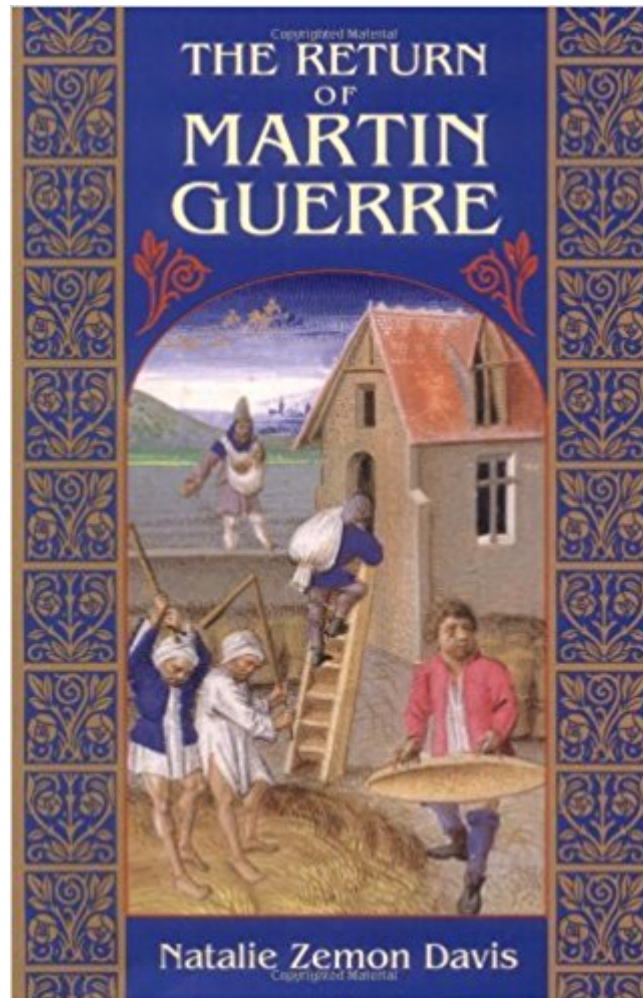




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# The Return Of Martin Guerre



## Synopsis

The Inventive Peasant Arnaud du Tilh had almost persuaded the learned judges at the Parlement of Toulouse, when on a summer's day in 1560 a man swaggered into the court on a wooden leg, denounced Arnaud, and reestablished his claim to the identity, property, and wife of Martin Guerre. The astonishing case captured the imagination of the Continent. Told and retold over the centuries, the story of Martin Guerre became a legend, still remembered in the Pyrenean village where the impostor was executed more than 400 years ago. Now a noted historian, who served as consultant for a new French film on Martin Guerre, has searched archives and lawbooks to add new dimensions to a tale already abundant in mysteries: we are led to ponder how a common man could become an impostor in the sixteenth century, why Bertrande de Rols, an honorable peasant woman, would accept such a man as her husband, and why lawyers, poets, and men of letters like Montaigne became so fascinated with the episode. Natalie Zemon Davis reconstructs the lives of ordinary people, in a sparkling way that reveals the hidden attachments and sensibilities of nonliterate sixteenth-century villagers. Here we see men and women trying to fashion their identities within a world of traditional ideas about property and family and of changing ideas about religion. We learn what happens when common people get involved in the workings of the criminal courts in the ancien régime, and how judges struggle to decide who a man was in the days before fingerprints and photographs. We sense the secret affinity between the eloquent men of law and the honey-tongued village impostor, a rare identification across class lines. Deftly written to please both the general public and specialists, *The Return of Martin Guerre* will interest those who want to know more about ordinary families and especially women of the past, and about the creation of literary legends. It is also a remarkable psychological narrative about where self-fashioning stops and lying begins.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

A fascinating reconstruction of a famous incident of impostorship and love in sixteenth-century rural France. Davis delicately deploys historical fact to suggest what is singular about the modern individual. (Todd Gitlin *The Nation*) In her intelligent and subtle analysis, the story gives an inside view of an otherwise little-known world, the private lives of peasants... Natalie Davis has also collaborated on an excellent film of the story (produced in France) as well as writing this book... About *Martin Guerre*, I would say, without hesitation, the movie was great, but Natalie Davis's book is even greater. (Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie *New York Review of Books*) Davis combines a veteran researcher's expertise with a lay reader's curiosity and an easygoing style. She draws on sophisticated... work in land tenure, legal rights, and demography to reinterpret a 'prodigious history' among the French peasantry... Davis's book combines ingredients essential to good social history--painstaking historical research and a vividly empathetic imagination. The result of this happy combination is that character emerges in context... Davis's book balances possibility and constraint, character and situation. It puts people back into history but doesn't take the social and political forces out of it. The universal is there in particular, and it makes you think not only about their choices then, but about ours now. (Pat Aufderheide *Voice Literary Supplement*) A fascinating anecdote, with enough colorful background, psychological complexity, and unsolved mysteries to delight any intelligent audience. (Kirkus Reviews) Natalie Zemon Davis... has scoured the legal and notarial records of south-western France to recreate for the reader not merely a highly entertaining story but a vivid picture of the world which fashioned its principal characters. Her observations on property rights, inheritance, customs, family relationships and the mechanisms of the law are welded together by a rare blend of historical craft and imagination... Professor Davis's ability to combine lively narrative, wit, historical reflection and psychological analysis will ensure for this book a wide audience. It is truly a captivating story with which to pass a rainy weekend; it is also a brilliantly professional reconstruction of the rural world of sixteenth-century France, which will both stimulate and inform for many years to come. (David Parker *Times Literary Supplement*) The fullest account to date of this extraordinary tale. Davis has constructed a fine piece of social history, a look into the lives of 16th-century peasants who left no records because they could neither read nor write. (Jean Strouse *Newsweek*) Davis combines a veteran researcher's expertise with a lay reader's curiosity

and an easygoing style... Davis's book balances possibility and constraint, character and situation. It puts people back into history but doesn't take the social and political forces out of it (Pat Aufderheide Village Voice)

Natalie Zemon Davis is Henry Charles Lea Professor of History, Emerita, Princeton University.

A fascinating story of deception, identity theft, and vagaries of memory. The time is 16th century. Place: Artigat; a small village in Languedoc, just south of modern-day Toulouse. Martin Guerre is the son of a peasant family who migrated to France from Spain's Basque region. Martin marries Bertrande. But after having a child, 24-year old Martin first steals grain from his own father (a vile act with serious consequences back then) and then runs away from his village for a life of adventure in Spain. His place is soon taken by Arnaud du Tilh, an audacious liar from nearby Sajas, who shows up at Artigat claiming he's the long-gone Martin Guerre. This is of course a story that cannot take place in the era of Facebook and Internet databases. But back then no villager has any photos taken or paintings made. No one actually has a firm description of the original Martin. Even though he is not as tall and thin as the Martin the Original, Martin's four sisters testify that the stocky Arnaud is indeed their lost brother. Go figure. That may be hard to believe but what to make of Bertrande who accepts the fake Martin as her real husband and admits him to her bed to give birth to his children? Can a woman's memory get that frail within such a short period of time? Or did she talk herself into that relationship thinking she can back out of it anytime she wanted by claiming she was deceived? We'll never know. What we know for sure is, Bertrande and the Fake Martin build for themselves a stable and almost exemplary marriage which lasts three years. The honeymoon ends when hubris rears its ugly head. The Fake Martin feels so confident in his new skin that he tries to sue Pierre Guerre (Martin's uncle) over property rights and inheritance. That's when Pierre, who is already suspicious of the Fake Martin's identity, sues Arnaud for identity and property theft, which can be punished by death. At the trial, the Fake Martin defends himself with remarkable vigor thanks to his prodigious memory. He quotes so many correct details about his past relationship with the Artigat residents that some judges start to think he might be the real Martin Guerre. That's when the real Martin, who has lost a leg in a battle while serving the Spanish King, shows up at the doorsteps of the courthouse in Toulouse and declares himself. At the end, Arnaud cannot maintain the facade to the bitter end and is forced to get down on his knees and admit his crime. After a public hanging, his body is burned to erase his memory for eternity. What's fascinating to me is the seriousness with which a 16th century French court approached the lawsuit. The judges listened to hundreds of

witnesses and tried every method they could think of to trip the Fake Martin and force him to reveal himself. If you're one of those who think that modern monogamy is an invention of the Victorian era, it's instructive to read that in 16th century France, the punishment for adultery was death. The mad courage of an impostor to take on a whole village and the mental energy he brings to the job at hand at the risk of death is nothing short of fascinating. No wonder the story was made into a movie, starring the lantern-jawed Gerard Depardieu. As I was reading this story I was amazed at the professional discipline with which the lawyers and judges of the time have handled this case. Reputations were on the line since the French judges were already an autonomous body of professionals back then with careers to build and images to protect. They were in competition with one another for glory and cash. That much is certain. But they were also struggling with the technical details such as interrogating the suspects, recording testimonies, deciding on how to use one testimony against another, sifting out motivations and contributing factors, thinking and weighing all the different possibilities, etc., all the while trying to stay within the bounds of the law. The author lifts the dusty covers of an opaque past and treats us to an illuminating look at what perhaps Max Weber would've called the "bureaucratization" of the judiciary process. Another reason why I was enamored by this book is the way it portrays in rich detail the unnerving frailty of human memory; the way our memories are bent out of shape for a long list of reasons. Memory is identity. If we can't trust our memories, how can we trust our identities? How can we trust a court testimony or a simple recollection when not one, not two, but FOUR sisters bear false testimony about the way their very own brother looked, walked, and spoke? Can such a thing happen in our own society today? I hesitate to say "no". A great and easy read. A page turner and a thriller that you can finish in a single day. Highly recommended.

Really good, informative book. As the summary notes, this is a non-fiction book detailing the disappearance of Martin Guerre in 16th century France, the assumption of Martin Guerre's identity by another man, and the subsequent trial. What made this book interesting was the discussion not only of the facts pertaining to the case but how the author delves into the customs, beliefs, and socio-economic systems that were in place during that time period in order to give a fuller picture of why and how this event happened. Also noted were how the story survived through the Ages and the variations those subsequent stories took compared to what we actually know happened based on records. Readers should make note that there are some French phrases sprinkled throughout that are not translated. I did not mind terribly since I speak it a little but others might find it annoying. The one thing I didn't like was the size of the book. It was bigger than your average-sized paper book

which made it seem juvenile.

This is a classic. If you don't know it, you should.

very slow & too many details absolutely not necessary, but research the author made is commendable.

I enjoyed reading it. Very clever situation. Watched the movie as well. Slightly different, of course. I liked the book better.

What a great book. Filled to the brim with historical information and being a student of history was just a fulfilling read! I could not put it down.

Good demonstration for understanding how to cite from limited sources.

After listening to a radio report about French culture in relation to the recent strikes over the proposed increase in retirement age, I was reading about "Montaillou" on the site when I discovered this title listed as a similar book of interest. I was intrigued by the situation, surely it was easy to pretend to be someone else in the "olden days". However, I was wrong! While life in sixteenth century rural France may have been simpler than today there still existed a community framework of unspoken rules and established/enforced laws. I initially took Martin Guerre's unfortunate wife, Bertrande, to be a wallflower - a woman whose life was dictated by the men and rules of her time. But in the end she was revealed to be a savvy, steadfast woman who was given a second chance to have the life she had wished for and embraced it, if only for a short time. The book illustrates that many of life's trials and tribulations - from mundane daily life to sensational events -- are in most ways the same today as they were in any other period in time. Besides the core story the book also contains information about the lawyers involved and some of their personal/professional story. While I am not a fan of non-fiction books I enjoyed this quick trip into another place, in another time -- thank you Natalie Zemon Davis.

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