Amy Goldstein's 'Janesville': Superb, heart-wrenching account on whatever happened to Wisconsin

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Janesville
An American Story

By Amy Goldstein
Simon & Schuster.

Reviewed by
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Two days before Christmas 2008, the General Motors assembly plant in Janesville, Wis., closed. With the 4.8 million-square-foot facility padlocked behind a chain-link perimeter, almost 10,000 people in the county found
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In Janesville, Amy Goldstein, a staff writer for the Washington Post, tells the story of the impact of deindustrialization and the Great Recession on a quintessential American community.

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.

In chilling detail, Goldstein lays out the choices the citizens of Janesville were compelled to make.

Jerad Whiteaker’s father retired on a GM pension. But Jerad himself loses his job on the assembly line. He turns down an offer to move to a GM plant in Kansas City, Kan., 500 miles away, because his wife and twin daughters do not want to leave Janesville - and because they won’t be able to sell their house (which is under water).

Jerad gets $4,000 in severance, and he accepts work when he can find it, at less than half his old pay. The Whiteakers drastically reduce their grocery bills, spend down their savings, and Tammy and the girls get part-time jobs.

In time, and with great reluctance, the Whiteakers accept shampoo, toothpaste, and other supplies from the “Parker Closet” (stocked by local groups with clothes, toiletries, school supplies, clothes, and food for students in poverty) at daughter Kayzia’s high school.

As Goldstein demonstrates, the Whiteakers and thousands of other individuals and families in the same predicament were not
well-served by the safety net provided by charitable organizations (expected to take up the slack in social services, but ironically forced by lack of money to reduce those services) and the state and federal governments.

Training programs, she indicates, tend not to enhance job prospects. Unemployed workers don’t qualify for benefits until they are nearly destitute. And, according to Goldstein, Forward Janesville, the city’s business and civic alliance, offered little more than tax breaks - and empty slogans - to companies that either threatened to leave or expressed interest in coming to town.

Therefore, it seems appropriate for Goldstein to end her splendid book with two conflicting images. At a banquet at the Holiday Inn, she writes, 750 wealthy Janesville citizens listen to “33 Reasons to Be Optimistic about Janesville, Rock County & Wisconsin,” a Forward Janesville report full of seemingly baseless sunniness, yet applauded by a power class determined to see their social vision through. They give their congressman, Paul Ryan, a standing ovation for declaring that the we’re-in-it-together spirit makes Janesville great. Meanwhile, Goldstein reveals, three-quarters of the people who lost jobs, or who now live with someone who did, report that they are worse off financially than they were when the recession hit Janesville.

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