



# Understanding Jim Crow: Using Racist Memorabilia to Teach Tolerance and Promote Social Justice

By David Pilgrim

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### Selections of racist memorabilia from the collection at the Jim Crow Museum

A proper understanding of race relations in this country must include a solid knowledge of Jim Crow—how it emerged, what it was like, how it ended, and its impact on the culture. *Understanding Jim Crow* introduces readers to the Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia, a collection of more than 10,000 contemptible collectibles that are used to engage visitors in intense and intelligent discussions about race, race relations, and racism. The items are offensive and they were meant to be offensive. The items in the Jim Crow Museum served to dehumanize Blacks and legitimized patterns of prejudice, discrimination, and segregation. Using racist objects as teaching tools seems counterintuitive—and, quite frankly, needlessly risky. Many Americans are already apprehensive discussing race relations, especially in settings where their ideas are challenged. The museum and this book exist to help overcome our collective trepidation and reluctance to talk about race. Fully illustrated, and with context provided by the museum's founder and director David Pilgrim, *Understanding Jim Crow* is both a grisly tour through America's past and an auspicious starting point for racial understanding and healing.

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

"This was a horrific time in our history, but it needs to be taught and seen and heard. This is very well done, very well done." —Malaak Shabazz, daughter of Malcolm X and Betty Shabazz

"This is a horrifying but important book that should be widely read to gain an accurate view of the long history of racism in the US." —Barbara H. Chasin, *Socialism and Democracy Volume 30*, 2016

"The museum's contents are only a small part of the damaging effects of the Jim Crow laws that were found all across America, including bright and sunny California. This history is not only an important part of understanding where America was but, in an age of states making it harder and harder for citizens to vote, it is relevant to note that we have been here before." —Henry Rollins, host, History Channel's *10 Things You Don't Know About*

"One of the most important contributions to the study of American History that I have ever experienced." —Henry Louis Gates Jr., Director of the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for African American Research

"For decades the author has been on a Pilgrimage to bring out from our dank closets the racial skeletons of our past. His is a crucial mission, because he forces us to realize that race relations grew worse in the first several decades of the twentieth century—something many Americans never knew or now want to suppress. This book allows us to see, even feel the racism of just a generation or two ago—and Pilgrim shows that elements of it continue, even today. See it! Read it! Feel it! Then help us all transcend it!" —James W. Loewen, author, *Lies My Teacher Told Me*; coeditor, *The Confederate and Neo-Confederate Reader*

"The museum has been one of my treasured go-to resources for teaching people about the deep seeded roots of the racism that persists in our collective subconscious. Only by facing our history and its hold on our psyche can we construct a better culture. This work is invaluable." —damali ayo, author, *How to Rent a Negro and Obamistan! Land without Racism*

"David Pilgrim makes a vital contribution to help us understand the grotesque depths of the psychological and cultural war of anti-black racism throughout the Jim Crow era. In our quest to build powerful multiracial grassroots movements for collective liberation, Pilgrim's book is a tool to help decolonize our minds, attack anti-Black racism in all of its forms, and create a multiracial democracy with economic justice for all." —Chris Crass, author, *Towards Collective Liberation: Anti-Racist Organizing, Feminist Praxis, and Movement Building Strategy*

"To justify the exclusion of and violence toward African Americans after the Civil War, pop culture churned out objects, images, songs, and stories designed to reinforce widespread beliefs about white supremacy and black inferiority. Pilgrim has pulled together examples of such so-called 'black memorabilia,' and he clearly

explains the meaning and purpose behind them—both at the museum and in his new book, *Understanding Jim Crow*." —Lisa Hix, *Collectors Weekly*

"This heavily illustrated book is a memoir of the author's decades-long drive to collect racist books, illustrations, and knickknacks in order to help Americans confront, understand, and move past racism." —Jan Gardner, *Boston Globe*

"*Understanding Jim Crow* contains examples of racist memorabilia . . . However, it is Pilgrim's thoughtful and passionately told story that makes the book more than just another, albeit unique, history of US racism." —Bill Berkowitz, [truth-out.org](http://truth-out.org)

"An amazing, wonderful, and important book whose objects and images may offend some readers. Highly recommended for all public and academic levels/libraries." —F.W. Gleach, *CHOICE*

#### About the Author

**David Pilgrim** is a professor, orator, and human rights activist. He is best known as the founder and curator of the Jim Crow Museum—a 10,000-piece collection of racist artifacts located at Ferris State University, which uses objects of intolerance to teach about race, race relations, and racism. He is the author of *On Being Black*. He lives in Big Rapids, Michigan. **Henry Louis Gates Jr.** is the Alphonse Fletcher University Professor and director of the Hutchins Center for African and African American Research at Harvard University. He is the author of *Life Upon These Shores: Looking at African American History, 1513–2008*. He is also an Emmy Award–winning filmmaker, literary scholar, journalist, cultural critic, and institution builder. He lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

#### Users Review

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##### Alvin Shaw:

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