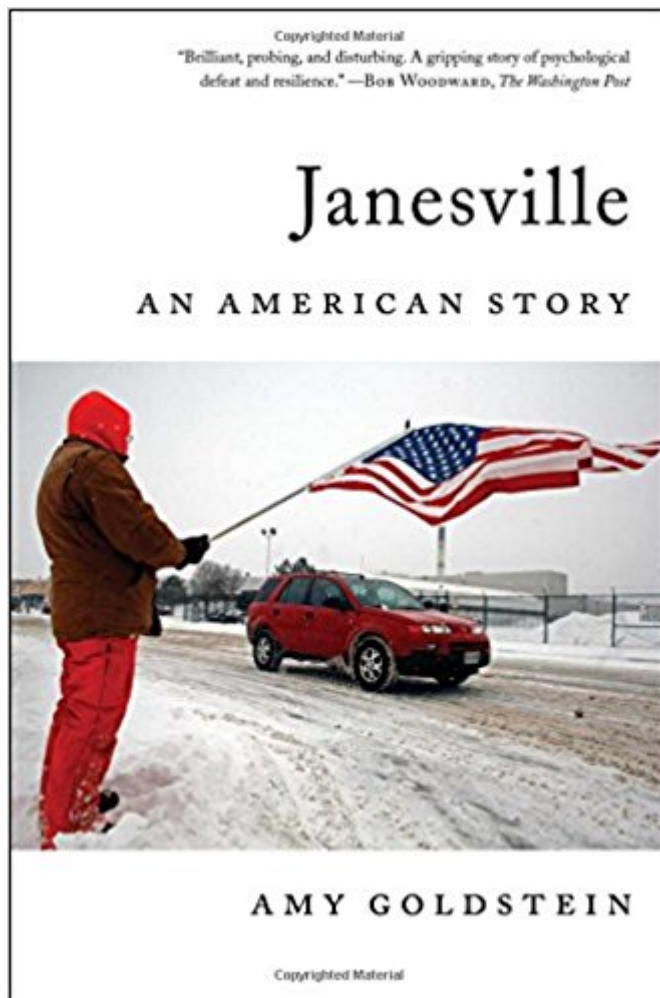




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Janesville: An American Story



Synopsis

“Moving and magnificently well-researched...Janesville joins a growing family of books about the evisceration of the working class in the United States. What sets it apart is the sophistication of its storytelling and analysis.” • The New York Times A Washington Post reporter’s intimate account of the fallout from the closing of a General Motors assembly plant in Janesville, Wisconsin • Paul Ryan’s hometown • and a larger story of the hollowing of the American middle class. This is the story of what happens to an industrial town in the American heartland when its factory stills • but it’s not the familiar tale. Most observers record the immediate shock of vanished jobs, but few stay around long enough to notice what happens next, when a community with a can-do spirit tries to pick itself up. Pulitzer Prize winner Amy Goldstein has spent years immersed in Janesville, Wisconsin where the nation’s oldest operating General Motors plant shut down in the midst of the Great Recession, two days before Christmas of 2008. Now, with intelligence, sympathy, and insight into what connects and divides people in an era of economic upheaval, she makes one of America’s biggest political issues human. Her reporting takes the reader deep into the lives of autoworkers, educators, bankers, politicians, and job re-trainers to show why it’s so hard in the twenty-first century to recreate a healthy, prosperous working class. For this is not just a Janesville story or a Midwestern story. It’s an American story.

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Customer Reviews

“Goldstein is a gifted storyteller, and Janesville is a raw, beautiful story, one that sheds

needed light on a country searching for some pathway to the future. J.D. Vance, author of *Hillbilly Elegy* “Janesville is haunting in part because it’s a success story.... One is awed by the dignity and levelheadedness of its protagonists, who seem to represent the best of America.... Goldstein is a talented storyteller, and we root for her characters as, moment by moment, they try their hardest. The New Yorker “Brilliant, probing, and disturbing. A gripping story of psychological defeat and resilience. Bob Woodward, The Washington Post “A superb feat of reportage, Janesville combines a heart-rending account of the implications of the closing on GM workers and their families with a sobering analysis of the response of the public and private sectors. The book is a must-read for anyone who wants to understand the economy of the Rust Belt and its implications for America’s once-proud middle class. The Philadelphia Inquirer “Anyone tempted to generalize about the American working class ought to meet the people in Janesville. The reporting behind this book is extraordinary and the story a stark, heart-breaking reminder that political ideologies have real consequences is told with rare sympathy and insight. Tracy Kidder, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *The Soul of a New Machine* “We’ve been hearing a lot since the November election about the press missing The Story of a middle class losing ground, hope, and heart. But it turns out that Amy Goldstein, one of our finest reporters, was on it all along. Her vivid portrait of a quintessential American town in distress affirms Eudora Welty’s claim that ‘one place understood helps us understand all places better.’ Diane McWhorter, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Carry Me Home* “Energetically reported and sympathetically narrated.... The story of ordinary people, how they cope or don’t cope with a largely, though not entirely, unexpected economic disaster. The Wall Street Journal “Goldstein gives the reader a gripping account of the GM layoff, the real loss it caused and the victims’ heroic resilience in adapting to that loss. By the end of this moving book, I wanted her to write a sequel on what might have been done to prevent the damage in the first place. The Washington Post “Reflecting on the state of the white working class, J.D. Vance’s *Hillbilly Elegy* focuses on cultural decay and the individual, whereas Amy Goldstein’s *Janesville* emphasizes economic collapse and the community. To understand how we have gotten to America’s current malaise, both are essential reading. Robert D. Putnam, New York Times bestselling author of *Bowling Alone* and *Our Kids* “Goldstein provides a welcome addition to the conversation on the broken social contract. Janesville is a town like countless others, and this book

offers a useful cautionary tale for public officials, sociologists, economists, and engaged citizens alike.

• The Boston Globe “Janesville is as relevant to the moment as a breaking news bulletin. It should be required reading for anyone who wants to understand how the Great Recession and deindustrialization have disrupted social, economic and political life in the American heartland. If you want to know why 2016 happened, read this book.”

• E.J. Dionne, New York Times bestselling author of *Why the Right Went Wrong* “Moving and magnificently well-researched.... Janesville joins a growing family of books about the evisceration of the working class in the United States. What sets it apart is the sophistication of its storytelling and analysis.”

• Jennifer Senior, The New York Times “The 2008 financial crisis is frequently reduced to a matter of statistics and graphs, which makes Goldstein’s extensive reporting so valuable and, at times, moving.... By emphasizing the effects of economic collapse on family life, Goldstein’s narrative doubles as a sort of generational saga: It humanizes the worst economic crisis of contemporary times by chronicling the enormous pressures it placed on several generations of Janesville residents.”

• The Nation “Fair-minded and empathetic.... While it highlights many moments of resilience and acts of compassion, Amy Goldstein’s Janesville: An American Story also has a tragic feel. It depicts the noble striving of men and women against overpowering forces—in this case, economic ones.”

• Milwaukee Journal Sentinel “Amy Goldstein was in the right place at the right time to help us understand why we no longer just get along. Having immersed herself in Paul Ryan’s idyllic hometown after its GM plant closed forever, she illuminates disrupted lives, marriages, and childhoods as the manufacturing and strong unions that built our modern middle class fade—fracturing the community and breeding the political polarization that helped give rise to Donald Trump.”

• Sheldon Danziger, President of the Russell Sage Foundation and coauthor of *America Unequal* “Meticulously reported and researched... filled with startling and disturbing facts and figures.”

• The Denver Post “[Goldstein] shatters a lot of conventional wisdom.”

• Minneapolis Star Tribune “Based on three years of probing interviews, Pulitzer Prize-winning Washington Post journalist Goldstein makes her literary debut with an engrossing investigation.... A simultaneously enlightening and disturbing look at working-class lives in America’s heartland.”

• Kirkus Reviews (starred review) “Goldstein’s exhaustive, evenhanded study of the plight of America’s working class through the lens of one emblematic community is deeply humane and deeply disturbing, timely and essential.”

• Library Journal (starred

review)

Amy Goldstein has been a staff writer for thirty years at The Washington Post, where much of her work has focused on social policy. Among her awards, she shared the 2002 Pulitzer Prize for national reporting. She has been a fellow at Harvard University at the Nieman Foundation for Journalism and the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study. *Janesville: An American Story* is her first book. She lives in Washington, DC.

“Even a small city wrenched by the worst of what a mighty recession metes out does not have a single fate.” Amy Goldstein tells the varied fates of the people of Janesville, Wisconsin beginning with the closing of Janesville’s manufacturing plants in 2008. She retells the lives of those who lost their jobs, explaining how they have fared in the following eight years. Janesville is a microcosm of hundreds of towns in the Rustbelt that starts at the Delaware River in eastern Pennsylvania and ends along the Des Moines River a thousand miles west in Iowa. It’s the story of many towns in this distressed part of our country that roared in last year’s election. The book interested me because as an industrial consultant I’ve worked in Janesville and dozens of similar industrial towns from Wisconsin to Upstate New York. I’ve witnessed first-hand how my clients among America’s former great industrial companies booted thousands of their employees out the door and shipped their jobs off to China and Mexico, often after brutally extorting the fired American employees into training their foreign replacements by threatening to withhold their severance pay. Though I moved to Florida in 1998, I returned in 2011 to a town in Michigan’s beautiful NW Lower Peninsula that is now reinventing itself, with some success, as a recreational town of marinas, boutique shops, craft breweries, and fishing charters. It is right across Lake Michigan from Green Bay. I get over to Wisconsin in most years, and have observed the changes described in this book. The story begins with the closing of the Janesville’s GM plant in 2008, which had operated since 1923. GM’s closing caused a chain reaction of closures among the other auto component factories in town. It was followed by the unrelated closing of the town’s other major employer, the famous Parker Pen Company, which fired its American employees and moved their jobs to Mexico. What happened to all these people booted from employment? As usual in life, it’s a mixed bag. Some of the union members with seniority were offered positions at other GM factories hundreds of miles away. They left their families in Janesville and

commuted home on weekends for years until they retired. (Perhaps they did not make permanent moves to the other towns because they held out hope that GM would eventually re-open the Janesville plant. Or perhaps, they were worried that the other GM factories would be closed too, stranding them yet again in another jobless town). A few moved into jobs in social work (getting paid with public money to rehabilitate their laid off neighbors) and criminal justice (prison guards for the unemployed who became criminals). Being the home of Speaker of the House Paul Ryan, Janesville had the political pull to make a mighty effort to recover its fortunes with grants of tens of millions of dollars of state, local, and federal money to potential new employers. The town succeeded, by paying \$11,500,000, to attract the distribution center of one of the "dollar store" chains. Another grant of \$36,000,000 of public money (state, local, federal) attracted a startup medical devices manufacturing company, that may eventually employ up to 150 people. However, offers of nearly \$600,000,000 failed to convince GM to reopen its plant. The new jobs pay much less than GM paid, so many people have drastically reduced their standard of living. And the new jobs took years to be created (the medical company will not create most of its projected employment until 2019 at the earliest). Many people were permanently removed from the middle class and drifted into the despair of living from food stamps in public housing, and of resorting to substance abuse to fill their empty days. The most surprising aspect of the book is that going back to trade schools and community colleges for "retraining" was generally counterproductive.===== "Laid-off workers who went back to school were less likely to have a job after they retrained than those who had not gone to school." Retraining did not translate into greater success at finding a job. Among those who went back to school, the proportion who ended up with steady work was smaller than among the laid-off workers who did not. Worse still, more of those who retrained were not earning any money at all.===== Perhaps this should not be surprising. When the major employer in a town closes, every other employer loses business and starts laying off its people too. What good does it do to retrain from being a factory hand to an office worker, when every office in town is also letting its office people go? The story ends in 2016, with Donald Trump elected President by the votes of folks battered by unemployment in the Industrial Midwest --- people who until then had leaned Democratic. (I was one of them --- having voted Obama in 2012 and Trump in 2016). Janesville's county voted for Obama in 2012 and Ms. Clinton, by a much narrower margin, in 2016. But it elects Conservative Republican Speaker of the House Paul Ryan to Congress. Anyone who wants to find a place to study American politics should start in Janesville, which mirrors the national mix of Democrats, Republicans, and Independents. My takeaways from

the book are:1. Plant closings create an economic cataclysm that is always worse than anticipated. They take down the component feeder factories that supply parts to the big plant. They destroy many small businesses that provided contracted services to the closed plant. The town's restaurants, merchants, bowling alleys, and so on lose much of their business and start to close. Foreclosed homes owned by the unemployed who are unable to continue paying mortgages flood the market and devalue everybody's property. It is difficult, if not actually impossible, to fully recover the economy of a town after a major employer lays off its people.2. We were sold a pack of lies about free trade benefiting our workers. NAFTA-WITH-MEXICO and GATT-WITH-CHINA were sold on the promise that they would "create millions of high paying jobs for American workers who will make products for export." American companies never intended to use free trade agreements to export to other countries. Not a single vehicle was ever exported from Janesville to Mexico or China. The pool of \$2 / hour labor in Mexico induced the Parker Pen Company to give its American employees the boot, and perhaps expedited the decision by GM to permanently close its Janesville operation. (I don't know if GM's management made this calculation, but I witnessed management's calculation at other companies that moving work to Mexico and China would enable the closing of US factories during the next recession).3. The "New Economy of high-paying information worker jobs" is bogus propaganda. Once high-paying jobs are lost, they never come back. The pool of low-cost jobs in Mexico and China impedes the creation of middle class jobs in the USA like we had prior to NAFTA being ratified in 1994.4. "Retraining for a better job" is a delusion foisted by executives and Wall Street money funds who profit by beating Americans out of their jobs. They want to make it socially acceptable to profiteer by sending their people's jobs to Mexico or China by pretending that it's the American workers' fault for being too dumb to retrain for some line of work more in demand. In truth, there aren't enough well-paying jobs anywhere in the USA to soak up the slack from industrial dis-employment (which, by the way, also dis-employs professional people in accounting, production management, and technology). It's like a game of musical chairs where after every round there is always somebody left standing who doesn't have a chair.5. I'm also wondering if Congress should pass laws making it illegal for governments to bribe companies with tens of millions, hundreds of millions, and even billions of dollars to set up shop in their jurisdictions. This merely creates "bidding wars" to see which

government entity can offer the most incentive to bring in mediocre businesses.

We've run up \$10 trillion of national debt and no telling how much debt at the state and local levels paying bribes to businesses, which often never fulfill their promises to hire people. This is yet another sign that the so-called "new economy" failed to replace the jobs that were lost when we relocated the high-paying jobs to Mexico and China. Nevertheless, despite all odds, there has been some recovery in the Rustbelt. Wisconsin, even with its diminished manufacturing economy, retains some family-owned, closely-held companies that haven't yet been taken over by Wall Street hacks who buy companies in order to shut them down and move the Americans' work to Mexico and China. I recently bought a Wisconsin-made Gravely lawn mower and a Wisconsin-made Speed Queen dryer. Excellent products built with the old-fashioned American pride of quality engineering and workmanship. Many other of Wisconsin's famous industrial companies like Harley Davidson, Kohler, and Manitowoc, have found ways to prosper by remaining in the state. Some are even hiring faster than they are laying people off. Some of my son's friends from Florida moved to Wisconsin in order to go to work building construction machinery. There are also quality of life issues that make the Midwest a special place. I moved my family back to NW Michigan, across the lake from Wisconsin, in 2011. Many of us who moved to glamor spots like California, Florida, Colorado, and Seattle when we were young returned to the Midwest in middle age. In Florida, I have neighbors from Michigan. In Michigan, I have neighbors who returned from Florida. Others are back from Colorado, and dozens are back from California. We like living in communities here the people know each other and care for each other's families. New businesses with new jobs, albeit primarily at minimum wage, are also coming to town for the first time in decades. A shadow of prosperity is glimmering for the first time in living memory. Places like Janesville and other towns in the middle of the country have a sense of community that will always make them home to the people who grew up there. If they have not recovered as quickly as we expected, neither have they died.

A compelling account of the impact of the closing of a General Motors factory in Janesville, WI told through the lens of individuals and families who were affected by the closing; hint: it's not pretty, and it's not just the laid-off workers who are affected. The book also provides an interesting view into the impact (or not) of job training programs. Read this alongside EVICTED if you want to get a sense for the challenges many Americans face on a daily basis and how intractable the issues are.

Great read! I lived in Janesville when "the plant" ruled the blue-collared world. Everyone I knew had a connection to assembly line. A Chevy dealer friend of mine in Galesburg, Illinois always told me the Janesville factory produced vehicles with the fewest post manufacturing problems. Most of the workers did not like the assembly line jobs but the pay and benefits allowed people to buy houses and of course new cars. When the plant closed...a big void was left that could never be filled. Everyone in Felt the loss.

This is a modest almost first person account of the wreckage created by a car plant closing in a town. There is no explanation of the role of technology in the layoffs, but it seems to be a small version of Detroit without the racist complications. The unwillingness of poor people locked into repetitive jobs to learn new skills is shocking.

This book provides an excellent insight into what happens when an industry shutdown occurs in a city or town that has relied heavily on it for its livelihood. The shortcomings of the traditional fixes, job training, recruitment of replacement employers, government intervention, are well illustrated. The notion that a community can recover by putting together a package of incentives to lure a new employer to town easily to replace the old is shown to have limited, if any, success, calling into question whether these incentive packages are worth the cost. One might well question the notion that unvarnished capitalism is the best system after seeing the social and economic wreckage General Motors inflicted on Janesville as described in this book. And to think that this is Paul Ryan's hometown!

I graduated from Janesville High School in 1962. Actually had Tim C. in my honors English class with Mr. Hardy. It is a great book and helped me understand what caused Wisconsin to go to Trump. I'm still not happy but I do understand it better and felt that the book was well researched and written. Great to know that Tim is thinking of running for governor.

Goldstein writes a pretty compelling argument for the trickle down impact of when a factory closes down and it's impact on families, charities, and the overall town. As someone who lives near Janesville in Illinois, I read with a greater understanding of what Janesville is going through as you see this commonly in other Midwestern towns that have depended on one sole industry for years without realizing that the lack of business diversity, while fine now, could become a problem if the major employer in town shuts down. It's a cautionary tale that's for sure.

Hillbilly Elegy and Janesville are the best two books I have read over the last 6 months. Anecdotes are indeed no proof, but they are a useful addition to proofs, particularly when they are as balanced as in Amy Goldstein's Janesville. The limited impact of retraining is well documented and depressing.

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