The Country I Left Behind: Conversations Across America by JL Deffenbaugh

Overview

John Deffenbaugh has written a book of its time, for its time. He has cast a critical eye over America, helping readers understand how the country got to where it is, and what the future holds.

John grew up in Peoria, Illinois in the ’60s, moved back to Scotland, then returned 50 years later to discover what had happened to the country he loved. For two years leading up to the last election, John traveled to every corner of the Lower 48, covering more than 50,000 miles by car, train, bus and bike like a modern-day de Tocqueville, visiting the historical sites that define the country in contradictory ways, and speaking at length with more than 600 people. Their trenchant comments about the nation are at the heart of his memoir, *The Country I Left Behind: Conversations Across America,* in which he compares the America of his youth, which many have mythologized, to the America of today, these Disunited States.

America, like the rest of the world, has changed a lot in 50 years. He left before its 200th anniversary and it’s now celebrating the 250th. He’s missed 20 percent of America’s history. In the United Kingdom, where he lived all these years, that time period is a blip in its history. Incredible change would not be unusual for such a young country, but America holds a unique place in the world. It’s the first democracy and now it’s greatest superpower.

Yet, all that is under threat. The presidency of Donald Trump is threatening American democracy and upending the rules-based international order. John found out what Americans think about these developments, having a listening ear and a neutral approach, so everyone openly shared their views. Enquiring, not advocating – and introducing himself as ‘John from Scotland’ – opened the door to generative conversations. He didn’t challenge what he heard, but instead asked questions to clarify and explore further. He therefore heard views across the full spectrum of opinion in America today. These conversations and John’s commentary are the core of his book, a socio-political travelogue that draws on the history and culture of America from the perspective of ordinary citizens across the land. He also got inside the two election campaigns, canvassing voters and attending rallies.

What he found was that the legacy of slavery has turned America into a deeply divided and unequal society. People believe that isolating their country from the multi-polar world will protect them even as dog whistle politics turn them on their countrymen. As a people, they are held together by national symbols, which are

fraying, and sports affiliations, which are inherently antagonistic. Americans, he found, are friendly, yet uncaring, trumpeting their own individualism while simultaneously decrying a decline in community cohesion and demanding that elites solve all their problems. They've accepted moral and governmental decay while championing anti-majoritarian institutions that undermine democracy and equality. But while the freedom he felt travelling the country is no sure thing for those living in it today, John found grounds for optimism in the willingness of the many Americans he met to take action to reclaim its future.

For readers of James Fallows's *Our Towns*, Beverly Gage's *This Land is Your Land*, Neil King's *American Ramble*, and especially Arlie Russell Hochschild's *Strangers In Their Own Land* and *Stolen Pride*, John's book explores conflicting attitudes from Green Bay to Tulsa to Austin, from Simi Valley to Salt Lake City to Stone Mountain, and scores of places in between. His book fills a gap in what is already on the shelves, offering a unique perspective at a time of acute turmoil and uncertainty for America, both at home and abroad. International readers will equally be attracted to John's book, offering insight to the complexity of America on which so many depend but don't understand.

Publication and marketing can tap into John's existing readership: contributors to his website https://rediscoveringamerica.us/, LinkedIn, Facebook and Instagram contacts who followed his road trip, and all the people he had conversations with over the many months on the road. John also had a radio audience in his hometown of Peoria: https://omny.fm/shows/greg-dan-show-interviews/former-peorian-returns-from-scotland-to-rediscover?in_playlist=podcast, along with media contacts in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. He has a range of contacts who can be approached to review and promote the book.

John also has an extensive gallery of photographs that can be used to illustrate his narrative: https://rediscoveringamerica.us/gallery/