

Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong, James W. Loewen (New York, New York: The New Press) 1995.
Reviewed by Heather J. Parmenter

James Loewen opens *Lies My Teacher Told Me* with “High school students hate history,” offering a rather dismal assessment of how American history is taught in America’s classrooms and the outcomes of teaching methods that rely heavily on textbooks. In his survey of twelve popular American history textbooks, Loewen confirmed what many high school students have suspected all along: the books are boring. He goes on to charge that American history books are Eurocentric, physically gigantic (he estimates that the average history text weighs four and one-half pounds and has 888 pages) and they are riddled with inaccuracies and misleading portrayals of people and events. Throughout his book, Loewen illustrates how American history texts sacrifice opportunities for critical thinking for an emphasis on blind patriotism and optimism. Loewen concludes that the resulting emphasis on facts, dates, and memorization in textbooks prevents students from learning how to interpret the past and from making connections between the present and the past. Without this context, he argues that students are ill-prepared to grapple with today’s societal issues.

Lies My Teacher Told Me dissects the contents of American history texts, exploring how these books present particular topics, events, and people, and what they leave out. Loewen looks closely at specific topics such as the role of Christopher Columbus, the settlement of Plymouth, the French and Indian War (where he reminds the reader that Indians were in fact in that war and that their involvement was based on well-defined political strategies), John Brown’s role in the years leading up to the Civil War, and Abraham Lincoln’s evolving attitudes toward slavery and the rights of African Americans. Loewen illustrates how the emphasis on the accomplishments of wealthy white Americans disenfranchises minority and poor students. This deprives these students of their identity and reinforces the idea among white students that minority or lower-class groups are not important. He faults history textbooks for their lack of explanation of the forces surrounding American poverty, racism, and social stratification, arguing that this is the information that helps students relate to each other and the world around them.

Loewen wraps up *Lies My Teacher Told Me* with a discussion regarding the textbook adoption process and the obstacles that confront history teachers including curriculum constraints, attitudes of school administrators, and parental expectations. With all these outside pressures, history teachers, as well as textbook authors, are forced to avoid the discussion of controversial issues in a subject where controversy is at the heart of the matter. By removing controversy from the discussion of historical events or people, history loses the very thing that makes it compelling and relevant in students’ lives. Loewen argues that by providing an understanding the historical processes that shaped American society, American history education could empower students as citizens to respond to racism, crime, poverty, and gender inequalities, and in doing so, effect change for the better in American society.

Throughout his book, Loewen tries to fill in the gaps left by American history texts by rounding out the interpretation of specific events and offering different perspectives toward historical figures. The reader is treated to a variety of exciting historical anecdotes and narratives, and can evaluate his or her own knowledge of American history, making *Lies My Teacher Told Me* a thoughtful and lively read.