What does it mean to be an American and how does one embrace their American-ness? Is it as simple as wearing a baseball cap boasting your favorite team and buying an American-made car, or does it resonate more with those who have lived what some call the American Dream? Charles LeDuff would argue that neither is true. In, “Detroit: An American Autopsy,” he posits that today’s American identity is indicative of the hardships and struggle one overcomes in life. A Detroiter, he states, “may be the most important American there is” (LeDuff 2013:7). This is due to the fact that they’ve weathered the hardest hits socially, economically, and politically during “some of the most historic and cataclysmic years in the American experience.” (LeDuff 2013:7). Throughout the short anecdotes that make up this non-fiction work, the unmentioned yet ever-present premise seems to be that being American is synonymous with being a survivor; an American is a fighter and a veteran of the domestic wars onset by the flaws of a country hidden deep in the creases of American soil, behind and beside stoic suburban towns, amid the roughest cities in this nation.

Throughout the text, LeDuff pokes fun at the corruption of politicians and unveils the ugly truths of Detroit’s dangerous neighborhoods. His comedic tone, friendly disposition and poetic approach to each of the short stories allow the reader to view this book as an informal conversational piece with profound messages.

“The neck bone is connected to the billionaire who owns the crumbling building where the man died. The rib bones are connected to the countless millions shuffling through the frostbitten streets burning fires in empty warehouses to stay warm – and get high. The hipbone is connected to a demoralized police force that couldn't give a sh*t about digging a dead mope out of an
elevator shaft. The thighbone is connected to the white suburbanites who turn their heads away from the calamity of Detroit, carrying on as though the human suffering was somebody else’s problem. And the foot bones – well, they’re sticking out of a block of dirty frozen water belonging to an unknown man nobody seem to gave a rip about” (LeDuff 2013:6).

This work is full of blunt and honest portrayals of the people left to pull together the remains of a former American epicenter jilted by its own country. It’s text helps shed light on an untapped reality rich with sociological implications.

In the context of this class and the American studies Department of Connecticut College, this book breathes life back into the notion that the American identity can be affirmed in opposition to itself in lieu of its opposition to others. While many courses in this department explore different processes of nation-building, most suggest that the United States tends to reify itself in opposition to another people, culture, region or politic. LeDuff’s (2013) argument adds depth to this conversation by questioning whether the future of American-ness is, in fact, the distancing of oneself from the ruin that America is quickly becoming.

Whether or not the reader agrees with LeDuff’s view of who “real” Americans are is of no consequence. The journey he illustrates is unparalleled to nearly any other I’ve read. Each story is like a scene from a movie, ushering the reader through the ins and outs of a city riddled with debris, saturated in memories of the “golden years,” and full of “use-to-have’s” (LeDuff 2013:13) scrapping for the last crumbs left of the American pie.