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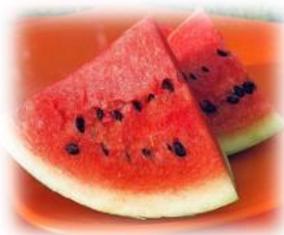
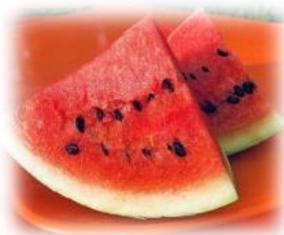
## *Book Notes #113*

August 2022

By Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence  
Dr. Andrew Roth

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### Watermelons!



This is going to be, much to my editors Pat Cuneo, Ben Speggen, and my wife Judy's surprise, a genuinely short **Book Notes**. I'm at Chautauqua Institution this week delivering a series of five lectures on the history and backstories of **American Holidays** for their *Roads Scholars Program*. It's a spin-off from my **The American Tapestry Project** as we continue to seek those things Americans love in common.

One of which is holidays. How many holidays do Americans celebrate? It is not a definitive number, but if I counted correctly at [timeanddate.com](http://timeanddate.com), Americans celebrate 256 holidays! [1] They range from mega-national holidays, like Thanksgiving and Christmas, to state holidays, like Massachusetts' Patriot Day on April 19 memorializing the Battles of Lexington and Concord, to obscure

holidays, like National Wear Red Day on February 4 promoting awareness of the scourge of heart disease. [2]

Holidays come in several buckets. The first two are the distinction between a holiday and an observance. A holiday is officially recognized by either the federal government, a state government, or local government and employees are given the day off. An observance is a date of some consequence, but it is not an official holiday and employees report to work. Holidays and observances come in three buckets: national, state, and local.

What month does not have a national holiday? Admittedly, this is a bit of a trick question because March and April present a conundrum. Technically neither has a national holiday, but for most Americans March 17's St. Patrick's Day has become a virtual national holiday as the "wearing of the green" and downing a pint of stout have become American traditions. Similarly, Easter, the holiest of Christian holidays, has slipped its sectarian moorings and become, with its rabbits, chicks and eggs, and surfeit of chocolate, a celebration of spring's renewal. Since Easter can occur in either March or April, both can claim a national holiday.

No, the only month without a national holiday is August! August does boast several national observances and state holidays and observances. Among the national observances are Purple Heart Day on the 7th, National Senior Citizens Day on the 21st, and Women's Equality Day on the 26th. State holidays and observances range from Barack Obama Day on the 4th (Illinois) to Hawaii Statehood Day on the 19th to Susan B. Anthony Day on the 26th (Massachusetts). August does have several important religious observances, including Tisha B'Av (Jewish), Ashura (Muslim), Raksha Bandhan (Hindu), the Assumption of Mary (Christian, in particular Roman Catholic), and Ganesh Chaturthi (Hindu).

But it does not have an official national holiday. From my vantage point, that is a gap that needs to be closed. I have two contenders: one serious, one whimsical. Given our fractious times, I'm betting on the whimsical as the one most Americans will recognize as "a common object of their love," those things that bind a people into a nation.

First, the serious. Women's Equality Day celebrates the final triumph of the suffragists and the adoption on Aug. 26, 1920 of the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution granting women the right to vote. It was first celebrated in 1971 when Congress passed U.S. Representative Bella Abzug's proposal to recognize the date as part of second wave feminism's drive to increase awareness of the importance of gender equality. It also sought to honor the pioneers of the 19th

century women's rights movement and the suffragettes who had fought for women's right to full participation in American society.

I have explored this issue in multiple **Book Notes**, most recently in the eight-part series "The Seeds of Our Discontents," in presentations about "Freedom's Faultlines: Tales of Race and Gender" as part of my **The American Tapestry Project** at the Jefferson Educational Society and elsewhere, and in multiple segments of my **The American Tapestry Project** podcast on WQLN/NPR.

But I promised to keep this short, so we'll defer a detailed brief for the case for Women's Equality Day as a national holiday for a future **Book Notes**.



My whimsical candidate is Aug. 3's National Watermelon Day.

Did you miss it?

Who doesn't like watermelon? King Tut did. Watermelon seeds were found in his tomb. Watermelons have been cultivated since at least the second millennium B.C. in ancient Egypt. The first recorded watermelon harvest was in Egypt 5,000 years ago. Watermelons first appeared in Africa, then traders took it to Mediterranean countries, Europe, and other parts of the world, including China and Asia by the ninth century. The word first appeared in English in 1615 and the fruit itself comes in more than 300 varieties. [3]

Watermelon trivia: 92 percent of a watermelon is water; there are more than 1,200 varieties of the sugary fruit; 85 percent of watermelons sold today are seedless; the world's heaviest watermelon weighed in at 350.5 pounds; watermelons are Oklahoma's official state vegetable; you can eat the entire watermelon (the rind is actually full of nutrients); watermelon can help prevent cancer because it is an excellent source of the antioxidant lycopene; you can spike a watermelon by cutting a hole in it, inserting a funnel and pouring in vodka; you can create watermelon sculptures; you can have watermelon seed spitting contests, but beware! The record distance for spitting a watermelon seed is an expectoratingly incredible 75 feet by one Jason Schayot. [4]

National Watermelon Day also has its own Facebook page, which can be found [here](#), which, among other things, features a video of the Peoria Zoo's George, a giant Aldabra tortoise, devouring a tasty melon. But National Watermelon Day's promoters have some work to do, as they sport a mere 1,010 followers of whom 1,001 "Like" the page. I wonder, did the other nine opt for cantaloupe?

Who knew?

Double "who knew?" There are also watermelon poems! At *H\*lllo Poetry*, there are pages of them, which can be found [here](#), like one Scott Gunnion submitted in 2018:

*from Watermelon Diet*

It was the watermelon diet, he said  
That's what killed me  
A lie as ripe as the freshest rind  
Listen to the man  
He was there at my deathbed  
Though he never cared for my diet  
It was the watermelon diet  
not some virus  
That consigned me to the Gods ... [5]

The great Chilean poet Pablo Neruda marked his love for the venerable fruit in "Ode to the Watermelon":

*from Ode to the Watermelon*

... the round, magnificent,  
star-filled watermelon.  
It's a fruit from the thirst-tree.  
It's the green whale of the summer.  
The dry universe  
all at once  
given dark stars  
by this firmament of coolness  
lets the swelling  
fruit  
come down:  
its hemispheres open  
showing a flag  
green, white, red,  
that dissolves into

wild rivers, sugar,  
delight!  
Jewel box of water, phlegmatic  
queen  
of the fruitshops,  
warehouse  
of profundity, moon  
on earth! [6]

One could wander and wonder for hours reading watermelon trivia. A simple Google search for “watermelon poems” gets 942,000 “hits” (which, actually, in Google-land is a small number). I promised to keep this short, and in that spirit, I offer my favorite among the tens and tens of dozens of watermelon poems.

Not only is it good, it’s also short. Charles Simic’s:

### Watermelons

Green Buddhas  
On the fruit stand.  
We eat the smile  
And spit out the teeth.

Remember to put it on your calendar for 2023 – Aug. 3 – ***National Watermelon Day: Spitting Allowed!***

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“Watermelon in Ghana” at **Wikicommons** available [here](#) accessed August 1, 2022.  
“Watermelon Garden” at **Wikicommons** available [here](#) accessed August 1, 2022.

### **End Notes**

1. "Holidays and Observances in United States in 2022" at [timeanddate.com](http://timeanddate.com) available [here](#) accessed August 1, 2022.
2. Ibid.
3. These and other watermelon factoids in this **Book Note** are from "National Watermelon Day – August 3, 2022" at **National Today** available [here](#) accessed August 1, 2022.
4. Ibid.
5. Gunnion, Scott. "Watermelon Diet" at **H\*llo Poetry.com** available [here](#) accessed August 1, 2022.
6. Neruda, Pablo. "Ode to the Watermelon" at **Silver Birch Press** available [here](#) accessed August 1, 2022.
7. Simic, Charles. "Watermelons" at **Academy of American Poets** available [here](#) accessed August 1, 2022.

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