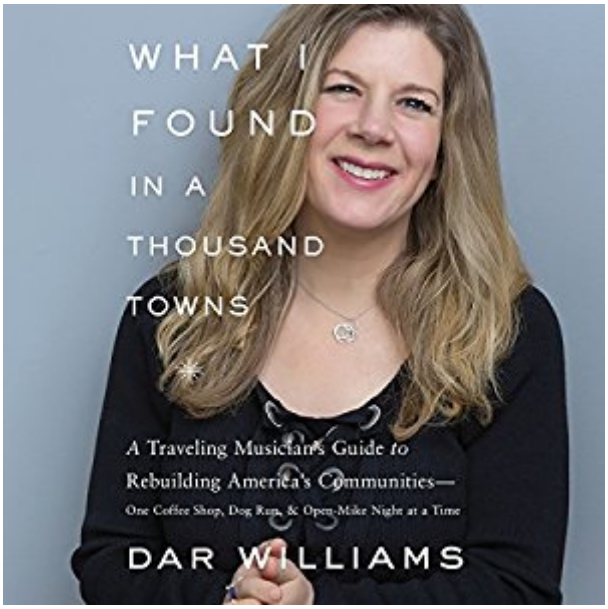
What I Found In A Thousand Towns: A Traveling Musician's Guide To Rebuilding America's Communities - One Coffee Shop, Dog Run, And Open-Mike Night At A Time



Synopsis

A beloved folk singer presents an impassioned account of the fall and rise of the small American towns she cherishes. Dubbed by The New Yorker as "one of America’s very best singer-songwriters", Dar Williams has made her career not in stadiums, but touring America’s small towns. She has played their venues, composed in their coffee shops, and drank in their bars. She has seen these communities struggle but has also seen them thrive in the face of postindustrial identity crises. Here, Williams muses on why some towns flourish while others fail, examining elements from the significance of history and nature to the uniting power of public spaces and food. Drawing on her own travels and the work of urban theorists, Williams offers real solutions to rebuild declining communities. What I Found in a Thousand Towns is more than a love letter to America’s small towns, it’s a deeply personal and hopeful message about the potential of America’s lively and resilient communities.

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Customer Reviews

As a touring musician, Dar Williams has witnessed the ways certain cities have evolved over the last quarter century. Some small to medium-sized American communities emerged from the malaise of the middle 1990s stronger, smarter, and prepared to face the tech-savvy new generation, while others didnÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢t. What makes the difference? Williams, a part-time university instructor, dons her researcher hat to understand.She starts with an insight revealed by a friend: Proximity. Our closest friends arenÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢t the people with whom we share the most values and interests, but with whom she share the most time. Successful communities provide

opportunities for what Williams calls Positive Proximity, which briefly means, putting the right people together in the right places to cultivate a growing heart. Some aspects of Positive Proximity are easier than others.Williams identifies three broad categories communities use to build Positive Proximity. She calls these Places, Identity Building, and TranslationÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â •that last a subtle concept which she explains somewhat vaguely. WeÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢ll return to that. The first, Places, is pretty self-explanatory. Coffee shops, music venues, and other man-made spaces bring people together to talk. Natural environment makes communities unique. And hybrids of natural and man-made space, like waterfronts, meld the best virtues.Identity Building emerges from the interactions which begin in Places. These are the activities that give individual communities their distinct flavor: not every town could cultivate a successful food tourism identity, like Williams describes in New YorkÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s Finger Lakes region. (I live in corn country, so believe me, the pumpkin patch market gets saturated quickly.) But successful communities have something, history or industry or land or something, to establish an identity.Translation is the process of turning Place and Identity into action. The bridges between economic and social classes, for instance, or between a town and its most lucrative industries. I struggle to encapsulate WilliamsÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢ description of this concept, possibly because she struggles too. Though important in turning principles into product, itÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s also pretty vague and shapeless. One suspects maybe itÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s something we discover by doing.Williams acknowledges these transitions are often time-consuming and difficult. Some communities may rely upon individual personalities to make such transitions. She describes one innovator in Ithaca, New York, who helped cultivate the townÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s identity outside its university, but he died unexpectedly. Ithaca had others ready to step into his shoes, though, and develop the momentum he created. Town councils and real-estate developers often lack the long-term vision real community demands.She also concedes that her principles can have deleterious consequences. One of the social justice movementÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s recent bugaboos, gentrification, often follows rapid community development. People want to live in creative, interconnected towns, and long-term residents quickly get priced out of their hometowns. But that consequence isnÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢t inevitable. Communities which have plans to manage rapid development often avoid gentrificationÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s risks, or other perils like crime, in ways Williams describes.Planning looms large in WilliamsÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢ vision for American community. Important, economically lucrative community renewals, like the refurbishment of Wilmington, DelawareÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s waterfront district, or Middletown, ConnecticutÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s recent restoration of ties between Wesleyan University and the city, have concrete, long-term plans, often public/private partnerships.

Something Williams says around page 65 really sticks with me: ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“I always thought love was the answer. And itÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s not. ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â¦ love is an outcome, not a plan.ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â•Living in Middle America, IÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢ve witnessed WilliamsÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢ principles in action. Many farming townsÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢ economic plans basically consist of waiting for the Eisenhower Era to return. But cities which plan their development, like DenverÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s LoDo neighborhood, or which preserve a unified community vision, like Lawrence, Kansas, just do better in the long run. Williams simply codifies the cultural principles that successful, growing communities under mass media radar consistently share.Some advance reviewers have complained that Williams voices some left-wing opinions between these covers. This apparently surprises them from a folk singer. Well, compared to her lyrics, this book is refreshingly apolitical; she simply starts from the opinion that people are more likely to love their neighbors (and organize accordingly) if they first know their neighbors. She also speaks warmly of more conservative-leaning towns and organizers. Her insights arenÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢t exclusive.Williams emerged from the same generation of singer-songwriter goddesses that gave us Ani DiFranco and Shawn Colvin. A working musicianÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s life has given her numerous homes away from home, and a distinctive perspective on important Seeing American cities and towns from an outsiderÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s viewpoint, sheÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s witnessed some towns grow exponentially, while others suffer, and some buy on credit what they cannot repay later. The distinction is often subtle.

One of the things I have learned is that we all have something to contribute to society.In her book WHAT I FOUND IN A THOUSAND TOWNS, recording artist and author Dar Williams explores the benefits of working together and what can happen when communities lose their way and their support. Some of what she shares will probably seem pretty common sense: if you want your town to flourish you have to support it in all ways, especially financially. The book also shows that support is something that can be given by all members of the community,regardless of age.We’re all in this thing called life together, so Dar reminds us to do our part to support each other and where we live, because so many times that lack of support can have far-reaching consequences and lead to losing more than we thought possible.

This is an interesting book about how just about anyone, in any town, of any size, can help revitalize their town. All of the examples are great, but I personally know of the 15 year or so "Phoenix" (a Mythical bird recovering from the ashes) of Phoenixville. The end of Phoenix Steel over 30 years

ago seemed to some to mark a dead end for this old, historic town, right next to the more famous Valley Forge Park. (BTW, this historic neighbor may have also played a part in amazing revival of Phoenixville.) The town has a bedrock of old and lovely homes, and a nice Main Street bordered by a public square, park, and library, which herald all kinds of local activities, events, fairs, marches, and so on. The revitalization of the Bridge Street hipster shopping and restaurant area is nothing short of amazing, as hundreds of new apartments have been built in the area as well. Cafes, bike shops, odd shops, are thriving, though the area seems to be suffering from nominal pedestrian traffic during the week. In fact, two bookstores have closed the past several years, and many other retailers seem to come and go. The old time theatres are still a treat, the town is a fun walk, and the First Fridays may have started here in the Philly area.The weekends, however, are fun, crowded and walkable with a steady stream of young and old carousing and wandering. The Steel museum is free and fun, as are the canals. (Tragically, a young lady was crushed to death by a falling tree here only a few years ago.). And the Schuykill River provides a nice backdrop. All this growth has probably once again hurt some of the locals, and the new and sometimes big money has moved in. Still, with intelligent planning, cit6izen interest, and a nice location about 25 miles outside Philadelphia, Phoenixville has been a winner for most. Also, the Wilmington riverfront is a similar story, a junior version of the famous Baltimore waterfront, which has really propelled that large and older city into the limelight. The other chapters describe similar citizen and government efforts to bring back towns to the forefront.

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