

Advance Reviews & Praise

HOLLOWING OUT THE MIDDLE: The Rural Brain Drain and What It Means for America

by

Patrick J. Carr and Maria J. Kefalas

Beacon Press

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Publishers Weekly; June 8th issue (Starred Review):

Ghost Towns

With a massive “youth exodus” from heartland America, small towns face extinction.

★Hollowing Out the Middle: The Rural Brain Drain and What It Means for America

Patrick J. Carr and Maria J. Kefalas. Beacon, \$26.95 (256p) ISBN 978-0-8070-4171-0

Thousands of small towns in rural America are being depopulated, or “hollowed out.” The brightest and most ambitious young people, dubbed “Achievers” by husband and wife researchers Carr and Kefalas, abandon the heartland for greater challenges and rewards in cities. Their less talented and/or less ambitious brothers and sisters, the “Stayers,” remain in places like smalltown Iowa, where the ethnographers surveyed 275 graduates of a local high school. Deft and detailed case studies bring the population to life, making the poor prognosis heartrending. While the authors insist that “with a plan and a vision” smalltown America can be revitalized, evidence to the contrary seems overwhelming. Globalization, the growth of agribusiness and the Achievers' hunger for “cultural vibrancy” suggest that the brain drain will not be replaced with a “brain gain”—despite the addition of scattered “Returners” and immigrants. Some analysts suggest that remaining human populations be relocated from the Great Plains and the land be restored to a vast Buffalo Commons, a “venue for bison and prairie restoration”; others foresee the region becoming a bastion for sustainable agriculture and green energy. Whatever the future may hold, the authors alert readers to this major change with clarity and compassion. (Oct.)

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Kirkus Reviews; June 15th issue:

Carr, Patrick J. and Maria J. Kefalas

HOLLOWING OUT THE MIDDLE:

The Rural Brain Drain and What It Means for America

Two sociologists' plan for damming the flow of talented young people from rural America.

The American heartland is committing suicide, with profound implications for the whole country, write husband-and-wife team Carr (Sociology/Rutgers Univ., New Brunswick) and Kefalas (Sociology/Saint Joseph's Univ.). For decades, parents and teachers in small towns such as Ellis—the pseudonymous Iowa community in which the authors lived and conducted research for more than a year—have funneled their brightest young people to college and to careers in big cities. Meanwhile, neglect befalls their less-gifted peers, who are condemned to blue-collar jobs with stagnant wages, or to poverty. The authors acknowledge that this problem is not new. But in a postindustrial economy that prizes education, the process will eventually turn rural communities into impoverished ghost towns. Carr and Kefalas categorize Ellis's young people according to their defining traits: Achievers, Stayers, Seekers, Returners. The authors' classification system makes sense, but their justification for making rural rejuvenation a national priority is thin at points. After mentioning the potential role of the rural Midwest in sustainable agriculture and energy, the authors drop the potentially intriguing thread. More convincing is their depiction of the dead-end lives of individual Stayers. Carr and Kefalas concede that it would be wrong to abort promising students' futures outside their hometowns, but they prescribe more investment in the Stayers, from community-college-based retraining programs to expanded Internet access in rural areas. The latter, the authors suggest, could also attract high-talent immigrants and even coax a few Achievers into staying.

Somewhat wonky, but an impassioned, mostly persuasive manifesto from two advocates for small-town America.

“The undoing of Middle America is the great secret tragedy of our times. For shining a bright, unwavering light on the unfolding disaster Patrick Carr and Maria Kefalas deserve enormous credit; for proposing solutions that actually have a chance of succeeding, they deserve the gratitude of frustrated midwesterners everywhere.”

—Thomas Frank, author of *What's the Matter With Kansas?* and *The Wrecking Crew*

“A solid and important work of first-rate ethnography. *Hollowing Out the Middle* is a rural panorama of heart-wrenching proportion.”

—Stephen G. Bloom, author of *Postville: A Clash of Cultures in Heartland America* and *The Oxford Project*

"*Hollowing Out the Middle* is a fascinating study that brilliantly describes and analyzes the problems of rural towns in America that are emptying out. It will raise national awareness of a serious domestic problem that has largely escaped media, political, and scholarly attention."

—William Julius Wilson, Lewis P. and Linda L. Geyser University Professor Harvard University

"In *Hollowing Out The Middle* the authors present a brave and daunting examination of why the most talented, the most productive young people leave our small towns and what can be done to stop this exodus. Those millions, like myself contributors to this *Hollowing Out The Middle*, who have flourished from the discipline, the warmth, the security, the high expectations and the life-experiences devoutly wish these same small town benefits for their children and grandchildren. This book is so generative, so fiercely compelling that I discovered that in my quiet moments, in my early morning wakeful periods, I became absorbed and engaged in the task of trying to solve the well-nigh unsolvable dilemmas presented here. I urge you to read this book."

—Mildred Armstrong Kalish, author of *Little Heathens: Hard Times and High Spirits on an Iowa Farm During the Great Depression*

"Reminiscent of the great sociological classics, *Middletown* and *Elmtown's Youth*, Pat Carr and Maria Kefalas have produced an exemplary account of coming of age in a Midwestern town. This book is required reading for the policy and research community and anyone thinking about issues facing young adults in America."

—Frank Furstenberg, Zellerbach Family Chair of Sociology, University of Pennsylvania and author of *Destinies of the Disadvantaged: The Politics of Teenage Childbearing*