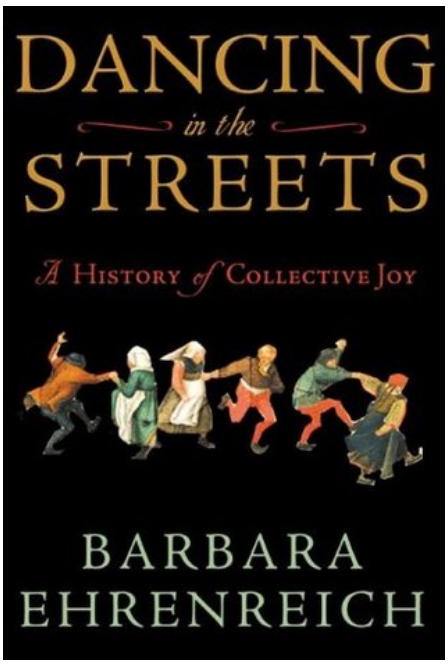

Dancing in the Streets: A History of Collective Joy

Barbara Ehrenreich

Dancing in the Streets: A History of Collective Joy

Barbara Ehrenreich

Dancing in the Streets: A History of Collective Joy Barbara Ehrenreich
From the bestselling social commentator and cultural historian, a fascinating exploration of one of humanity's oldest traditions: the celebration of communal joy
In the acclaimed "Blood Rites," Barbara Ehrenreich delved into the origins of our species' attraction to war. Here, she explores the opposite impulse, one that has been so effectively suppressed that we lack even a term for it: the desire for collective joy, historically expressed in ecstatic revels of feasting, costuming, and dancing.
Ehrenreich uncovers the origins of communal celebration in human biology and culture. Although sixteenth-century Europeans viewed mass festivities as foreign and "savage," Ehrenreich shows that they were indigenous to the West, from the ancient Greeks' worship of Dionysus to the medieval practice of Christianity as a "danced religion." Ultimately, church officials drove the festivities into the streets, the prelude to widespread reformation: Protestants criminalized carnival, Wahhabist Muslims battled ecstatic Sufism, European colonizers wiped out native dance rites. The elites' fear that such gatherings would undermine social hierarchies was justified: the festive tradition inspired French revolutionary crowds and uprisings from the Caribbean to the American plains. Yet outbreaks of group revelry persist, as Ehrenreich shows, pointing to the 1960s rock-and-roll rebellion and the more recent "carnivalization" of sports.
Original, exhilarating, and deeply optimistic, "Dancing in the Streets" concludes that we are innately social beings, impelled to share our joy and therefore able to envision, even create, a more peaceable future.

Dancing in the Streets: A History of Collective Joy Details

Date	:	Published January 9th 2007 by Metropolitan Books (first published January 1st 2006)
ISBN	:	9780805057232
Author	:	Barbara Ehrenreich
Format	:	Hardcover 320 pages
Genre	:	History, Nonfiction, Sociology, Psychology, Cultural, Audiobook

From Reader Review Dancing in the Streets: A History of Collective Joy for online ebook

Larry Bassett says

Barbara Ehrenreich is one of my hero authors because of her books Nickel and Dimed and Bait and Switch. She has written a number of other books but these two address social issues that I find particularly compelling. They are also books where her writing is quite personal and succinct. On the other hand *Dancing in the Streets* hammers home its points by excessive repetition. For example, in the Introduction Ehrenreich writes a twenty page thesis on ceremonies that she considers celebratory in some way. Hardly any of these examples, and there are many, are unique. Most are of the same nature but in different cultural settings. She calls these ecstatic rituals. This point is made and made, then made again. Enough, Barbara, I get the point. She concludes "If we possess this capacity for collective ecstasy, why do we so seldom put it to use?"

In Blood Rites she explores the negative collective action of war. In *Dancing in the Streets* she looks in the other direction for positive examples. This takes the form of an academic thesis, like *Blood Rites*, with fifty pages of notes, bibliography and index. I am tempted to put both these books in the reference section of the library and only go to it when I am interested in seriously exploring the topics. These are not for bedside reading tables. I cannot celebrate *Dancing in the Streets* although from the catchy title I expect an enjoyable experience. But it is more represented by the serious subtitle *A History of Collective Joy*. And since so much of the book is devoted to the loss or absence of festivals, we might subtitle it The Loss of Collective Joy.

So, I guess, my reaction to the book really had to do with expectations. I was looking for something catchy and readable and I got a deep, serious viewpoint. I was hoping for the happy personal celebration of a sports victory of my home team but got the formal experience of the choir singing the Hallelujah Chorus.

"Go back ten thousand years . . ." Ehrenreich likes to start at the beginning with the prehistoric times. "We can infer these scenes from prehistoric rock art depicting dancing figures, which has been discovered at sites in Africa, India, Australia, Italy, Turkey, Israel, Iran, and Egypt, among other places." With the help of modern anthropologists she can "infer" quite a bit and sometimes I wonder what came first, the conclusion or the inference. She sees "marching, chanting, dancing" everywhere she looks.

She spends many pages delving into Dionysian worship asserting that it wasn't "fundamentally sexual in nature" challenging a common modern day assumption. On the other hand "With his long hair, his hints of violence, and his promise of ecstasy, Dionysus was the first rock star." There is some conflict about sexuality in this statement given our current stereotype of rock stars! Furthermore, she explores the collapse of paganism beginning with the rise of Christianity. "In a world without Dionysus/Pan/Bacchus/Sabazios, nature would be dead, joy would be postponed to an afterlife, and the forests would no longer ring with the sound of pipes and flutes." Far from that state, Ehrenreich sees Jesus as taking on many of the characteristics of Dionysus as one way to explain his rise to prominence and the effort of his followers to fit him into the world as he found it. The parallels between Jesus and Dionysus are striking as Ehrenreich lists them. She also observes that Jesus "was born into a Jewish culture that had embraced, to a certain extent, the pagan gods, especially Zeus and Dionysus." The phrase "to some extent" may be a key to understanding the view Ehrenreich takes.

> It is fair to say that first- and second-century Christianity offered an experience in some ways similar to that provided by the Greek mystery cults, and the "oriental" religions in Rome – one of great emotional intensity, sometimes culminating in ecstatic states. Christians . . . sang and

> chanted, leaped up to prophesy either in tongues or in normal speech, drank wine, and probably danced and tossed their hair about.

Having said all that and more, Ehrenreich is bold enough to say that “Generalization is unwise here . . .”! She goes on to explain the current Christianity as “diminished” from its Dionysian origins. The current conflict in the Church between speaking in tongues and patient listening, between ecstatic dancing and sedate sitting was in the front of my mind as I read this section. To accept the course of evolution (if I may use that word!) of the church as expounded by Ehrenreich requires an open mind and rather flexible beliefs. It mostly does not work if one is dogmatic.

Ehrenreich explores the reasons carnivals, large public parties, declined in frequency. One conclusion is that “Without question, industrial capitalism and Protestantism played a central role in motivating the destruction of carnival and other festivities.”
Although there is no answer to “the question of whether carnival functioned as a school for revolution or as a means of social control,” the book provides some gruel for thought.

Ehrenreich does occasionally drift off course. Sometimes the drift is interesting but only tangentially related to collective joy!

> And it should be emphasized that the new concern to separate eating from excreting, and one human body from another, had nothing to do with hygiene. Bathing was still an infrequent, even – if indulged in too often – eccentric, practice, the knowledge that contact with others and their excreta can spread disease was still at least two centuries away.

In what seems to me to be another excursion into the barely related, Ehrenreich devotes a twenty page chapter to melancholy in the 1600s ascribing it as the 17th century version of our depression. What does this have to do with Dancing in the Streets?

> If the destruction of festivals did not actually cause depression, it may still be that, in abandoning their traditional festivities, people lost a potentially effective *cure* for it.

What was the cure for melancholia in the late 16th and early 17th century? Eat, drink and be merry. Go to a festival! What, you say the festivals have been excluded from the churches and banished from the countryside? Oh my!

So what should we do in today’s modern or post-carnival era about depression?

> I know of no attempts in our time to use festive behavior as treatment for depression, as if such an experiment is even thinkable in a modern clinical setting. There is, however, an abundance of evidence that communal pleasures – ranging from simple festivities to ecstatic rituals – have served, in a variety of cultures, as a way of alleviating and even curing depression.

And she goes on to give a number of examples suggesting in conclusion that we should not reject “one of the most ancient sources of help – the mind-preserving, lifesaving techniques of ecstasy.” Actually sounds like a prescription for a party is called for!

But the years of European expansionism sent somber folk out to conquer the world and end the festivities wherever they were encountered. We are still talking about loss of Dancing in the Streets. And then – Sieg Heil! – back come the massive crowds to adulate their fascist leaders. But are they experiencing joy or crowd psychology?

And then we are brought to the present time when Dancing in the Streets is brought to you by rock concerts indoors and then outdoors. And the thrill of the home run or goal or basket or great play or political victory can bring a crowd to their feet in collective celebration. We have lived this part of celebration and it brings the book to an ending where Ehrenreich ponders whether the days of carnivals will ever return with its ecstatic joy. The book has mostly related the extinction of carnival-like events over the centuries. Ehrenreich closes by saying that we need more chances "on this crowded planet, to acknowledge the miracle of our simultaneous existence with some sort of celebration."

I didn't find very much to jump up and dance to in this book. It is full of academic speculation and recollection. It seems to go back to the beginning of human life in a well researched canvas of vanishing planned and spontaneous collective joy. It is too much like a book that the professor might assign parts of for a sociology class.

Dancing in the Streets is similar to Blood Rites in its academic approach to the topic. And since I had already read *Blood Rites*, I was not crushed with disappointment to find the drone of an academic thesis. I just did not find excitement in either book. Lots of information, that's for sure, but not much excitement. It wouldn't make a very good movie either.

I just was not ready for so much more academia in *Dancing in the Streets* so I am giving it two stars: "It was OK." I was hoping for something a little more user friendly. I also would have appreciated a few portions about how to find the path to more collective joy.

Siria says

Four out of five stars for the idea, two out of five stars for execution. Ehrenreich's introduction to *Dancing in the Streets: A History of Collective Joy* points out a quizzical disconnect in modern Western culture. We put an awful lot of time and effort into studying depression, malaise, the things that make us happy and the things that isolate us, but very little effort into studying the things that make us happy or which bring us together. Ehrenreich traces the history of expressions of communal joy and ecstatic communion—and the suppression of those celebrations—from prehistoric times through to the present day. In general, I think she makes some good points here. Why is it that modern Westerners can conceive so easily of strong bonds between individuals but less so between groups? What have we lost in the search for individual freedom? There's definitely fodder for thought and for discussion in the ideas Ehrenreich raises.

However, I cannot recommend the methodology which Ehrenreich uses here. She admits at the outset that there is a bias in the sources towards the history of the West, yet makes little attempt to correct that tendency in her own writing. Moreover, what little discussion she has of non-Western cultures largely comes from Western sources. The subtitle of this book should really be *A History of Collective Joy* ***in the West***.

Ehrenreich may also have read broadly in order to read this book, but she does not seem to have read deeply, and much of the secondary scholarship on which she draws is shockingly dated, dating from the 50s and 60s.

E.R. Dodds' work is foundational for a lot of recent scholarship, but it's also been superseded in many, many ways—the man died in the 70s! Why does she reference his work and not Peter Brown's? (Surely a more influential scholar in the field of late antique religion, whose work would, I think, be illuminating on this topic, even if he never directly addresses it!)

I suspect, based on the chapters on medieval Europe (the area with which I'm most familiar) that this partly proceeds from a selective choice of/reading of the sources, and partly from the fact that she seems not to have read much secondary material not directly relevant to the topic. I think that a knowledge of Caroline Walker Bynum's work on food and the body in the Middle Ages, for instance, would have changed her characterisation of the medieval Mass and how laypeople participated in it. Similarly, greater familiarity with scholarly terminology on Ehrenreich's part would have strengthened her work—when historians or anthropologists refer to things as "liminal", that does not mean, as she seems to think, that they are dismissing something as marginal or unimportant, but rather that it gains in power or possibility because it straddles the margins of more than one sphere. It's not so easily categorised.

(I listened to the audiobook version of this. I greatly enjoyed the reader's style and verve, but I really wish that she'd taken the time to clarify the pronunciation of non-English words before the recording. The French in particular made me wince.)

Jeremy Preacher says

I liked this and found it an interesting read. Ehrenreich presented some historical events in an unusual light - the rise of Protestantism as a reaction against the increasing disapproval by the Catholic Church of public celebration being the main example. I was also fascinated by the idea, provocative although not well-supported, that the early Christians were shaped by Dionysian cults, because the Roman Jews were also followers of Dionysus. I'd love to see some more evidence along those lines - it's definitely not a modern article of Jewish faith.

That said, there are some substantial criticisms I could make. Looking at a couple thousand years of European history through a single narrow lens is interesting but not at all convincing - I don't believe the author thinks she's found the key to all history or anything, but the presentation is shaped that way and I found it thin. Secondly, the Eurocentrism - which she explicitly apologizes for and explains - is tedious. Certainly for someone who's more a journalist than a serious historian or anthropologist, focusing on Europe is the path of least resistance, but it's not nearly as compelling. My third big objection is that she makes very little effort to make her thesis relevant to modern life. She discusses sports, briefly, mentions Halloween literally in one offhand remark, and doesn't touch on flash mobs, the effect of the internet, modern religious or secular holidays, or anything else in the current day at all. I'd be happy to read a second book focused on that, to be honest - maybe happier than I was with this one.

To be clear, I liked and enjoyed the book, and it gave me some interesting things to think about. A work of major scholarship it is not, but it's worth a read.

Jessi Vowels says

i liked the concept, i agreed with many of her argumentsbut could not deal with it's half-assed research and

academic posturing. there were all kinds of research problems, logical fallacies, and an almost gratuitous use of the word "masking", but my one major bugaboo, which completely drove me up a wall through the entire book was her frequently bashing of anthropologists for using words she felt were derogatory, without actually bothering to *understand the definitions of the words*.

specifically, liminal does indeed mean "marginal," but not in the sense of "unimportant"; rather, it's more literally "in the margins," or outside the boundaries of clear societal definition. calling something liminal is not to dismiss it as unimportant, but rather to say it exists in an in between, non-definable cultural realm which is typically afforded great significance, power, and respect, and as such tends to make people uncomfortable. for example, menstrual periods, a period of engagement before a wedding, and pregnancy could be described by an anthropologist as "liminal", and surely one would not think they would be dismissing such things as unimportant.

this frequent misuse of the word led me to doubt the accuracy of many of her claims throughout; seeing as the book was pretty much a review of the literature on the subject (which i at least know to be woefully sub-par and poorly understood as far as anthropological writings are concerned) i was left feeling like i didn't come out with much in terms of actual knowledge. i still kind of liked the thing though, as the topic, and several of her observations on the matter, was good food for thought and conversation.

Ryan says

The topic -- group dance, ecstatic joy experienced in groups, and trance states -- seems under explored and appreciated. I expect and hope that *Dancing in the Street* will be more interesting than the blockbuster, *Nickel and Dimed*.

Notes while reading:

A big challenge in this text will be exploring a topic that will trample on some of her audience's sensitivities without actually trampling on too many of her audience's sensitivities.

So far as I can tell, the ways that this phenomenon maybe does survive in the West do not seem to be mentioned here, including raves, some forms of group fitness, and pentecostalism. Perhaps they will be explored by the end.

I didn't realize that I didn't know anything about the origin of mystery cults.

"It is tempting to divide the ancient temperament into a real of Dionysus and a realm of Yahweh--hedonism and egalitarianism versus hierarchy and war. On the one hand, a willingness to seek delight in the here and now; on the other, a determination to prepare for future danger. A feminine, or androgynous, spirit of playfulness versus the cold principle of patriarchal authority. This is in fact how Robert Graves, Joseph Campbell, and many since them have understood the emergence of a distinctly Western culture: As the triumph of masculinism and militarism over the anarchic traditions of a simpler agrarian age, of the patriarchal "sky-gods" like Yahweh and Zeus over the great goddess and her consorts. The old deities were accessible to all through ritually induced ecstasy. The new gods spoke only through their priests or prophets, and then in terrifying tones of warning and command. But this entire dichotomy breaks down with the arrival of Jesus." This was not the sentence I was expecting to read at the end of this paragraph.

Apparently my surprise is due to my own ignorance. It's apparently well established that a construct of Jesus seems to have been built around Jesus's memory, and a lot of the parts in that construct were borrowed from Dionysus. Ehrenreich is skeptical of these similarities and seems to feel they are a sign of manipulation. It occurs to me that there may a sort of religious equivalent to Kuhn's scientific paradigm that would lead people to imbue new stories with familiar constructs.

What's kind of (accidentally?) brilliant about *this* construct is that JC's the son of Yahweh. He also seems to have little to do with fertility. So anyone who wants to point to some sort of conflict or divide in these religious structures will find a sort of unity, at least in the early forms of Christianity.

It occurs to me that the new atheists have overlooked the most obvious way to combat religiosity. Look into the details of the origins of the religion. It's odd to me how few of the details Ehrenreich explores here are a part of any discourse on religion (or in this case Christianity) that I'm familiar with.

Ehrenreich describes the early Christian teachings as being received as just another "oriental religion" that appeals especially women. I've never heard this notion that women might be more enthusiastic about religion before. Is this a thing?

A lot of this book focuses on hierarchies and how they are threatened by collective joy. The church doesn't like these ecstatic rituals because they offer direct communication with supreme beings. They also invite women to dance, which at some point in the Dark Ages the church decided was devilish. The upper classes don't like festivals them because there is an equalizing effect that comes from seeing that everyone is foolish. Protestants and capitalists feel that they distract from work and keep people from drinking moderately, waking up early, and showing up to work on Saturdays. Apparently, people before and during the French Revolution used festival icons to signal their defiance of the upper classes; they'd write variations of "down with rent" on their maypole in addition to usual decorations.

I actually came to this novel expecting to read more about the psychology of joy, but the most important words in the title are, in descending order, streets, collective, dancing, and finally joy. To be honest, there has not yet been a definition of joy. Do the figures in a Norman Rockwell painting experience joy?

Although the opening discusses how Europeans judged indigenous populations for engaging in collective joy rituals, this book has focused on the Greeks, and then Christianity. This limited exploration is disappointing. There is an attempt to address it, but the problem is that Ehrenreich's definition of ecstatic joy is limited to readings of Ancient Greek sources. There is mention of contemporary people who dance to hypnotic drumming, but there are no interviews with these musicians and dancers. Why not?

There is an argument that people experience depression because they have been robbed of this sort of joy. I'm beginning to think that everyone has an explanation for depression. But I do recall the movie made about David Foster Wallace (the one with Jason Seagul) and how he found a sort of joy in collective dancing. I don't know that it was enough for him, sadly. Maybe there's more to depression than that.

The analyses of fascism, sport, and rock are not very convincing, and I'm not wild about placing them together in a way that equates them with one another. Ehrenreich makes a distinction between ecstatic ritual and spectacle. She is most sympathetic to rock music, but I couldn't figure out why a rock concert wouldn't be classified as spectacle in the same way an NFL game is. Maybe the failing is my own.

Mardi Gras does not appear.

All in all, the history is not very comprehensive and often unconvincing. The topic is very interesting and rarely explored, at least in my experience as a reader. So, although this will likely be one of the most well remembered books I read this year, I only hesitantly recommend it.

Richard Reese says

I was intrigued when our book group selected *Dancing in the Streets* by Barbara Ehrenreich. It's a history of collective joy and ecstatic ritual — stuff that's pretty rare in the land of the glowing screen people. Studying humankind's long transition from wild and free to robo-consumers, it's easy to perceive gradually advancing emotional decay. Cultures slid further away from intimate connections to the family of life, and human societies grew from small clans of friends and family into sprawling megalopolises inhabited by millions of strangers.

In Colin Turnbull's lovely book, The Forest People, the Mbuti Pygmies were beautiful people who thrived in a Congo rainforest. They did not worship invisible deities, because that required a vivid imagination. Instead, they had profound reverence and respect for their forest, which was not invisible, and gave them everything they needed. This love often inspired song, dance, and jubilation. Paradise was where their feet were standing. Turnbull wrote that the Pygmy "likes to laugh until tears come to his eyes and he is too weak to stand. He then sits down or lies on the ground and laughs still louder."

In *The Mbuti Pygmies*, Turnbull spoke fondly of Father Longo, a Catholic missionary. Pygmies had no word for evil. "In order to convert them, then, he would first have to teach them the concept of evil, and that he was not prepared to do." He left them unmolested.

I had great hopes for Ehrenreich's book, because it was a very neat idea. I imagined a book to help us remember how essential it was, for health and sanity, to spend our lives in intimate daily contact with the family of life, in a thriving undefiled ecosystem — the mode of living for which we evolved. The book didn't quite do this. Its time window was the era of civilization, beginning with brief glimpses of Canaanite orgies, and the lusty Dionysian cults of Greece. The main focus was on Europe in the last 500 years.

For most, life in medieval times majored in backbreaking drudgery and poverty. Folks avoided insanity by taking breaks for festive gatherings — carnivals where people wore costumes and masks. There was singing, dancing, drinking, and good-natured mockery of their superiors. The struggles of daily life were left behind, as peasants and nobles joined together, rolled down their socks, and dissolved into a sweet whirlwind of joyful noise and ecstatic celebration.

There were big cultural changes when puritanical cults appeared on the stage, with their fanatical intolerance. Calvinism descended like a hard frost on fun. Pleasure was of the devil. Festivities were banned. The music stopped. Get back to work! Naturally, this led to an epidemic of morbid melancholy (depression).

Over time, multinational salvation-oriented religions drove wedges into cohesive social relationships. Believers were encouraged to regularly contemplate their shortcomings, and worry about where their souls would reside in the afterlife. There was increased focus on "me," the individual, and less on "us," our community. With the rise of individualism came "isolation, loneliness, a sense of disengagement, loss of vitality, and a feeling of burden because reality had no clear meaning."

Then came the age of colonization, when this injured mindset spread to distant lands, forced its beliefs on

others, and destroyed their cultures. Missionaries were rigid, racist, domineering, and intolerant — dour and cheerless people who never laughed. Savages were no longer allowed to practice their traditional ecstatic rituals, because they were devil worship. Joy became a mental illness.

Ehrenreich wrote in 2007, but her chapter on the rise of fascist nationalism could have been written this morning. Following their defeat in 1918, Germans were down and out. Hitler revived their spirits with mysticism, color, and pageantry. Hitler was a masterful performer and bullshit artist who entranced vast crowds with his highly animated oratory, repeatedly shouting slogan after slogan. Thousands roared back, "Sieg heil!" [LOOK]

The Nazis built an enormous stadium at Nuremberg, and held annual gatherings in it. Around the perimeter, 130 antiaircraft searchlights were aimed straight up into the night, creating an awe-inspiring circular colonnade of light beams. Folks were spellbound by the sight of thousands of soldiers, in crisp new uniforms, goose-stepping with astonishing precision, to the thundering drumbeats.

Like the Pied Piper, Hitler tried to unify and lead all good Germans to a heroic racially pure Teutonic utopia. On the streets, gangs of roughneck brown shirts with swastika armbands aggressively harassed the socialists, Jews, and other undesirables. The swing music of racially inferior Negroes was banned. Radio and cinema reinforced the Third Reich's message — make the Fatherland great again.

Military spectacles were a powerful way to manipulate crowds. The barrage of high energy nationalism whipped them up. But being orderly spectators was far less interesting than enthusiastically participating in singing, dancing, and merrymaking. Nazi events were heavily policed. Eventually, the parades and speeches got boring.

After the Hitler show was reduced to rubble, Ehrenreich discussed two new fads that seemed like modern attempts to revive ecstatic rituals — rock music, and sporting events. In the '60s, the Western world seemed to snap out of its brittle Puritan trance, get up, and dance. White kids discovered what black folks had known for a long time — tune into the beat and shake those hips. Letting yourself go led to ecstatic experiences. At Beatles concerts, the music was often drowned out by the intense screaming and shrieking of thousands of girls.

At football and soccer games, crowds quit being passive spectators. Events took on carnival characteristics. They put on costumes with their team colors, and painted their faces. There were synchronized crowd movements, chants, dancing, feasting, and singing. Eventually, the crowds got so loud and distracting that the players on the field complained. Over time, games began to increasingly take on aspects of nationalistic military spectacles. There were marching bands, precision drill teams, celebrities, loud music, flag waving, national anthems, and fireworks.

Modern psychology is focused on self-control, being a dependable human resource in an industrial society. Old fashioned communal festivities were focused on escape from routines, losing the self, and becoming one with the soaring ecstasy of big joy. I wish that Ehrenreich had invited Jacob Grimm into her story. Long, long before the plague of Puritans, Europeans had deep roots in their ancestral lands, places that were spiritually alive with sacred groves, streams, mountains, animals, and fairies. In *Teutonic Mythology*, Grimm described annual German bonfires:

"At all the cities, towns, and villages of a country, towards evening on the first (or third) day of Easter, there is lighted every year on mountain and hill a great fire of straw, turf, and wood, amidst a concourse and jubilation, not only of the young, but of many grown up peoples. …Men and maids, and all who come, dance

exulting and singing, hats are waved, handkerchiefs thrown into the fire. The mountains all round are lighted up, and it is an elevating spectacle, scarcely paralleled by anything else, to survey the country for many miles round from one of the higher points, and in every direction at once to see a vast number of these bonfires, brighter or fainter, blazing up to heaven."

At Midsummer, there were wheels of fire rituals. "A huge wheel is wrapt around with straw, so that none of the wood is left in sight, a strong pole is passed through the middle, and is grasped by the guiders of the wheel. At a signal… the wheel is lighted with a torch, and set rapidly in motion, a shout of joy is raised, and all wave their torches on high, part of the men stay on the hill, part follow the rolling globe of fire as it is guided downhill to the Moselle. …Whilst the wheel is rushing past the women and girls, they break out into cries of joy, answered by the men on the hill; and inhabitants of neighboring villages, who have flocked to the river side, mingle their voices in the universal rejoicing."

In the old days, white folks still knew how to party like Pygmies.

BooksTwins says

Es el primer ensayo que leo así que no tengo mucho conocimiento pero debo decir que me gustó mucho pues nos guía a través de los principios de nuestra historia, pasando por la época de Jesús, Dionisio, la revolución industrial, el nacimiento del carnaval, la época del rock y de los hippies, terminado con los eventos deportivos de hoy en día. Es impresionante como nos seguimos comportando como hace miles de años y como siempre los "ricos" y la iglesia han querido evitar este éxtasis común que une a la gente. Y cuando no pueden evitarlo, intentan controlarlos o hacen "festejos" suyos.

Sami Eerola says

Great history book that not just tells the history of street dancing, but also the history of Western culture, imperialism and capitalism. This book starts as a regular anthropological study, but after 100 pages it turns in a quasi anarchist "peoples history" book, that argues that to create a centralized state and capitalism the cracking down of street dancing and collective spontaneity was "necessary". In the end this book argues that all the mental illnesses and depression that people suffer in society today is caused by lacking of organic spontaneous collective joy. But everything is sourced and cited so this is a great source book on how came to be that white Europeans are so poor dancers compared to Africans.

Gavin Morgan says

Ehrenreich leads the reader through ecstatic rituals' persistent effervescence in spite of authoritarian campaigns against collective joy, and the solidarity it can inspire.

As a white American, I have always felt an important part of myself locked down, and tied up. Ehrenreich identifies it as a practice of social movement that's been stripped from me over long generations of Orwellian memory-holes.

Pinko Palest says

the basic premise of the book is excellent: carnival is subversive and collective joy teaches people how to overthrow hierarchies. Sadly, the author doesn't deal with this main point nearly enough. Instead, she goes on several tangents which not only add little but can be widely off the mark too. At the very beginning she makes a case for collective dancing being hard-wired in human genes, which is as biologically deterministic as they come. By the end, she makes a case for the carnivalization of sport, citing the example of the Mexican Wave, thus proving that she only really knows american sports and has little to no idea of European fandom (I have never heard of any football supporter ever indulging in the dubious pleasure of a mexican wave, except for people who've only ever been to world cup finals games). Inbetween there's many other instances where the author is just plain worng. Still, I agree with her basic premise so much that I managed to squeeze 4 stars out of 5, but I really can't giver her the 5/5

Sofia says

This was more of a history of the *suppression* of collective joy rather than the rituals of joy themselves. None the less, full of fascinating information, including the fact that before Yahweh became the one god of the Jews, they worshiped the middle eastern version of Dionysus. The author also comes to some interesting conclusions about how our culture went from first hand experience of divinity through ecstatic ritual, to "faith", which, if you look at it honestly is an act of the imagination and is far removed from *knowing* the divine.

Clara Stefanov-wagner says

I was disappointed to find that "collective joy" was narrowly defined in a very specific sense of trancelike, community-wide ritual associated with religious festivities. This is further defined (or at least described) as being characterized by a loss of individual consciousness and orientation on a level that would be considered pathological in other contexts. Working from this restrictive definition, the author takes the view that such occasions have vanished, and that we have lost an essential part of human culture in the process. In the sense of near-insanity that overtakes an entire town, perhaps this is true. But this ignores the many smaller/more-scattered communities that continue to experience collective joy and the celebration of a group identity at contra dances, church services, scout camps, sports games, and concerts throughout America and the world. The social history and raw factual information were well researched and thoroughly interesting; the attempt at drawing a conclusion was unnecessary and alienating.

Elizabeth says

I chose not to finish this book; being a fan of both joy and dance, this made me sad. As an investigative reporter, Ehrenreich might be quite skilled. But I am not impressed with her grasp of religious history nor her style of psychological conjecture to support her points. There are better sources than this book for cultural theories. If I'm going to spend time on the history of an event, I want more hard facts.

Cynthia Haggard says

Barbara Ehrenreich's DANCING IN THE STREETS is both a celebration of dancing and a condemnation of the authorities who are trying to prevent large groups of people from running amok in the interests of law and order.

This wonderful book is a potted history of dance, from its roots back in the misty past, through various ancient civilizations and up through the present day. Ms. Ehrenreich conveys how natural it was to dance and how this is a knack that many of us have lost today. People who either live in Northern Europe or can trace their ancestry from that part of the world have difficulty loosening up enough to dance even for a few minutes, let alone for hours or days. And since this somewhat Puritanical attitude has pervaded the world, all of us suffer from a lack of dancing in our lives.

I am in awe of how much research Ms. Ehrenreich has done for this book. Of course, dancing is not just about dancing. In the ancient past, it was used to cure people of sadness. Since the early Middle Ages, it seems to have taken on more political overtones, and people who danced often did so for reasons of social justice. In fact dancing impinged on so many aspects of people's lives from religion (where people danced to their prayers) to the military, to sports. And what is fascinating is how Ms. Ehrenreich argues that relatively recently the young men and women of the 50s and 60s who would not sit down in their seats during a rock concert, were merely reaching back (albeit unconsciously) into a Dionysian past.

For those of you who have often wondered about dancing, and its various social incarnations, this book is for you. Five stars.

Linda says

Three and a half stars.

This is not a topic about which I would have deliberately sought out information, but Ehrenreich is one of those authors who can lead me willingly into uncharted waters.

The joy of which the subtitle speaks is the ecstatic variety, most familiar to modern Western readers as a relic of a bygone age, in which there might be speaking in tongues, dancing to the point of exhaustion, and other expressions in which the individual seems to lose him or herself to some greater collective force of the group.

Her examination begins in ancient Greece, moves to ancient Rome, then becomes closely tied to the history of Christianity, which, until around the 12th or 13th century, appears to have been a danced religion, much like the other religions of the day. The eventual exclusion of dancing from religious ritual was a gradual process, which involved not only a clergy eager to maintain tight control of their followers, but surprisingly (at least to me), the invention of capitalism and Calvinism, both of which required the poorer classes to be a sober, hard-working, reliable source of labor who would be meekly grateful for whatever meager wages were provided to them.

Once the church stamped out public celebrations related to worship, the urge to gather and have fun in large groups found other means of expression-- first in the carnivals of the Middle Ages, and later in nationalist gatherings (favored by both Hitler and Mussolini), rock concerts, and sporting events.

While primarily a book of history, the book also touches on psychology, sociology, and the politics of race.
