

From zombie culture to circus culture, anthropologist Wade Davis explores the way we live

LOUISE LOIK
EDITOR

What is left to ask the man who has spoken before audiences and individuals in every corner of the world, published his thoughts in dozens of books and magazines, and been interviewed by innumerable journalists?

“Why are you here?” Is what some have suggested as a point of inquiry; not in an esoteric kind of way, but in a physical, geographical way.

“Here,” being Bowen Island. It’s a place that seems to draw the people who push away from the mainstream. Bowen is Wade Davis’ home.

It seems natural that a man like Davis might be drawn to this place of contradictions. Surrounded by water and locked to the land, it’s home to free spirits and leading edge thinkers. It’s both creative and casual but also constrained and contained, as life revolves around the schedule of a ferry.

Davis is both a linear and creative thinker; an adventurer and a family man. He protests against LNG in Howe Sound, but he’s worked for LNG in Peru. Having lived and travelled to the most remote, exotic and wild places, Davis now lives in this placid community. He lives in a small town, but his influence is global. He is both a creative free spirit and an astute, disciplined man of science, one of National Geographic’s Explorers for the Millennium.

Davis, who grew up in Montreal and West Vancouver, is here on this island because his heart has always drawn him back under the familiar coastal canopy of the forest. When he describes the beauty of the area, there is passion in his blue eyes as if having just seen this area for the first time. He refers to Vancouver as one of the greatest cities in the world. “We live on the edge of the wild. Salmon spawn up the rivers and the black bear descend out of the mountain to feast on them. Where else can you be surrounded by orcas so close to a city?” asks Davis.

With extended family nearby and friendly faces on the trails and in the shops, Bowen Island has an irresistible small town feeling for Davis and his highly accomplished wife, Gail Percy. From their home with whimsical architecture that includes a small onion dome, Davis walks alongside a pond to get to his studio. Frogs pause in their chorus and Davis comments on how remarkable it is that frogs appear out of nowhere to establish themselves at this pond. He stops to check on the progress of a sapling he planted a year ago, disappointed to find that it isn’t doing as well as he’d hoped. Like any other islander, he talks about renovating his home and landscaping, and gives a recommendation about a local construction crew that have become his friends.

Though he’s a local, it’s still a challenge to catch up with Davis between his travels to Tibet, Colombia, California, Tanzania and Jordan, where one of his daughters is living. Davis has been in demand the world over as a speaker and a thought-leader since the late 1980s and the release of his international bestseller, *The Serpent and the Rainbow*. David

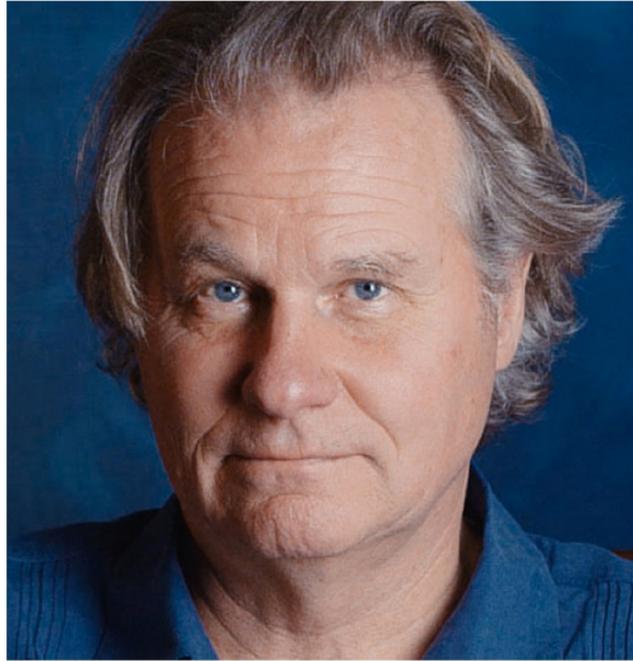
Suzuki described Davis as “a rare combination of scientist, scholar, poet and passionate defender of all of life’s diversity.” His list of accomplishments and awards would more than fill this page and yet, for a man whose time is so valuable and in such demand, he is not reclusive. Instead, he is a friendly local, chatting at the checkout counter like everyone else. Though Davis would seem to prefer to shine the spotlight on his wife Gail Percy, and her accomplishments in anthropology and the fashion industry than to do yet another interview about his work, he is nonetheless gracious and patient. Davis explains that he arrived here with 1,500 boxes of books. His studio, overlooking a fairy tale setting, is lined with books grouped by category relating to a book he’s written, or is writing, from botanicals to the Himalaya. He points to one section and explains that he used 600 books in order to write one non-fiction book. Davis is a stickler for detail in his writing. “I feel I need an understanding of every component of the story,” he says. He is proud of the depth of his research for each book. “If I mention the sound of a throaty gurgle when a bullet hits a head, it’s because a physician described it as a throaty gurgle. I don’t take poetic license, that’s what gives a work of non-fiction its authenticity.”

In spite of the fact that Davis may be in three countries in a month, or that he is writing five books, speaking in front of thousands of people at a time, lecturing, and exploring new ideas, his studio is meticulously organized, his reference books almost all leather-bound and thick. With warm woods and homey touches, the room feels like a place for science, contemplation, inspiration and study.

The grey-haired explorer talks about his work and his life with the quiet well-modulated voice of a professional presenter; the names of well-known authors, poets, philosophers, and world leaders are reference points that dot the dialogue. From an office swivel chair, he offers up an overwhelming feast of topics and thoughts on everything from the Dalai Lama to raising daughters.

His is a quick mind, touching briefly here and there, but then delving into matters of the heart, like the importance of young adults maintaining an optimistic outlook. Davis feels that this generation of young adults is inundated with pessimistic predictions and a heavy burden to fix the world’s problems.

“It’s not up to them. It’s up to us to fix it,” he says. As a father to two adult daughters, Raina and Tara, and as a UBC professor, he observes that this generation “wants to be doing meaningful work that is authentic and true, and to contribute in a real meaningful way. They don’t want to hear that the sky is falling.” Tara, 27, is living in Colombia, where she and her boyfriend run guided river trips. Raina, at 24, is in Amman, Jordan, working on a book on educational reform in Tunisia. The girls grew up spending their summers in the forest and paddling wild rivers with their parents. “Every summer the kids got three months of uninterrupted time with mom and dad, off the grid, in the Canadian bush with all the incredible people that came through,” says Davis.



“There are advantages to being known, but I’m not looking for fame,” says Davis.

He is referring to time spent at their Stikine, B.C. fishing lodge. The lodge, located on a lake on Wolf Creek has been part of his life for 37 years. Though seven hours from the nearest town, the lodge was a hub of activity for adventurers who came for rafting, fishing and hunting. Davis says the richness of the relationships with the locals and the beauty of the location was “soul food” for the family and “that was the well that we drank from the rest of the year.”

He is passionate about his family life. “My sister lives here on Bowen,” says Davis with great warmth. “She is the most decent human being I’ve ever met. She’s a very special person.”

He reflects on the two of them growing up in the 1950s, as a generation when “technically, fathers didn’t travel, but they were never at home. They worked, came home, had a couple of drinks, watched TV, went to bed. The parent figure was there, but not there.” He pauses, “people ask me ‘How did you manage to have such a happy family, with such incredible girls?’ I give a lot of credit to Gail. And yes, I was away a lot, but when I was home, I was home.”

He says he made sure his girls understood why he was away so that they would never feel that he was being neglectful. “They were proud of what I was doing,” he says. “I always made sure I wasn’t away for more than three-and-a-half to four weeks. When I was home, I was home for afternoon snacks, and I’d read them stories and put them to bed.”

Davis also has great respect for his parents, who made sure he and his sister went to Ivy League schools. “Every day I was there widened the gap between myself and my father, which is what made his gesture so generous . . . I never would have had the opportunity I had if I’d been in Canada.” He describes Canada of having a culture of caution, a culture of “no.” He recalls walking into his professor’s

office and stating that he would like to study ethno-botany and the professor immediately facilitated an opportunity for Davis to go study plants in South America. “That never would have happened here,” he says.

When Davis eventually grew restless, he moved on to anthropology; specifically studying voodoo culture in Haiti.

As Jane Goodall is to primatology, Davis is to social anthropology. Both are audacious, rule breakers, both showing the world a new way to see. Ostensibly, he’s a rock star of the science world on his way to becoming iconic in Canada. He isn’t at all comfortable with the concept.

“Canada has five icons: the hockey player, Wayne Gretzky, the writer, Margaret Atwood . . .” Before he can finish the list, he stops, wanting to be clear. “There are advantages to being known, but I’m not looking for fame.”

Davis says he isn’t interested in being the pop star of anthropology. He is interested in having an impact on the world, on having a lasting legacy for good. He adds, “Regarding changing the world, anyone who wants to change the world is delusional and dangerous. Like Mao Zedong.”

Davis is taking part in social change. He wrote a speech for Justin Trudeau before he became prime minister and received the Honour of Canada. He has given TED talks and is on the board of advisers for TED Talks. He’s been a National Geographic Explorer in Residence, is a bestselling author of numerous books, and is an adviser to Cirque du Soleil on a new production. He was recently in Columbia, his favourite place in the world, working alongside Colombian naturalists for a government project to depict the beauty of Colombia for school children around Colombia. Davis is also working on a book about cowboys while helping his long-time friend, guitarist and founder of The Grateful Dead, Bob Weir, to write a book. Davis says that when people ask him why he is working on the book, his answer is simply, “because I want to.” He is also compiling a book of his National Geographic photos from 2002 to the present.

What the various accomplishments reflect is Davis’ propensity to pivot and face new directions and new challenges, and to push the limits. He says that every thing he has done in his life, in school and work has served him further down the line. Davis learned about writing and film that would serve him later in life. To his father’s horror, he abandoned university at 22 and headed off to study ethno-botany, which led to an opportunity to study Haitian voodoo and zombies.

Davis’ quest for knowledge would take him on a journey of lifelong learning. His insights are documented in all manner of media, from National Geographic to books and his TED Talks. His work as an anthropologist has recently garnered him an award of Canada, one of many awards and credentials accumulated over the decades.

For young adults today, he advises, “You can’t have just one specialty any more,” says Davis. “You have to put yourself in the way of opportunities, where success is the only option, the only possible outcome and you will find yourself achieving things you might not have thought possible.” It’s the same advice he’s given over and over, with unflagging passion.

“Maybe because I grew up in the bourgeois middle-class suburban scene, I wanted to get out at every single level, and I learned to do that by jumping off cliffs. I kinda came to discover that when you jump off a cliff you land on a feather bed. The world doesn’t beat you down it lifts you up. If you give it a chance.” Davis continues to take big leaps forward. He is working on no less than five books now, all on contract.

What next? For Davis, it’s simple. “I want to celebrate the wonder of ‘what is.’”



As Jane Goodall is to primatology, Davis is to social anthropology. Both are audacious, rule breakers, both showing the world a new way to see. Ostensibly, he’s a rock star of the science world on his way to becoming iconic in Canada. He isn’t at all comfortable with the concept.

