



**BOOK**

**REVIEW**

# American Made

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# American Made: A Story of Identity and Survival

American Made questions the concepts of identity and survival and shines a light on how people react when one of those things is threatened.



## Shannon (white female)

Shannon is a single mother who grew up very poor and is now relying on an extremely abusive man to feed herself and her children. To her, the job at Rexnord meant more than a paycheck – it literally was the difference between life and death. Shannon became one of the only women to work in the “heat-treat” department, which was a very dangerous, but highly paid position at Rexnord.

- ▶ **Survival:** “But the biggest reason Shannon didn’t leave Dan was that she couldn’t afford to. A rich woman had the resources to leave an abusive man; a poor woman had to bide her time.” (pg 85)
- ▶ **Identity:** “The self-esteem Shannon got from the factory work emboldened her in her war with Dan.” (pg 87)

Although she was on the fence, Shannon eventually decides to help train the Mexican employees. Rather than feeling threatened by her replacements, Shannon tells them “I’m happy you got the opportunity to make some money. I was blessed for a while, now it’s your turn to be blessed.” (pg 232)

## Wally (black male)

Wally, who was always entrepreneurial in spirit, took a job at Rexnord after being hit with a \$26,000 medical bill, despite dreams of opening his own restaurant. Wally was known for being kind and well-liked and was promoted to chairman of efficiency at Rexnord despite early obstacles of getting a job given his race.

- ▶ **Survival:** “The brush with death made him see the sense in a job with medical insurance.” (pg 69)
- ▶ **Identity:** “We’re all the same,” Wally Hall told the crowd. “Everybody gets up and goes to work for a purpose: to provide for their families”....“an opportunity to feed our families. An opportunity to wake up every morning and be proud of what you do. They taking it all away from us.” (pg 54)

When Rexnord announces the plant closing, Wally sees that as an opportunity to pursue his dream of opening a BBQ restaurant. Wally decides to travel to Mexico to train the new employees when the Rexnord factory shuts down. Wally eventually passes away and never realizes his dream of opening Wally Gator’s Woodfire BBQ.

## John (white male)

John was a lifelong Democrat that was raised in a family of strong unions supporters, and considered himself an advocate for the working man. Despite his union loyalty, John found himself butting heads with his coworkers over the presidential election – they were supporters of Bernie Sanders, and John was a supporter of Donald Trump on the basis that he would keep jobs in America.

- ▶ **Survival:** “By August, they were down to their last \$200”....“They were about to tell their landlord that they were vacating when John’s buddy from Rexnord called. He’d gotten John another interview”. (pg 78)
- ▶ **Identity:** “Working at Navistar had felt more like a membership in a band of brothers than a job.” (pg 74)

When Rexnord announces the plant closing, John actively opposed training the new employees and encouraged his coworkers to also do the same. John initially gets a job at Kroger, and then switches to Dilling, a company that services machines. Not long after, John was overheard complaining about his job and was fired – ending up jobless once again.

Even after the Civil Rights and Women’s Rights movements, the effects of institutionalized racism and sexism are still deeply entrenched in our current labor dynamics. Well paying jobs were often reserved for white men, making it a privilege for racial minorities and women to access these jobs, rather than a right. I think this is also why Wally doesn’t seem as angry when the plant closes – because “black people were more accustomed to adversity, joblessness, and unemployment.”(pg 213)

**Economic prosperity is not a zero-sum game, despite what we’ve been led to believe.** In the book, it is mentioned that “among whites, there’s a lingering view that the American Dream is a ‘fixed pie’ such that the advancement of one group must come at the expense of all other groups” (pg 209). However, data shows that uplifting disenfranchised communities is better for the GDP of our entire country, meaning that economic mobility and prosperity for one actually helps us all.

**Difficult 1 on 1 conversations, though usually the most uncomfortable, can also be the most impactful.** After being a lifelong Democrat, John crosses over party lines to vote for Donald Trump. To me, it seems like much of this shift was encouraged by his relationship with Tim – who had also experienced similar setbacks. This reminded me of how important it is to have difficult conversations not just in class, but also on a 1:1 basis with coworkers, family, and friends, where our voices can be more impactful.

Part of what makes us human is our desire to belong to a community bigger than ourselves, and we have always relied on cooperation to survive. Although people make decisions that seem irrational from the outside, at a very basic level humans are driven by the instinct to survive and the desire to belong. Understanding this can help us understand why people make the decisions they do, and how people will react when their belonging in a community is threatened.