

Saving the Daylights Out of Saving Daylight

MICHAEL MARTONE

Once, in the middle of a fall night, I was riding the *Broadway Limited* west from New York to Fort Wayne when the train came to a squeaking, creaking halt in the middle of an Ohio cornfield. Such delays are not all that unusual on Amtrak, which runs its routes over private rails. Passenger trains are often shunted off to a siding to give the proprietor freight the right-of-way. But this pause was different. Tonight the country's time was falling back; time zone after time zone, time was turning back time. This wrought havoc with the train's schedule. If we didn't stop, we'd actually arrive early at the next station. We had to let the schedule catch up. I stood looking out over the Dutch door in the vestibule between cars. Cornfields everywhere. All over the country, trains waited, panting, stopped in their tracks. Out of time, I waited for the hour to overtake us all, slamming by us, expedited, a true "Limited"—tracks cleared, high-balling west.

Michael Downing, in his remarkable book *Spring Forward*, mentions this phenomenon of stalled trains along with many other skewed consequences, strange and stranger, of what he calls *The Annual Madness of Daylight Saving Time*.¹ His is an admirable popular history of mass hysteria in a class with Michael Pollan's deciphering of the Tulip

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¹Michael Downing, *Spring Forward: The Annual Madness of Daylight Saving Time* (Washington, D.C.: Shoemaker and Hoard, 2005. Pp. xiv, 202. Bibliographical references, index. \$23.00).

Madness in *The Botany of Desire* (2001) or Marvin Harris's materialist decoding of the Potlatch in *Cows, Pigs, Wars, and Witches* (1989). Not quite a *Wisconsin Death Trip* (1973), *Spring Forward* does however shake its head at the long strange journey taken by "time" and at the strange manifestation of both its pastness and its futureness—not simply figuratively but quite literally, in a persistent residue and befuddled ritual, in our apparently adjustable present midst.

On another train, at another time. It was New Year's Eve and I was heading west. The passengers on my coach roused themselves at midnight to sing "Auld Lang Syne," a synchronized celebration with the ball dropping in Times Square, not far from the terminus from which we had departed. There was improvised confetti, pitiful horns, splits of champagne, opportunistic kissing. We chugged through the night, crossing, in the dark, some line of demarcation. Once in Indiana we resumed our initial places, and waited for the year to end again. There was another countdown. The singing started up on cue as the engine's Doppler horn yodeled. The confetti defied gravity. The bubbles found their way back into the champagne. Brand new kisses were minted out of the ones recently scrapped.

The drama of *Spring Forward* lies between two notions of time: the one connected to the motion of the planet, the other to the machines and schemes that regulate it in theory. It is the disconnection of the first from the second that Mr. Downing stages here with great precision. He is particularly adept at constructing the narrative of this conflict from the arguments of governmental hearing rooms and the daily decaying "news" of newspapers. All of these embedded stories boil down to the same conclusion: The more daylight saving time is studied the more confusing it becomes to its students. The contemplation of time seems to infect everyone with this special malaise. All seem helpless, hapless before the inevitability of this idea whose time has, well, come and keeps coming.

The book, of course, is itself trapped in a kind of time. Any book has an existential imperative of beginning, middle, and end, and this one flows that way, too, starting at the beginning and moving through its time as if on rails. It was the railroads (having unleashed a machine that, in fact, traveled faster than time) that standardized time in the first place. This story is, of course, covered here. A plaque affixed to the side of a building in Chicago marks the site where time was, well, fixed by fiat, fitted out as another Midnight Special, its own locomotive. No

accident, then, that Einstein himself dispatched an animated example of an engine to tame the wild notions of relativity. This book, but not just this book, is stuck in its own irresistible progressions of time, its free-floating forwardness. Forward! Perhaps backwards. But rarely repetitious, and never simultaneous. One word after the other. Alas, our time-honored timely timed madness wired, now, into us.

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