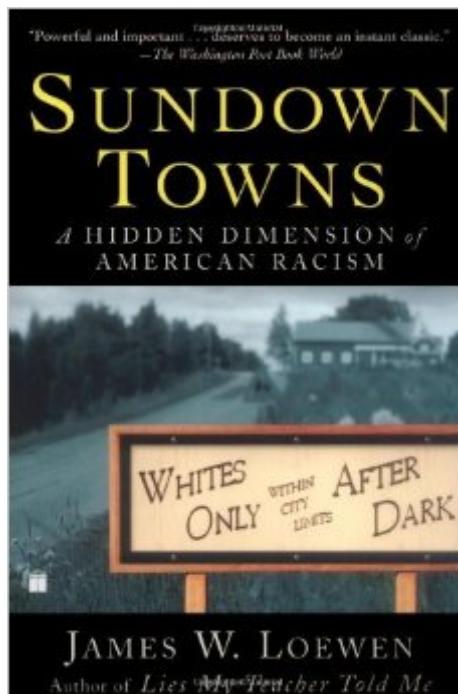


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Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension Of American Racism



Synopsis

Bestselling author of *Sundown Towns*, James W. Loewen, exposes the secret communities and hotbeds of racial injustice that sprung up throughout the twentieth century unnoticed, forcing us to reexamine race relations in the United States. In this groundbreaking work, bestselling sociologist James W. Loewen, author of the national bestseller *Virtual History*, brings to light decades of hidden racial exclusion in America. In a provocative, sweeping analysis of American residential patterns, Loewen uncovers the thousands of "sundown towns" — almost exclusively white towns where it was an unspoken rule that blacks could not live there — that cropped up throughout the twentieth century, most of them located outside of the South. These towns used everything from legal formalities to violence to create homogenous Caucasian communities — and their existence has gone unexamined until now. For the first time, Loewen takes a long, hard look at the history, sociology, and continued existence of these towns, contributing an essential new chapter to the study of American race relations. *Sundown Towns* combines personal narrative, history, and analysis to create a readable picture of this previously unknown American institution all written with Loewen's trademark honesty and thoroughness.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

So many American historians tell us what we want to hear. Prof. Loewen tells us what we very much *need* to hear. A sundown town, good reader, is a town that will allow a given race to pass through provided it gets out by sunset. *Sundown Towns* is the story of how much of small-town America came to be all-white, or so nearly all-white as to make mock of diversity. Growing up a white

Westerner in mostly white towns, I always had the question about race relations: "Why the hell would such a high percentage of black people choose to live in nasty big cities? Why don't they move here? I won't hurt 'em. Their kids would get better educations and they'd do fine." It sounds so easy. Did any of you ever wonder that? As Prof. Loewen documents with the greatest of care, after the Civil War that's what happened. And then, town by town, said black people were driven out and told never to return. The census figures combined with eyewitness accounts will admit of no other conclusion. Black people ended up concentrated in the only areas that were relatively safe to be black in. The American landscape was an immense minefield for them after 1890: can't stop here for gas, can't even pass through here, can't spend the night here. At some point you just go to Detroit, or wherever, and try and make do. I live in Kennewick, Washington, which along with Richland (its sister city) was a sundown town until at least the mid-1960s. Every approach I make to delve into the topic is met with cold silence and deep disapproval. People don't return my phone calls, and I see fear in people's eyes. It is obvious that what I am seeing is a shame reaction, the hope that the last witnesses will die off before anyone records the truth.

"Sundown Towns" examines an underappreciated aspect of segregation and racism in the United States. The book provides a useful history of how the racial distribution of towns changed from the Civil War era to the present and how various measures were used to keep towns White or "Caucasian" (a category that was used to exclude a wide variety of peoples). I've lived in or near several towns given prominence in the book and have had family or friends who lived near other places. The book helped answer questions I had living in South Central Indiana in the '80s, where I was struck by the number of "all white" towns and the odd history of the sizable college town where I lived (Bloomington had no non-student African-American community "of record" until large industrial employers like GE came in the 1950s, an odd circumstance for a sizable town, with important commercial and government functions, as well as a major university). The book is particularly damning in its attention to racial segregation and repression in the North and West, although it is rather lacking in attention to the complexity of living arrangements in the South. The author relies on local historical sources, archives, and oral histories. The oral histories seem to be the most inconsistent, which is recognized, but not fully appreciated. The variation in forces that led to the creation of sundown towns is appreciated but under analyzed. The author tends to jump from his main topic to broader considerations of segregation and this waters down some of the work. There are degrees to which towns really fit the "sundown" definition. Parma, Ohio had a small numbers of Black residents in the 1960s and would not fit in the same class as Cicero or Berwyn.

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