

Written by Jeff Ignatius
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The cliché says that history is written by the winners, but that's not true when it comes to history *textbooks*.

For the most part, they're not even written by the "authors" whose names grace the covers. Instead, they're written by employees of or freelancers for publishing companies deathly afraid of controversy -- fearful that a passage offensive to virtually any constituency will result in their books not being adopted in schools.

James W. Loewen's *Lies My Teacher Told Me* -- first published in 1995, and revised and updated in 2007 -- documents how badly the most popular high-school textbooks teach American history. As part of the Quad City Arts Super Author program, Loewen will discuss his work at seven programs from April 15 to 17. (For a list of events, click [here](#)

. To read about Chris Crutcher -- the other Super Author visiting our area next week -- see ["Innocence, Ignorance, and Experience: Quad City Arts 'Super Author' Chris Crutcher Discusses His Controversial Young-Adult Literature."](#)

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Loewen has also written *Lies Across America* (which tackles historic-site markers the same way he attacked history textbooks) and *Sundown Towns*, about communities with written or unwritten laws designed to keep them free of racial minorities. And he co-wrote a textbook on Mississippi history that gave him his first insight into the textbook-adoption process that avoids controversy at the expense of truth.

Accessible, passionate, detailed, and often startling, *Lies My Teacher Told Me* documents the errors, lies, and omissions that mar history textbooks -- opening with Helen Keller's ignored radicalism and expanding its scope from there, dealing extensively with society's treatment of Native Americans and blacks and also critiquing the presentation of more modern events, including the wars in Vietnam and Iraq.

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Beyond the details that are wrong, the core narratives in these textbooks are problematic, Loewen said in a phone interview last week. He said history textbooks suggest "unrelenting, automatic progress," the idea that "we started out great and we've been getting better ever since."

They are also sycophantic to the government, he writes in the book: "Textbook authors portray a heroic state, and, like their other heroes, this one is pretty much without blemishes. Such an approach converts textbooks into anti-citizenship manuals -- handbooks for acquiescence."

In addition, Loewen writes that the books take all the vitality and uncertainty out of history: "Taking ideas seriously does not fit with the rhetorical style of textbooks, which presents events so as to make them seem foreordained along a line of constant progress. Including ideas would make history contingent: Things could go either way, and have on occasion. The 'right' people, armed with the 'right' ideas, have not always won. ... This is not textbook style. Textbooks unfold history without real drama or suspense, only melodrama."

The effect is that history becomes dull. "High school students hate history," the introduction to the first edition begins. The author later claims: "American history is full of fantastic and important stories. These stories have the power to spellbind audiences, even audiences of difficult seventh graders. These same stories show what America has been about and are directly relevant to our present society."

The genesis for the book, Loewen said in our interview, was his first teaching job, at the historically black Tougaloo College in Mississippi. A sociologist, Loewen was teaching a social-science seminar, and he asked his students about Reconstruction.

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Sixteen of his 17 students, he recalled, described Reconstruction at "the period right after the Civil War, when blacks took over the government of the Southern states, but they were too soon out of slavery and so they screwed up, and white folks had to take control again."

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The first part of that is true - that Reconstruction followed the Civil War. Beyond that, he writes in *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, "African Americans never took over the Southern states. All governors were white, and almost all legislatures had white majorities throughout Reconstruction. African Americans did not 'mess up'; indeed, Mississippi enjoyed less corrupt government during Reconstruction than in the decades immediately afterward. 'Whites' did not take back control of the state governments; rather, *some white Democrats* used force and fraud to wrest control from biracial Republican coalitions."

Loewen told me that he was aghast, so he visited high-school history classes. "My students had learned exactly what was being taught," he said. Although he visited predominantly black schools with black teachers, they were mostly reading from textbooks filled with lies. This was history as approved by the KKK.

"I concluded that history was being used against my students, literally, and I think it's a national problem," Loewen said.

That pushed him to read the books being taught most frequently in high-school American-history classes. "It was a near-death experience," Loewen joked. "I claim I'm the only American ever to have read 12 high-school American-history textbooks. And then for the new edition ... I read six more of the rascals."

Loewen said that his initial survey of the textbooks revealed that none of them included what he called "the most important single thing in world history certainly since the life of Jesus Christ": "The most horrifying omission was the plague -- what's euphemistically called the 'Columbian exchange,'" Loewen said. "The key difference that Christopher Columbus made and still makes to us is he started the process of going across the ocean and conquering other people on the other side, which started the process of stuff flowing across the ocean" This includes everything from ideas to precious metals to livestock.

"Perhaps the most important of all were the disease germs that came mostly from east to west" that wiped out large portions of the native populations of North and South America, Loewen said. "The textbooks didn't mention it. They pretty much didn't mention it."

History, by the Book: James W. Loewen Talks About "Lies My Teacher Told Me," April 15-17

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Some noted the plague but didn't tie it to the "Old World" settlers or describe the extent to which it decimated native populations.

That error has largely been rectified in newer textbooks, Loewen said, although he credits the 500th anniversary of Columbus' voyage more than his book for the change. "I did not have much hope of changing the textbooks," he said.

Even though he didn't expect textbooks to improve, the first edition of *Lies My Teacher Told Me* was at risk of being *considered* obsolete, Loewen said.

"We Americans do have this touching belief in progress, ... and it applies to textbooks," he said. "My book was in danger of not being believed anymore, because they must have fixed the textbooks."

Not true, Loewen found in preparing the second edition. While the books have grown -- to an average length of 1,152 pages -- they still make almost all of the same errors.

"Except for the change in Columbus ... they haven't gotten better," he said. "In a couple ways, they've actually gotten worse."

Loewen devotes one chapter in his book to the systemic problems that result in bad textbooks, and it's a dispiriting lesson. Basically, all of the problems detailed in the previous 11 chapters can be explained by looking at the textbook-adoption process. Essentially, textbook publishers want to be bought by as many states and school boards as possible, so they neuter history texts to avoid offense.

Authors "pre-censor themselves," he said. "The publishers are very cautious."

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For example, every textbook treads softly around President Franklin W. Pierce, even though Loewen called him the second-worst president in American history. "No textbook says he's incompetent," he said. "Why? Well, they don't want to not get adopted in New Hampshire," the president's home state.

Nearly half the states adopt textbooks statewide, so publishers need to appeal to the bureaucrats who make those decisions. (Illinois and Iowa allow school districts to make those choices. For more information on textbooks used locally, see the [sidebar](#).) And whether the decisions are made at the state or local level, those reviewing textbooks rarely if ever actually *read* them, Loewen said.

What's disappointing about *Lies My Teacher Told Me* is that Loewen doesn't offer a systemic solution for a systemic problem. His prescription in the book is that teachers should stop relying on textbooks, and prompt their students to question and research what they're reading.

That would suggest that we're stuck with inadequate history textbooks.

"What I hoped my book would do was change teaching," Loewen said. "By gosh I think it's done that." But he admitted that "I don't know how to get textbook publishers to do better."

He said he's an optimist, however, and he expects that a new, truer textbook will one day shatter the current template. "Books are clones of each other, and a different textbook would get a lot of attention," he said. "If it was good, and if it was shorter, and if it was interesting, it would rapidly garner a substantial market share. And once that happened, then maybe another textbook publisher would try to imitate *that* book."

He also said that school districts could make a difference by rejecting the typical textbooks -- which retail for between \$90 and \$110 -- and instead teaching from a 300-page paperback, such as those used for people trying to become American citizens. "It gets the basics right," he said, and would force teachers to engage with the subject matter. "A few school systems doing that would set a new paradigm, and then teachers would teach differently," he said. "They wouldn't just cover the book for the whole school year They would have to supplement. They'd have to get students doing projects and having debates and doing all kinds of exciting

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things."

For more information about James W. Loewen, visit the author's Web site at UVM.edu/~jloewen

For a list of Quad City Arts Super Author events, visit QuadCityArts.com/literarysuperauthorevents.asp

Loewen said he wants to document all of the United States' "sundown towns" on an interactive online map. If you know of one, contact the author at jloewen@uvm.edu.

Sidebar: High-School History Textbooks in the Quad Cities

Although both Iowa and Illinois allow local school districts to make decisions on textbooks, Illinois does have the [Illinois Textbook Loan Program](#), which provides a major incentive for districts to choose textbooks approved by the state.

Ken Jacke, director of instruction/assessment, outlined in an e-mail the process in Rock Island/Milan School District #41: "The textbook-adoption process usually starts with a review of the current text being used. If deficiencies/inadequacies are found (in social studies/history, usually this means outdated), a committee is formed including teachers and administrators to research texts from different vendors. The process is somewhat closed in some respects, since we base our selection process on the free textbook lists that are screened and furnished to us by the State of Illinois. ... Once a recommendation is received from the selection committee (usually taking at least several months of research and study), the selection is then screened by the Curriculum Cabinet as to alignment with state standards and district power standards, cost, etc. If the Curriculum Cabinet agrees with the recommendation of the selection committee, a recommendation is then made to our superintendent and school board for purchase. If the Curriculum Cabinet does not agree, then the recommendation is sent back to the selection committee for review and possible alteration."

The *River Cities' Reader* surveyed Quad Cities school districts to find out their basic high-school American-history textbooks:

Bettendorf: *American Anthem* (not discussed in *Lies My Teacher Told Me*).

Davenport: *America: Pathways to the Present* (discussed in *Lies My Teacher Told Me*).

Moline: *American Anthem* (regular history, not discussed in *Lies My Teacher Told Me*), *America Past & Present* (AP history, not discussed in *Lies My Teacher Told Me*).

Rock Island/Milan: *The Americans* (discussed in *Lies My Teacher Told Me*).

United Township High School: *The American Nation*. (a newer edition of which is discussed in *Lies My Teacher Told Me*).