

*Small-Town America: Finding Community, Shaping the Future.* By Robert Wuthnow. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2013. Pp. xx+498. \$35.00.

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To quote Marcia Pelly Effrat: "Trying to study community is like trying to scoop Jell-O up with your fingers. You can get hold of some, but there's always more slipping away from you" (*The Community: Approaches and Applications* [Free Press, 1974], p. 1). Fortunately, Robert Wuthnow does not concern himself with yet another attempt at defining the indefinable, but concentrates instead on thick descriptions of how residents of small-town America experience community in the places where they live—a refreshing and productive approach to sociology of community. In good ethnological tradition, Wuthnow explores the meanings small-town residents place on their lives in these places and in the process has penned a compelling portrait of them and the places they live that dispels many of the more familiar and enduring stereotypes of small-town America, most particularly its stifling homogeneity, and presents it instead in its grand diversity. *Small-Town America* makes deft use of secondary data and over "seven hundred semi-structured qualitative interviews in three hundred communities scattered among forty-three states" (p. 7) to tell his story of their stories. The result is perhaps, in our opinion, one of the most exhaustive and comprehensive studies to date on small-town America. The sheer volume of detail, the compelling and easy-to-read prose, and the exhaustive coverage of all things small town make this book a must for any upper-division or graduate seminar on community and an invaluable resource for researchers interested in studying the larger issues of what it means to live and experience community in these places.

The central theme of the book is that small-town America can best be understood from learning about and appreciating the residents' experiences and perspectives of community themselves. Failure to see small-town America from this approach lends itself to the perpetuation of many inaccurate stereotypes and myths that continue to skew the way social scientists define community. It is clear that Wuthnow does not subscribe to the "community lost" narrative, nor is he an advocate of the rural community as the genuine prototype or ideal form of community. He simply but convincingly argues that the physical isolation and the small population of small towns create specific environments for daily social interaction that is fundamentally different from social interaction in more populated areas. Interacting across limited shared public space and available services builds community narratives and ties that are more personable and more interdependent than in places of greater population densities. It does not

make for better community, just a different way community is experienced. Thus every element of lived community experience for residents of small towns is shaped and framed by demographic factors like physical isolation and sparse population density. Residents of small towns find community “in subtle and highly varied ways, and yet in ways that are profoundly influenced by the scale in which their daily social interaction takes place” (p. xiv). In many ways, small towns are rural enough to be largely autonomous, yet they are very much connected to the wider American discourse through a myriad of connections outside of their borders. In short, the boundaries that shape residents’ rural community experience extend well beyond the geopolitical boundaries of the town itself and must be factored in to understand how these residents experience community. Wuthnow is vigilant in not overgeneralizing findings but always quick to point out how critical it is to recognize the diversity that occurs in small towns. Residents of small towns continue to create their own unique metanarratives based on their differing circumstances in their respective communities yet with some common and important demographic elements. “People describe their experiences and understandings of community . . . with considerable regularity” (p. 341).

Our favorite chapter was 11, the concluding chapter, in which Wuthnow ties into a neat bow his concluding observations into 10 “building blocks” for community borrowing from Suzanne Keller’s work. These 10 themes or building blocks include territory, membership criteria, institutional frameworks, cultural values, belief system, myth of community, rituals and celebrations, leadership structure, social networks, and the spirit of community. While all 10 building blocks are part of the community experience, each community will vary in the relative importance of each. The themes are practical conceptual tools for researchers and they encapsulate Wuthnow’s desire to contribute a grassroots-level theory to the rural community/small-town debate. Regarding the topics addressed in the other chapters, Wuthnow provides something of substance for anyone interested in any aspect of community. The introduction builds his argument for understanding small-town life in the eyes of those who live there. In chapter 2, he shows how social class continues to be a significant factor in small-town life, but functions as more of a “leveling experience” because of everyday interaction between rich and poor due to more frequently sharing the same limited public spaces. The next two chapters delve into why rural people value their communities versus alternatives. We also found chapter 5 crucial due to its coverage of how individual circumstances and histories play a significant role in why residents of small towns choose to stay even when they have options to move elsewhere. Many end up choosing to balance their own wants with what could be considered communal needs. Chapters 6 through 10 delve into rural leadership, religious organizations,

a slowly shifting moral discourse, rural residents' bitter feelings toward government, and what the future holds for small-town America.

Perhaps the one thing that truly sets Wuthnow's work apart from other contemporary treatises on community in America is the exhaustiveness of his methods. As mentioned, his principal data come from over 700 semi-structured interviews in 300 towns in 43 states. Of these interviews, 150 were conducted in metropolitan settings for comparison purposes. The ability to draw such comparisons across these data alone makes his study very robust. Yet, he goes even further by combining these qualitative interviews with quantitative data from a variety of sources, including data from the last four decennial censuses, as well as creating additional summary findings on small towns out of the American Community Survey (2005–9) to illustrate the macro shifts in small towns since 1980. He visited more than 100 towns and moderated some of the focus groups. All these data sources and the intelligent way Wuthnow uses them to weave his story of small-town residents' stories of community make his book one of the most well-rounded contemporary studies on American rural life available. Readers will appreciate his easy-to-read writing style and his detailed notes section in the back of the book on every chapter, including a methodology appendix with the questions used in interviews.

In *Small-Town America: Finding Community, Shaping the Future* there is a wealth of information for the field researcher, the demographer, the survey designer, and the community theorist. We are confident that Wuthnow's work will lead to more insightful explorations in community theory and how rural America continues to play a significant role in American society.

*The Spirit's Tether: Family, Work, and Religion among American Catholics.* By Mary Ellen Konieczny. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. Pp. xiv+294 pp. \$29.95 (paper).

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Mary Ellen Konieczny's comparative ethnography of two Catholic parishes sheds significant light on the diverse and contested terrain that is American Catholicism in the 21st century. Konieczny thoughtfully couples explorations of congregational practices and parishioner narratives to reveal how differently Catholicism is enacted and understood across liberal and conservative lines. At the center of *The Spirit's Tether* are ongoing debates within Catholicism that all pertain to family life. These issues include divergent ideas about appropriate social roles for women