Overview: Spurred by his inadvertent encounter with meth in Gooding, Idaho, during 1999 and amplified by the increased publicity of the perils caused by America’s most dangerous drug, Nick Reding targeted and infiltrated the miniscule town of Oelwein, Iowa, of only 6,772 people, located an hour north of Cedar Rapids, between 2005 and 2007. Catalogued in Reding’s investigative book, “Methland: The Death and Life of American Small Town, Oelwein was a town on the brink of disaster, and a prototypical example of the ‘socio-cultural cancer’, as Reding coined it, subduing the lives of entire community “as seven in ten children under the age of twelve lived below the poverty line, while 80 per cent of the 400 students at the high school were eligible for the federal school lunch program.” (12)

Vulnerable to any relief from the horrors of small-town America, the production, distribution and utilization of “crank” became a communal affliction that ripped through the Midwestern states. “Georgia, Illinois, Missouri or Tennessee experienced a 500 per cent increase in seized meth labs from 1998 to 2004, while Iowa went from 321 labs busted in 1998 to 1,370 labs being seized six years later.” (29)” Following the cutbacks at the Gillette plant, closing of the meatpacking factory and struggling returns for small-scale farmers in which Oelwein’s unemployment rate reached double the national level, meth and economics became both the product and result of each other. Leaving no leaf left unturned, Reding examines the transitional development of meth from the synthesisation of 19th century Japanese scientists to the personal production of household labs, which he proposes has a direct relation to the prevalence of labs in small towns. Out of work and remote from any other narcotics market, many rural residents, like Oelwein junkie Roland Jarvis, became small-time cooks in which they could discreetly
manufacture their batch in the tubs or bowls of tackle shops, river barges, motel rooms and even retirement homes. Ultimately, the drug became much stronger, and in turn more addictive.

Although Reding successfully examined the trends and influences of the limited financial standings, inadequate educational conditions and deteriorating infrastructure in small town America, he also attributed the extreme isolation as a consistent theme among the rural settings that appeared to contribute significantly to crank use. However, rather than simply identifying the dynamic between social seclusion and drug use, Reding engages in his study by asking direct and … questions that ask ‘why particular frequency in these small towns?’ ‘Why methamphetamine as the popular choice?’ and ‘What triggered this epidemic?, so we can reverse such proceedings. In Methland, Reding lucidly depicts the truth of crank in small town America, composing that “together, Lori and meth were an antidote to the small-town sense of isolation, the collective sense of depression and low morale that had settled on Ottumwa since most farms went belly-up, the railroad closed, and the boys at the meatpacking plant lost their jobs.” (pg. 71)

Ultimately, meth began tranquilizing rural American towns of their degradation and detachment at a staggering rate due to crank’s inexpensive and accessible manufacture, but overall its ability to make people feel very good. Unfortunately, as District Attorney described the Reding, “We’d lost all the bases of civilized culture around here. It was third-world. People began referring to Oelwein as Methlehem, and the cruel irony is that it is a horror completely of our own making.” (pg. 33)

How this work can be applied to American Studies: As an in-depth case study of a particular sector of American society, Methland is a quintessential American Studies text. Engaging questions of race, class, gender, and what it is that makes this problem particularly American,
this book is valuable to almost anyone interested in American Studies, and to both intro-level American Studies courses as well as advanced ones.