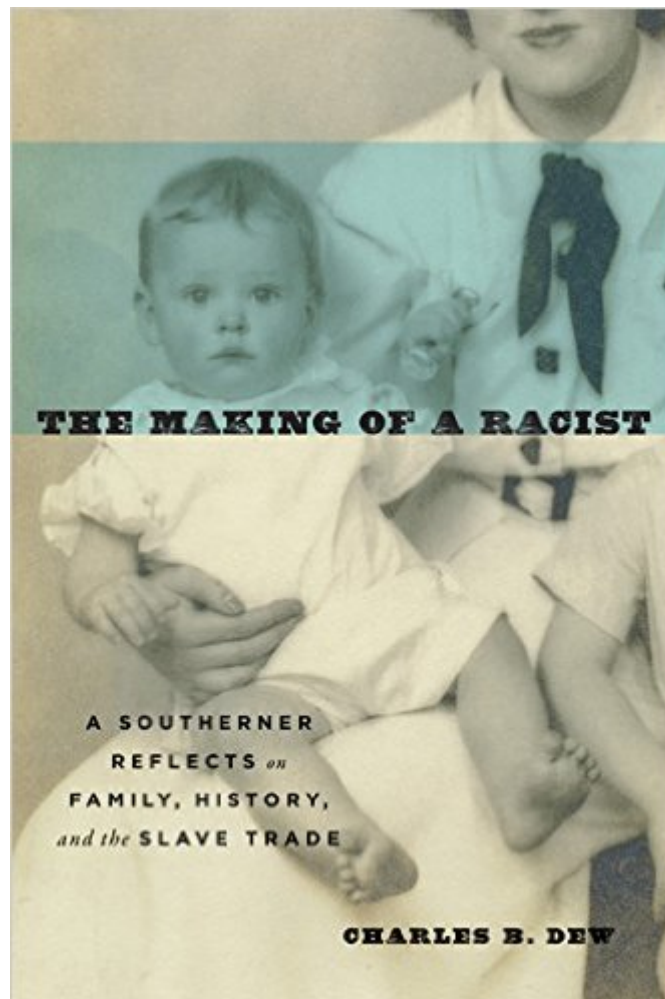


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The Making Of A Racist: A Southerner Reflects On Family, History, And The Slave Trade



Synopsis

In this powerful memoir, Charles Dew, one of America's most respected historians of the South--and particularly its history of slavery--turns the focus on his own life, which began not in the halls of enlightenment but in a society unequivocally committed to segregation. Dew re-creates the midcentury American South of his childhood--in many respects a boy's paradise, but one stained by Lost Cause revisionism and, worse, by the full brunt of Jim Crow. Through entertainments and "educational" books that belittled African Americans, as well as the living examples of his own family, Dew was indoctrinated in a white supremacy that, at best, was condescendingly paternalistic and, at worst, brutally intolerant. The fear that southern culture, and the "hallowed white male brotherhood," could come undone through the slightest flexibility in the color line gave the Jim Crow mindset its distinctly unyielding quality. Dew recalls his father, in most regards a decent man, becoming livid over a black tradesman daring to use the front, and not the back, door. The second half of the book shows how this former Confederate youth and descendant of Thomas Roderick Dew, one of slavery's most passionate apologists, went on to reject his racist upbringing and become a scholar of the South and its deeply conflicted history. The centerpiece of Dew's story is his sobering discovery of a price circular from 1860--an itemized list of humans up for sale. Contemplating this document becomes Dew's first step in an exploration of antebellum Richmond's slave trade that investigates the terrible--but, to its white participants, unremarkable--inhumanity inherent in the institution. Dew's wish with this book is to show how the South of his childhood came into being, poisoning the minds even of honorable people, and to answer the question put to him by Illinois Browning Culver, the African American woman who devoted decades of her life to serving his family: "Charles, why do the grown-ups put so much hate in the children?"

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Customer Reviews

Sorry. I'm writing a review of a book I have not yet read. However, I just heard Charles Dew speaking on NPR. I'm ordering this book based on his comments. Charles Dew tells his personal, first-hand experiences of growing up in the South. He talks about how racialism is learned by osmosis. This is an important topic. It needs to be addressed. Compassion and understanding not hate are important if we are to learn to live together.

After listening to an interview with Charles Dew, I eagerly anticipated this book. Unfortunately, in spite of Dew's engaging style and thoughtful memories, I was left wanting. The first part of the book deals with Dew's own experience of learning from day one that the Confederacy still existed, that African Americans were inferior, how his parents were complicit in those lessons, and the moments the veil fell from his eyes and he no longer was blind to racism in his family and world. The second part deals with the history of the dehumanization of enslaved people, owner and overseer history and how the institution was perpetuated without guilt. The author adequately describes the struggle of loving one's parents but not loving the words they spoke or how they treated others. He describes the time when he felt his pangs of guilt over racist jokes or treatment of others. He states his case by how his students react to his stories and the slave sale documents and letters he has them read. Dew does ask the question that I wonder, "How do people see evil right in front of them and do nothing?" But that is never answered. More's the pity. He toes a line between loving his parents and excusing them that for me was hard to read, though I understood it. I believe the overbearing presence of white privilege in his life was not fully discussed on a personal level even as this was a memoir.

Professor Dew positions himself as a professional historian who as well was an EYEWITNESS to Jim Crow totalitarian government in the southern USA from the 1930s to the 1960s. Yet he fails to document how this totalitarianism was systemically maintained legally and culturally in HIS Florida town during HIS lifetime to the benefit of him and his family. Who were the local White people who thought up the ever-evolving nuances of Jim Crow? Perhaps Professor Dew has forgotten. The ugly

caricatures of Black people that Dew's mother used to indoctrinate him to xenophobia as a child can only be part of the story. The slave market discussion about "walking credit cards" as described by Claud Anderson is only the preface to Jim Crow's OVERKILL. I will be reviewing some of the resources Dew briefly cited (one, a primer for young White boys). But the machinations of Jim Crow totalitarian governance deserve academic classes in universities worldwide: I feel that Dew missed an opportunity to provide true insight for a syllabus. Perhaps Professor Dew is overwhelmed and speechless like so many elderly Black people I know when the subject of Jim Crow is first broached by younger Blacks like me. But then later, these elderly people will offhandedly recall an insult here, spite there or maybe a lynching comes to mind. They haven't forgotten. And I won't forget either. REPARATIONS NOW!!!

I also have not read the book yet. Heard him speak on NPR today and seems like a man that I would love to get to know and read about his experiences. I've been reading books based on the African American experience, I welcome the opportunity to learn how this superiority engraving occurred in the minds of Whites Americans during slavery and segregation and how this hatred still occurs today. Looking forward to this read!

Another must-read, especially by older white Southerners. I've lived in the South for the past 54 of my 75 years so I qualify!! The book, written by an older white Southern historian, sheds light on my observations over the past 54 years of living in the South. It is a fascinating read - extensively researched- and I couldn't put it down.

Like the first two reviewers, I ordered this book based on the Charles Dew interview on NPR. Initially, the book was a page turner. There were fascinating descriptions of the conduct of Dew's parents and the literature he was given that caused him to believe that blacks were inferior. Dew described how his father went into a rage when a black man came to see him at his side door instead of his back door. Then we learn how Dew escaped his racist views after being sent to college in the north. The page turning grew slower after I read how the author had uncovered records of Richmond Virginia slave traders that survived the fall of Richmond to the Union forces. There were fascinating descriptions of the mechanics and huge financing of the slave trade. But the author apparently was a bit too fascinated by the slave trading archives. Half as many descriptions of the records would have been sufficient to make the author's points. In the NPR interview, Dew described the level of segregation that existed in the south when he grew up there. One example

was the practice of court rooms having two bibles for giving oaths, one for blacks and one for whites. After the book's description of the slave trading archives, I expected the author to describe similar examples to tie slavery to white attitudes in the south and to segregation practices there. But the book didn't even mention the courtroom bibles or some of the other segregation practices described in the interview I read the book on Kindle. That sometime leads to abrupt endings in nonfiction works. After describing the slave trading records, Dew did some preaching about the evils of slavery and segregation. I began to fear one of those abrupt endings although Kindle indicated 24% of the book remained. But then at 76%, the footnotes appeared.

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