

# 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.