

SANT JORDI

Those of you who are here today and don't come from our part of the world are probably curious about the origins of Sant Jordi's day. For us, natives of Catalonia and speakers of its many centuries old language, Catalan, April 23th is as meaningful as the 4th of July or Valentine's day. First, a word about the hero himself, Sant Jordi or Saint George. We don't know for sure if he existed, but we know that he did an invaluable service to our people, nonetheless.

We trace him to the middle ages, when the Arabs occupied Catalonia for a brief period of time. According to tradition, after a coalition of Catalan and French troupes under King Charlemagne forced them out of our territory, the Arabs in revenge released a dragon in one of its rivers. The dragons eventually settled in a cave and demanded an annual tribute in the form of a maiden. Jordi was a young knight that came to the rescue of one of these maidens, who happened to be a princess. You'll find the familiar scene in a number of medieval paintings, not all of them Spanish, portraying a more or less ferocious dragon cowering before the knight's spear and a grateful and graceful princess beaming at him. In some variations of the theme the dragon metamorphoses into a giant spider, always standing for irrational powers defeated by those of light.

In 1904 Pere I (Peter the 1rst), king of Aragon and Catalonia, marked a victory in battle by naming Sant Jordi the patron of Catalan knights. In the XVth century Sant Jordi became the patron of all Catalonia. The legend doesn't dwell on how he rose from knighthood to sainthood, and we won't either.

April 23rd became his designated day and, given the prominent place books enjoy in Catalan culture, it also became Book Day. Over the years, somebody thought this was a neat idea and promoted April 23rd to International Book Day. I knew the date is more than symbolic when, not long ago, I was explaining it to a student from Malasia. "Oh, sure!" he said, "it was a big deal in my school back home; we always exchanged gift books."

Nature contributes to the celebration by producing flowers at this time of the year, hence the tradition of the rose. So, if you walk the streets of a Catalan city on this day you'll see people of all ages buying and carrying books and roses, very much as you see here today, plus authors shaking hands with their readers and signing books at their tables. Originally, men and women gave or received books and roses across gender lines: books for men, roses for women. As you can imagine, these stipulations have been overruled by recent generations to the greater joy and profit of business that

sell both books and roses to a huge number of customers, regardless of sex. On Sant Jordi's day more books are sold in Catalonia than in the entire rest of the year.

Other reasons conspire to select this date to honor the book around the world. Miguel de Cervantes and William Shakespeare died on April 23rd of the same year, and a couple of centuries later, one of the greatest Catalan writers, Josep Pla, also chose April 23rd to make his departure. What more patrons do we need?