

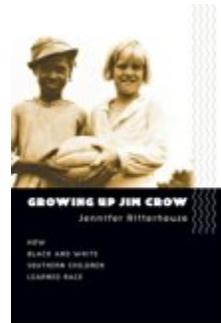
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jennifer Ritterhouse. *Growing Up Jim Crow: How Black and White Southern Children Learned Race*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006. x + 306 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5684-0.

Reviewed by Shelly Lemons (Department of History, St. Louis Community College at Meramec)

Published on H-SAWH (May, 2007)



Coming of Age in the New South

How do we know who we are and what that means? How do we learn race? And what role does racial favoritism play in an individual's self-image? Historian Jennifer Ritterhouse seeks answers to these questions in *Growing Up Jim Crow: How Black and White Southern Children Learned Race*. Underlying Ritterhouse's analysis is the idea that our memories influence how we identify ourselves. By examining how black and white southerners have remembered their childhoods in a segregated society, Ritterhouse hopes to trace the emergence of racial consciousness.

In the years following the American Civil War, the nation engaged in a long process of putting the country back together again. Presidents, politicians, and private citizens disagreed about which features a reconstructed South should include. While some argued that simply restoring political representation for former Confederates and stimulating economic recovery was enough, other Americans insisted that sincere social change must take place. For the South, social change would require a reassessment of the place of African Americans in society.

During the postwar years, southerners, both black and white, grappled with the implications of national changes. As people struggled to rebuild southern society, many continued to follow pre-established patterns of race relations. Everyone was aware of the social construction of race that had developed under slavery.

Southerners had already learned race as both a system of social interaction and a means of self-identity.

The development of *de jure* segregation throughout the South would soon influence young southerners' understanding of race. With the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision of 1896, the Supreme Court ruled that segregation did not violate the Constitutional protection of civil rights. Within their own communities, blacks redefined openly their promotion of self, especially by insisting on the use of proper titles such as "Mr." and "Mrs." Moderate whites saw segregation as a means to reduce racial violence while allowing blacks to participate in public life. Many whites, however, worried that segregation might give blacks an undue sense of equality.

Ritterhouse looks at how many young white southerners viewed these revised interpretations of race relations through the veil of childhood. More and more parents came to view education as the best means to help their children realize or maintain social mobility. Black middle-class parents, many whites feared, encouraged their children to want equality by placing a strong emphasis on education.

Ritterhouse makes a strong case that racial views were taught in the home and reiterated in public interactions. White mothers in particular played a role in socializing their children to see themselves as superior to black children. While white women might teach the basics of racial etiquette, white men enforced the social

limits. Any breach, real or imagined, of southern social norms drew severe, often violent, responses. Black children received no exception from whites' expectations of acceptable racial interactions. Young boys could be castrated, and young girls sexually assaulted, for presumed defiance of racial etiquette. As a result of this very real threat, black parents offered their children lessons in race relations as a means of protection in the face of racial violence, harassment, and danger. Children of both races internalized these views.

For middle-class black parents, an added and very important component to social lessons was the development of respectability. By showing that they indeed possessed manners and morals, black southerners rejected stereotypes of racial inferiority. Ritterhouse suggests that lessons in black respectability also served to promote a sense of equality and entitlement in younger blacks that eventually resulted in change rather than security. Parents taught of the need for a dual consciousness in order to survive. By the middle of the twentieth century, many children, motivated by their engrained sense of self-respect, rejected dual consciousness and demanded racial equality. These young people became the activists of the civil rights movement. Theirs was not a quest to maintain the status quo but a mission to eradicate the double standard of racial etiquette.

Like middle-class blacks, working-class blacks had a sense of respectability. They also taught their children to display proper manners and morality, especially when in the presence of whites. Members of the middle class, however, were often critical of working-class definitions of respectability.

One demographic group that Ritterhouse does not address quite as clearly is the white working class. Many individuals among the South's ruling elite cast this group aside as expendable. This attitude may well have been influenced by Social Darwinism, which argued that economic success was a result of a physical, moral, and mental "fitness" that not every person possessed.

Ritterhouse argues for connections between race, class, and gender. Gender made a difference in how children interpreted their experiences. In the cases presented in *Growing Up Jim Crow*, girls tended to see discrimination in a broader sense than did their male counterparts. Boys were more likely to define discrimination in terms of individual expressions of manhood. Boys also tended to experience more violence as a consequence of breaching racial expectations. Many young boys justified their aggression with claims that men had to be ready to "fight back" (p. 121).

For children, written laws about racial segregation or equality held less importance than practice. Parents and peers reinforced children's expectations of race and racial etiquette. As youth, they tended to follow what was expected. Black and white children frequently played together until the white child's race consciousness brought an end to the youthful play. Black children were more likely to keep a dual consciousness, something black parents consistently stressed for their safety. While white children went to high school and experienced a teenage social life, black children went to work and came face-to-face with workplace harassment.

Ritterhouse argues that by their early teen years, black children seemed more inclined than their white counterparts to translate their childhood experiences into action and calls for change. White children appeared more likely to hold onto their childhood training in racial etiquette until adulthood, if they questioned those expectations at all.

In some sense, Ritterhouse "breaks the rules" of writing history in her work. She does not attempt to give an objective account of southern race relations under Jim Crow. The very nature of her project seeks a subjective look at how people understood race. Her sources reflect that. Using interviews and editorials, as well as more traditional sources, Ritterhouse interprets personal reflections of the past. The result is a book that makes us think about our own identities and how we have come to view race and race relations today.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-sawh>

Citation: Shelly Lemons. Review of Ritterhouse, Jennifer, *Growing Up Jim Crow: How Black and White Southern Children Learned Race*. H-SAWH, H-Net Reviews. May, 2007.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13158>

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.