Lies My Teacher Told Me

Author: James W. Loewen

He was born February 6, 1942 in Decatur, Illinois and died August 19, 2021. Loewen was an American sociologist, historian, and author. His father David was a medical director and a physician from an immigrant Mennonite community; his mother, Winifred (Gore), was a librarian and teacher.

In 1963, as a junior in college, Loewen spent a semester in Mississippi, an experience in a different culture that led him to question what he had been taught about U.S. history. He was intrigued by learning about the unique place of 19th-century Chinese immigrants in Mississippi culture. Loewen later earned a PhD in sociology from Harvard Univ. based on his research on Chinese Americans in Mississippi.

Loewen co-edited *Mississippi: Conflict & Change* (1974), a Mississippi history textbook with Charles Sallis. It won the Lillian Smith Book Award for Best Southern Nonfiction in 1975. However, it was rejected for use in Mississippi's public schools by the Mississippi Textbook Purchasing Board on the grounds that it was too controversial and placed too much focus on racial matters.

Loewen challenged the board decision in a federal lawsuit, and he won. The American Library Association considers *Loewen v. Turnipseed* a historic First Amendment case and one of the foundations of the "right to read freely.

Learn more about Loewen's Interests

Loewen wrote a book about sundown towns - all-White neighborhoods in the United States that excluded non-white people through intimidation, violence, or discriminatory local laws. The term originated from signs that warned "colored people" to leave the area by sundown. There is a Library podcast about Burbank's own history that covers this topic: Episode 014: Human Relations and Fair Housing. burbankinfocus episode

Other books by James Lewon

Burbank Public Library only owns *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your High School History Textbook Got Wrong*.

- *The Mississippi Chinese: Between Black and White (second ed.). 1971*
- *Social Science in the Courtroom. 1982*
- *The Truth About Columbus1992*
- *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your High School History Textbook Got Wrong. 1995*
- *Lies Across America: What Our Historic Markers and Monuments Get Wrong. 1999*
- *Sundown Towns. 2005*
- *Teaching What Really Happened: How to Avoid the Tyranny of Textbooks and Get Students Excited About Doing History. 2010*
- *Loewen, James W.; Sebesta, Edward H. (2010). The Confederate and Neo-Confederate Reader: The "Great Truth" about the "Lost Cause". 2010.*
- *Up a Creek, With a Paddle: Tales of Canoeing and Life. 2020*

Map of North America pre-Colonization:

Other books recommended by Burbank Public Library staff:

These Truths by Jill Lepore. Lepore uses the way democracy was defined at the time as the lenes through which she looks at the history of the U.S. Lots of interesting vignettes.

A People's History of the United States by Howard Zinn. United States history told from the perspective of grassroots level people. An antidote to the “great man” version of history.

Guns, Germs, and Steel by Jared Diamond. The work addresses the question of why the peoples of certain continents succeeded in invading other continents and conquering or displacing their peoples.

Discussion Questions for *Lies My Teacher Told Me*:

(from THE NEW PRESS QUESTIONS)

Introduction: Something Has Gone Very Wrong.
Loewen claims history is the least-liked subject in high school in most districts. Is he right? Do you agree with his explanation?

1. **Handicapped by History: The Process of Hero-making.**
   What is "heroification"? (p. 11) Why does Loewen choose Hellen Keller and Woodrow Wilson to illustrate the heroification process? What are the three taboos in textbook publishing, according to Loewen? Why do they exist? (p. 27) Loewen states that when students are making Helen Keller jokes they are "deflating a pretentious symbol that is too good to be real," rather than poking fun at disabilities and disabled people. Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?

2. **1493: The True Importance of Christopher Columbus.**
   How does learning about the European arms race as a factor in Columbus's voyage to the Americas affect your understanding of American history? Loewen advocates for introducing controversy into history curriculum to allow students to weigh evidence and arguments regarding pre-Columbian explorers—including those from Phoenicia, Africa, Siberia, and elsewhere. What effect do you think this kind of historical education would have on students in school and in civic life? (p. 45) Columbus and other members of his expedition left behind firsthand accounts of violent subjugation of Natives into slavery, for both labor and sex, but few textbooks incorporate these facts. Neither do they mention Columbus's contemporaries like Las Casas who opposed slavery, land-grabbing, and forced labor. Why do you think textbooks leave out these matters? Do you agree that they should? (p. 69)

3. **The Truth About the First Thanksgiving**.
   Loewen notes that the epidemics that ravaged Native populations in New England—diseases carried by European Americans—constituted the most important geopolitical event of the early seventeenth century. Is he right? Before reading the book, what did you know about the first Thanksgiving? How has this chapter confirmed or refuted what you previously knew? (pp. 85–88)

4. **Red Eyes.**
   Loewen writes that textbooks speak of the first people to settle in North America as "primitive savages, vaguely Neanderthalian," while European settlers like Columbus are upheld as grand adventurers on a mission. According to Loewen, why do authors assert that earlier settlers were less civilized? (p. 97) Loewen defines "syncretism" as taking elements from two (or more) cultures to form something new. He says it is "how cultures typically change and survive." When Loewen speaks to Native Americans, he emphasizes syncretism as the way out for Native youth to avoid having to "choose" between "Western culture" and "Indian culture," both of which, he points out, are already syncretic. Do you think choosing both is possible?

5. **"Gone With the Wind:" The Invisibility of Racism in American History.**
   Textbooks Loewen claims that textbooks now handle the topic of slavery with "depth and understanding." On what grounds does Loewen make these claims, and why did this change occur? Do you feel this has changed the way slavery is understood in public discourse? Loewen states that there are two legacies of slavery that persist in contemporary American society. Have you observed these at work in your own communities? (pp. 142–146) Loewen points out that few American textbooks include photographs of lynchings or other acts of white violence and terrorism against black people. Do you think they should?

6. **The Land of Opportunity.**
   Most textbooks do not mention the major strikes that labor lost in the late twentieth century, effectively omitting any narrative of labor's diminished power today. Do you agree with Loewen that this makes unions seem anachronistic and may convince workers it is unnecessary to have a voice in the workplace? (pp. 205–206) What losses do students face in school and civic life when history books omit terms like class, social stratification, income distribution, or inequality? What is the risk that textbook authors face if they discuss social class? Why does Loewen take issue with defining everyone as part of the middle class? How would you define middle class? Contrary to the rags-to-riches narratives told in textbooks, Loewen notes that only 3 percent of executives and financiers in America around the turn of the century started as poor immigrants or farm children while 95 percent of them came from upper-class and upper-middle-class backgrounds. Did this surprise you? Why do you think the rags-to-riches story has persisted despite historical fact? (p. 213)

7. **Watching Big Brother: What Textbooks Teach About the Federal Government.** What are the two approaches that college courses and textbooks take when analyzing U.S. actions overseas? What are the effects of these views? (pp. 221–223) Describe the "international good guy" view of the United States government. How does this view correspond with the image of the government that Loewen has constructed over the course of previous chapters? Why does Loewen take issue with the fact that multinational companies like Walmart or Mitsubishi are not mentioned in American textbooks? (p. 224)

8. Down the Memory Hole: The Disappearance of the Recent Past.
What are the challenges that historians and textbook authors face when writing about recent history? What are some advantages? (pp. 260–262)

9. What Is the Result of Teaching History Like This?
Loewen claims that emotion "is the glue that causes history to stick," but rote memorization leaves students "with no resources to understand, accept, or rebut historical referents used in arguments" by political candidates, professors, or journalists. In the current age of "alternative facts," what do you feel would make students more capable and equipped to discern truth from lies? (p. 342) In school, did the narrative of "the exceptional fairness of America" rub you the wrong way? If not, did Loewen's argument convince you that it should have? (p. 344)

10. Afterword: The Future Lies Ahead—and What to Do About Them.
Loewen notes that Lies My Teacher Told Me is not a comprehensive critique of the gaps in history education but rather an approach for all of us to become independent learners who can sift through arguments and evidence and make reasoned judgments. If you were writing your own version of Lies, what would you include? Before reading the book, did you feel your education in history was sufficient and/or historically accurate? If so, did reading the book challenge this? After reading the book, what were the points that Loewen made that you found the most shocking? What were the points that were most affirming?