

On the shelf: Methland, by Nick Reding

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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In 2006, Congress passed the [Combat Methamphetamine Epidemic Act](#) as part of the Patriot Act. By then, methamphetamine abuse had [grown quickly](#) in the public imagination from a B-list drug problem to an epidemic. Meth was causing serious problems—some obvious and others [less so](#)—all over the country. CMEA helped control the retail sale of meth ingredients such as pseudoephedrine (nasal decongestant). But was it as helpful in combating these problems as congressional [fanfare](#) indicated?

Journalist

Nick Reding spent an extended period of time in the small town of Oelwein, Iowa, before and after passage of CMEA. In [Methland: The Death and Life of an American Small Town](#),

he tells the story of the town's intertwined histories with economic depression and meth. Reding takes the time to get to know a number of the major players: the meth cooks, traffickers and addicts; the mayor, prosecutor and doctor. He profiles these individuals with empathy and respect, as well as tremendous journalistic insight.

Before CMEA,

the police were busting local tiny-to-medium-scale labs on a regular basis. The book's most haunting episode tells of a cook who blew up his house, melted off much of his face and begged the cops to shoot him. After the law passed, much of this drug-production activity ceased, and with it the sense of national emergency. But meth *use* didn't take the same hit, as Reding learned on a return trip to Oelwein. Cracking down on small-time cooks in the States didn't end the demand for their products, and larger producers in Mexico were happy to pick up the slack.

Methland closes with Oelwein slowly, hesitantly on the mend. Reding, who [acknowledges](#) that the town's comeback has continued, has [taken heat](#) from area residents accusing him of factual errors and sensationalism. But Oelwein aside, Reding's analysis of the far-reaching causes and effects of meth is persuasive and sobering, and his portraits of people and places are engrossing.