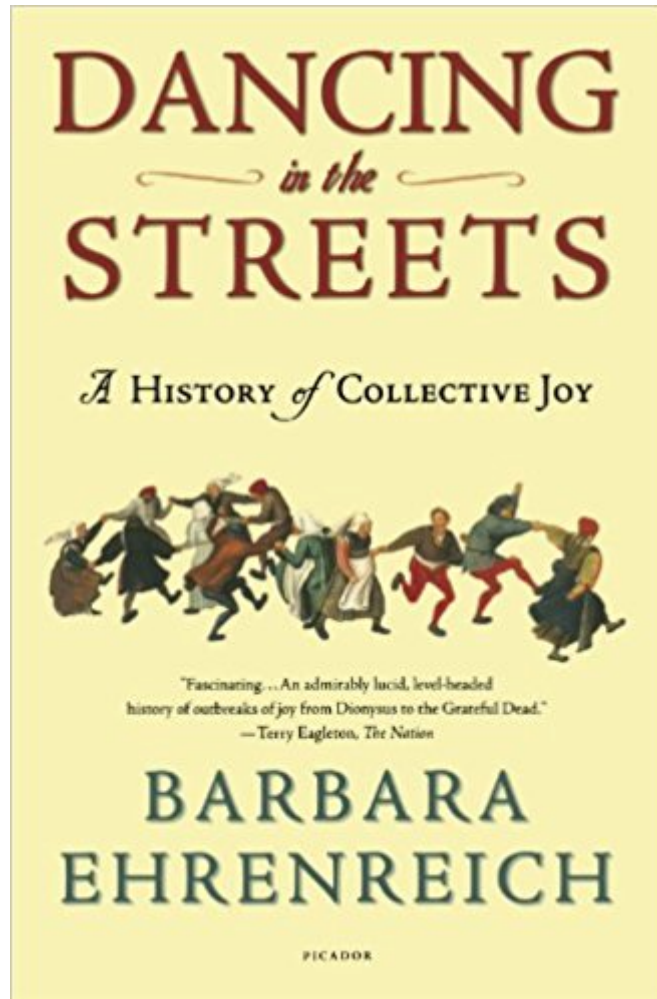


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# Dancing In The Streets: A History Of Collective Joy



## Synopsis

"Fascinating . . . An admirably lucid, level-headed history of outbreaks of joy from Dionysus to the Grateful Dead." •Terry Eagleton, *The Nation* Widely praised as "impressive" (*The Washington Post Book World*), "ambitious" (*The Wall Street Journal*), and "alluring" (*The Los Angeles Times*), *Dancing in the Streets* explores a human impulse that has been so effectively suppressed that we lack even a term for it: the desire for collective joy, historically expressed in revels of feasting, costuming, and dancing. Drawing on a wealth of history and anthropology, Barbara Ehrenreich uncovers the origins of communal celebration in human biology and culture. From the earliest orgiastic Mesopotamian rites to the medieval practice of Christianity as a "danced religion" and the transgressive freedoms of carnival, she demonstrates that mass festivities have long been central to the Western tradition. In recent centuries, this festive tradition has been repressed, cruelly and often bloodily. But as Ehrenreich argues in this original, exhilarating, and ultimately optimistic book, the celebratory impulse is too deeply ingrained in human nature ever to be completely extinguished.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

I listened to the audio version of this book. I found this book to be fascinating and stimulating. As a life-long Roman Catholic, I thought the earlier reviews that decry the author for her 'church bashing' and 'Stalin'-like approaches were rather unfair and unnecessarily ad hominem. The author clearly put a great deal of time and effort into this book (either that, or she has an amazing team of researchers working for her! ;-D). It was fascinating for me to listen as she wove disparate pieces of

information into a beautiful tapestry about the history of collective ecstatic dance in the Western world. (These kinds of books are very difficult to write. If you haven't tried to write a book such as this, I would strongly invite you to do so ... you'll gain a new appreciation for authors such as Ehrenreich who make it look so easy.) I picked this book up because I very appreciated the author's *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America* and *Bait and Switch: The (Futile) Pursuit of the American Dream*. I appreciate the author because she is focusing on issues that, in my opinion, should deeply concern today's Christians, such as the rich becoming richer and the poor becoming poorer. As a mental health professional, I also found her discussion on depression and mental health issues to be very insightful. The person who read the audio book did a wonderful job. I found her voice very easy to listen to.

Good research comes from good questions. Barbara Ehrenreich's book is the result of two excellent questions that she writes are prompted by a sense of loss: "if ecstatic rituals and festivities were once so widespread, why is so little left of them today? If the 'techniques' of ecstasy represent an important part of the human cultural heritage, why have we forgotten them, if indeed we have?" Going chronologically from the stone age cave drawings where the collective experience of dancing and feasting was felt so important as to record it, Ehrenreich sweeps through to present times, to what she calls an age of spectacle and sports. Along the way, Ehrenreich tells you about anthropologists who in the beginning neglected dance altogether and psychologists who are still too busy studying only the depressed individual to take any notice of those of us who experience joy. She takes a long hard look at Calvinism through the immensely troubled life of John Bunyan and tracks the dance mania in the 13-15th century Europe that ended in a crackdown on bodily movement from both Church and State in the 16th century. Ehrenreich cleverly posits this crackdown could very well be linked to the European Depression in the 17th century and she cites evidence in the novels, poetry, and autobiographies of the times. She finds only sporadic outbreaks of collective joy in present times, one such episode emanating from the sixties culture. Coming to this book as a dancer and knowing the joy of dance I interpret Ehrenreich's work as demonstrating the struggle that exists in the physical body when you dance. In other words, to move or not to move.

Barbara Ehrenreich is a writer and thinker involved in the exploration of social phenomenon. She is certainly a political thinker and definitely has a point of view about social phenomena as they impact modern life. She is not an historian or an anthropologist. I'm at a loss to understand the criticism of

this book based on what it never pretends itself to be, a history of dance or an anthropological study of the ecstatic phenomenon. Several people have found it necessary to point out that Barbara Ehrenreich is on the left politically and a product of the 1960s with an "ah hah" mentality that seems to indicate she has somehow tried to hide this, or that it is inherently shameful. Social thinkers who propose changes in the way we currently conduct our lives or our society ALWAYS have ideas which they promote (pejoratively described as biases) because they actively advocate for change. It would be dishonest to attempt to hide them behind a false "objectivity." This kind of false "objectivity" has sapped the life, not only from much that passes for social commentary, but also from investigative journalism, in which the collection of a quote or two from "authorities" on each side of a conflict has replaced the search for the truth about a given situation. It has also led to the false notion that the truth is always located in the middle of the road. Bravo to Barbara Ehrenreich who never hides behind this sort of fakery in her search for the truth as she sees it. She invites readers to join the dance of two minds, the writer's and the reader's, in thinking about topics that engage her own thoughts. Some critics seem to be attacking the fact that her writing is interesting and fun to read. Never fear!

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