



Whose America? Culture Wars in the Public Schools

By Jonathan Zimmerman

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What do America's children learn about American history, American values, and human decency? Who decides? In this absorbing book, Jonathan Zimmerman tells the dramatic story of conflict, compromise, and more conflict over the teaching of history and morality in twentieth-century America.

In history, whose stories are told, and how? As Zimmerman reveals, multiculturalism began long ago. Starting in the 1920s, various immigrant groups--the Irish, the Germans, the Italians, even the newly arrived Eastern European Jews--urged school systems and textbook publishers to include their stories in the teaching of American history. The civil rights movement of the 1960s and '70s brought similar criticism of the white version of American history, and in the end, textbooks and curricula have offered a more inclusive account of American progress in freedom and justice.

But moral and religious education, Zimmerman argues, will remain on much thornier ground. In battles over school prayer or sex education, each side argues from such deeply held beliefs that they rarely understand one another's reasoning, let alone find a middle ground for compromise. Here there have been no resolutions to calm the teaching of history. All the same, Zimmerman argues, the strong American tradition of pluralism has softened the edges of the most rigorous moral and religious absolutism.

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Whose America? Culture Wars in the Public Schools By Jonathan Zimmerman Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #1676447 in Books
- Brand: Brand: Harvard University Press
- Published on: 2002-09-19
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 1.16" h x 5.76" w x 8.40" l,
- Binding: Hardcover
- 320 pages

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Editorial Review

From Library Journal

Zimmerman, director of the History of Education Program at the Steinhardt School and Education Program, New York University, examines the culture wars that have been fought in America's schools since the Civil War and divides what is commonly held to be one battle into two distinct conflicts, each with its own unique beginnings. These two conflicts are fought over the teaching of history and religion and are aptly named Chicago and Dayton after their place of origin (the Chicago School Systems and Dayton, TN, respectively). The author chronicles the struggles by ethnic minority groups against the Anglo-Saxon majority to gain a place in the history texts and curriculum. Interestingly, these conflicts sometimes resulted in fundamentally opposed organizations landing on the same side of an issue. Zimmerman then turns his discerning eye to the tangled politics of religious instruction, prayer, and sex education in the schools. By placing these conflicts within their historical context, the author leads readers to a deeper understanding of the issues and how they have influenced and continue to influence public school instruction. This landmark piece of scholarship is recommended for academic and public libraries and education history collections. Mark Alan Williams, Web Lib. & Document Storage Svcs., Chicago
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Review

Zimmerman examines the culture wars that have been fought in America's schools since the Civil War and divides what is commonly held to be one battle into two distinct conflicts, each with its own unique beginnings...By placing these conflicts within their historical context, the author leads readers to a deeper understanding of the issues and how they have influenced and continue to influence public school instruction. [A] landmark piece of scholarship. (Mark Alan Williams *Library Journal* 2002-08-01)

Zimmerman argues that the educational wars over religion in the schools and the content of history and social studies courses are separate battles with different stakes, and that the former have been more contentious than the latter. He offers histories of both since the 1920s to illustrate his point and concludes with suggestions about how the religious wars might be resolved. This is a thought-provoking and well-written book...[It] is essential reading for anyone concerned with these issues. (M. Engel *Choice* 2003-02-01)

Zimmerman does make a convincing argument. Examples of history textbooks published today substantiate his claim of a diversity coexisting with dullness. So, what exactly does Zimmerman's position mean for the classroom? This book calls for a reexamination of how U.S. history is taught...This call for presenting multiple perspectives in American history classrooms is a timely one. (Athena Liss *Social Education*)

Review

Jonathan Zimmerman has written a terrific book. Beautifully written and deeply informed, *Whose America?* addresses issues in American education, politics and identity that are enormously important. It is the best study yet done of political battles about curriculum, how political horse-trading on all sides has shaped the nature and substance of textbook versions of history, and it has great relevance to debates currently raging about what is taught in schools, in matters of facts and values. On these inflammatory subjects, Zimmerman's even-handed treatment of all sides of these deeply divisive issues is one of the book's great strengths, and offers a lesson in itself to future historians. (Jeffrey Mirel, Professor of Educational Studies and History, University of Michigan)

Users Review

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