

## Book Reviews

While there is not much new in some aspects of Lincoln's life, such as his bouts of melancholy, White provides a great many intimate details in a wonderful, flowing narrative. In this regard, this biography surpasses Donald's largely academic work. But make no mistake, *A. Lincoln* is not just for the casual reader. It should be on the shelves of every high school and college library in America.

One of the book's themes is Lincoln's personal and intellectual development, from the limited opportunities in the frontier wilderness of Kentucky, Indiana, and Illinois to his iconic status as America's greatest president. Struggles are seen as the key to Lincoln's maturation—whether they were private, including family, women, and religion, or public, the Civil War. For example, Lincoln became estranged from his father yet doted over his own children. He never joined a church nor left a written statement of conversion yet believed in the divine will of God and mentioned God fourteen times and cited four biblical passages in his second inaugural address. With only a few weeks of military experience and seeing no actual combat during the Black Hawk War, Lincoln became the nation's first modern commander-in-chief during the Civil War, transforming and enlarging the powers of the executive branch. And at a time when the tide had turned and Union victory seemed assured, Lincoln displayed reserve and humility, avoiding the pronoun "I" in the 272 words of the Gettysburg Address. Thus, White presents Lincoln as something of a paradox: humble yet confident, curious yet pragmatic, compassionate yet resolute, common yet extraordinary. In short, he was a simple yet complex man whose moral integrity became his life's foundation.

White states that Lincoln is "one of the few Americans whose life and words bridge time." Past generations have attempted to define him, claim him. Ronald White has provided the twenty-first century with the opportunity to do the same. *A. Lincoln* can be summed up best by recasting Edwin Stanton's April 15, 1865, final declaration of the slain president this way—It belongs to the ages.

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**James W. Loewen. *Teaching What Really Happened: How to Avoid the Tyranny of Textbooks & Get Students Excited About Doing History*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2009. Pp. 264. Paper, \$21.95; ISBN 978-0-8077-4991-3.**

Since 1995, James W. Loewen's *Lies My Teacher Told Me* has enjoyed phenomenal success in both sales and influence. Nobody who has read it can look unskeptically at a history textbook again. Loewen's *Lies Across America* (1999) proved a worthy successor, inviting readers to look critically at the historical plaques and monuments that litter the American landscape. More recently, Loewen turned his attention to the forgotten heritage of structural racism in small-town America, in his 2005 book *Sundown Towns*. Now, in *Teaching What Really Happened*, Loewen

promises in the subtitle that he will explain *How to Avoid the Tyranny of Textbooks and Get Students Excited About Doing History*. Loewen has an ambitious goal, and he sets out to fulfill the promise of the subtitle in a volume that appears in the Multicultural Education Series of the Teachers College Press, which suggests another major goal for this book, that of incorporating a more robust multicultural agenda into K-12 history. Neither aim will be surprising to anyone familiar with Loewen's work, but this time, he attempts to lay out for readers a blueprint of sorts for connecting the two.

In the first part of the book, in which Loewen lays out his philosophy and goals, he assures teachers that they need not succumb to pressure to "cover" everything in the text (or that might be on the tests), and urges them not to lose sight of the forest for the trees, much less, as he puts it, the "twigs" of individual factoids. Rather, he suggests, they should select 30-50 subjects to address in a school year, and ignore the rest. He assails standardized tests and counsels teachers to set their own objectives for their classes, with an emphasis on historiography and critical thinking. So far, so good. Although he demurs on the idea of prescribing what teachers teach, the remainder of the book models, in six detailed chapters on six subjects, the ways in which he argues that teachers can "cover" topics critically, while inspiring students to a love of history.

But much of the book is, in fact, a script for a history that is supposedly relevant to a multicultural America, and the line between model and prescription is blurred. The subjects Loewen discusses are the timing and means of the arrival of the first people in America; why Europe came to dominate the world; the myth that Indians sold Manhattan to the Dutch for \$24 worth of beads; slavery; the causes of the Civil War; and the era of lynching. Most of these are, as Loewen argues, important and potentially of great interest to students, or at least to those in high school. But this section of the book, ironically, reads like a textbook, and an especially opinionated and weakly-documented one at that, supported only by poorly-developed chapter bibliographies.

To be fair, perhaps Loewen's intention really is to inspire and excite teachers, not to instruct them, in which case only time will tell whether his teaching suggestions actually do serve to "get students excited about doing history." Loewen overestimates the extent to which most teachers are willing and able to risk their livelihoods by shifting their teaching focus from the state "twig tests" he so rightly derides. Even the best teachers have difficulty getting around crowded state curricula and exhausting testing regimens. Further, the anecdotal evidence Loewen offers for the success of his approach suggests that what excites students most is iconoclasm, pointing out that the chance to prove teachers and other adults wrong is irresistible. While that is true of teenagers (assuming they know the myths), it isn't true of elementary school students, who (in the right hands and with the right topics) have an innate love of history, although it would help if we taught them about Egyptians, Romans, and Vikings, rather than Teddy Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan.

As an historian, I have always enjoyed a bit of iconoclasm, and I used it to my great advantage in the classroom, for example, by starting my discussion of the American Revolution with clips from Mel Gibson's *The Patriot*. But Loewen's

relentlessly iconoclastic approach misrepresents what history is. Critical thinking about received wisdom is a central part of an historical education, but that critical thinking must extend to a rigorous examination of one's own views. History as academic discipline is not about shaping the evidence to one's political views, but about following the evidence in the pursuit of truth, no matter how unpalatable that evidence proves. As Loewen himself observes, professors prefer their students arrive in college unprepared because "social studies," with its cheerily triumphal perspective, has little or nothing to do with history as a subject. Loewen might be a sociologist, but he understands this. However, what he actually advocates is something else. The title alone, *Teaching What Really Happened*, ducks the reality that history is not what happened, but an ongoing argument about the interpretation of the past. Loewen's embrace of the sociological term *verstehende* does not emphasize that historians, as they participate in this argument, must try to emphasize with all historical players, not merely those with whom they sympathize. Do we learn more by empathizing with the victims or with the victimizers, with slaves or slave owners?

By purveying history as identity politics, Loewen thus diminishes the discipline. At the same time, by making himself an easy target for conservatives in this book, he risks marginalizing efforts to retrieve history from the hands of those who would prefer it remain a bloodless exercise in memorizing factoids. Historical education is fundamentally about being inspired by content taught with clear-eyed passion and style: There is no indication in this book that a teacher could offer a subject like military strategy or traditional political history, interest students in it, and get them to think critically, and yet that can and does happen.

Those who hope for Loewen to fulfill the promise in the subtitle might be disappointed. As a resource, assuming that teachers wish to tackle the topics Loewen describes, the book is problematic. Good teaching is not done to a script, but depends on the knowledge and enthusiasm of great teachers who do their best to eschew dogma of any kind. On a practical level, the suggested activities might be too time-consuming and too lacking in content and clear outcomes if teachers are to have any hope of dealing with 30-50 subjects that Loewen suggests. The sparse chapter bibliographies frequently cite Loewen's earlier works and little else, and provide an inadequate starting point for teachers and students. While this book, like all of Loewen's critiques, provides some food for thought for working teachers, those seeking texts for a college course in historical methods might be best advised to stick with *Lies My Teacher Told Me*. There, Loewen was on surer ground, critiquing textbooks rather than trying to write one.