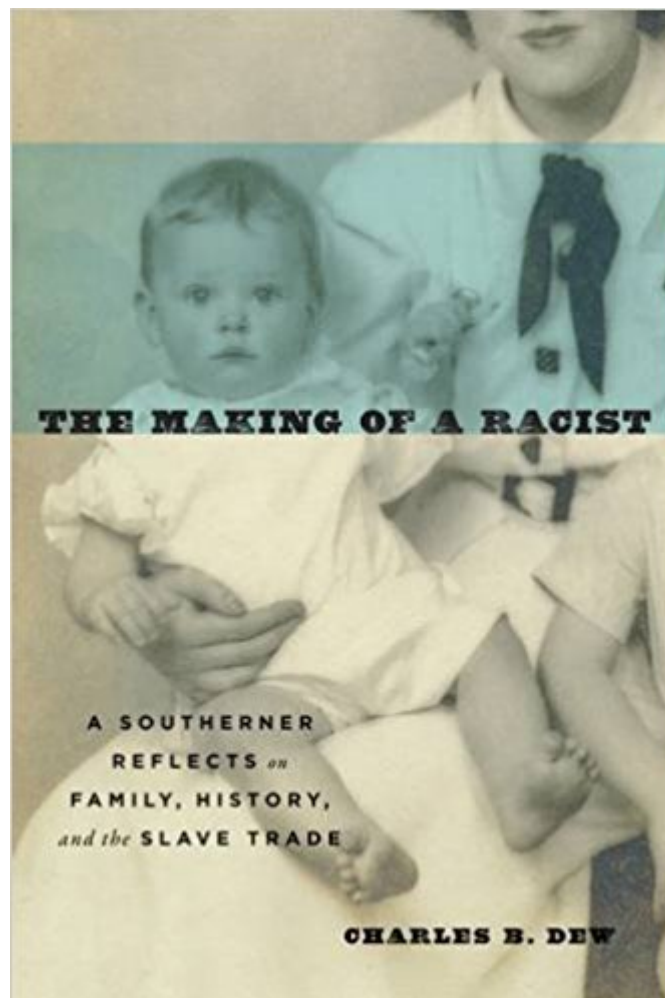




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The Making Of A Racist: A Southerner Reflects On Family, History, And The Slave Trade



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

Each one of Charles Dew's books has helped shape the conversation on the history of race in this nation. His new book, which combines an honest autobiography of life in the 1950s with a sobering account of archival history and reckoning, is a characteristically eloquent reflection. Dew allows us to understand just how deeply racial thinking saturated white southerners who were otherwise admirable people. Charles Dew is one of our wisest and most humane historians. (Edward L. Ayers, University of Richmond, author of *The Promise of the New South: Life after Reconstruction*) *The Making of a Racist* provides a searching and brave account of the honeyed pathway to race hatred, the bracing disorientation of learning better, and the haunting, guilty sense of having been there, and knowing that so many have stayed behind. (Walter Johnson, Harvard University, author of *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom*) In his compelling new memoir, Professor Charles Dew '58, one of America's most respected scholars on the history of slavery, shares the story of his childhood growing up white in the Jim Crow South and how his consciousness--and conscience--were raised at Williams. (Williams Magazine) Charles Dew's short book is a memoir with broad cultural reach, an even-handed, cleanly-written overview befitting an historian retiring after a distinguished professional career.... There is nothing theoretical, melodramatic, or confessional about Charles Dew's remembrances.... Nor does Dew take any personal credit, or express any smug sense of acquired virtue, while recounting his emerging enlightenment about race prejudice. His narrative voice earns trust by its plainspoken honesty. (The Key Reporter (Phi Beta Kappa)) When you consider the sheer inhumanity it took for people -- good Christians all, in their own estimation -- to buy other people, or sell other people, or rape other people, or cheat and restrict other people, or just to kill other people outright with a bestial sadism you wouldn't inflict on an ailing dog. -- . why? What was it in white Southern mores, folkways or history that made this such an indelible -- though not unique -- characteristic of theirs, that allowed so many of them to do such things or simply to stand in complicit silence, without a peep from conscience, as such things were done all around them? Why? It is the triumph of Dew's book to pose that question at long last. (Washington Post) This book makes for a brief and humane look into racism in the United

States. It should prove valuable for students and any citizen who wonders what went wrong. (Daily Press) It's up to books like [Dew's] to help educate people so we begin to understand reports coming from the Department of Justice. (The Diane Rehm Show) Atlanta Journal-Constitution: What do you hope this book will accomplish? Dew: I thought that there were not enough white voices in our racial dialogue. We have had some incredible, powerful black voices like W.E.B. Du Bois, James Baldwin and Ta-Nehisi Coates. But not enough from the white side and it is important that we do so in the hope that it would resonate with others. When I would teach, I would tell stories of how I grew up. Everybody was focused on me. I had their undivided attention. Maybe that feeling was worth talking about and believing. I have spoken publicly a lot and something has happened that I didn't anticipate. A number of African Americans have thanked me and said they never understood where this stuff came from. How did this happen? Where did it come from? (Atlanta Journal-Constitution) The Making of a Racist tells the story of historian Charles Dew's experience growing up in the South in the era of Jim Crow. Dew joins us for a conversation today about racism in America and the pivotal moments that helped him outgrow the views instilled in him as a child. (WHRO's "HearSaywithCathyLewis")

Charles B. Dew is Ephraim Williams Professor of American History at Williams College and the author of the Fletcher Pratt Award-winning *Apostles of Disunion: Southern Secession Commissioners and the Causes of the Civil War* (Virginia) and *Bond of Iron: Master and Slave at Buffalo Forge*, selected as a New York Times Notable Book of the Year.

I'm halfway through. This is a heartfelt memoir about growing up in the segregated South. He does a deep dive into what influenced him to become a racist in his "Confederate Youth." He casts his net widely: childhood storybooks, parents' subtle and not-so-subtle racial stereotypes, schools, friends, siblings. It's a deeply personal piece. Can't wait to finish.

5 stars for the first half. This is a very important book about a history professor who was born in the Jim Crow south and how he, like many other youth of the south, was "trained" to be a racist. It is a very unique perspective on the issue of race in America. However, in the second half of the book, it gets less personal and more textbook like with the author going into exhaustive detail regarding his research regarding documents and letters he encountered at different times in his career. While I do not undervalue the importance of this research or its inclusion in this book, I feel that it starts to read like a textbook and detracts from the very personal story and eventual enlightenment of the

author.

A well written and thought provoking look at the roots of racism in America, using a study of slavery as its basis. Thoroughly annotated. Both historical and personal in its approach. One of the main questions still not answered: how did all of the people who supported the slave trade, either as buyers or sellers, and later the cruelty of the Jim Crow South overlook the inhumanity it required? But maybe that is an impossible question to answer satisfactorily. Anyone perplexed by racism in America should read this.

Rather short, easy read. First half is an interesting autobiographical account of being brought up in an affluent racist family and gradual realization of the inequity and destructiveness of the associated attitudes. The pain the author's realization brings to his family, especially his lawyer father who is racist but otherwise honorable, and their inability to adjust is evident. The delicate balance between love of family and fair treatment of outsiders in an underlying theme. His solution, which I found commendable but others might consider cowardly, is to largely avoid disagreeable subjects with his father. How the author's transition was made, through education and experience, makes a remarkable story. I found the story hopeful though he offers no quick or easy solutions. In the second half of the book the author puts on his professorial hat as an historian and starkly relates the horrendous findings of some of his research. If one needs any reminder of the horrors of slavery and Jim Crow laws it can be found here.

My interest in this book came about after hearing the author on a radio interview. The rise in overt racism in America during 2016 motivated me to learn more about the etiology of such attitudes and behaviors esp. against African Americans. Toward that end, I found the book helpful. The book provides a keen appreciation for the subtleties of racist ideology on the minds of children and offered, at least to me, an understanding as to why people can engage in racist expression and behavior while insisting they are not being racist. I thought that, toward the middle of the story, the author wandered away from the central message in favor of unnecessary family biography but he eventually got back on message. His story offers a clear explanation for what we have seen and heard so much of in our recent history relevant to race relations in present day America.

I really liked the first half of the book as it told personal stories and was well written. I think the second half of the book fell short. It was rather dry and read more like the phone book. I'm sure it is

very interesting if you are an archival researcher but for those who are not, it would be helpful to arrange the information in a narrative form. I felt like the book raised questions but didn't adequately answer them. Too much was simply left hanging and I think there is probably a very good story here.....and one that needs to be told.

It gave me much more insight into the thought processes of Caucasians, especially those from the South. A sad but true revelation of the privileged mind. Thanks for letting us in on this

The book is easy to read and very full of details. However, only the first half is truly about the author's experience of growing up in the Jim Crow south. That part is damn good, and I was hoping for more, having heard the author on NPR and was intrigued by the story. A good 80 of the 167 pages is devoted to the slave trade in Richmond, VA. In this part of the book, he does a very good job of providing context for the records he examined concerning the slave trade.

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