

Goldstein, Amy (2017) *Janesville: An American Story*, Simon & Schuster, New York, Ny.

Review by Jeffrey S. Rothstein

What transpires when an automaker shuts an assembly plant and a small city loses its largest employer and blue collar workers' 'best place to get good pay, good benefits' and 'a stable work life' (p. 29)? What happens to those workers and their families 'when good jobs go away and middle-class people tumble out of the middle class' (p. 5)? How does the community navigate the economic and social upheaval? These are some of the questions explored in *Janesville: An American Story*, journalist Amy Goldstein's compelling narrative of the aftermath of the 2008 closure of General Motors' facility in Janesville, Wisconsin.

Based on a diversity of research, including Goldstein's own interviews, historical archives and newspaper articles, and even a documentary about Janesville from which the author quotes dialogue, the book follows a wide cast of characters whose lives are somehow impacted by the plant closure. The author invites us into the homes of workers dealing with job loss and deciding what to do next, schools where local teachers respond to their students' growing emotional and financial crises, and a local job center suddenly flooded with clients. We also sit in on the planning meetings of local politicians and businesspeople strategizing the way forward.

The book is divided into six sections, one for each year, 2008 through 2013. Within each section, chapters of two to seven pages provide glimpsed updates into the lives of Goldstein's informants – workers and their families, politicians, educators, local business people – affected by, and responding to, the plant closure. This format allows Goldstein to simultaneously illustrate the rippling effects of the plant closure through Janesville while juxtaposing the unequal ramifications on members of that community. Indeed, Goldstein concludes that by 2013 a single community has been split into 'two Janesvilles.'

On the one-hand, there is the Janesville of factory workers whose jobs at GM and the automaker's local suppliers have disappeared at the onset of the Great Recession. This is the Janesville struggling to hold their families together and keep from falling into poverty. Investigating this Janesville, Goldstein's research takes on an ethnographic bent, offering intimate portrayals of the families' decision-making around questions with no good or easy answers. Should the family breadwinner take a job at GM's plant in Fort Wayne, Indiana and commute four hours home on weekends? Is it better to keep the family together and hope to find

a decent paying job locally? Is it worth trying to retrain at the local community college, and for what job? As the book progresses, we see the consequences of those decisions – the loneliness of living away from home in Fort Wayne; teenagers with multiple jobs buying groceries and dipping quietly into the closet at school stocked with donated clothes and toiletries; laid off workers with new degrees unable to match the incomes they enjoyed at GM.

On the other hand, there is the Janesville of the local businesspeople and politicians who can afford to be ‘ambassadors of optimism’ (Chapter 28). They view the GM plant closure as a challenge, and perhaps even an opportunity to rebrand the city. They attend fundraising banquets for local charities and celebrate the victories of Republican Governor Scott Walker and local Congressman Paul Ryan. We get to know the local bank executive as she teams up with a billionaire from Janesville’s traditional rival, Beloit. The two women form and lead Rock County 5.0, a business coalition promoting a five-year strategic plan to overcome the two communities’ economic dependence on, and identification with, the automotive industry.

Those looking for complex theoretical analyses of this material will not find much beyond this idea that the plant closing resulted in a split of this community into two Janesvilles. There are some startling statistics on the failure of retraining programs to improve graduates’ earnings over their counterparts who just went and looked for a new job, as well as some jobs data that calls into question the efficacy of local economic initiatives. But the implications of these empirical findings are mostly left for readers to discern.

Amy Goldstein is a journalist, not a scholar. Her goal is not to contribute to academic debates, but to convey and conjure the very emotions that academic writing frequently eschews. She does so to great effect in this work of creative non-fiction, particularly as she incorporates her subjects’ recollections of what they were saying and thinking at seminal moments into scenes written in the present tense. For example, Chapter 20 opens with the line ‘*Just get going, Matt Wopat whispers to himself. Go.*’ He is behind the wheel of his pickup readying himself for the drive to his new job at GM’s plant in Fort Wayne. His wife and daughters ‘are crowded together. He watches them as if in a picture frame. They’re crying. They’re blowing kisses his way’ (p. 103). In the chapter *Discovering the Closet*, a student introduced to the closet in her high school stocked with donated clothes and toiletries ‘is overwhelmed by this thought that is hitting her, all of a sudden. ‘There’s [sic] more kids like me!’’ (p. 182).

If there is fault to be found in this narrative, it lies in the caricature of Janesville before the plant closing as the bucolic, tight-knit community with a ‘can-do spirit’ to which Goldstein refers repeatedly. Those of us familiar with Janesville before the plant closure knew a more complicated workplace and city. My own book depicts a GM workforce with schisms between Janesville natives and workers who had transferred from other states after the automaker closed their plants. Furthermore, Goldstein’s description of Paul Ryan as rising from ‘one of three sprawling families in town known collectively as the ‘Irish Mafia’ because of an outsized role in construction that made many of the Ryans wealthy’ (p. 37) suggests a city of some historic class divisions. In fact, though Ryan links his politics to ‘the values and people of Janesville’ (p. 225), Goldstein is careful to point out that he does not win a majority of the Janesville vote and, after being introduced as Mitt Romney’s 2008 running mate, is forced to hold his ‘homecoming’ outside his own congressional district to avoid pro-union demonstrators.

What makes Goldstein's oversimplified depiction of Janesville before the GM plant closed disappointing is that as 'An American Story' of economic upheaval, a more complex Janesville would be more representative. Economic crises do not create class divisions in American society; they expose and exacerbate them. That is what happened in Janesville. Plant closure affected the whole city, but some lives continued relatively unchanged while others faced upheaval. Goldstein captures this all-too-familiar phenomenon in a book that is both a page-turner and potential teaching tool for helping students understand the real-life impact of de-industrialization, economic inequality, and the failure of our economy to produce quality jobs for the working class.

Reviewer Bio

Jeffrey S. Rothstein is Associate Professor of Sociology at Grand Valley State University in Grand Rapids, Michigan. His research focuses on the changing nature of work in the global economy and the impact of globalization on labor. He is the author of *When Good Jobs Go Bad: Globalization, De-unionization and Declining Job Quality in the North American Auto Industry* (Rutgers University Press).