

## Is there a wrinkle in time?

Book explores theory that the calendar is off by about 1,000 years

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EDMONTON - At age 17 I made a heartfelt commitment to my math teacher, a dedicated man named Mr. Frodsham, who despaired of ever cramming the binomial theorem into my reluctant cementhead. He did not succeed.

I swore to him that if I passed Mathematics 30 I would never, ever open another math textbook as long as I lived. I promised never to take another math class. I vowed never to be the cause of another math teacher's frustration. I would not take mathematics as an option at university -- as if -- and would do nothing more complicated than balancing my chequebook, a task which still never quite works out exactly as it should.

I broke my promise to Mr. Frodsham last week and read Florin Diacu's *The Lost Millennium: History's Timetables Under Siege* (Knopf Canada, 309 pp., \$35), a thicket of a book that's crammed with theories on celestial mechanics, graphs and mathematical formulae. Defeated as I was so long ago by the binomial theorem, it came as no surprise that the book was painfully slow going.

I confessed as much during an interview with Diacu, an affable sort who teaches mathematics at the University of Victoria. I told him that I had to re-read many passages many times and while he sympathized, he made no apologies.

"It's not a novel," he says of his book that explores the idea that our system of counting the years could be out by as much as a thousand years. "Sometimes mathematicians when reading a particularly difficult text get through only a page a day." Clearly, they are a patient lot.

"What I tried to do was address the book to people who are accustomed to following longer arguments. And I had to put in some concepts on things like celestial mechanics because they were essential to understand the arguments being presented."

He didn't want to attract criticism from fellow scientists and mathematicians that he had "dumbed" it all down for those among us who are numerically challenged.

"That would have been easy," he says. "But I prefer to have people maybe not understand all the details but get the big picture."

It's a complicated business, but followers of Anatoly Fomenko, a Russian math prof who came up with the new chronology, insist that the Dark Ages, roughly the 500 years before 1000 AD, never happened. The mistake, apparently, began in the 1500s when our current system of counting the passing years came into effect, and we've been living with the consequences ever since.

For his part, Diacu remains a skeptic, but feels that Fomenko's theory is important enough to be investigated more fully. If what Fomenko says is true -- and he does come across as a bit of a crackpot -- the world could be turned on its ear.

For example, it could mean telling Christian fundamentalists that Jesus walked the earth in the year 1075 or that Moses didn't wander in the desert for 40 years. In fact, according to some Fomenko apostles, it's possible he didn't wander in the desert at all.

Fomenko, however, is not alone and Diacu, whose field of expertise is celestial mechanics, points out that Johannes Kepler in the 1600s and Isaac Newton in the 18th century raised serious questions about traditional chronology. Furthermore, a handful of modern scientists have found references to things like lunar and solar eclipses in ancient documents, all of which leads them to believe that history really begins about 800 AD.

Fomenko goes somewhat farther and suggests that some dynasties have overlapped and that some popes and kings, known to traditional historians as distinct characters from different centuries, were really one and the same person. Thus, Fomenko says, Pope Stephen I (254-257) was really the happily named Pope Hilarius (461-468) and the Roman emperor Theodesius (408-450) was really Charlemagne (768-814). Admittedly, it's a leap.

But Diacu, despite his reservations about some of Fomenko's methods, urges readers to look at all sides of the question before dismissing the theory out of hand.

"It's a very serious issue. My main goal was not to say whether Fomenko was correct but whether traditional chronology was correct. We were taught in school that dates in history were ironclad, and this is obviously not the case."

Nevertheless, timetables of history aren't an obsession for him, Diacu says.

"I was intrigued by Fomenko's ideas, and I thought they were worth exploring in greater detail, but I have interests in a lot of other areas."

Included among them are an upcoming book on voting patterns in a democracy, and he and a team of international mathematicians only last weekend solved a nagging problem regarding gravitational effects on planetary systems that had been plaguing their kind for almost 40 years.

The team met in Banff, went over their work, and came up with a solution that withstood the kind of, well, nitpicking for which mathematicians are justly famous.

So what do guys like Diacu do when they crack a nut like that? If they're believers in Fomenko, do they party like it's 1006 or 942 or whatever?

"Good question but, no, we didn't. I don't think we actually thought of it, but maybe we should. Besides, one of the other fellows had to get back to teaching his class."

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