

Interview with Kenneth C. Davis, author of *America's Hidden History: Untold Tales of the First Pilgrims, Fighting Women and Forgotten Founders Who Shaped a Nation*

Q: Why isn't this new book in your Don't Know Much About series?

A: Some people might think I'm a fool for tampering with success. But I felt that it was time to extend myself as a writer and tell stories in more detail and complexity than I have been able to do in the shorter, question-and-answer format of the Don't Know Much About series. For nearly 20 years, I've been working in familiar—call it 'safe'—territory. A few years ago, I found myself yearning for the challenge of telling longer, very important stories as dramatic narratives. It's part of that grand American notion of 'setting out for the territories'—heading for the unexplored.

Q: How did you pick the stories?

A: These six stories cover a broad range of our history, spanning from the Spanish exploration in the mid-16th century to George Washington's inauguration in 1789. What they have in common is that they are stories the textbooks left out. In some ways, these stories found me—like lucky accidents. When I set out, I knew I wanted to write about a certain period, and I began, as I always do, by following my curiosity. For instance, I had long been fascinated by the largely untold tale of a Spanish explorer named Cabeza de Vaca who was the first man to go from one end of North America to the other. When I was in Florida, where Cabeza began his epic journey, I literally stumbled across Fort Matanzas and the story of the real first Pilgrims in America. They were, in fact, French Huguenots who were massacred by the Spanish in 1565. I had never heard this story and it was compelling on so many levels—religious wars, European contact with the Indians, and the untold story of the Spanish in America.

Q: Is this what you mean by 'Hidden History?'

A: It is a perfect example, in many ways. Just as Fort Matanzas is an obscure spot off the beaten tourist path in Florida, many stories have been hidden away from us, but are really crucial to understanding how America came into existence. In part, these episodes have been 'untold' because they are messy and brutal. They don't fit the tidy, schoolbook history served up to us when we were children.

For instance, in my second chapter I write about three extraordinary women in Puritan Massachusetts whose lives offer a much different picture of the Puritan past than the Thanksgiving idyll familiar to most Americans—of the Pilgrims sitting down for a 'happy meal' with the Indians. Most of us didn't hear about the Massachusetts mother who took 10 scalps and became America's most famous woman. But Hannah Dustin's exploits speak volumes about the dangers of life in colonial New England in the 18th century.



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Q: Why is so much of our history ‘hidden?’

A: The chief reason is simple—the winners write the history books. And so the saga of the Spanish in America has been largely ignored. Growing up, we all received the Anglo-American winner’s version that begins with Jamestown.

And then there is the embarrassment factor. Some stories are hidden the way the crazy relative gets hidden in the family photo album. It’s easier to ignore Benedict Arnold’s heroic exploits than explain how a hero became a villain. Or to bury the fact that the young George Washington disobeyed orders and started a world war. What we end up with is the ‘Great Myth’ which is so much less tantalizing than the warts-and-all truth.

Q: Would you say, then, that your research yielded lots of surprises?

A: I can honestly say that every single chapter contains events that surprised me. The fact that Protestants seeking religious freedom came to America and established a successful settlement half a century before the Mayflower Pilgrims sailed was certainly a surprise. That these French settlers were murdered because they were Protestants—and for that reason alone—surprised me. Some of the surprises are about obscure people, like Dr. Joseph Warren—a compelling patriot hero completely missing from the rote version of the Revolution. Others explore familiar people like Benedict Arnold, the simplistic villain of my schoolbooks—a complex man who in other circumstances would have been a hero with statues in his honor. This is the great thing about getting behind the headlines of history. There are so many rich, complex—call them surprising—stories and people that we should really know. I have tried to bring these ‘ah-ha’ moments to life in this book.

Q: Why do you say these stories shaped the nation?

A: We are all familiar with the phrase ‘turning points in history’. Each of the stories in this book are turning points—I call them ‘fulcrum moments’—in their own way. But for many reasons they were largely overlooked. If a headstrong 22-year-old George Washington had been strung up by the French at Fort Mifflin, how would that have changed history? If a British plan to assassinate three of Boston’s most prominent patriots in 1775 had succeeded, would there have been a revolution? When a few thousand dissident farmers and veterans of the revolution rebelled in western Massachusetts in the 1780s, it completely altered American history. We might not have a Constitution without that crisis.



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Q: What do you ultimately hope to accomplish with this book?

A: What I've tried to do is something very simple. I want to get people to question the easy assumptions we often have about American history. And I want to do that by emphasizing the real stories of real people, some famous and familiar, others completely unknown to many Americans, the 'Human Factor' usually ignored by textbooks as they focus on dates, battles, and court decisions. The real history of America is sometimes vicious, cruel, murderous, and far from noble. But the bottom line is that, like most writers, whether historians or novelists, I want to get at the truth. That's what really counts.

And the other key point I have always tried to make in my books is that these stories matter today. We look back and see how blood shed over beliefs played a determining role in shaping the country. What story is more important in our time? This after all, is the real point of studying history in the first place.

Q: You aren't a trained historian. Where did you get your passion for history?

A: Maybe the passion comes from not being a trained historian. When I was five years old and my father was teaching me to swim in Lake Champlain, I am sure he didn't think I would be writing history books about what happened on that lake. But what began as family camping trips to places like Fort Ticonderoga and Valley Forge gave that young boy a lasting sense that history doesn't just happen in books. It happens to real people in real places. I have always felt a connection to these places and to the people who made history there. If I am lucky and have done my job right, my excitement will radiate out and we won't continue to see those painful surveys showing how ignorant we are about our nation's past. The American mind will open just a little wider.

Joseph Conrad once wrote about providing what he called "that glimpse of truth for which you've forgotten to ask." That idea drives my passion as a writer. Of course, the bonus here is that truth is fascinating. As I wrote nearly 20 years ago, when I was working on *Don't Know Much About History*, the truth is so much more interesting than the historical tummy tuck and makeover we got in our school books.

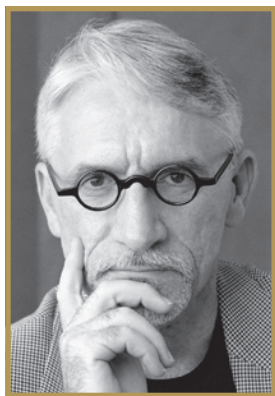


Photo by Nina Subin

Kenneth C. Davis is the bestselling author of *Don't Know Much About History*, which spent 35 consecutive weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list, sold nearly 1.5 million copies, and gave rise to his phenomenal Don't Know Much About® series for children and adults. A contributor to NPR's "All Things Considered", Davis appears frequently in the media, has spoken at the Smithsonian Museum and American Museum of Natural History, and has written for the *New York Times* and *Newsday*, among other publications. He lives in New York City and Dorset, VT.