. Readers may or may not recognize your root reference, but a bit of research can explode with colorful details, including all the trimmings.

Especially all the trimmings on the food.

Food customs are where your originality spices this recipe for holidays. Those who enjoy spicy food can taste the difference between Thai hot cuisine, Texas Five Alarm Chili and a hot curry. Food itself is one of the most important memorable, elements of nearly any holiday. Your world has its own cookbook. Smell, taste, color and special preparation all create something unique in a holiday dish, adding plausibility.

It also adds a level of total immersion if you actually experiment and create some of these fictional-world holiday foods in your own kitchen. The recipe book for them is something fans will genuinely appreciate, just the way fans enjoy finding musical scores for the bardic ballads in a favorite fantasy series. Some fantasy writers are almost multimedia artists when including scores and other worldbuilding material. You can also use your kitchen experiments to immerse yourself during the writing and create a sense of veracity.

Food experiments apply to fasts as often as to feasts. Fasting can be found in many diverse religions. From the Islamic holiday Ramadan, where the devout don't eat until the sun goes down for an entire month, to the Catholic Lent, a fast that lasts more than a day or so will have enough food per day for the devout to survive. It can be as specific as eliminating certain foods. Passover food eliminates leavened bread for religious reasons, and results in tasty treats like matzoh bread and matzoh ball soup that many non-Jewish people enjoy when the season comes around. Psychologically, fasts draw people's attention to the feasts that come before or after them. All the wild partying of Carnival, Mardi Gras, and Fat Tuesday in many Catholic countries is the last big blowout before they settle down to Lent. Through most of Catholic history, every Friday was a fast day and meat couldn't be eaten. The rules have loosened in modern times, but there's still a token (self-declared) fast of some kind for the Lent month that most will keep in some way or another.

Other special limits or customs may apply in religious holidays. Daily rituals are common. Special clothing may be worn, and people may bare or cover their heads. Some activities like dancing, singing or praying may be required or forbidden. The common thread in all these practices is that the daily rhythms of life are changed to draw attention to the religion's principles. For a fictional world, this is a chance for you, the author, to decide what principles your fictional religion expresses and highlight them with customs that make the reader recognize how much your characters believe their religion's core values.

Silences, vows of silence, limits on speech or singing can be ways to express solemn themes. Holidays for the dead may be loud and wild or quiet and mournful. Themes of remembrance may have specific forms and meters of speech and song. Clothing may be muted, dull and plain compared to day-to-day dress. The meaning of the holiday will be expressed in every custom surrounding it.

Any personal idea or rant the author has can be expressed in fictional holidays. If your futuristic culture has the background of twentieth century thought, people may consider self-esteem important. A holiday could be set aside for taking care of the self, combined with extreme respect for the boundaries of others -- something of an individuality day in which people wore what they felt like, deliberately ate their favorite

foods, complimented each other on how creatively they interpreted it. That would say something about the colony world that created that holiday. It would probably be a day off from work, but it might also be a day to swap jobs with someone else in order to do something that's normally only a hobby. The characters who grew up in that world might take that holiday for granted if its meaning would become cliché to them. This makes holidays a way for the author to express the theme of the book without a lot of story-dragging explication. It won't be preachy if your characters all have different reactions to it within the range of their culture. It's showing, not telling.

Music is important to most holidays. Many holidays have traditional songs; sometimes also pageants, plays, and reenactments of the holiday's beginnings. Most of all there will be a lot of amateur performance of easy traditional material. Creating the original material is harder than playing Jingle Bells on a piano. Luckily it gets easier in SF.

In SF, if your characters have roots on Earth, they *are* playing Jingle Bells. Of course, they're doing it their way. Perhaps they're doing it on a holographic piano, virtually rendered within an unbelievably inaccurate, romanticized, and sentimentalized Dickensian drawing room. Perhaps they've turned the old black and white movie *It's A Wonderful Life* into an antique media event similar to modern stagings of *A Christmas Carol*. Take the trends of real holidays that you know, and then ask yourself what a few hundred or thousand more years' deletions or additions might have done to them. Santa Claus might be traditionally black and ring a bell, but he will still be there somewhere. Even today, in warm climates, Santa shows up in red shorts instead of a heavy winter coat, but his reindeer still fly South with him and go surfing, too.

Fireworks are plausible for any culture with gunpowder. They are often either harmless reenactments of firefights, or they're used to frighten demons. If there are no fireworks there might be noise. Plenty of it. Holidays are a time when people let down their hair and do silly things and make a lot of noise, if it is not a holiday given over to silence. Drums are common and so is anything rhythmic or loud. The volume helps disguise the amusing harmonics of untrained voices enthusiastically belting out traditional songs off key. That's what makes it fun. That's also the human detail that works, like the way the film *Star Wars* dirtied up the pristine starships to create plausibility.

Real people who only sing that loudly on holidays, tone deaf or not, are loved by their loved ones. Holidays make those mistakes sentimental. Children's mistakes will be sentimentalized above everything else, even if the child's mortified.

That leads to another aspect of holidays. Anything that familiar will also be the butt of jokes. Holiday humor may even consist of jokes hundreds of years old, repeated annually to the same belly laugh. If those traditional holiday songs are easy, the average wit can come up with a parody version. Jokes and parodies start to reveal what your culture thinks is important. The jokes that aren't told may reveal what that culture thinks is too sacred for humor. When I look at the Christmas customs, Santa jokes are a mainstay for cards, sketches, parody songs and anything else people can think of. Yet a comedian making jokes about the Madonna or virgin births will offend, not amuse, most audiences.

Showing all the tensions that emerge between characters during the stress of holiday preparations is a good backdrop, and one of the things fictional holidays are useful for. Family and other relationships are stressed, and if there is any tension, it may erupt into personal conflict. Everyone's spare time is devoted to group activities: making costumes and decorations, preparing speeches and songs, and other creative endeavors. The extra effort behind the jollity brings out the darker side of holidays. If the world or personal situation is bleak, and the characters face hardships, tempers will flare. However, sometimes holiday spirit will prevail. Group activity and shared meaning can draw characters together in sentimental recognition of all loved ones and even distant kinships. How many people only hear from cousins at holidays?

Aliens have different kinships, and in *their* holidays those kinships will display themselves. Their biology will affect what they celebrate. Spawning Day will still come at the biological season of their animal ancestors for a broadcast breeding species. Sentients will elaborate the ancestral animal's nest building and mate attracting behaviors into song, costume, dance, artistic works and religious symbolism. Their biology will affect the aliens and their values. For aliens, I'd recommend writing from life and looking far outside the human species for interesting ideas.

Drawing holidays from animal behavior works in fantasy, too. How many fables, talking animals, animal totems and anthropomorphic animals occur in high fantasy? If your cat were sentient, what holidays would she celebrate? Would her seasonal heat become a great fertility festival where males perform, dance, sing, decorate themselves and try to get her attention? Would all that become ritualized for cat people?

Also the animals your fictional people keep will affect its culture and holidays. Most of the Christmas legends about shepherds grew out of a Middle Eastern shepherd culture. Horse peoples may well have holidays that reflect the habits, behavior and care of horses even if there are no sentient horses in the world. In many hunting cultures, the animals aren't domesticated and ceremonial hunts may be important.

Some scarce game may only be eaten on holidays. Reading anthropology articles and books may give a good overview of what's important to a specific way of life. The ceremonies will come through vividly and feel right even to readers who haven't read four different books by Margaret Mead.

Holidays are often shared across borders and may create temporary truces. Profoundly meaningful events, like an annual ceasefire, may occur on the most important holidays. I created one of those for a short story once, a divine wedding between the god of one nation and the goddess of another that usually warred. Its specific customs wound up creating major plot turns in four different fantasy novels set in that world, and casual references gave depth to other books in the series. Just because you created a truce doesn't mean that you can't let characters break it! Your commanders might brutally take advantage of a holiday that isn't shared by their soldiers. Differences in holiday customs can even be turned into causes for war. If one side is more ascetic, and the other does something on holidays that breaks a major taboo, that may be the cause of a popular war.

Finally, look within your fictional cultures at their day-to-day lives and ask what's important to them. Some holidays can come up whole cloth out of your world's history and cultural diversity. If it was important in their view of history, it's important enough to have a day set aside for it, with reenactments, good food and traditional music, dance, and acting. You might include crowd activities embellished by special costumes and decorations that, though simple, are deeply meaningful. A good final filter for holiday songs, dances and activities is to get some real children to play with the stuff, sing the songs and dance the dances. Kids like playing anyway, and if they can manage the material, it's likely to be a winner.

Happy holidays! Keep in touch and I'll drop in for the grub!