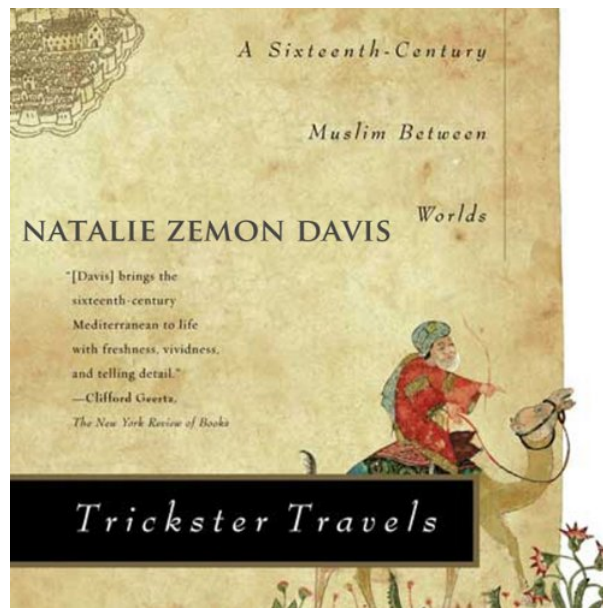
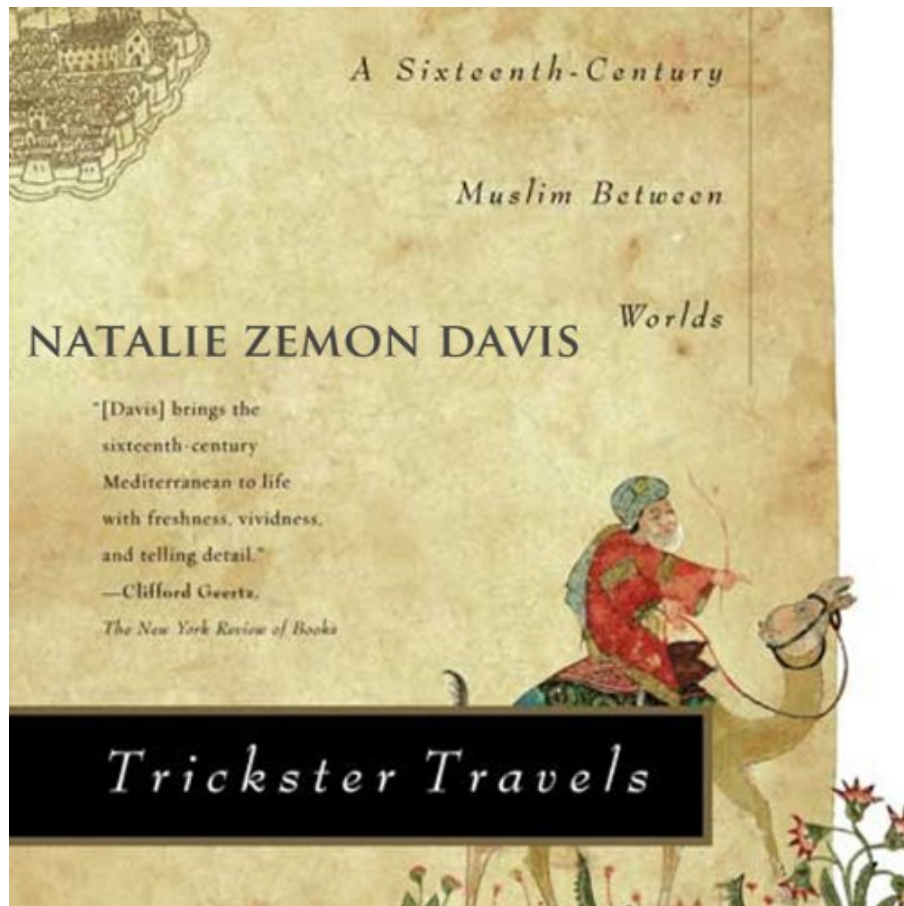


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"[Davis] brings the sixteenth-century Mediterranean to life with freshness, vividness, and telling detail."
—Clifford Geertz,
The New York Review of Books

Trickster Travels

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TRICKSTER TRAVELS: A SIXTEENTH-CENTURY MUSLIM BETWEEN WORLDS BY NATALIE ZEMON DAVIS PDF

Al-Hasan al-Wazzan - born in Granada to a Muslim family that in 1492 went to Morocco - became famous as the great Renaissance writer Leo Africanus, author of the first geography of Africa to be published in Europe (in 1550). He had been captured by Christian pirates in the Mediterranean and imprisoned by the Pope; when he was released and baptized, he lived a European life of scholarship as the Christian writer Giovanni Leone; by 1527, it is likely that he returned to North Africa and to the language, culture, and faith in which he had been raised. Natalie Zemon Davis offers a virtuoso study of the fragmentary, partial, and often contradictory traces that al-Hasan al-Wazzan left behind him, and a superb interpretation of his extraordinary life and work.

- Sales Rank: #85953 in Audible
- Published on: 2013-02-18
- Format: Unabridged
- Original language: English
- Running time: 661 minutes

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Fascinating but Frustrating

By Sam A. Mawn-Mahlau

This book does its best to wipe the cobwebs off the figure generally known in the West as Leo Africanus, a man raised in Fez by a family displaced from Muslim Spain during the Christian conquest, who travels widely as a diplomat through Africa, and then is brought to Rome as a captive where he authors a number of fascinating books, including a book on Africa and his African travels. This is a meticulously researched book, replete with voluminous footnotes full of both detail and inciteful asides.

However, the book is doomed to fail in its central project from the outset: even after the author's diligent research and careful writing, Leo Africanus remains hidden behind the folds of cleo's gown. The underlying documentation of his life is simply too sparse. Too much of "Trickster" is too speculative. Too little of the book relies on quotations of the subject's own words. Too many threads are started but then reluctantly abandoned by Zemon-Davis because of unavailable or incomplete sources. Most of what survives today of Leo Africanus is simply his work, his books written in Rome, and getting beyond the work to the man himself may simply be beyond the ability of any historian.

However, Zemon-Davis is crystal clear throughout the book as to where she is speculating or supposing and where she has evidence, and what her evidence is, and she does incorporate a number of useful quotations. Every sentence of this book is the work of a truly diligent professional historian.

While failing in its central project, the book succeeds in helping us to visualize and understand key elements

of the age, and Zemon-Davis does a great job (particularly in those wonderful footnotes) of bringing to life both the life of an Andalusian family in Fez and the life of intellectual circles in 16th century Rome. Reading the book, I was struck on page after page with interesting thoughts and questions; the book truly sparked my curiosity. What of all those differing translations of Leo Africanus' work? What might they say about the societies in which they were written? What of all that poetry referenced by Leo Africanus? How did that Arabic poetic sensibility influence the Christian regions it touched? And What of those African civilizations he visited?

I am left wondering if this very good book Zemon-Davis has written might have been a truly great book if its focus shifted just slightly from this fascinating but inscrutable man, perhaps acknowledging and acceding to the limitations of the existing research material. Her title refers to "a sixteenth-century muslim between worlds", but it is the two worlds more than the subject himself that she best elucidates.

And so, despite its flaws, reading this book has been a pleasure, and I can recommend the book to others very highly, though I still suspect that had the author conceived the work as more of a history and less of biography, it just might have been a classic on the same scale as her "Return of Martin Guerre." And so I withhold the fifth star, and give this one a very solid four stars.

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful.

Disappointing Work by a Distinguished Historian

By Simple Scholar

Natalie Zemon Davis is not the first historian to examine the life al-Wazzan. Her contribution to the study of early modern history comes, rather, from her interpretation of al-Wazzan's life. She suggests that al-Wazzan's conversion was not completely genuine. Caught between the tensions and contradictions of the Christian and Islamic worldviews, al-Wazzan, Davis argues, attempted to avoid public conflict and denouncement of either religion. In his writings, he attempted to "build a bridge for himself, one that he could cross in either direction" (114). His writings are, therefore, esoteric. They employ the Arabic concept of *hila*, or stratagem. On the one hand, his scholarship integrated Arabic storytelling into the Western world, synthesizing Christian and Muslim thought. On the other hand, al-Wazzan wrote his treatises carefully and cautiously, lest Christians or Muslims challenged his orthodoxy. Davis argues convincingly that al-Wazzan's corpus needs to be examined with his autobiography in mind.

While Davis' book is engaging, "Trickster Travels" partakes in several of the pitfalls of cultural history. Above all, Davis employs too much conjecture in her book. For example, in her long – and virtually unnecessary – chapter on sex, Davis, drawing on the slang al-Wassan uses in his "Geography," raises the possibility that al-Wazzan frequented the brothels of Rome and Africa and that he may have engaged in homosexual activity or had suppressed homoerotic desires. While he may have had such tendencies, Davis does not provide enough evidence to support this claim. The second pitfall of cultural history present in Davis' book is that the modern concept of 'identity' is imposed on al-Wassan's life. Although Davis does show that al-Wassan realized that he was caught in between worlds, she does not demonstrate that al-Wassan viewed himself as an 'individual' in the modern sense of the word. Al-Wassan seems less concerned with identity politics and more concerned with the more philosophical question of what is truth.

These faults aside, Davis's book is a fine monograph. Davis's prose is clear and easy to read. The book, printed by a major publishing house, is accessible to a wide reading audience and could be used in an undergraduate class to introduce students to global history in the sixteenth century. Despite being a work of popular history, the work is an impressive product of world-class scholarship. There are one hundred pages of notes, a small glossary of Arabic words, and an extraordinary bibliography of primary and secondary sources.

6 of 8 people found the following review helpful.

The charged politics and turmoil of his life and times brings history to life

By Midwest Book Review

TRICKSTER TRAVELS: A SIXTEENTH-CENTURY MUSLIM BETWEEN WORLDS could also have been featured in our 'travel' section for its fascinating travelogue entries; but is reviewed here for its value to any studying 1500s history. Al-Wazzan traveled widely as an ambassador and merchant throughout Africa in the early 1500s, was captured by Spanish pirates and presented to Pope Leo X, where he converted to Christianity while explaining Islam to his puzzled audience. The charged politics and turmoil of his life and times brings history to life, with history professor Davis using manuscripts of the times - including some previously unknown - to explore fully al-Wazzan's image and importance. Unfamiliar with his name? Try 'Leo Africanus', author of the first geography of Africa.

Diane C. Donovan

California Bookwatch

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