

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/23/books/natalie-zemon-davis-dead.html>

Source: New York Times, 23 October 2023

Natalie Zemon Davis, Historian of the Marginalized, Dies at 94

She wrote of peasants, unsung women, border crossers and, most popularly, Martin Guerre, a 16th-century village impostor recalled in a 1980s movie.



Natalie Zemon Davis in 1991. She injected informed speculations in her books. “What I offer you here is in part my invention,” she wrote in one, “but held tightly in check by the voices of the past.”Credit...Frédéric Reglain/Gamma-Rapho, via Getty Images

By Elsa Dixler

Oct. 23, 2023

Natalie Zemon Davis, a social and cultural historian whose imaginative and deeply researched investigations of the lives of marginalized figures — peasants, long-forgotten women, border crossers of all sorts — profoundly influenced the discipline, died on Saturday at her home in Toronto. She was 94.

The cause was cancer, Aaron Davis, her son, said.

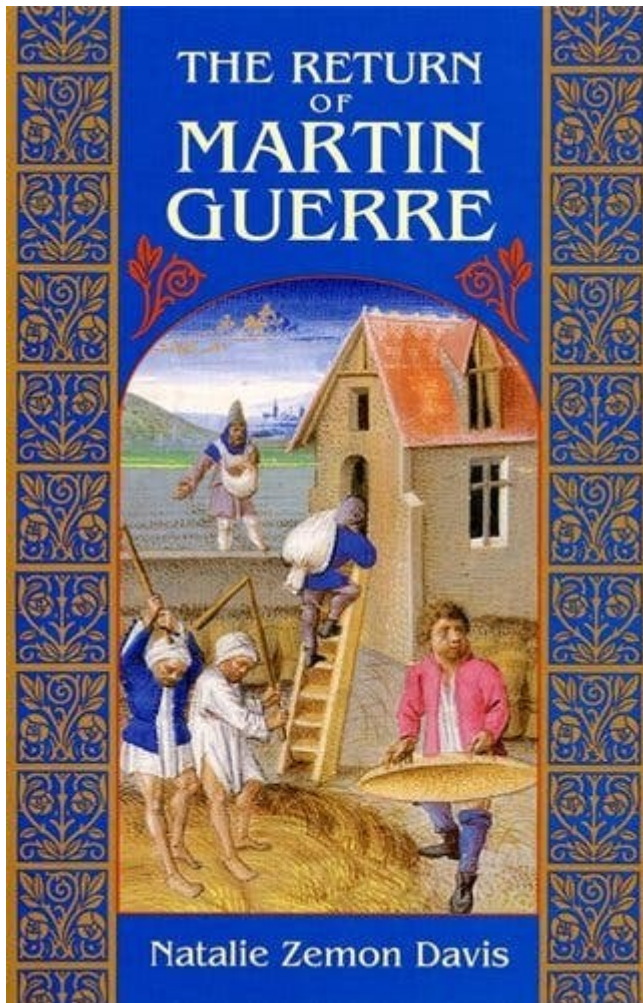
Drawing on insights from anthropology and literary criticism, as well as meticulous archival digging, Professor Davis both represented and inspired an emerging approach to history in the second half of the 20th century, often by filling in gaps in the historical record with informed speculations based on deep immersion in the period under study.

Her best-known book was “The Return of Martin Guerre” (1983), based on the tale of a 16th-century peasant in Languedoc, France, who for several years successfully impersonated a man from a rural village who had abandoned his family.

Her book was a kind of follow-up to a 1982 movie by the same title, which was directed by Daniel Vigne and starred Gérard Depardieu and Nathalie Baye. Professor Davis, who had published a groundbreaking collection of essays, “Society and Culture in Early Modern France” (1975), was the historical adviser to Mr. Vigne and the screenwriter Jean-Claude Carrière while they were working on the film.

But with the release of “Le Retour de Martin Guerre” in theaters in France and elsewhere (it had its U.S. premiere in 1983), Professor Davis recognized that the movie could not convey the nuances of the story and so decided to give “this arresting tale,” as she put it in a preface to the book, “its first full-scale historical treatment, using every scrap of paper left me by the past.”

Image



Professor Davis's "The Return of Martin Guerre" is based on the tale of a 16th-century peasant in Languedoc, France, who successfully impersonated a man from a rural village who had abandoned his family. Credit...Harvard University Press

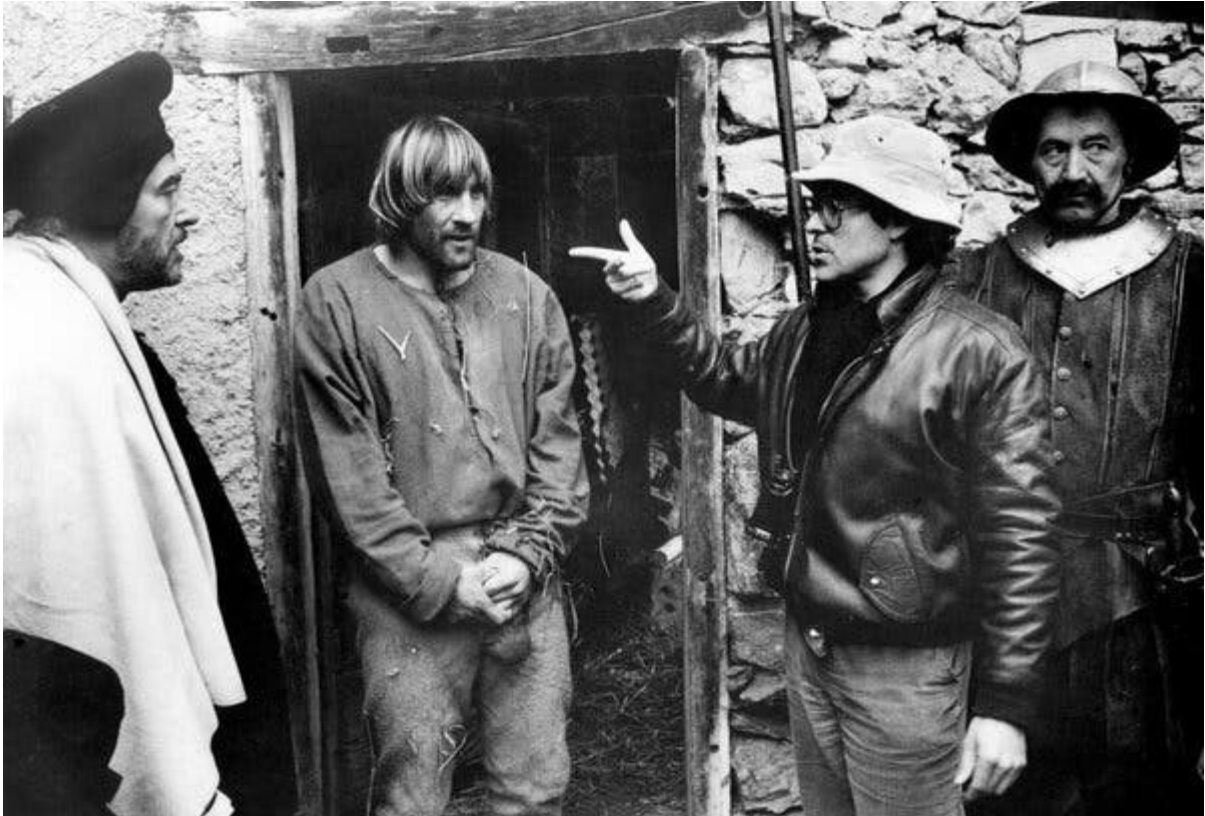
The book was warmly received. In The New York Review of Books, the French historian Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie called it a "major work of historical reconstruction."

Most earlier accounts focused on Arnaud du Tilh, the Gascon peasant who passed himself off as Martin Guerre. Those accounts assumed that Guerre's abandoned wife, Bertrande de Rols, had been fooled by the false Martin. They made Arnaud du Tilh "the inventive figure in the tale," Professor Davis wrote.

For her, though, Bertrande was central to the story. "By the time she had received him in her bed," Professor Davis wrote of the impostor, "she must have realized the difference." Bertrande, in Professor Davis's telling, "knew the truth" and colluded in the masquerade until it became impossible to sustain.

In the book's introduction, Professor Davis wrote that "what I offer you here is in part my invention, but held tightly in check by the voices of the past."

Image

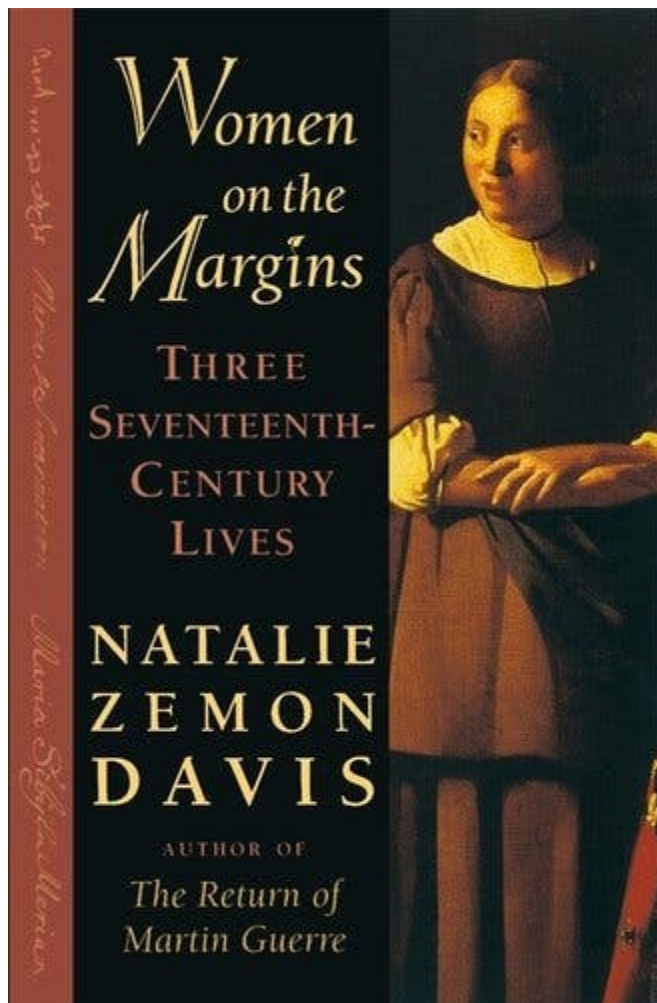


A scene from the 1982 movie “The Return of Martin Guerre,” starring Gérard Depardieu (in the doorway). The director, Daniel Vigne, is second from right. Professor Davis was the film’s historical adviser. Credit...European International, via Everett Collection

Her next book, “Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and Their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France” (1987), examined stories that common people accused of homicide told in order to secure a pardon from the king. After 1990, her work embraced outsiders and border-crossers around the world.

“Women on the Margins” (1995) presented the lives of three 17th-century women of different religions — Judaism, Roman Catholicism and Protestantism — who came from different regions: Germany, Canada and Suriname. In *The New York Times Book Review*, the historian [Arthur Quinn](#) called the book “a stylishly sketched 17th- and 18th-century biographical triptych” that was “yet another exploration of how the modest in early modern Europe strove to fashion identities for themselves.”

Professor Davis published two books in 2000. “The Gift in Sixteenth-Century France” is an anthropological look at how gift-giving and reciprocal obligation helped structure society, and “Slaves on Screen” examined the portrayal of slavery, and resistance to it, in five movies, from “Spartacus” (1960), set in ancient Rome, to “Beloved” (1980), an adaptation of the Toni Morrison novel rooted in the American South. Professor Davis said history films offered “thought experiments” about the past, but she criticized their use of fictions that misled viewers.



Professor Davis's 1995 book presented the lives of three 17th-century women of different religions — Judaism, Roman Catholicism and Protestantism — who came from different regions: Germany, Canada and Suriname. Credit...Harvard University Press

After 2001, Professor Davis turned her attention to researching a 16th-century diplomat for the sultan of Fez, al-Hasan al-Wazzan al-Gharnati al-Fasi, who was kidnapped by Christian pirates in 1518 and taken to Rome. He converted to Christianity and lived there for nine years, writing books for Europeans in Italian and Latin about North Africa and Islam, most familiarly under the name Leo Africanus. He was best known as the author of the first geography of Africa published in Europe, in 1550.

Her resulting book, "Trickster Travels: A Sixteenth-Century Muslim Between Worlds," was published in 2006.

Africanus, Professor Davis said, had a "double identity and vision, a Muslim curious about Christianity, a North African interested in exploring the world of Rome and Italy." But hard documentation about him was sparse; to figure him out, she said, she had to develop "a plausible life story from materials of the time." As she had in the case of Martin Guerre, she speculated about Africanus's behavior based on the practices in the world from which he came.

Natalie Zemon was born in Detroit on Nov. 8, 1928, to Julian and Helen (Lamport) Zemon, both American-born children of Eastern European Jewish immigrants. Her father worked in

the textile business, and her mother was a homemaker. Natalie was one of only a few Jews at Cranbrook Kingswood, a girls' finishing school in Bloomfield Hills, Mich. Although she was popular and successful there, she felt like an outsider, by her account.

Enrolling at Smith College in Massachusetts, she became involved in left-wing politics, participating in a Marxist study group and protesting racial discrimination. In 1948, she met Chandler Davis, a mathematics graduate student. They married six weeks later. After pursuing studies in social and cultural history, Ms. Davis graduated from Smith with a bachelor's degree in 1949 and pursued a master's at Radcliffe, where she was exposed to the research techniques of social history.

She worked on her doctorate at the University of Michigan after her husband was offered a job there in 1950. But after he was held on charges of distributing Communist literature, the government seized their passports in 1952, preventing her for a time from going to France to pursue her chosen area of concentration, 16th-century French society.

In 1954, after refusing to answer questions before the House Un-American Activities Committee on First Amendment grounds, Mr. Davis was cited for contempt. He was fired by Michigan and blacklisted. Afterward, the couple, who by then had three children, eked out a living through part-time teaching and journal editing. Professor Davis did not receive her Ph.D. until 1959.

Her career, like those of most academic women of her generation, was shaped in part, and stalled, by her husband's. She and her family moved again, in 1962, when Mr. Davis obtained a teaching job at the University of Toronto.

But while teaching part-time, she continued her research, publishing the results in essays and papers and presenting her work at conferences. ("Sometimes I typed with a child on my lap," she said.) She held a [faculty position](#) at Toronto from 1963 to 1971.

In 1971, she and a colleague, [Jill Ker Conway](#), shook up Toronto's conservative history department by teaching a course on the history of women and gender, one of the first in North America. (Dr. Conway went on to become the first woman to be named president of Smith College.)



President Barack Obama presented Professor Davis with the National Humanities Medal at the White House in 2013. Credit...Pete Marovich/Getty Images

That same year, at 42, Professor Davis landed her first tenure-track teaching post, at the University of California, Berkeley; she was the first woman in the university's history department. Four years later, she published her first book, "Society and Culture in Early Modern France." This strikingly original collection of essays reflected her "remarkable breadth of learning," one reviewer wrote.

Professor Davis moved to Princeton in 1978 and stayed for 18 years, succeeding Lawrence Stone as director of the [Shelby Cullom Davis Center for Historical Studies](#). In 1996, she retired as the Henry Charles Lea professor of history. She had helped found women's studies programs at both Princeton and Berkeley.

Returning to Canada, she was named a professor emerita in the University of Toronto's history department.

Professor Davis became president of the American Historical Association in 1987, only the second woman to hold that position. She was made a Companion of the Order of Canada in 2012 and was presented with the 2012 National Humanities Medal by President Barack Obama.

Chandler Davis [died](#) of a stroke last year. In addition to her son, Professor Davis is survived two daughters, Hannah Taïeb and Simone Davis; a brother, Stanley Zemon; four grandchildren; and three great-grandchildren.

Professor Davis was a charismatic teacher well loved in the profession. “At conferences and round tables, Dr. Davis is usually the most senior and well-known face in the room,” an article about her in a University of Toronto magazine said, “yet she’ll often pull aside grad students to ask about their work — and how they’re juggling it with family.”

In a speech to the American Council of Learned Societies, Professor Davis told of how her years of study had given her confidence in the resilience and adaptability of societies.

“No matter how bleak and constrained the situation,” she said, “some forms of improvisation and coping take place. No matter what happens, people go on telling stories about it and bequeath them to the future.” She added, “The past reminds us that change can occur.”

Alex Traub contributed reporting.