

"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

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LIES MY TEACHER TOLD ME

EVERYTHING YOUR AMERICAN
HISTORY TEXTBOOK GOT WRONG

James W. Loewen



THE NEW PRESS

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*Dedicated to all American history teachers
who teach against their textbooks
(and their ranks are growing)*

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TO THE FIRST EDITION

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TO THE SECOND EDITION

AS I ENDURED THE MORAL and intellectual torture of subjecting myself to six new high school American history textbooks in 2006-07, the following assisted in important ways: Cindy King, David Luchs, Susan Luchs, Natalie Martin, Jyothi Natarajan, the Life Cycle Institute and Department of Sociology at Catholic University of America, and Joey the guide dog in training. Many of the folks thanked for their assistance with the first edition—including those at The New Press—also helped this time. So did Amanda Patten at Simon & Schuster.

INTRODUCTION

TO THE SECOND EDITION

I really like your book, Lies My Teacher Told Me. I've been using it to heckle my history teacher from the back of the room.

—HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT¹

I just wanted to let you know that I don't consider Lies My Teacher Told Me outdated; I really don't see much improvement in textbooks at all!

—HIGH SCHOOL TEACHER, SHERWOOD, AR²

I was expecting some liberal bullshit, but I thought it was right on.

—WORKER, BAYER PHARMACEUTICALS, BERKELEY, CA³

READERS NEW TO *Lies My Teacher Told Me* should go straight to page one. This introduction tells old friends (and enemies?) how this edition differs from the first and why it came to be. Since it came to be largely because reader response to the first edition was so positive, the introduction seems self-congratulatory to me—another reason to skip it. *Lies My Teacher Told Me* does take readers on a voyage of discovery through our past, however, and some readers may want to learn of the reactions of fellow passengers.

From the first day, readers made *Lies* a success. As its name implies, The New Press was a small fledgling publisher without an advertising budget; word of mouth caused *Lies* to sell. The book first created a stir on the West Coast. “Although the book is considered controversial by some, libraries in Alameda County [California] can’t keep it on their shelves,” reported an article at California State University at Hayward. A high school student wrote to the editor of the *San Francisco Examiner*: “I was a poor (D-plus) student in history until I read *People’s History of the United States* and *Lies*

My Teacher Told Me. After reading those two books, my GPA in history rose to 3.8 and stayed there. If you truly want students to take an interest in American history, then stop lying to them.”⁴ An early review in the *San Francisco Chronicle* called *Lies* “an extremely convincing plea for truth in education,” and my book spent several weeks on the Bay Area bestseller list in 1995.⁵

Independent bookstores—the kind whose owners and clerks read books and whose customers ask them for recommendations—spread the buzz across North America. “Turns American history upside down,” wrote “Joan” of Toronto in 1995 in a column called “Best New Books Recommended by Leading Independent Bookstores.” “A landmark book,” she went on, “a must read, not only for teachers of history and those who write it, but for any thinking individual.”⁶ *The Nation*, a national magazine, said that *Lies* “contains so much history that it ends up functioning not just as a critique but also as a kind of counter-textbook that retells the story of the American past.” Soon *Lies* reached the bestseller lists in Boston; Burlington, Vermont; and other cities. It was also a bestseller for the History and Quality Paperback Book Clubs. In paperback, *Lies* has gone through more than thirty printings at Simon & Schuster. From the launch of [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com), *Lies* has been the sales leader in its category (historiography). So, as far as I can tell, *Lies* is the bestselling book by a living sociologist.⁷ Counting all editions, including Recorded Books, sales of the first edition totaled about a million copies.

I wrote *Lies My Teacher Told Me* partly because I believed that Americans took great interest in their past but had been bored to tears by their high school American history courses. Readers’ reactions confirmed this belief. Their responses were not only wide, but deep. “My history classes in high school, I found, were not important to me or my life,” e-mailed one reader from the San Francisco area, because they “did not make it relevant to what was happening today.” Some adult readers had always blamed themselves for their lack of interest in high school history. “For all these years (I am forty-nine), I have had the opinion that I don’t like history,” wrote a woman from Utah, “when in truth, what I don’t like is illogic, or inconsistency. Thank you for your work. You have changed my life.”

Many readers found the book to be a life-changing experience. A forklift operator in Ohio, a forty-seven-year-old housewife in Denver, a “do-gooder” in upstate New York were inspired to finish college or graduate school and change careers by reading this book. “Words cannot describe how much your book has changed me,” wrote a woman from New York City. “It’s like seeing everything through new eyes. The eyes of truth as I like to call it.” While readers repeat adjectives like “shocked,” “stunned,” and “disillusioned,” many have also found *Lies* to be uplifting.

To be sure, not every reaction was positive. Although one reader “never could

decide whether you were a Socialist or a Republican,” others thought they could and that *Lies* suffers from a leftward bias. “Marxist/hippie/socialist/ anti-American/anti-Christian” commented one reader at Amazon.com, who would be shocked to learn my real feelings about capitalism. “What a piece of racist trash,” said an anonymous postcard from El Paso. “Take your sour mind to Africa where you can adjust *that* history.”

That was, of course, a white response—a *very* white response. Very different has been the reaction from “Indian country.” A reader who I infer is part-Indian wrote:

Your book *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, and especially the chapter “Red Eyes,” has had an unprecedented effect on how I view the world. I have never felt inclined to write a letter of approval for anything I’ve read before. Your description of the Indian experience in the United States and, more importantly, the concept of a syncretic American society has subtly, but powerfully, changed my understanding of my country, and, in fact, my own ancestry.

If, as *Lies My Teacher Told Me* shows, history is the least-liked subject in American high schools, it is positively abhorred in Indian country. There it is the record of five centuries of defeat. Yet, properly understood, American history is not a record of Native incompetence but of survival and perseverance. From speaking before Native audiences in six states, I have come to understand to what extent false history holds Native Americans down. I now believe that only when they accurately understand their past—including their recent past—will young American Indians find the social and intellectual power to make history in the twenty-first century. That understanding must include the concept of syncretism—blending elements from two different cultures to come up with something new. Syncretism is how cultures typically change and survive, and all Americans need to understand that Native American cultures, too, must change to survive. Natives as well as non-Natives often labor under the misapprehension that “real” Indian culture was those practices that existed before white contact. Actually, real Indian culture is still being produced—by sculptors like Nalenik Temela (page 133), musicians like Keith Secola, and American Indian parents everywhere.

Lies has also enjoyed huge success among African Americans. In the fall of 2004, for example, it reached number three on the bestseller list of *Essence* magazine and was the only book on that list by a nonblack author. “My students, who are all African Americans, were immensely enthused and energized by your book,” wrote a sociology professor at Hampton University. A Missouri native wrote that he found *Lies My Teacher Told Me* and *Lies Across America* “incredibly empowering” and planned “to buy an extra copy of both books and leave them in the barbershop I patronize in downtown St. Louis. I figure if one or two kids read it, it will make a huge difference

for generations to come.”

Working-class groups and labor historians have also enjoyed *Lies*. “Thanks again for your scholarship and solidarity in helping show the side of the story that best reflects the roots of the other 90 percent who aren’t wealthy,” wrote a nonwealthy reader in 2004. Programs in gay and lesbian studies and women’s studies have also invited me to speak, even though *Lies My Teacher Told Me*—unlike its successor *Lies Across America*—contains no explicit treatment of sexual identity or preference or gender issues.⁸ Prisoners respond positively, too: a Wisconsin inmate, for example, wrote, “My congratulations to you for the courage you had to have to write such a book that goes against the grain.” Hardly least, “regular” white folks—even males—like my book, too, perhaps because I take obvious satisfaction in and give credit to those white men from Bartolomé de Las Casas through Robert Flounoy to Mississippi judge Orma Smith who have fought for justice for all of us.

If *Lies My Teacher Told Me* has made such an impact, why this new edition? Especially when the book, as of 2007, was selling better than ever, averaging nearly two thousand copies per week?

Back in 2003, writing from Walnut Creek, California, a devoted reader convinced me of the need for a new edition. “I think many people believe that your book describes problems that USED TO exist in school textbooks, not as current problems,” she e-mailed me. “My own anecdotal experience with my own kids’ school textbooks is that many of your original findings remain valid. An updated edition would make it harder for people to minimize your book’s truth by characterizing it as dated.” Questions from audiences over the years taught me that despite my debunking of automatic progress in Chapter 11, many readers still believe in the myth, even as applied to the textbook publishing industry. The problems I noted with high school history books were so galling that these readers *want* to believe—and therefore *do* believe—that the books must have improved. Unfortunately, we cannot assume progress. Whether history textbooks have improved is an empirical question. It can only be answered with data. And it is an interesting question, especially to me, because it subsumes another query: Did my book make any difference?

So I spent much of 2006-07 pondering six new U.S. history textbooks. I did find them improved in a few regards—especially in their treatment of Christopher Columbus and the ensuing Columbian Exchange. I also found them worse or unchanged in many other regards—but that is the subject of the rest of the book. It’s safe to conclude that *Lies* didn’t influence textbook publishers very much. This did not surprise me, because fifteen years earlier, Frances FitzGerald’s critique of textbooks, *America Revised*, was also a bestseller, but it, too, made little impact on the industry.

However, *Lies* did reach and move teachers. Doing so is important, because one teacher can reach a hundred students, and another hundred next year. Teachers were a central audience I had in mind as I wrote *Lies*. What have they made of it?

Sadly, a few teachers rejected *Lies* unread, concluding from its title that I am one more teacher-basher. The book itself never bashes teachers. As a former college professor who in a typical semester appeared before students for nine hours a week, I have great respect for K-12 teachers. Many work in classrooms for as many as thirty-five hours a week; on top of that they must assign, read, and comment on homework, prepare and grade exams, and develop next week's lesson plans. When are they supposed to find time to research what they teach in American history? During their unpaid summers and weekends? Moreover, I realize that a sizable proportion—I used to estimate 25 to 30 percent, but the number is growing—of high school American history teachers are serious about their subject. They study it themselves and get their students involved in doing history and critiquing their textbooks. In speeches to teacher groups, I used to begin by acknowledging all the foregoing, trying to persuade them to venture beyond the book's title.⁹ Moreover, there is a certain tension between the title and the subtitle, "Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong." If teachers merely rely on their textbooks, however, and try to get students to "learn" them, and if the textbooks are as bad as the next eleven chapters suggest, then teachers are complicit in miseducating their charges about our past.

In central Illinois, a teacher provided an example of what to do about bad textbooks. In autumn 2003, treating the early years of the republic, she told her sixth graders in passing that most presidents before Lincoln were slave owners. Her students were outraged—not with the presidents, but with her, for lying to them. "That's not true," they protested, "or it would be in the book!" They pointed out that the book devoted many pages to Washington, Jefferson, Madison, Jackson, and other early presidents, pages that said not one word about their owning slaves. "Maybe I'm wrong, then," she replied, suggesting that they check her facts. Each chose a president and found out about him. When they regrouped, they were outraged at their textbook for denying them this information. They wrote letters to the putative author and the publisher. The author never replied, which did not surprise me—as we shall see, many authors never wrote "their" textbooks, especially in their later editions. Some are even deceased. The students did get a reply from a spokesperson at the publisher. "We are always glad to get feedback on our product," it went, or boilerplate to that effect. Then it suggested, "If you will look at pages 501-506, you will find substantial treatment of the Civil Rights Movement." The students looked at each other blankly: how did this relate to their complaint?

Such a critique is a win-win action for students. Either they improve the textbook for the next generation of students, or they learn that a vacuum resides at the intellectual center of the textbook establishment. Either way, they become critical

readers for the rest of the academic year.

The story of these sixth graders shows that we underestimate children at our peril. Teachers who have gotten students as young as fourth grade to challenge textbooks and do original research have found that they exceeded expectations. A fifth-grade teacher in far southwestern Virginia wrote me that at the start of the year his students say they hate history. “Within two weeks, all or most love history.” He gets them involved with:

primary source documents such as newspaper accounts and actual photos of freedmen being lynched. This is tough on the kids sometimes but they handle it well. They get an attitude about evil and vow to keep it from happening. They no longer think that video games with people getting blown up are funny. They even start to check out books on history and read them and get away from the sanitized vanilla yogurt in the textbooks and shoot for a five-alarm chili type of history. They love history that has “the good stuff ” in it. And then they are promoted and go back to the textbook! Which creates a problem. They raise hell with the next teacher! They become politically active within the middle school. They look like they will become good citizens.

Surely good citizens are what we want—but what do we mean by a “good citizen”? Educators first required American history as a high school subject as part of a nationalist flag-waving campaign around 1900. Its nationalistic genesis has always interfered with its basic mission: to prepare students to do their job *as Americans*.

Again, what exactly is our job as Americans? Surely it is *to bring into being the America of the future*. What should characterize that nation? How should it balance civil liberties and surveillance against potential terrorists? Should it allow gay marriage? What should its energy policies be, as the world’s finite supply of oil begins to impact upon us? To participate in these discussions and influence these debates, good citizens need to be able to evaluate the claims that our leaders and would-be leaders make. They must read critically, winnow fact from fraud, and seek to understand causes and results in the past. These skills must stand at the center of any competent history course.

These are *not* skills that American history textbooks foster—even the recent ones. Nor do courses based on them. Why then do teachers put up with such books? The answer: they make their busy lives easier. The teachers’ edition of *Holt American Nation*, to take one example, begins with twenty-two pages of ads making this point. One page touts its “Management System.” It contrasts two photographs. One shows a teacher struggling to carry a textbook, several other books, some overhead projections,

a binder of lecture notes, and miscellaneous papers, the other a teacher smiling as she slips a single CD into her purse. “Everything you need is on one disk!” trumpets the ad, including “editable lesson plans,” “classroom presentations” containing lecture notes suitable for projection, and an “easy-to-use test generator.” No longer do teachers need to make their own lesson plans or construct their own tests, and if they run out of things to say in the classroom, the disk also contains previews of the teaching resources and movies that Holt offers as ancillary materials. Many of these supplements, including a series of CNN videos, are more valuable education tools than the textbook itself. The problem is that the purpose of all the ancillaries is to get teachers to adopt Holt’s textbook. Then, since the textbook runs to 1,240 pages—and all too many teachers assign them all—students are unlikely to have time to do anything with any of these additional materials.

Sometimes help comes from the top down. Many school systems have grown displeased with the low student morale in these textbook-driven history courses. As a matter of school-board policy, at least two systems require any teacher in social studies or history to read my book. Homeschoolers have also found their way to *Lies My Teacher Told Me*. Wrote David Stanton, editor of a resource catalog for homeschoolers, “I read it cover to cover (including the footnotes), found it hard to put down, and was sad when it ended.”

Students have also taken matters into their own hands. A fourteen-year-old in Mount Vernon, South Dakota, going into the ninth grade, had already read *Lies My Teacher Told Me* and *Lies Across America*. “These are EXCELLENT books!” she wrote. “After reading them, I spread them around the school to different teachers. All were shocked and, due to this, are changing their teaching methods.” John Jennings, a high school student somewhere in cyberspace, wrote that he and a group of his friends “have read your book *Lies My Teacher Told Me* and it has opened our eyes to the true history behind our country, positive and negative.” He went on to add that he is “signed up to take American History next semester . . . and we are using one of the twelve textbooks you reviewed, so I can’t wait to attempt to start discussions in class concerning issues discussed in your book and use your book as a reference.” A North Carolina dad wrote, “My daughter uses *Lies My Teacher Told Me* as a guerrilla text in her grade eleven Advanced Placement U.S. History, and loves it—although the teacher isn’t always as pleased.” My favorite e-mail of all came in from a lad somewhere at AOL.com: “Dear Mr. Loewen, I really like your book, *Lies My Teacher Told Me*. I’ve been using it to heckle my history teacher from the back of the room.” My friends all like it, too, he went on. “If I could get a group price on it from the publisher, I could sell it in the corridors of my high school.” I got him the group price, and since then, several teachers—perhaps including his—have told me that my book, in the hands of precocious pupils, made their lives miserable until they got their own copy, which jarred them out of their textbook rut. So there is also hope from the bottom up.

Best of all has been the response in the “aftermarket”—adults who have turned to

Lies because they sensed something remiss about their boring high school history courses. Many find it a book to share. “I read it twice and then it made the round of friends who were stubborn about returning it, but I finally got it back and now I’m reading it again,” wrote a security guard in California. “After completing each successive chapter, I always felt that I had to comment to a friend about what I just learned,” wrote a graduate-student-to-be in education. “I have been sharing your information with every teacher I can get to stand still for five minutes,” wrote a teacher’s aide in Montana. “This is a book that you buy two of,” wrote a professor in New Hampshire, “one to read and keep, and one to lend or give away.” A reader in Sherman Oaks, California, said, “It is more than just interesting: it is life-enriching. I will give copies as gifts . . . for years to come.” Some readers get them cheap: they join the Quality Paperback Book Club to obtain four copies of *Lies* for a dollar each, give them to four friends, quit the club, then join again to get four more.¹⁰

I hope you find this new edition of *Lies* as useful as the first in getting people to question what they think they know about American history. If you do, share it with others. No doubt the publisher would like to sell everyone you know a copy, but I’m happiest when *Lies* gets multiple readers. I’m also happy to get readers’ reactions—positive or negative¹¹—to my work. You can reach me through my website, uvm.edu/~jloewen/, or jloewen@uvm.edu.

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 BILLINGS¹

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

—JAMES BALDWIN²

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

—GEN. PETRO G. GRIGORENKO, SAMIZDAT LETTER TO A HISTORY JOURNAL, c. 1975, USSR³

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,