



Kenneth C. Davis

Don't Know Much About History
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An Interview with Kenneth C. Davis

Q: The original edition of *Don't Know Much About History* has sold more than 1.3 million copies. To what do you attribute its success?

A: First of all nobody was more surprised by that success than me. There has been an assumption that we all hate history, probably because all the surveys keep telling us that. But the simple fact is that people really do love history. They just hate the dull, watered-down version they were forced to learn in school. For 13 years, I have been talking to people around the country about history and I

discovered that the appetite for learning and information is huge. We just don't want it the way it was back in Mrs. Smith's American History 101 — memorizing a few dates, reading textbooks, and burping it all back for a test on Friday. So the secret to this success was simple: "If you build it, they will come." Just tell people about history in a way that is lively, meaningful, fun, relevant and most important, human, and they will listen. Work with people's natural curiosity instead of destroying it with myths, lies and tedium.

Q: Is your format similar to the "Dummy" and "Idiot" books?

A: I never really read one, so I'm not sure. But I guess the key difference is that I don't think my readers are dummies or idiots — they are curious people like me who feel that they were cheated by the educational system and want to catch up. They just don't want to sit through a long semester and take pop quizzes anymore. I think they are intelligent people with a curiosity who feel they got gipped in school. So I don't "dumb down" answers. I try to have fun while still informing. It's an approach that works for history haters and history buffs alike. But I think we may all be plowing the same field, which is the hunger for information. I think my formula is simple and possibly unique. I ask questions — occasionally offbeat and irreverent ones — and try to answer with humor and humanity in a few pages, rather than in dissertation length responses. And I love to add the voices of the real people of the period so we can hear history for ourselves.

Q: What's new in this revision of *Don't Know Much About History*? And how did you actually go about doing the revision?

A: I am a serious news junkie and article clipper. Over the past 13 years, I spent a lot of time compiling files of news articles relating to history questions, and organizing them with any eye toward an update. So in a sense, the research has been ongoing, almost since the book was first published in 1990. When I actually sat down to write, it took a bit more than a year to pull it all together. I honestly did not anticipate that I would practically add half a book! But that's how it turned out. The new edition is nearly 50 percent larger than the original; and it only costs two dollars more. Quite a bargain!

As to what is new, there is the obvious. I bring the book up to date on the major events that have taken place since the late 1980s. Since that includes the Reagan Presidency, the end of Communism and the Cold War, 20 years of AIDS in America, the first Gulf War, the Clinton years — including his impeachment — the elevation of Alan Greenspan to mythic heights, and the most bizarre presidential election in more than a century — that covers an awful lot of territory.

In addition, there are updates and revisions to the earlier history that have been brought about by new scientific discoveries, like the DNA test done on descendants of Thomas Jefferson suggesting he was the father of slaves. And archeological discoveries, like the dig that uncovered the original fort at Jamestown. Or major discoveries about the first people to arrive in America: It also means correcting the media distortions, whether from the pop culture like Disney's Pocahontas or Oliver Stone's JFK, or from the news media: For example, most people now probably believe that J. Edgar Hoover was a cross dresser. In fact, that was an unsubstantiated claim by a paid informant. We do know a lot about Hoover and his abuses of power, but that gets overshadowed by the question of whether Hoover wore pumps or strappy heels. So the tabloid headline sticks in the popular mind, but it takes away from the more serious questions of abuse by the FBI, a very important issue these days as we are in the midst of this anti-terror campaign.

This revision also reflects the tremendous reader and listener response I have had over the years. In many cases, I have added specific questions people have asked me like, "Why is there a statue of Benedict Arnold's Boot?" There is also tremendous fascination in questions about religion in America, so I delved more deeply into that aspect of our Founding Fathers.

And finally, I have always tried to give a voice to the voiceless, the people we didn't always hear about. So there is even more about the history of blacks, women and American Indians in this edition — to address the grievous oversights of the past. We should all know about the Race Riots in Tulsa, Oklahoma that left some 300 people dead. And we should remember what a huge part of history Muhammad Ali was when he opposed the Vietnam War back in 1967. Those are moments that need more of a spotlight. I've tried to shine that light in some unusual spots.

Q: Your books have a reputation for busting myths and for taking a household name approach to the subject. Does that approach hold true in this revision?

A: Those are two key ways I think you get and keep people interested in history. We all have these myths or common assumptions that we grew up with. To me, it is always fascinating to burst them, to look behind the glossy makeover to see the warts-and-all story. I find that the truth is always more interesting than the myth.

The real George Washington, a young math whiz who loved to count windowpanes, is a lot more interesting than the mythical ax-wielding cherry tree killer. Or the Hollywood myth of the American Indian that I grew up with. When you truly learn about Sitting Bull — how he was a spiritual leader whose concern was for his people, you see him in the same light as a Washington. It is transforming. That is one reason I chose to start my new children's biography series with a book about Washington and another about Sitting Bull.

As for household words, I feel that this goes to the heart of people's desire to learn. There are so many names and phrases we consider important, but we don't know why. Their essential meaning gets forgotten — Mayflower, Gettysburg, Reconstruction, Great Depression, D-Day, Watergate, Cold War. We hear them all the time, but they are just words to many people who are unclear about where they came from and why they matter. My books offer a quick, fun, accessible refresher course, so you can read those words in the newspaper or hear about them on television and know what is being discussed.

Q: What do you consider the most significant developments in recent history? And what were the most significant aspects of the revision?

A: As a child of the Fifties and Sixties, the first part is easy for me. The end of the Cold War and Communism. Since World War II, there has been almost no aspect of American life, policy or history that wasn't affected by the superpower rivalry between the U.S. and Soviet Union. And then like that, it was gone.

To me, one of the most astonishing additions to the book comes at the end of the section about Reagan, when I quote Colin Powell as a "Voice." He says, "The world is quiet today, Mr. President." And then I note that Russia was allowed to join NATO as a non-voting member.

Fifty years of international strife that had us on the brink of world destruction simply wiped clean! As a historian, I wonder how that 50 year Cold War period will be viewed someday. Maybe just a footnote!

But you can take almost any period in American History and see that there have been remarkable discoveries during the past 20 years. For instance, we keep uncovering White House tapes other than the infamous Nixon tapes. We learn that LBJ was clearly aware that Vietnam was a huge mess, but he didn't see any way out of it. Kennedy's dream of the Moon landing was primarily aimed at beating the Soviets rather than the pure challenge of conquering space. And of course, there is Jefferson's DNA: Now, while it has been reported that Jefferson was the father of children by his slave Sally Hemings, that fact is not indisputable. Several other Jefferson males of that period could have been the father. That points up the problem with how the media reports these things.

Q: If I read the original *Don't Know Much About History*, why should I get the new updated version?

A: Well, your copy is probably dog-eared and messy by now, so you get a nice, fresh clean one. Seriously, there is so much new information, not only about the recent past but about the other periods in American History, that it is almost a completely new book. If you liked the first book, I think you'll like this even more. More Voices, more insights into extraordinary people, more stories of real people doing remarkable things, whether they are heroic like Jackie Robinson braving death threats to take the baseball field, or villainous like Benedict Arnold turning his back on his country because of an overbaked ego and an overly ambitious young wife.

Q: Finally, you're not a "trained historian" and you didn't even finish college. What qualifies you to write the book?

A: I'd argue that not being a trained historian is an advantage! A good part of our problem has come from the academics — the professors and historians — who like to write for and talk to each other and leave the rest of us out of the conversation. They get caught up in the fine points and often lose the proverbial forest, not even for the trees, but for the acorns scattered on the forest floor.

I approached these books as a curious person, as a lover of research, and as a journalist writing for a general interest newspaper or magazine. I want to inform and educate my readers — not impress my colleagues.

As for a degree, I think curiosity and passion and a bit of missionary zeal to inform and educate count for a lot more than a degree. So I join that long list of Americans who bypassed college, starting with Washington and Lincoln and a whole host of others.

Of course, like many a father, now that my children are college-aged, I tell them, "Do as I say, not as I did."