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History rewrite might be necessary, author says



RICK MCGINNIS/METRO TORONTO

Author Florin Diacu

THE LOST MILLENNIUM
Florin Diacu
Knopf Canada hardcover
\$35
****** 1/2 (out of five)**

Too many books arrive on bookshelves tricked out with more hype than they can justify; rare is the book for which no amount of hype can match its significance.

Florin Diacu's *The Lost Millennium* is just such a book, a slim but dense volume that makes a convincing case that everything we know about time may be wildly wrong.

Diacu, a Romanian-born mathematician who teaches at the University of Victoria in British Columbia, has written an electrifying summary of a debate that's been raging quietly in the worlds of history, astronomy and mathematics for decades, even centuries, on the idea that our conception of time, and the dates by which we mark the passing of history, might be drastically in error, by as much as a thousand years.

The Lost Millennium is a departure from Diacu's specialty, celestial mechanics, though he says that his discipline informs the way he regards history.

"See, being a mathematician and a scientist, I trust science before I trust somebody's word about something. ... Science doesn't lie, mathematics doesn't lie, if we trust the numbers that we can extract from something, after studying the issue in detail and not rushing into conclusions, then looking at how the documents can agree with the numbers."

His book revolves around several significant characters. There's Joseph Scaliger, a 16th-century polymath who wrote the chronology upon which most history is based, and Isaac Newton, the famous mathematician who was the first significant dissenter from Scaliger's work.

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And there's Anatoli Fomenko, a brilliant Russian whose radical theories are the most recent assault on Scaliger's chronology. Diacu spends much of the book explaining Fomenko's theories, teasing out their most provocative assertions, but also noting where he wildly overreaches. In the 400 years since Scaliger, incredible advances have been made in astronomy and physics, the sciences by which we can map time.

In their light, it seems absurd not to question Scaliger's chronology. In Diacu's eyes, we're on the verge of a historic change, and he regards his book as an attempt to frame the very important questions we're going to have to ask.

"Physics went through this problem," he says. "At the end of the 19th century, an entire revolution came through physics because of Einstein. All the foundations we knew then, we had to change.

Well, if this happens now to history, I don't know — I hope it doesn't, I hope everything is correct, but there is evidence that we have a big problem here ... sooner or later historians will have to answer why many things — scientific things — don't agree with their conclusions."

RICK MCGINNIS/METRO TORONTO

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