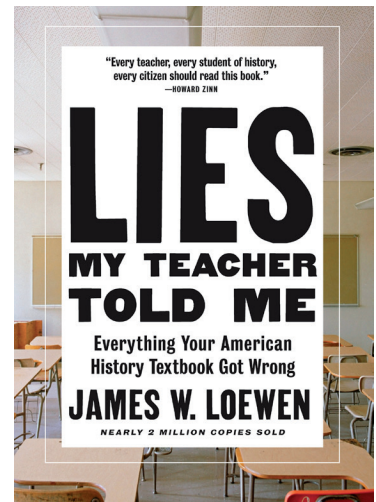


# The New Press Reading Group Guide

## *Lies My Teacher Told Me*

*Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*

by James W. Loewen



## 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?

Do you think Loewen is right in his diagnosis of why textbooks have omitted important historical truths about Columbus?

Do Loewen’s corrections of the Columbus story threaten certain American narratives that are still alive today?

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? Who might such omissions alienate? Who might including this material alienate? (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? What are the implications of this kind of history? (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.” Had you heard of the term? Might learning it help decrease Americans’ ethnocentrism?

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. What are they and what ideology does Loewen state is tied to these legacies? Have you observed these at work in your own communities? (pp. 142–146)

Loewen describes his shocking encounter with students discussing their opinion of the Reconstruction era. Did this anecdote surprise you? Why or why not?

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. John Brown and Abraham Lincoln: The Invisibility of Antiracism in American History Textbooks**

How is John Brown remembered today? What does this say about the current political climate in the United States and the viability of antiracism?

Textbooks often cite states' rights as a key reason for secession. According to Loewen, this is flatly wrong. What is the present-day view on the origins of the Confederacy? What mythology was the Confederacy founded on?

## **7. 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)

Have the recent teacher strikes and *Janus* ruling made you more curious about the history of workers' rights in the United States?

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)

## **8. 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)

### **9. See No Evil: Choosing Not to Look at the War in Vietnam**

Before reading this chapter, what did you know of the Vietnam War? Had you seen these photographs? Knowing what you know now, and having seen or revisited these photographs, has your opinion on the war and the politics of it changed?

If you are familiar with photographs and stories of the Vietnam War, how do you feel about these being omitted from textbooks? What do you feel present-day students are missing out on?

Why might publishers avoid including photographs of the Vietnam War in particular?

How has the mystification of the Vietnam War informed discussions of contemporary war and violence in the United States, according to Loewen? Have you observed this personally, regarding discussion of the war in Iraq?

### **10. 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)

### **11. Progress Is Our Most Important Product**

Loewen discusses the American “faith in progress,” in particular regarding the usage of the terms “developed” and “developing nations” in textbooks. Did Loewen’s critique on progress and development challenge your notion of history? (p. 284)

How does Loewen suggest a change in history textbooks could affect the current climate crisis? (pp. 290–294)

### **12. Why Is History Taught Like This?**

Loewen outlines multiple sources for the inaccuracies of the American textbook, including publishers, authors, and local and state curriculum adoption boards. Based on the arguments Loewen provided, which of these sources do you find most credible and why? (pp. 307–308)

### **13. 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)

### **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?

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**James W. Loewen** is the bestselling and award-winning author of *Lies Across America*, *Lies My Teacher Told Me About Christopher Columbus*, and *Sundown Towns*, all published by The New Press. He also wrote *Teaching What Really Happened* and *The Mississippi Chinese: Between Black and White* and edited *The Confederate and Neo-Confederate Reader*. He has won the American Book Award, the Oliver Cromwell Cox Award for Distinguished Anti-Racist Scholarship, and the Spirit of America Award from the National Council for the Social Studies. In 2012, the American Sociological Association gave him its Cox-Johnson-Frazier Award; he was the first white person to win this honor. Loewen is professor emeritus of sociology at the University of Vermont and lives in Washington, D.C.