

# Holidays in Hell and Other Delights: A Worldbuilding Workshop

By Holly Lisle

*Things get lost on hard drives, and then one day when you're in the middle of hunting for one thing, something else turns up that you forgot you wrote. And this is that – a rediscovered writing workshop I built back in 2006 for my Forward Motion writers in the first writing community I built. Resurrected here for your uses now. – Holly*

You're galloping along on your novel, which is set in Hell. You'd like to develop a bit of Hellish culture, do some solid background and worldbuilding, and give your readers something to think about. You develop your map, your government, your... er... seasons, and finally your calendar.

At which point you pull up short.

You've used a variation of the Gregorian calendar, but reversed it. You still have a December 25th. But obviously your little devils, demons and imps aren't going to be celebrating Christmas.

## **So... what sort of holidays do they celebrate in Hell?**

This all goes to worldbuilding, and the importance of holidays and celebrations to human beings (and by extrapolation, perhaps to aliens and fantasy creatures, too).

Holidays fall into several basic categories:

- Religious

- Civic
- Historical
- Corporate, and
- Odd

**Religious holidays** seem fairly tame on the surface, but dig a bit deeper and the possibilities are endless. Along with such quiet holidays as Christmas and Hanukkah, consider such gory holidays as Aztec sun festivals where sacrifices got their hearts ripped out, and such complex holidays as observances of the births and deaths of saints and martyrs by the sometimes highly-specialized groups who consider themselves watched over by those saints or martyrs.

**Civic holidays** are those declared by governments, for whatever reason. Everything from Labor Day picnics, Presidential birthdays and Western Culture Week to town bicentennials, tank parades through Red Square, and Guy Fawkes Day are civic holidays. Staged riots and protests can be, too, if they're backed by the government, scheduled, planned, and on the public calendar well in advance of their dates.

**Historical holidays** tend to be days of remembrance, and since the things people choose to memorialize in historical holidays tend toward major disasters, these generally aren't a lot of fun. Days commemorating attacks, battles, victories and even defeats and massacres fall into this realm.

**Corporate holidays** are holidays created by interested corporations in order to Sell Stuff. Mother's Day, Father's Day, Secretary's Day, Sweethearts' Day, National Hat Day, International Hula-Hoop Day, and Universal Pepsi- Drinkers' Week are all examples (some fictitious) of corporate holidays.

**And then there are Odd Holidays.** These tend to be local, and have a rich and weird tradition behind them. If your town puts together a celebration each year in which a naked woman rides through town on a horse covered only by her hair while people

stand in the streets purposely not looking at her, just because some chick once did this, you are participating in an Odd Holiday. Ditto voluntarily running through the streets in front of a herd of stampeding bulls, and taking turns jumping naked into frigid water through a hole cut through the ice of a local pond, followed by racing like madmen for the steambath while smacking the snot out of each other with pine boughs.

Odd Holidays have the potential to be ludicrously fun, and all you have to do to create one is make up the story of the guy who did it first, five hundred years earlier.

## **Time to develop the holidays.**

Here are the questions you ask yourself for each type of holiday.

### **Religious:**

*(Go through this question list for each religion in your universe that you decide to use)*

- One god (or anti-god) or more than one? List the gods' names.
- Do the gods have birth or death dates? List relevant dates.
- Do they oversee specific facets of human life, like farming, fishing, housekeeping, childbirth, etc.? List areas of specialization.
- Have they intervened in human affairs in specific instances, either in mythology or in fact? For example, did Smard, God of Lightning, smite the invading, armor-wearing Pettites on the Fifth of Togush? Bet they celebrate Smardstuurm Day.
- What about saints and martyrs? List any of those that interest you, along with their histories and associations.

- Any holidays of other religions that this religion wants to eradicate? Figure out ways that the religion can *absorb these holidays and alter them* to fit its own needs.
- What are the key features of the religion? Deep piety, self-sacrifice, reproduction and expansion of the people, wild and unbridled lust? Some holidays will emphasize ways of encouraging people to participate in these major values.

## **Civic:**

- Who rules the area now? List names. These folks may get their own days.
- Who ruled it in the past? List names. Those still held in favor by the current regime may have their own days.
- Which groups of people are in favor with the current regime? Soldiers, medical personnel, priests, cowboys, hunters, laborers, miners, strippers? Consider holidays for these groups.
- What civic virtues would the current regime like to encourage? Honesty, industriousness, keeping the streets clean, eating more meat, enlisting in the military? Give these desired virtues their own holidays.

## **Historical:**

- What wars have your groups won and lost?
- Name the wars, give them dates, then give them holidays.

*Now think smaller.*

- What significant battles were fought in each of these wars?
- Where were they fought, and who fought them?

- Any special heroes?
- Any special causes?
- Why didn't Helen of Troy get Helensday?

These smaller events will be great for local holidays.

*Now think sideways.*

- Any bizarre, humiliating, or weirdly appalling events in the national past?
- Any attempted overthrows of government that resulted in the would-be usurpers blowing themselves up?
- Any battles lost because the war-elephants came down with horrendous diarrhea on the night before battle? (I confess I can't think of how you'd celebrate a holiday based on this event, but I'd love to find out.)
- Any great terrain discoveries? Where, what, when, and by whom?
- Any famous people whose lives changed their world, either for better or worse? Who were they, when were they born, when did they do their greatest thing, and when did they die?

## **Corporate:**

- What are the major products mined, harvested, raised or manufactured by your people?
- Which of these products are most necessary?
- Which of these products are most profitable?
- Which of these products were seriously overproduced last year, causing falling prices and a need for someone to come up with a new killer app to use them? For example, if you really need to get rid of vast oversupplies of corn before your storage of it causes vast oversupplies of mice, what events could your folks create for National Create-With-Corn Week?

## **Odd:**

What are the weirdest sects, weirdest events, or weirdest people in your chosen area?

List a few of these, and come up with holidays to celebrate their achievements. (If you need help with this one, you need only go as far as the Guinness Book of World Records, Ripley's Believe-It-Or-Not, and reality programs on television for inspiration.)

## **So back to Holidays in Hell.**

I think we have Demon Days, the Impstravganza All-Souls Festival and Bazaar, Torturers' Day, National Temptation Week, Creative-Uses-for-Middle-Managers Month, and The Feast of All Gluttons (where gluttons make up the main course).

And of course, Lucifer Day. Or maybe every day is Lucifer Day in Hell.

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