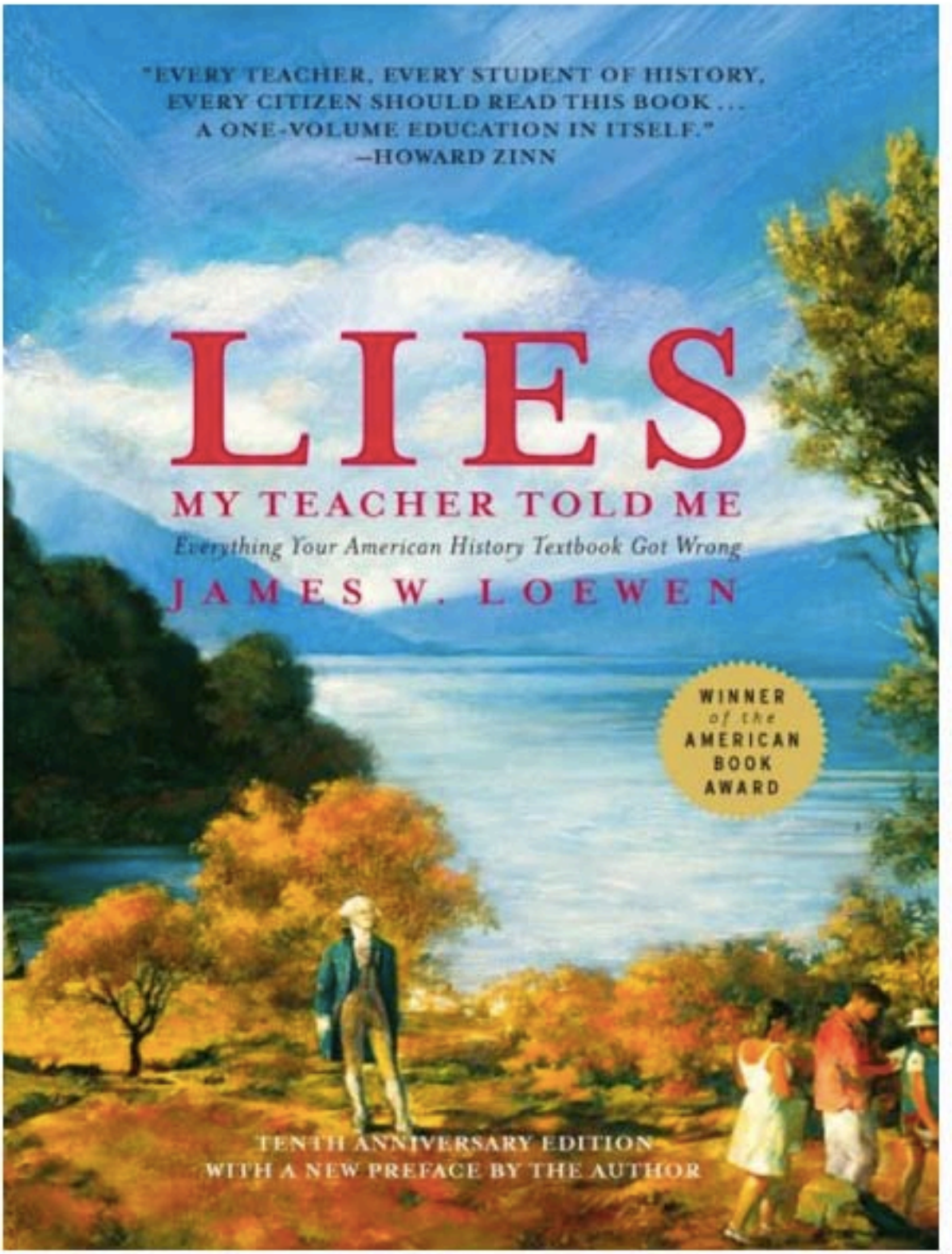
"EVERY TEACHER, EVERY STUDENT OF HISTORY, EVERY CITIZEN SHOULD READ THIS BOOK . . . A ONE-VOLUME EDUCATION IN ITSELF."
—HOWARD ZINN
LIES
MY TEACHER TOLD ME
Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong
JAMES W. LOEWEN
WINNER of the AMERICAN BOOK AWARD
TENTH ANNIVERSARY EDITION
WITH A NEW PREFACE BY THE AUTHOR

INTRODUCTION

SOMETHING HAS GONE VERY WRONG

It would be better not to know so many things than to know so many things that are not so.

—JOSH BILLINGS[1]

American history is longer, larger, more various, more beautiful, and more terrible than anything anyone has ever said about it.

—JAMES BALDWIN[2]

Concealment of the historical truth is a crime against the people.

—GEN. PETRO G. GRIGORENKO, SAMIZDAT LETTER TO A HISTORY JOURNAL, c. 1975, USSR[3]

Those who don't remember the past are condemned to repeat the eleventh grade.

—JAMES W. LOEWEN

HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS hate history. When they list their favorite subjects, history invariably comes in last. Students consider history "the most irrelevant" of twenty-one subjects commonly taught in high school. *Bor-r-ring* is the adjective they apply to it. When students can, they avoid it, even though most students get higher grades in history than in math, science, or English.[4] Even when they are forced to take classes in history, they repress what they learn, so every year or two another study decries what our seventeen-year-olds don't know.[5]

Even male children of affluent white families think that history as taught in high school is "too neat and rosy." [6] African American, Native American, and Latino students view history with a special dislike. They also learn history especially poorly. Students of color do only slightly worse than white students in mathematics. If you'll pardon my grammar, nonwhite students do more worse in English and most worse in history.[7] Something intriguing is going on here: surely history is not more difficult for minorities than trigonometry or Faulkner. Students don't even know they are alienated, only that they "don't *like* social studies" or "aren't any good at history." In college, most students of color give history departments a wide berth.

Many history teachers perceive the low morale in their classrooms. If they have a lot of time, light domestic responsibilities, sufficient resources, and a flexible principal, some

teachers respond by abandoning the overstuffed textbooks and reinventing their American history courses. All too many teachers grow disheartened and settle for less. At least dimly aware that their students are not requiting their own love of history, these teachers withdraw some of their energy from their courses. Gradually they end up going through the motions, staying ahead of their students in the textbooks, covering only material that will appear on the next test.

College teachers in most disciplines are happy when their students have had significant exposure to the subject before college. Not teachers in history. History professors in college routinely put down high school history courses. A colleague of mine calls his survey of American history "Iconoclasm I and II," because he sees his job as disabusing his charges of what they learned in high school to make room for more accurate information. In no other field does this happen. Mathematics professors, for instance, know that non-Euclidean geometry is rarely taught in high school, but they don't assume that Euclidean geometry was *mistaught*. Professors of English literature don't presume that *Romeo and Juliet* was misunderstood in high school. Indeed, history is the only field in which the more courses students take, the stupider they become.

Perhaps I do not need to convince you that American history is important. More than any other topic, it is about *us*. Whether one deems our present society wondrous or awful or both, history reveals how we arrived at this point. Understanding our past is central to our ability to understand ourselves and the world around us. We need to know our history, and according to sociologist C. Wright Mills, we know we do.[8]

Outside of school, Americans show great interest in history. Historical novels, whether by Gore Vidal (*Lincoln*, *Burr*, et al.) or Dana Fuller Ross (*Idaho!*, *Utah!*, *Nebraska!*, *Oregon!*, *Missouri!*, and on! and on!) often become bestsellers. The National Museum of American History is one of the three big draws of the Smithsonian Institution. The series *The Civil War* attracted new audiences to public television. Movies based on historical incidents or themes are a continuing source of fascination, from *Birth of a Nation* through *Gone With the Wind* to *Dances with Wolves*, *JFK*, and *Saving Private Ryan*. Not history itself but traditional American history courses turn students off.

Our situation is this: 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. American audiences, even young ones, need and want to know about their national past. Yet they sleep through the classes that present it.

What has gone wrong?

We begin to get a handle on this question by noting that textbooks dominate American history courses more than they do any other subject. When I first came across that finding in the educational research literature, I was dumbfounded. I would have guessed almost anything else—plane geometry, for instance. After all, it would be hard for students to interview elderly residents of their community about plane geometry, or to learn about it from library books or old newspaper files or the thousands of photographs and documents at the Library of Congress website. All these resources —and more—are relevant to American history. Yet it is in history classrooms, not geometry, where students spend more time reading from their textbooks, answering the fifty-five boring questions at the end of each chapter, going over those answers aloud, and so on.[9]

Between the glossy covers, American history textbooks are full of information—overly full. These books are huge. The specimens in my original collection of a dozen of the most popular textbooks averaged four and a half pounds in weight and 888 pages in length. To my astonishment, during the last twelve years they grew even larger. In 2006 I surveyed six new books. (Owing to publisher consolidation, there no longer are twelve.) Three are new editions of "legacy textbooks," descended from books originally published half a century ago; three are "new new" books.[10] These six new books average 1,150 pages and almost six pounds! I never imagined they would get bigger. I had thought—hoped?—that the profusion of resources on the Web would make it obvious that these behemoths are obsolete. The Web did not exist when the earlier batch of textbooks came into being. In those days, for history textbooks to be huge made some sense: students in Bogue Chitto, Mississippi, say, or Beaver Dam, Wisconsin, had few resources in American history other than their textbooks. No longer: today every school that has a phone line is connected to the Web. There students can browse hundreds of thousands of primary sources including newspaper articles, the census, historic photographs, and original documents, as well as secondary interpretations from scholars, citizens, other students, and rascals and liars. No longer is there any need to supply students with nine months' reading between the covers of one book, written or collected by a single set of authors.

The new books are so huge that they may endanger their readers. Each of the 1,104 pages in *The American Journey* is wider and taller than any page in the twelve already enormous high school textbooks in my original sample. Surely at 5.6 pounds, *Journey* is the heaviest book ever assigned to middle-school children in the history of American education. (At more than $84, it may also be the most expensive.) A new nonprofit organization, Backpack Safety America, has formed, spurred by chiropractors and other health care professionals. Its mission is "to reduce the weight of textbooks and backpacks." In the meantime, pending that accomplishment, chiropractors are visiting schools teaching proper posture and

lifting techniques.[11]

Publishers, too, realize that the books look formidably large, so they try to disguise their total page count by creative pagination. *Journey*, for example, has 1,104 pages but manages to come in under a thousand by using separate numbering for thirty-two pages at the front of the book and seventy-two pages at the end. Students aren't fooled. They know these are by far the heaviest volumes to lug home, the largest to hold in the lap, and the hardest to get excited about.

Editors also realize how daunting these books appear to the poor children who must read them, so they provide elaborate introductions and enticements, beginning with the table of contents. For *The Americans*, for example, a 1,358-page textbook from McDougal Littell weighing in at almost seven pounds, the table of contents runs twenty-two pages. It is profusely illustrated and has little colored banners with titles like "Geography Spotlight," "Daily Life," and "Historical Spotlight." Right after it comes a three-page layout, "Themes in History" and "Themes in Geography." Then come hints on how to read the complex, disjointed thirty- to forty-page chapters. "Each chapter begins with a two-page chapter opener," it says. "Study the chapter opener to help you get ready to read."

"Oh, no," groan students. "Nothing good will come of this." They know that no one has to tell them how to get ready to read a Harry Potter book or any other book that is readable. Something different is going on here.

Unfortunately, having a still bigger book only spurs conscientious teachers to spend even more time making sure students read it and deal with its hundreds of minute questions and tasks. This makes history courses even more boring. Publishers then try to make their books more interesting by inserting various special aids to give them eye appeal. But these gimmicks have just the opposite effect. Many are completely useless, except to the marketing department. Consider the little colored banners in the table of contents of *The Americans* . No student would ever need to have a list of the "Geography Spotlights" in this book. One spotlight happens to be "The Panama Canal," but the student seeking information on the canal would find it by looking in the index in the back, not by surmising that it might be a Geography Spotlight, then finding that list within the twenty-two pages of contents in the front, and then scanning it to see if *Panama Canal* appears. The only possible use for these bannered lists is for the sales rep to point to when trying to get a school district to adopt the book.

The books are huge so that no publisher will lose an adoption because a book has left out a detail of concern to a particular geographical area or group. Textbook authors seem compelled to include a paragraph about every U.S. president, even William Henry Harrison and Millard Fillmore. Then there are the review pages at the end of each chapter. *The*

Americans, to take one example, highlights 840 "Main Ideas Within Its Main Text." In addition, the text contains 310 "Skill Builders," 890 "Terms and Names," 466 "Critical Thinking" questions, and still other projects within its chapters. And that's not counting the hundreds of terms and questions in the two-page reviews that follow each chapter. At year's end, no student can remember 840 main ideas, not to mention 890 terms and countless other factoids. So students and teachers fall back on one main idea: to memorize the terms for the test on that chapter, then forget them to clear the synapses for the next chapter. No wonder so many high school graduates cannot remember in which century the Civil War was fought![12]

Students are right: the books are boring.[13] The stories that history textbooks tell are predictable; every problem has already been solved or is about to be solved. Textbooks exclude conflict or real suspense. They leave out anything that might reflect badly upon our national character. When they try for drama, they achieve only melodrama, because readers know that everything will turn out fine in the end. "Despite setbacks, the United States overcame these challenges," in the words of one textbook. Most authors of history textbooks don't even try for melodrama. Instead, they write in a tone that if heard aloud might be described as "mumbling lecturer." No wonder students lose interest.

Authors almost never use the present to illuminate the past. They might ask students to consider gender roles in contemporary society as a means of prompting students to think about what women did and did not achieve in the suffrage movement or the more recent women's movement. They might ask students to prepare household budgets for the families of a janitor and a stockbroker as a means of prompting thinking about labor unions and social classes in the past and present. They might, but they don't. The present is not a source of information for writers of history textbooks.

Conversely, textbooks seldom use the past to illuminate the present. They portray the past as a simpleminded morality play. "Be a good citizen" is the message that textbooks extract from the past. "You have a proud heritage. Be all that you can be. After all, look at what the United States has accomplished." While there is nothing wrong with optimism, it can become something of a burden for students of color, children of working-class parents, girls who notice the dearth of female historical figures, or members of any group that has not achieved socioeconomic success. The optimistic approach prevents any understanding of failure other than blaming the victim. No wonder children of color are alienated. After a thousand pages, bland optimism gets pretty off-putting for everyone.

Textbooks in American history stand in sharp contrast to other teaching materials. Why are history textbooks so bad?

Nationalism is one of the culprits. Textbooks are often muddled by the conflicting desires to promote inquiry and to indoctrinate blind patriotism. "Take a look in your history book, and you'll see why we should be proud" goes an anthem often sung by high school glee clubs. But we need not even look inside.[14] The titles themselves tell the story: *The Great Republic, The American Pageant, Land of Promise, Triumph of the American Nation.*[15] Such titles differ from the titles of all other textbooks students read in high school or college. Chemistry books, for example, are called *Chemistry* or *Principles of Chemistry*, not *Triumph of the Molecule.* And you can tell history textbooks just from their covers, graced as they are with American flags, bald eagles, the Washington Monument.

None of the facts is remembered, because they are presented simply as one damn thing after another. While textbook authors tend to include most of the trees and all too many twigs, they neglect to give readers even a glimpse of what they might find memorable: the forests. Textbooks stifle meaning by suppressing causation. Students exit history textbooks without having developed the ability to think coherently about social life.

Even though the books bulge with detail, even though the courses are so busy they rarely reach 1960, our teachers and our textbooks still leave out most of what we need to know about the American past. And despite their emphasis on facts, some of the factoids they present are flatly wrong or unverifiable. Errors often go uncorrected, partly because the history profession does not bother to review high school textbooks. In sum, startling errors of omission and distortion mar American histories. History can be imagined as a pyramid. At its base are the millions of primary sources—the plantation records, city directories, census data, speeches, songs, photographs, newspaper articles, diaries, and letters that document times past. Based on these primary materials, historians write secondary works—books and articles on subjects ranging from deafness on Martha's Vineyard to Grant's tactics at Vicksburg. Historians produce hundreds of these works every year, many of them splendid. In theory, a few historians, working individually or in teams, then synthesize the secondary literature into tertiary works—textbooks covering all phases of U.S. history.

In practice, however, it doesn't happen that way. Instead, history textbooks are clones of each other. The first thing editors do when recruiting new authors is to send them a half-dozen examples of the competition. Often a textbook is written not by the authors whose names grace its cover, but by minions deep in the bowels of the publisher's offices. When historians do write textbooks, they risk snickers from their colleagues—tinged with envy, but snickers nonetheless: "Why are you devoting time to pedagogy rather than original research?"

The result is not happy for textbook scholarship. Many his-

tory textbooks list up-to-the-minute secondary sources in their bibliographies, yet the narratives remain totally traditional—unaffected by recent research.[16]

What would we think of a course in poetry in which students never read a poem? The editor's voice in an English literature textbook might be as dull as the voice in a history textbook, but at least in the English textbook the voice stills when the book presents original works of literature. The omniscient narrator's voice of history textbooks insulates students from the raw materials of history. Rarely do authors quote speeches, songs, diaries, or letters. Students need not be protected from this material. They can just as well read one paragraph from William Jennings Bryan's "Cross of Gold" speech as read *American Adventures*' two paragraphs *about* it.

Textbooks also keep students in the dark about the nature of history. History is furious debate informed by evidence and reason. Textbooks encourage students to believe that history is facts to be learned. "We have not avoided controversial issues," announces one set of textbook authors; "instead, we have tried to offer reasoned judgments" on them—thus removing the controversy! Because textbooks employ such a godlike tone, it never occurs to most students to question them. "In retrospect I ask myself, why *didn't* I think to ask, for example, who *were* the original inhabitants of the Americas, what was *their* life like, and how did it change when Columbus arrived," wrote a student of mine in 1991. "However, back then everything was presented as if it were the full picture," she continued, "so I never thought to doubt that it was."

As a result of all this, most high school seniors are hamstrung in their efforts to analyze controversial issues in our society. (I know because I encounter these students the next year as college freshmen.) We've got to do better. Five-sixths of all Americans never take a course in American history beyond high school. What our citizens "learn" in high school forms much of what they know about our past.

This book includes eleven chapters of amazing stories—some wonderful, some ghastly—in American history, including a new chapter on our two Iraq wars and the continuing "war on terrorism." Arranged in roughly chronological order, these chapters do not relate mere details but events and processes with important consequences. Yet most textbooks leave out or distort these events and processes. I know, because for twenty years I have been lugging around eighteen textbooks, taking them seriously as works of history and ideology, studying what they say and don't say, and trying to figure out why. I chose these eighteen as representing the range of textbooks available for American history courses.[17] These books, which are listed (with full citations) in the Appendix, have been my window into the world of what high school students carry home, read, memorize, and forget. In addition,

I have spent many hours observing high school history classes in Mississippi, Vermont, and the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area, and more hours talking with high school history teachers.

Chapter 12 analyzes the process of textbook creation and adoption in an attempt to explain what causes textbooks to be as bad as they are. I must confess an interest here: I once co-wrote a history textbook. *Mississippi: Conflict and Change* was the first revisionist state history textbook in America. Although the book won the Lillian Smith Award for "best nonfiction about the South" in 1975, Mississippi rejected it for use in public schools. In turn, three local school systems, my coauthor, and I sued the state textbook board. In April 1980 *Loewen et al. v. Turnipseed et al.* resulted in a sweeping victory on the basis of the First and Fourteenth Amendments. The experience taught me firsthand more than most writers or publishers would ever want to know about the textbook adoption process. I also learned that not all the blame can be laid at the doorstep of the adoption agencies.

Chapter 13 looks at the effects of using standard American history textbooks. It shows that the books actually make students stupid. Finally, an afterword cites distortions and omissions undiscussed in earlier chapters and recommends ways that teachers can teach and students can learn American history more honestly. It is offered as an inoculation program of sorts against the future lies we are otherwise sure to encounter.

As a sociologist, I am reminded constantly of the power of the past. Although each of us comes into the world *de novo,* we are not really new creatures. We arrive into a social slot, born not only to a family but also a religion, community, and, of course, a nation and a culture. Sociologists understand the power of social structure and culture to shape not only our path through the world but also our understanding of that path and that world. Yet we often have to expend much energy trying to get students to see the influence on their lives of the social structure and culture they inherit. Not understanding their past renders many Americans incapable of thinking effectively about our present and future. If our journey together through this book will make the realities of our past more apparent, then this "most irrelevant" subject—American history—might become more relevant to you. At least, that's my hope.