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Author tackles Confederacy with honest conversations



JOY SEWING
COLUMNIST

There are two decidedly different camps when it comes to the American experience: Some people are honest about our history, and some are not.

If the truth weren't an issue, however, there would not be a concerted effort to erase certain chapters of American history by purging museums of artifacts and iconography deemed un-American and removing murals that remind us of the nation's darkest moments.

I talked with New York Times best-selling author Clint Smith, an author and poet who recently appeared at the Jung Center Houston. A native of New Orleans, Smith moved with his family as a teen to Houston after Hurricane Katrina.

He shared with me a different perspective to consider in this discussion about the truth and lies of our past.

To many people, he said, history is the story they are told over generations and generations. Anything that conflicts with that narrative would imply that they were misled. For some, this creates "an existential identity crisis," he said, leaving them to question everything they hold to be true.

"For so many people, this is not about primary source



Yi-Chin Lee/Houston Chronicle file photo

A visitor takes a photo of the Absolute Equality Mural in 2022 in Galveston, the birthplace of Juneteenth. In researching his book, Clint Smith visited Galveston, among eight other historic places.

documents or federal budgets. It's the story they are told and the stories they tell that are passed down generations, so that loyalty takes precedence over truth," he said.

I had to sit with that for a moment. If you have to learn a different story about America, it may mean you have to tell a different story about yourself and your people.

Smith has chronicled his quest to find out more about his family and the nation's foundation of slavery in his most recent book, "How the Word is Passed." Several of his books have been banned.

It's American history that he did not learn growing up.



Carletta Girma/Contributor

Smith recently spoke at Jung Center Houston.

In researching the book, Smith visited eight places pivotal to the history of slavery in America to understand how a distorted version of that history was taught to him and is taught

to most children, along with the ways many Americans delude themselves about that history.

Among the places he visited were Thomas Jefferson's Monticello planta-

tion in Virginia; Galveston, where Juneteenth was born; and the Louisiana State Penitentiary in Angola, La., which was built on a former slave plantation. He even visited the Blandford Cemetery in Virginia, which contains the remains of more than 30,000 Confederate soldiers.

Changing perspective is not an easy task. Smith dives into the discomfort of talking about racism, slavery, and the Confederacy without pointing a finger of shame.

Yes, that is possible.

There are so many millions of people in this country, of all ethnic groups and races, who don't understand the founding story of Amer-

ica and the legacy of slavery that is embedded in that. There is a notion that our history should be only one story.

"Most people have done things in their lives that they are proud of and done things that they are not proud of. America is no different. It's bizarre that we would extend a different expectation to the country that we live in and suggest that we shouldn't talk about the things in the country that we love and that we don't love," Smith said.

The most patriotic thing one can do is to sit with the good and bad, he said.

Later, hearing Smith speak in front of the sold-out audience at the Jung Center's event, I wanted more people to hear his message: that a deeper understanding of who we are as a nation can push us forward and help us evolve. I applaud the Jung Center for making such a thoughtful night happen.

"Clint Smith speaks with an urgent, humane gravity and a grace-filled moral clarity about the worlds that are always present and almost always unseen in our collective experience," said Jung Center executive director Sean Fitzpatrick. "Becoming psychologically mature requires us to welcome these realities — however painful or ugly — into our awareness."

There are so many millions of people in this country — of all ethnic groups and races — who don't understand the founding story of America and how the legacy of slavery that is embedded in that. It doesn't have to be that way.