

OUR TOWNS

ALISTAIR MACLENAN TALKS TO TWO PEOPLE WHO FLEW OVER THE SMALL TOWNS OF THE US TO UNDERSTAND THEIR GEOGRAPHY – AND THEIR CULTURES

Tom Hanks and I have something in common. Yes, I was surprised too.

What is it? Both the two-time Oscar winning actor, director, writer and fourth highest-grossing box office star of all time and I (with... what I do) would like to visit Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

I must extend my sincerest apologies to the people of Sioux Falls, South Dakota as, before I read *Our Towns* by James and Deborah Fallows, I'm not sure I'd swear to being able to place South Dakota on a map. In my defence, I wonder how many Americans could do the same for South Yorkshire.

'OUR TOWNS' IS FULL OF HOPE FOR A COUNTRY THAT, FOR THE VERY FIRST TIME IN MY LIFE, FEELS LIKE IT MIGHT JUST NEED SOME

Mr Hanks tweeted after reading the Fallows' book because he said it told 'the most optimistic stories, about America! Non-fiction, personal May move to Sioux Falls, at least visit. Rapid City, too. Others! Hanx.'

Geography is the study of the physical world but the features that it describes mould people's lives. Tim Marshall's *Prisoners of Geography* is a brilliant explanation of this phenomenon at a macro, continental scale, but James and Deborah Fallows have more than matched his insight at the level of inland, small town America.

They may not have sold as many films as their illustrious fan, but both Jim and Deb (hey, I did meet them at this year's Esri User Conference) have had extraordinarily successful writing careers that include producing a small library of books, articles and even speeches for President Jimmy Carter! Combining these skills with their experience of living in China and seeing

the stark contrast between the lives of rural people and those in the urban sprawls of Beijing and Shanghai, the Fallows decided to explore the heartland of the US by visiting towns such as Vermillion OH, Eastport MI and Demopolis AL, amongst a host of other marvellous named conurbations, to see if there was a disconnect between the perception and the reality of living away from the densely populated coasts.

So, between 2013 and 2016 they repeatedly clambered into their cramped single-propeller, two-seater Cirrus SR22 and flew into 'fly-over' America. In addition to making such a trip possible, the low-

altitude aerial views also provided unique geographic insights into the location and design of the towns that no other form of transport could match. The resulting book of stories describe a small-town inland America that is bursting with 'engagement, experimentation and people moving forward.'

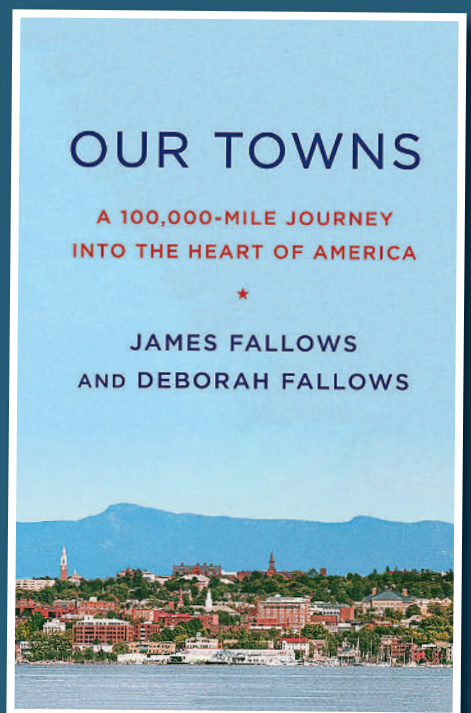
The Fallows found communities mobilising – in many cases, rather wonderfully, around the town library – to effect change, support the assimilation of newly arrived immigrants and to create flourishing business and creative environments.

Who knew that Eastport MI is the leaving point for pregnant American cows bound for Turkey to replenish depleted cattle numbers there? Or that Sioux Falls is at the cutting edge of high-altitude balloon technology and precision agriculture? *Our Towns* is full of hope for a country

that, for the very first time in my life, feels like it might just need some. When Deborah asked the young members of San Bernardino Generation Now why they used street art to educate their town's people, cleared up rubbish in the streets and did what they could to make rough parts of town look more appealingly, they told her it was a combination of anger that no one else had done it and faith that it was the right thing to do.

Maybe Tom and I will visit that town too.

Alistair MacLenan is founder of the geospatial B2B marketing agency Quarry One Eleven (www.quarry-one-eleven.com)



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