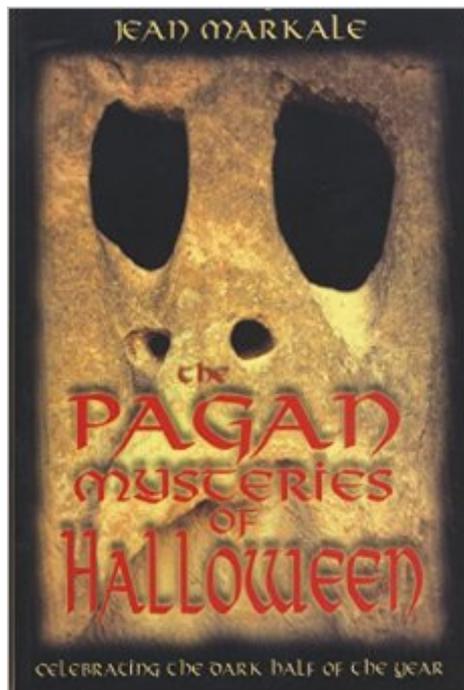


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The Pagan Mysteries Of Halloween: Celebrating The Dark Half Of The Year



Synopsis

A comprehensive examination of the rituals and philosophies of the Celtic holiday of Samhain, the inspiration for Halloween. • Presents the true meaning of this ancient holiday and shows how contemporary observances still faithfully reflect the rituals of pagan ancestors. • Explains why this holiday, largely confined to the English-speaking world since the advent of Christianity, has spread throughout the rest of Europe over the last two decades. One of humanity's most enduring myths is that the dead, on certain nights of the year, can leave the Other World and move freely about the land of the living. Every year on October 31, when the children of the world parade through the streets dressed as monsters, skeletons, and witches, they reenact a sacred ceremony whose roots extend to the dawn of time. By receiving gifts of sweets from strangers, the children establish, on a symbolic plane that exceeds their understanding, a fraternal exchange between the visible world and the invisible world. Author Jean Markale meticulously examines the rituals and ceremonies of ancient festivities on this holiday and shows how they still shape the customs of today's celebration. During the night of Samhain, the Celtic precursor of today's holiday, the borders between life and death were no longer regarded as insurmountable barriers. Two-way traffic was temporarily permitted between this world and the Other World, and the wealth and wisdom of the sidhe, or fairy folk, were available to the intrepid individuals who dared to enter their realm. Markale enriches our understanding of how the transition from the light to the dark half of the year was a moment in which time stopped and allowed the participants in the week-long festival to attain a level of consciousness not possible in everyday life, an experience we honor in our modern celebrations of Halloween.

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Customer Reviews

Jean Markale is described as a poet, philosopher, historian and storyteller. His field of specialty is pre-Christian and medieval culture and spirituality. He is a very well known French author of over 40 books and is a specialist in Celtic studies at Sorbonne University in Paris. It is not surprising then that Mr. Markale has written a most profound study of the Celtic celebration of Halloween or Samhain from the perspective of an actual historian and philosopher. The original of this book was first printed in France in 2000 and was translated and brought to the English speaking market in 2001. I must first congratulate Mr. Graham for his extraordinary translation of this book. Not being fluent in French, I would never have tackled such a volume, but Mr. Graham has preserved, in my opinion, the poetic flavor of Mr. Markale's work. It flows rather than reading dry and halting, like many tomes on this subject. The book is composed of only four chapters: The Celtic Festival of Samhain, The Fantastic Night, The Festival of All the Saints and The Shadows of Halloween. This is followed by a conclusion. While the number of chapters is small, the content of each is enormous, giving page after page of facts, religious comparisons, philosophies and supporting evidence for the practices of this misunderstood holiday. I believe the best way to summarize what this book is about is to quote the author from his Conclusion: "It is a way not of "taming death" as Montaigne said, but of exorcising it by establishing a direct line between before and after, which will display the permanence of life in all its aspects and all its states.

If Halloween is your favorite holiday, then this book is for you! It's a scholarly exploration of the holiday's origins. Because the Pagan Celts didn't leave many written records, there's not much to go on, but Markale does a plausible and interesting job. According to the author, whose picture on the back cover will cause nightmares, Halloween is descended from the pre-Christian Irish holiday of Samhain. Samhain, the end of the old year and the beginning of the new, is November 1. It is a time for renewal and the establishment of harmony. If the King had done a good job during the year, his powers were renewed. Legal contracts were also reviewed and renewed, and communal properties were redistributed if necessary to prevent discord. Everyone was required to attend the festivities, regardless of rank or class. Feasting, combined with heavy beer and mead drinking, created an air of joviality and a willingness to let bygones be bygones, preparing for a fresh new year. Samhain is also a time of spirituality, when a door between our world and the Land of Promise opens, and contact with the Sidh, or fairy people, is possible. The fairy people appear to be the ghosts of the dead, who exist in a parallel world underground and have knowledge of the future. Sometimes they play evil tricks on mortals, but sometimes they provide assistance or convey

special powers. Intercourse with them is also possible. Is this underground world a metaphor for the subconscious? We only know that Samhain is a time of altered consciousness when time itself is compressed or expanded. Hemp and/or magic mushrooms may also have had a ritualistic role. The Celtic concept of the afterlife differs from the Christian in that there is no punishment for sin, nor special reward for the righteous.

This is an interesting and highly detailed book about the origins and evolution of Samhain and Halloween, with a strong emphasis on Celtic traditions, practices, laws, customs, and rituals. Markale writes on page five: "In reality, as we will see later, it is these oft-decried profane rituals that are the origin of Christian ceremonies." He goes on to explain how many of the pagan traditions and rituals, such as those performed on Samhain, became incorporated into Christian practice and have been traditionally celebrated as part of our Halloween festivities. This book is much more technical and historical than other Halloween books, and because of that can be slightly dry in spots. At other times, the wording may be a little odd - but that is a purely subjective observation and shouldn't hinder anyone from reading it. Overall, I definitely recommend this book for anyone interested in the real history of Samhain. "The Pagan Mysteries of Halloween" was the first book on Halloween that I ever read and I think it is useful for several reasons. First, it helps put to rest some of the myths surrounding Samhain and the Druids. Markale explains, for example, why and how the notion of Druidic human sacrifice on Samhain is a myth. He explains where some of these ideas come from, such as from ancient Roman records, and why they are almost certainly flawed. He spends much of the book detailing what we know regarding the actual customs of the Celts on Samhain. He describes Samhain thus: "The religious character of Samhain is clearly apparent . . . Samhain is also a political, legislative, judicial, and of course "commercial" festival inasmuch as contracts of all kinds were formally concluded then" (21).

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