



Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong

James W. Loewen

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Americans have lost touch with their history, and in *Lies My Teacher Told Me* Professor James Loewen shows why. After surveying eighteen leading high school American history texts, he has concluded that not one does a decent job of making history interesting or memorable. Marred by an embarrassing combination of blind patriotism, mindless optimism, sheer misinformation, and outright lies, these books omit almost all the ambiguity, passion, conflict, and drama from our past.

In this revised edition, packed with updated material, Loewen explores how historical myths continue to be perpetuated in today's climate and adds an eye-opening chapter on the lies surrounding 9/11 and the Iraq War. From the truth about Columbus's historic voyages to an honest evaluation of our national leaders, Loewen revives our history, restoring the vitality and relevance it truly possesses.

Thought provoking, nonpartisan, and often shocking, Loewen unveils the real America in this iconoclastic classic beloved by high school teachers, history buffs, and enlightened citizens across the country.

Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong Details

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Trevor says

The problem with this one is that it has so much content, so much information per page, that it is hard to know where to start. I found this book nearly life altering, particularly since I'm a week away from studying to become a history teacher. If you are in the US this is a very important book for you to read as you are sure to be shocked by some of the myths about your history that are discussed here. For the rest of us in the non-USA this book is just as important because it serves as a guide to understand why Americans are so remarkably ignorant or ill-informed about their history. Along the way this book has interesting things to say about such subjects as why education does not make people more compassionate or more likely to think for themselves and why textbooks present such a distorted picture of US history in the first place. This is, in short, a deeply powerful book about how we ought to educate our children and why the fact that schools do such a bad job at teaching history is part of the reason why they do such a poor job at providing the kind of education needed by students to help them live their lives in a democracy.

This book bases its arguments around what is printed in (and omitted from) twelve popular textbooks on US history. The lies this book is concerned with are the distortions and untruths that are a commonplace in high school American History textbooks. As he points out early in this book, the first year of most college history courses in the US are about seeking to remove all of the misinformation students have been taught in high school. One of the author's colleagues refers to first year American History as 'Iconoclasm I and II'.

And the distortions he documents here are nearly enough to turn your hair colour. Take that ever nice deaf and blind girl, Helen Keller, who made good and thereby proved by the sheer force of example of her life that anyone can make it in America – the land of opportunity, home of the free, land of the brave. What is never mentioned, Loewen points out, is that this message, and this is the story presented of Keller's in virtually all of the text books, is the exact opposite of the meaning Keller sought to illustrate by her own life's work. Keller, for most of her life, was a Socialist and avid supporter of the Soviet Union. She actively sought to improve the lot of other people who were either deaf or blind while pointing out that these people were generally made so by industrial accidents. She said that most of these people had no hope of achieving in any way similar to how she had. If anything, it was her moral outrage at the social inequities in capitalist society that she wanted to be remembered for and the work she did to remove these inequities, work so that we too should be outraged and do something about these outrages – but instead our textbooks turn a blind-eye and stop up our ears to her life's work and message while painting a halo around both her and her teacher. A halo so bright that it hides the truth with its glare.

His discussion of Woodrow Wilson is possibly even more disturbing. Wilson's support of the Ku Klux Klan, for example, is never mentioned in any of the books, and his segregation of the US government is likewise ignored by all of the textbooks. Of course, lies of omission are no less lies. Did you know that when Wilson was president of Princeton it was the only northern university not to admit black students? Or that Wilson only once met African American leaders in the White House but virtually through them out?

Wilson did much to bring about the modern world and many of his achievements following the First World War in particular are a great tribute to him, but, as is pointed out here, American high school textbooks seem incapable of presenting a 'warts and all' picture of US 'heroes'. Take as an example Wilson's high praise of the film *The Birth of a Nation* – a jaunty little film whose themes will become clear once you are told it was originally called *The Clansmen* and was about the great lie in American history, that Reconstruction

following the Civil War was a time when African Americans dominated life in the south. Wilson said, “It is like writing history in lightning, and my only regret is that it is all true.”

Racism is a key theme in American history and an important way to understand much about modern America. And yet, it is a theme that is mostly ignored in all of the textbooks. The part played by plague in depopulating America so that white and black settlers could take over Native American land is not discussed at all in any of the text books – despite the impossibility of American being so settled without biological warfare. Columbus’s extermination of the Native Americans of Haiti is not mentioned in any of the text books and this fact fits well with the theme that heroes can do no wrong and if they did do wrong then such wrongs are either excused or ignored. As he points out, “In the early 1920s the American Legion said that authors of textbooks ‘are at fault in placing before immature pupils the blunders, foibles and frailties of prominent heroes and patriots of our Nation.’”

I have known so little about US involvement in Haiti, but all I am finding out is deeply shameful and therefore reason enough to keep it hidden. I need to quote this bit, “Then the United States supervised a pseudo-referendum to approve a new Haitian constitution, less democratic than the constitution it replaced; the referendum passed by a hilarious 98,225 to 768”. Of course, hilarious is used here in the sense that we laugh and cry about the same things. However, Columbus’s extermination of the estimated 8 million natives of Haiti, often by working them to death, makes most of the horrors that followed on that tortured island pale in comparison.

Did you know that King James (yes, of the Bible fame) gave thanks to the Almighty God for providing the plague that helped depopulate the Americas of its original inhabitants? He was not the first or the last to do this, but you might not think that from any of the history books studied in American high schools as the entire topic remains taboo.

And just what was the Civil War fought for? Surely not something as crass as slavery. His discussion of the treatment given to the end of slavery in textbooks, particularly from the 1920s (a time at the full depth of the nadir of backlash – particularly in southern states, but similar in the north) is heart-wrenching. History in the US seems to be written to ensure that middle class white kids don’t get offended – the effects on African Americans, Native Americans, Spanish Americans or working class Americans is of little or no interest to the authors of these text books.

The stuff in this book on white people living with Native Americans with even Benjamin Franklin saying that ‘No European who has tasted Savage Life can afterwards bare to live in our societies’ is a damning indictment of ‘our societies’ and something else never mentioned in history text books.

Did you know that the Native Americans paid \$24 for Manhattan Island weren’t even the Indians who lived there? Rather than being stupid, these Indians are the colonial equivalent of the guy who sold the Eiffel Tower to scrap metal dealers. Of course, finding the ‘right’ Indian to buy land from was very low on the list of priorities of those doing the buying.

Look, I haven’t even told you about classes in the United States and how textbooks assure students that there have only been middle class people in America since the 1600s. The extensive chapters on slavery and reconstruction are mind-blowing. As is the factoid gleaned from his students – 22 percent of whom thought the Vietnam War was fought between North and South Korea (you’d have thought there was a bit of a hint there in the name of the war, but obviously not).

Look, I could go on and on. This book is truly fascinating and it provides some hope and lots of ideas on

how history could be taught so as to help students think for themselves, to learn about their history and to engage in the life of their society. None of these involve writing the 'perfect' history book, but all of them involve asking that most essential of all questions (so important they generally ask it in Latin) *cui bono?* Who benefits?

A magnificent book and one that has filled me with passion. I can't praise this book enough.

Chris says

Why does nobody like high school history? Or civics, or social studies, or whatever they're calling it these days. Why does pretty much everybody hate this class? I mean, you have people who can memorize irrelevant sporting statistics for the last fifty years, but they can't name more than two nineteenth-century presidents.

The author of this book, a teacher and researcher of history, started looking into this. He'd found among his high school and college students an appalling level of ignorance in basic American history. So, he decided to try and figure out what went wrong and why.

His conclusion? Textbooks. The textbooks that we use in American history classes are simplistic, dry and patronizing, aimed not at teaching the students about the rich epic that is American history, but rather at reinforcing what they already believe to be true: America is a great place, and it's just getting greater.

Loewen has a lot of bones to pick with the history texts, but he limits himself here to ten. He looks at things like heroification, social biases, omission of the underclass and so on. With twelve common texts to draw upon, he tries to see what they omit and what they include, and he is shocked and appalled.

The primary sin of American history textbooks, he believes, is a lack of conflict. They present our history as a series of semi-benign events that all turned out okay in the end. These were not things that we (the government, a president, society) did, they were things that just happened. There is no causality, no emotion, no contradiction. Nothing ever leads to anything else, and none of it certainly is reflected in modern times. And so what is left is a bright-eyed, doped up view of America, where everything is just fine, and whatever may happen in the future, we'll get through that as well.

His position is that if we could teach history properly, as a continuum that affects us even now, it would be more interesting. If we showed the contradictions and the unpleasantness, we could teach students to think critically and, in turn, be better citizens. The cynic in me, of course, immediately thinks, "Well, no one wants that!"

He does try to offer solutions, things that a good textbook should do - focus on fewer topics, offer a broader view, and force students to work outside the text, for example - but he also acknowledges that it's not nearly as easy as it sounds. One of the reasons why history texts have to be so bland and inoffensive is because they have to be. If the subject matter is too controversial, the economic implications could be catastrophic. Too much focus on Black achievement during the Reconstruction? Southern schools won't buy your book. Not enough focus on the achievements of women? Say hello to NOW, you'll be hearing from them a lot. For every page and every paragraph, there's some parent, teacher, administrator, student, or just plain nutjob who

might take offense, and so the solution is to be as inoffensive as possible. And in a country where people get very offended very quickly, I can see how textbook publishers might find it easier just to give up and put out the same crap edition after edition.

It's a tough problem to solve, and Loewen admits that he doesn't really have the solution. All he can really do is shine a light on the problem, and hope that we can figure it out. Because history is essential to knowing what to do with the future of America. And, of course, the rest of the world....

Jen says

When I started this book, I thought it would be along the lines of "your teacher told you this...but this is what happened..." You know like "hey columbus didn't discover the new world...blah blah blah" and there was some of that.

But more importantly, and far more interestingly, this book is an indictment of how American history is taught. As the book went forward, even I found myself thinking "yep, that's what I was taught" and wondering if I would have found American history less boring had it been as filled with flawed characters as European.

Most of my European history comes from books. I read a lot. Starting with Garrett Mattingly, which is not a bad way to start. Mattingly doesn't sugar coat. And when European history is taught, teachers don't have the same pressures to heroify (this is kind of a word http://wiki.answers.com/Q/What_is_hero...) Europeans as Americans. Instead we go "oh those silly pesky Europeans..." With our own leaders, we are taught to rever them. Even the most obvious example of the sainthood of Washington. Not saying he wasn't a good person, but he was also a real person.

The book argues that if students were taught that you can be flawed and conflicted AND change the world, how much more inspiring would that story be. Instead only those who go forward in American history (and for the most part that doesn't include me) learn the shadows in the heroes.

But this is simply annoying compared to ethnic-bias that pervades the teaching of American history. I found myself just saddened when I read example after example of things that I had been taught, and how it was inherently racist. And I'm not just talking about the Civil War. I could give examples, but I'm seriously struggling with which to choose. There are simply too many.

This book is not a fun read full of "neat facts" about history--it's more than that, much more. I was in turns angered, saddened, and ashamed by what passes off as teaching history. Not only are we taught incorrect information, but we are taught in such a way that assures us it will be found boring.

This was a wonderful and thought-provoking book. I'm better for having read it.

kendall says

The thesis of the book is interesting and well supported, however, I found it pretty dry which was disappointing considering a main point Loewen makes is that Middle School/High School History books are

too boring. He goes into too much depth in the first two chapters making the same point over and over again, while quickly and concisely exploring more current history, which again is the same criticism he makes of the textbooks he attacks. I also think the extreme liberal tone of the book took away from the author's credibility and it would have been more successful without his unnecessary bashing conservatives. Despite my criticism I found the book very thought provoking and relevant. I would love to see Loewen included a comparison of how the same "history" is taught in different countries providing support with passages from different textbooks in France and Germany during WWII for instance.

Pouting Always says

James Loewen reviews the history books commonly used in the US public school system and the factual inaccuracies contained in those books. The book goes over many of the common practices in publishing history textbooks especially those concerning sanitizing our history for children and what is appropriate for them to know about our country. Before reading this I had never actually thought about my own experiences in school with history but I feel like a lot of what he discusses was really valid and I agreed with much of what he said. I do tend towards being much more liberal though but I don't think there's anything wrong with acknowledging our mistakes as a country and I think the fact that we don't educate people properly about our history and government plays a pretty big role in the many problems that crop up. People deserve to be told the truth and to decide for themselves and I don't think it necessarily makes a person not patriotic to criticize its country's behavior. Many people are blamed for their poor voting choices but that isn't helped by the lack of information most people have about our actual history. I really enjoyed this one and it made me think about a lot of things I hadn't before, my enjoyment of this may stem from the fact that I'm still relatively young and haven't read as many books like this one though. I would totally recommend it though to people interested in history or those dissatisfied with the static sanitized history they learned in school.

Michael Finocchiaro says

While not as good or revolutionary of *A People's History of the United States* by Howard Zinn, Loewen writes an entertaining and eyebrow-raising book about the hidden catastrophes in American history that your teachers did not tell you about. I would personally read Zinn first but this is an excellent followup (and much shorter if the length of Zinn initially intimidates you). It is highly readable and once again in the current context of fake news and flag-waving ignorance, a critical book to see that America - despite its ideals - has not always lived up to its self-proclaimed goal of being the Home of Democracy and Freedom. To be read. Now. Urgently.

Mischenko says

I had to take a sociology course when I was in college and had a genuinely interesting professor. He's one that I won't ever forget and still think about from time to time. He was the type of teacher that made learning interesting and it was a class I actually enjoyed going to. Anyhow, he gave us a recommended reading list of books he thought we should take a look at. None of them were mandatory, but I read them all. This is one of those books.

I was never really interested in learning history when I was in grade school, not even American History. Many of the historical events in American History that I did learn about in school—according to the author of this book—were inaccurate. This book made me feel quite ignorant after reading it. For example, as a child we were taught that Columbus was a great explorer who discovered America, not one that initiated cruel policies and killed people. I discussed some of it with my grandfather who was also a teacher of many subjects and some of it he did agree with, while some he wasn't totally sure about. Ironically, my children's 3rd grade history text is still teaching the people and events in American History the same way by withholding truth.

The section that discusses why history hasn't been taught correctly is thought-provoking. The author brings to question why American History has been basically dumbed-down with very simplified requirements as to what we needed to learn to just pass the tests. Could this be why so many don't enjoy learning American History? Could it be why many can't retain it? It was an eye-opening book for me and I still keep it on my shelf for reference. Although controversial, I think it's a book worth reading, especially if you have an interest in history.

My rating on this is: 5*****

Jim says

This was a great book! The first two-thirds gives example after example of the many lies, omissions, and half-truths found in American high school history books, and the last third speculates why this has happened. Here's one example:

Almost everyone knew the world was round before 1492. Columbus's main reason for traveling to the new world to find gold, and he was responsible for killing, torturing and enslaving natives by the millions. Eight million in Haiti alone were reduced to 200 within 60 years - now seen as history's first documented genocide. Columbus practically invented genocide.

The new world was not populated by sparsely-scattered tribes, but by as many as 100 million Indians, which were systematically wiped out by one plague after another, most introduced purposely. Columbus's role in setting up the system is never mentioned. Indians were hunted for sport, murdered for dog food, and given to officers as sex slaves. Tributes in gold or cotton were due every 3 months, and Indians who did not comply had their hands chopped off.

The book goes on to discuss the invisibility of both racism and anti-racism in history books, and example after example of how history books white-wash our history, always making America look like the good guys, and never mentioning our mistakes.

The author would like to see history taught showing both sides of each event, and involve students in discussions of the pros and cons, which might make it more interesting to study.

Why is history taught this way? The author speculates that, although we strive for the truth in all other subjects, we purposely lie in history books, because we are trying to use history to build patriotism and a love of America in our children, and the truth might get in the way of that goal. We also want to shield our children from the harsh realities of the world, at least till they study history in college.

But most students never study history in college, and the facts go unlearned. I found much in this book that I never knew. Except for the controversy about teaching Evolution, history is the only subject whose content is dictated by parental groups and school boards.

This is a book that will make you stop and think like few others will.

Evie says

I love works that give you the uncensored truth about history, but this particular book left me feeling as though the author had something to prove, rather than reveal.

Jamie says

Ostensibly, *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* by James Loewen is a book about factual inaccuracies found in a survey of twelve popular History textbooks. That's a good hook, but unfortunately once the hook gets you the place it pulls you into is slightly different than what you might expect. This book might more accurately be titled *Subtle Biases Created by Questionable Omissions in A Few Textbooks*. But that, of course, is not quite as bombastic a title and you probably wouldn't read the book, would you?

After a brief false start involving how Hellen Keller was a raging Communist, Loewen starts his review of American history in precolonial days, beginning with the atrocities of the Conquistadors and other European explorers. Then it moves on to the atrocities of the White European settlers. Then the atrocities of the early American, White colonists. Then the atrocities of the antebellum slave owners. Then the atrocities of the postbellum racists. Then the atrocities of the opponents of the civil rights movement. You see the pattern here? It holds up for most of the book.

Throughout it all, Loewen does a pretty good job of showing how textbooks often omit information and whitewash (pun intended) the characters of prominent Europeans and Americans, such as Christopher Columbus and Abraham Lincoln. And it is pretty interesting to read how, for example, textbooks describe how the Nina, the Pinta and the Santa Maria were "storm battered" and floundered into the shores of the new world full of crews on the brink of mutiny, while Columbus's own personal journal pretty much says that hey, the weather has been awesome this whole trip and everyone is still in a great mood. Or how Lincoln made several campaign speeches in which he turned his nose at the idea of racial equality.

And Loewen makes good points about how these omissions seem to be systematic done towards the end of downplaying the unpleasant (like, say, the genocide of Native Americans through disease and murder) and emphasizing the heroic (like, say, taming a wilderness that in truth wasn't that wild because the Indians had already cultivated it but are dead now). At times, his comments are impressively subtle, like when he notes how textbooks often credit President Kennedy and other governmental institutions for coming up with anti-discrimination legislation during the 60s, when the government was, for the most part, bowing to pressure from civil rights activists, who really deserve all the credit. This kind of misinformation, he argues, teaches that Blacks and their White allies were not the ones who enacted these changes can thus not expect to view them as inspirations for future battles. It's a subtle point, but Loewen makes good arguments that stuff like this is all in the name of making us feel good about our country and unquestioning about our pride in our

history. And he's good about describing how this is doing a disservice to people both as students of history and as eventual participants in our system of government.

BUT, that all being said, I'm not quite sure I've ever read anything so awash in liberal White guilt as this book. It's not that I necessarily disagree with any of this, but the tone of the work is often offsetting and sometimes approaches zealotry. I was really hoping to read more interesting tidbits about stuff that history books get wrong, the kind of stuff that might serve well as idle chit-chat at my next dinner party or bar crawl. But it doesn't take long for it to become apparent that that's not what this book is about. It's really just a vehicle for Loewen's politics. Not that there's anything wrong with that and not that I found myself disagreeing with his politics too often (well, sometimes). It's just not the book I expected or even really wanted.

Dustin says

What I learned from this textbook:

1. That it is not weird that I hated history/social studies in high school, but now find it interesting.
2. That textbook "authors" can't be bothered to do their own research, so all the textbooks tell the same apocryphal stories (George Washington and the cherry tree, the first Thanksgiving, Columbus as all-round good guy, the US as "international good-guy peacekeeper, with NO ulterior motives), making every factoid on every page suspect.
3. That our history is far richer and more interesting than any one book (including this one) can possibly tell, so relying on a single book to teach a class like this is setting everyone, teacher and student alike, up for failure.
4. That while history is based on facts, the interpretation of those facts really does constantly change, and how we learn about them is based on previous societal changes. It is up to every student and teacher to separate fact from interpretation, and then to apply their own interpretation as needed. A discussion of slavery and Reconstruction written by a privileged European-American before the Civil Rights movement will not carry much water if read critically instead of just read to memorize the factoids for the test.
5. That our leaders have learned from the past and are applying its lessons to the present and the future:

"Of course the people do not want war....But, after all, it is the leaders of the country who determine the policy, and it is always a simple matter to drag the people along, whether it is a democracy, a fascist dictatorship, a parliament, or a communist dictatorship. Voice or no voice, the people can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders. That is easy. All you have to do is tell them that they are being attacked and denounce the pacifists for lack of patriotism." - German Field Marshall Hermann Goering, Nuremberg, April 18, 1946

Read this book, now. Then go out, and read more books, preferably primary and secondary sources, which tell the actual story, and include the controversies that still remain, both in ascribing motives to the people who made history, but also the controversies in interpreting what the facts actually mean, both for the present and the future.

Daniel says

re-read the updated version. Still excellent.

As a history major in college, I still have an affinity for the subject. This book was very interesting, because it challenged many of the things we were all taught in the American educational system.

It's a real eye opener, and while you may have a superficial knowledge of some of the events and trends that we were never taught, or taught in such a way that the real issues were glossed over, this book delves into them in depth.

I would highly recommend this book, even if you are not into history.

Maurean says

I originally picked this up several years ago because the blurb on the back cover appealed to me:

“Lies My Teacher Told Me” is for anyone who has ever fallen asleep in history class.”

Mr. Loewen’s premise is that history textbooks have been presented to portray a slanted, optimistic and patriotic “dumbed-down” view of America, because this suits the needs of the conservative white people who sit on the textbook adoption boards. By critiquing 12 highly used American History textbooks, the author successfully presents several topics which they currently address, and uncovers the alleged omissions and distortions.

I completely agree with the author’s basic belief that American students are getting short-changed when we present only the PC-version of our country’s heritage, not to mention the fact that this watered down presentation only serves to bore them all to tears (students consider history to be “the most irrelevant” and “boring” of all the 21 subjects commonly taught in school). I, personally, was interested to learn that not one of the twelve textbooks described the geopolitical implications of Christopher Columbus’s encounter with the Americans; none mention that Columbus was the first to send slaves across the Atlantic. When we present our youth the world through rose-colored glasses, where no controversial subjects arise, it no doubt causes them to be ill prepared for the real world that exists beyond the classroom.

Having said all that, however, I found Loewen was overplaying the “politically correct” hand himself, replacing the conservative, Euro-centric rhetoric with his own overtly socialist and liberal leanings. His strong opinions on historical events may cause some readers to overlook his message on education. For this reader, it made for just the kind of boring recitation of skewed political propaganda the author claims to be rallying against. If you are interested in the topic of education and how it is being inseminated to our children through textbook censorship and abridgement of the facts, then I would recommend Diane Ravitch’s “The Language Police: How Pressure Groups Restrict What Students Learn” for a more balanced examination of this issue. (clicking on the title will link you to a reader’s journal/discussion of the book)

Felicia says

This book is a TOTAL eye-opener about how we're taught cultural prejudices and distorted American history through classroom textbooks. I mean, I'm pretty liberal, but the perspective of this author totally opened my eyes to things that I just took for granted about how our history was founded, about people we deify who were not the gods we simplify them into being, like Christopher Columbus and the Pilgrims, etc, and how racial inequality and sexual inequality is subtly established in the text in ways that you never would notice unless they're pointed out for you.

I really recommend this as a way of seeing things with different eyes, really interesting and worth picking up!!

Kaora says

Americans need to learn from the Wilson era, that there is a connection between racist presidential leadership and like-minded public response.

This book is so important to read.

I do not know if there is any other field of knowledge which suffers so badly as history from the sheer blind repetitions that occur year after year, and from book to book.

History is a subject that I haven't taken since high school. Because I, like so many others, found it incredibly boring. I grew up in Canada but largely what was taught was the same. I learned the US presidents and how the US and Canada split. But the underlying theme was the same. Canada is great and awesome and look at all the things we have done! But History isn't all sugar and spice and everything nice.

We didn't learn about Columbus in the slave trade, or how he used Indians for dog food, or how he cut their ears and hands off because he wanted gold. We didn't learn Jefferson owned slaves. We didn't learn that American Indian camps were Hitler's inspiration.

And not knowing is a dangerous thing. History has been rewritten to avoid controversy, and in doing that we have removed any lessons we could possibly learn from it and any conclusions we may draw from it by independent thinking.

Our teachers have failed us. Loewen does a great job of asking questions about why we learn what we learn and the dangers we face by modifying our history that is so relevant today.

History, despite its wrenching pain, Cannot be unlived, and if faced With courage, need not be lived again.

I highly recommend everyone reads this.

Cross posted at Kaora's Corner.
