



# Hidden America: From Coal Miners to Cowboys, an Extraordinary Exploration of the Unseen People Who Make This Country Work

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Five hundred feet underground, Jeanne Marie Laskas asked a coal miner named Smitty, “Do you think it’s weird that people know so little about you?” He replied, “I don’t think people know too much about the way the whole damn country works.”

Hidden America intends to fix that. Like John McPhee and Susan Orlean, Laskas dives deep into her subjects and emerges with character-driven narratives that are gripping, funny, and revelatory. In Hidden America, the stories are about the people who make our lives run every day—and yet we barely think of them.

Laskas spent weeks in an Ohio coal mine and on an Alaskan oil rig; in a Maine migrant labor camp, a Texas beef ranch, the air traffic control tower at New York’s LaGuardia Airport, a California landfill, an Arizona gun shop, the cab of a long-haul truck in Iowa, and the stadium of the Cincinnati Ben-Gals cheerleaders. Cheerleaders? Yes. They, too, are hidden America, and you will be amazed by what Laskas tells you about them: hidden no longer.

## **Hidden America: From Coal Miners to Cowboys, an Extraordinary Exploration of the Unseen People Who Make This Country Work Details**

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## **From Reader Review Hidden America: From Coal Miners to Cowboys, an Extraordinary Exploration of the Unseen People Who Make This Country Work for online ebook**

### **Peter Mcloughlin says**

This book takes you into jobs on which our way of life depends but are invisible to most of us. They include coal miners, oil rig operators, truckers, migrant farm workers (50% are undocumented), cowboys, air traffic controllers, land fill operators, gun dealers, and NFL cheerleaders. The last two are not admittedly necessary jobs but a big part of large industries. Unlike a cop, teacher, doctor, telemarketer, dentist, office worker we are not likely to come across these people in daily life. We depend on most of them but we don't know about their lives and routines or what its like to work those jobs. Some we have a vague idea which the book fleshes out in an expected way some come as a total surprise as to the nature of job and jobholder. The conditions air traffic controllers work under was the most surprising and alarming, the NFL cheerleaders in the book were also surprising in how little they were paid by such a lucrative industry and how as people they are the opposite of air headed eye candy we assume from stereotype. There are a lot of cool factoids and a deeper description of the lives of these people. The chapter on migrant farm workers will probably change your opinion on immigration reform and give one a new found respect for undocumented workers who put food on our table. an interesting look into sides of America you don't see.

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### **Nicole says**

Thoroughly enjoyed this book - especially the chapter on the Puente Hills Landfill right here off the 605 Freeway! Written in 2012, if you want a non-politicized look at predictors of today's national landscape, this is it. Well, maybe not completely non-politicized, but toned way down compared to current rhetoric. The author acknowledges that she comes from a progressive standpoint, but works hard to present a well-rounded picture of her subjects (oil rig workers, coal miners, professional cheerleaders, truckers etc.). You can tell she really comes to care for them. Empathy is appreciated these days.

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### **Mythili says**

How do air-traffic controllers remember what instructions they've given each flight? How do cattle ranchers produce a signature steak? Who picks the blueberries sold stacked in neat cartons at the grocery store? "We don't pal around with them on our college campuses and they are not invited to be pundits on TV," journalist Jeanne Marie Laskas writes in Hidden America. Laskas sets out to uncover the men and women whose largely unseen work animates ordinary life. It's a noble premise pursued with gusto. But for a veteran reporter, Laskas at times displays a strange naiveté about the workings of the world. Making inquiries at a gun store in Arizona, she's surprised the store's patrons are vocal supporters of the right to bear arms ("I hadn't come to Yuma to discuss the Second Amendment, but it kept coming up"). At one point she muses that "it is difficult to understand why so many beautiful young women would eagerly and longingly" choose to be professional cheerleaders. The Great Pacific Garbage Patch, in her telling, exists because of "lawbreakers and people in countries without regulations" rather than the simple over-consumption of law-abiding Americans. Nevertheless, the candor and charm of her wide-eyed approach has a way of opening up her subjects. She meets a philosophizing coal miner trying to be a better father and heartbroken 30-something woman truck driver wondering if she'll ever have a family of her own. "Sometimes I just think

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my give-a-shit spring is about to bust,” an Alaska oil-rig operator confides. Hearing their voices, it’s impossible not to see the world a little differently.

<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles...>

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### **Sally Ewan says**

Very interesting book about workers in a variety of 'hidden' areas such as coal mines, landfills, air traffic control towers, and oil fields. The author displays a genuine interest in these people's lives and gives us a great window into these workplaces. She said in the intro that the one most foreign to her was the gun shop, but even there she is cheerfully game to keep an open mind. Great read!

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### **Courtney says**

Really interesting book- but I wish it had offered up some thoughts and conclusions, maybe tied things together somehow. I felt the individual stories just ended abruptly.

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### **Grady McCallie says**

I'm grateful to have received an early reader's copy of this book, and glad to have read it. The book collects a set of essays -- really, profiles of people in specific lines of work -- previously published in GQ magazine, with one from Smithsonian and two new chapters. Despite the author's (editor's?) efforts to fit the pieces under a single theme - the jobs we rely on but don't know anything about -- they read as pieces with separate origins. They take different approaches to their material, and choose their subjects differently. The chapter on the coal miners works as a discussion of working people doing an important but invisible job, but it's one of the few that does. The chapter on Sputter, the black woman long-distance trucker, is a fine essay, but is absolutely not about an ordinary working person in an invisible job; it's about how we bear solitude and grief and yet also reach out to form new friendships and community, and is a classic personal essay rather than a run at sociological analysis. Packaging these essays as a single exercise increases the chance that a reader misses the point and quality of several of them - it took me several days after finishing the book to understand what I'd actually read.

One recurring frustration: the author writes as an upper middle class, coastal liberal for a similar audience. It's not that she's patronizing - she works hard to avoid presenting her subjects as quaint -- but virtually every chapter includes a moment, or a series of moments, where she says something from a parochial perspective and her subjects look at her as though she's just arrived from another planet and they have to patiently explain how life actually works. That gimmick gets old. It's also beside the point: what makes these essays stick is not the portrayal of subcultures, but the glimpses of discrete individuals coping with brokenness and human limits in down-to-earth and humanizing ways. In that light, the best and most moving of the chapters is the one about a team of roughnecks on a frozen oil rig six miles off Alaska's North Slope, and especially their tool-pusher TooDogs.

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## Fanfei says

If people, mainly of the online community, still wonder who on earth voted for Trump, well, this book may shed some light on this matter. As one of the earlier comments suggest, these people are not only 'hidden', but largely 'disconnected' from the general perception of US society. Although Jeanne Marie Laskas didn't attempt to dig out the underlying reason of it, this book offers an unusual and intimate glimpse into the indispensable yet neglected cells that keep this monstrous country running. A compilation of magazine article-style stories, this book is both informing and amusing. (Thanks to Laskas' extraordinary and highly recognisable storytelling style.) It'll take less than a couple of hours to complete the entire book.

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## Peggy Bird says

In "Hidden America" the author spends time with some of the people who keep the cars running, the lights on, the goods moved and food on the table but who most of us never think about. She goes underground with coal miners, onto North Slope oil rigs with the men who drill for oil, rides the Midwest with a woman who drives an 18-wheeler. Laskas even spends time with the Ben-gals, cheerleaders for the Bengals. (It was my least favorite chapter because I'm not convinced football makes America work. But that's beside the point.)

Laskas does this for only one reason--she isn't trying to score points, political or otherwise. She's not trying to be politically correct. She merely wants those of us who benefit from the work of these people to see who they are, what they do and, maybe even, why they do it.

It's not that she doesn't make personal comments--she does. She talks about how surprised she was by her reaction to firing weapons when she went to Arizona to interview a man who owned a gun store. She talks about how guilty she felt about her contribution to the waste disposal issues cities face when she spent time with people who managed the landfill near LA.

But personal comments aside, she doesn't present the people she interviews and hangs out with as problems to be solved. She presents them as they see themselves, and she does it well. The book is fascinating, the people she interviewed interesting and the story of what makes the country work worth telling.

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## Lisa says

An already fascinating topic is made more readable by Laskas' casual, folksy style. Sometimes, it's almost as if she's adopted the jargon of the people she meets and interviews. She interjects some of her personal narrative, which doesn't quite fit but adds to the story's readability.

The chapter on NFL cheerleaders isn't necessary; I personally don't think their jobs are essential to making this country work. The chapter on guns is disturbing, and the Puente Hills Landfill -- which uses trash to power electricity -- should be required reading so we don't end up with stagnant mounds of trash.

There's an introduction, but no "conclusion." The last chapter just ends, making for an abrupt end to the book as a whole.

There are so many other jobs in hidden America that would be fascinating to read about, but this is a great glimpse.

## Judy Collins says

*Review to follow!*

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## Landis says

I read this book for my book club and it offered a tremendous jumping off point for myriad discussions about social responsibility, the role of women, corporate responsibility, etc. Jeanne Marie Laskas has a wonderful knack of creating characters that come to life. Although this book is non-fiction, her descriptions of the people she met and her interactions with them were delightfully engaging.

This is not a book that will give you a lot of meat to digest about the problems of the coal miner, or the air traffic controller. You can always augment this text with additional research on your own. It is a book about her experiences of just being with the people who inhabit these hidden worlds in America. Without preaching, one comes away with an understanding of some of the issues that workers face and with a profound appreciation for what they do and how they have crafted the narrative of their individual lives.

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## Tamsen says

3.5 stars.

Hidden America reads almost like short stories - they are loosely tied together with the theme of "unseen people who make this country work." With the exception of the Bengals cheerleading chapter, this is mostly the case. I wish Laskas had dove more into the WHY - why are these people unseen? She briefly touches on the disconnect, but never delves farther into the subject.

And this book plainly illustrates that very disconnect -- I was surprised by many of the details in the stories. I think others (and our students, should we choose this for our university's common reading program) would benefit from hearing about the very things we take for granted (where our garbage goes, how we fly and arrive at our destinations safely, the dangers involved in mining coal or extracting oil - and how we use those resources daily).

Some quotes I liked:

"I spent months trying to position myself and my world around these people - people who seem stuck in a bygone era that isn't bygone at all. If anyone is gone, it's us, the consumer. We forgot, or we lost touch, or we grew up with our lives already sanitized. We live over here and they live over there, and we have almost no access to a way of life that we are so unwittingly dependent on... How is it that our own neighbors are the stuff of anthropology? If that says anything about us, it's definitely not flattering."

"Washington County, occupying the far eastern tip of [Maine], is where the majority of the blueberry barrens are located, and it has 12.2 percent unemployment, the highest in the state. And yet, the money does not

draw the local unemployed into the fields - an inexplicable dimension to the new American dream repeated nationwide. Raking is hard, backbreaking, and the sun is hot. Just a generation ago, the harvest was a community effort. A ritual that brought all the locals to the barrens. The blueberries were ripe! They had to be picked! There was so little time! You could make decent cash, help your farmer friends, have a good time gossiping with your neighbors, and shame the teenagers caught kissing behind the birch trees. Afterward you'd celebrate a successful harvest in town at the blueberry festival, compete for best jam, pie, candle or soap. The locals no longer do the raking, but the blueberry festivals still happen all over Maine, and the townspeople still celebrate, and the tourists still come."

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### **Janci says**

I almost stopped reading this book. First, I would not mind her voicing her opinion if she didn't specifically state that she was going to keep her opinions out of the accounts, let the story speak for itself. But her opinion on migrant workers was clear. Not one that I disagree with but it didn't belong in this book, per her own words.

Maybe I have too many friends and relatives that are the unseen people who make this country work. The author lives in Pittsburgh and didn't know anything about coal miners? My husband's uncles died of black lung disease...but I suppose if you are a professor, you don't fly in those circles.

Once she took herself out of the story and really focused on her subjects, the book became much better. Overall, it was an interesting read, a lot of interesting people. I didn't know about ranchers for example. The book made me realize that there are a whole lot of people out there that don't know anyone that drives a truck or picks up tools to earn a living.

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### **Emily says**

Have you ever wondered where your trash goes when the trucks haul it away? Or how it is that your electrical outlets are powered? What has to happen in order for you to enjoy that juicy steak? How does your local Wal-Mart keep its shelves so fully stocked? Those mysteries and more are revealed in Hidden America. The author seeks to describe and humanize several processes that people take for granted in everyday life, and she does a remarkable job. Laskas doesn't just explain the process, she introduces us to the people involved in making them happen, which lends much more weight and human interest to the essays. By the end of each chapter, the reader is invited to genuinely care about these people whose work is so important to keep this country running. Just like you don't really think about how your brain is making your heart beat or your lungs breathe or that paper cut heal, the average person does not frequently consider these essential processes. Personally, I expected to be depressed by coming to know about the dangerous and unpleasant circumstances in which some people are forced to work in order to make my life easier. However, it seems that almost all of these people actually like their jobs! It made me surprised and almost hopeful. The book ends on a particularly encouraging note, with the most seemingly disheartening thing of all: a landfill. Hidden America is an important book for any responsible citizen to read, and it's an enjoyable experience as well.

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### **Leslie says**

This book is about people conscientiously doing physically hard jobs that keep America running. A lot of people with physically easy jobs -- ahem, former library employees -- should read this book to help them straighten up their attitudes.

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## Naomi says

Appreciate the folks you may not know who make the life Americans lead, even if you work in one of the industries profiled in this book. Fans of Mike Rowe's Dirty Jobs or Studs Terkel's essays on labor will find much to enjoy in this book. Others will find much to ponder. Good read for religious leaders before Labor Day; much to explore in it about work, life, what we pay attention to and what we ignore, and the inherent worth and dignity of every person for small groups.

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## Cheryl says

I always wanted to read Working\* by Studs Terkel, but the size intimidated me (I was a busy teen when it was popular, after all). This shorter book might whet my appetite for that, and that might be worth reading even though it's old enough to be 'history' now.

\*I see he actually has quite a few books; I'll investigate.

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So, anyway, back to Laskas' book, now that I'm finally done. What I wanna say first is, wow. Exceeded my expectations. Highly recommended.

Best read a chapter at a time, because, although there are many commonalities between the people, there are differences, too, and you don't want to misunderstand what the career culture differences are between being a coal-miner, say, and a landfill machine operator. (For one, the former drink a lot more, at least at the respective sites Laskas focused on.)

The inclusion of the chapter on gun ownership was, in many ways, the most interesting and the most brave, because Laskas, from Pittsburgh, had no idea at first how \*not\* "hidden" gun culture is away from the urban East.

In general, Laskas gets big points from me for truly getting in deep, and also doing background research. She did a great job of getting a lot of different people to talk to her, take her places, let her try things. It probably helped that she's old enough to be a mom to many of her subjects, and she's not all foxy or dainty.

Now, it's not a perfect book. Laskas is a journalist, and knows how to edit and spin. Though everything she said and implied seemed \*T\*rue and straight-up, surely other migrant workers, or long-distance truckers, or cheerleaders could say that they don't agree with her book, don't think she spoke authentically of their experience. I wouldn't know. But enough of the text seems important enough that I feel I learned a lot.

I also enjoyed it. I felt that, for the most part, Laskas really does appreciate the folks she spent time with. She seems to have made a serious effort to avoiding committing the anthropological fallacy... she knows, and makes it clear that, these are our neighbors, our sisters, ourselves. And getting to know them is like getting to know new friends.

Wise new friends. "O, just think about it," Joe says. "What is a sewage treatment plant? It's an apology to

nature for putting too many people in one place."

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I still want to read Working, though.

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### **Meg - A Bookish Affair says**

There are a lot of unsung heroes in this country. These are the people that if they stopped doing their job, we would notice and quickly! These people don't get a lot of the glory. They're not people whose names we all know. Yet they are an integral part of our society.

Laskas states in the beginning of the book that this book is not meant to be political but it veers in that direction a little bit, depending on the topic and person being discussed. This book is at its best when the people who do all of these different jobs (coal miner, truck driver, fruit picker, etc.) and it's at its worst when it veers into the political zone or the fluffy zone.

There is a chapter that is basically a diatribe on gun ownership under the guise of talking about those that work in sports shops selling guns. While this book is not always neutral, it is still a good picture of some of the jobs that have to get done in this country. What I do know is that you could not pay me to be a coal miner. This girl would faint if I had to go in those teeny, tiny passageways (oh claustrophobia, you slay me!).

There is another chapter that deals with a woman who is a construction worker but also a Cincinnati Bengals cheerleader. The chapter focuses way more on the cheerleading aspect and some of the other cheerleading stories. This chapter was very fluffy and almost a little condescending. On the other hand, I found myself wondering why this chapter was even in the book as it seemed to deal with a job that isn't really useful.

There are also really good stories in here. The coal miners really stand out to me. Here are some people who really risk their life (even the flash from a camera down in the mines could set off a massive explosion) but who go and do their job everyday. Then there are the fruit pickers. Fruit picking is a job that not a lot of Americans will do. It's hard and tedious work. There are whole groups of people that follow different fruit harvests throughout the country in order to have a job. It's really amazing.

Laskas goes in search of these people to learn about their lives and why they do what they do everyday. The majority of the stories (the gun sellers and cheerleaders just didn't do it for me) that make up this book are all interesting. These people don't get a lot of glory but they really keep this country moving. It was nice to get a little more insight into their lives!

Bottom line: a great non-fiction read!

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### **Jeff Scott says**

In Jeanne Marie Laskas book Hidden America; she strives to bring to light those workers we rely for everyday functions, such as turning on a light or throwing away trash. Often, this sort of book is more of an expose of an industry. The terrible working conditions in the coal mine are emphasized. It leads to an investigation. The coal mine is then shut down and everyone cheers. Another way to look at that story is that a lot of people are out of work. Those workers are the focus of Laskas's book Hidden America.

With a focus on jobs that directly affect everyone, but no one sees, Laskas brings out a fresh new perspective. Coal workers, blueberry pickers, cattle ranches, cheerleaders, air traffic controllers, and more are interviewed in this book. She doesn't just interview them, but she genuinely cares about the people she speaks with and really brings out their character. Her work is a combination of Mary Roach and Barbara Ehrenreich. She doesn't come from a judgmental perspective, but really inhabits what it feels like. Sometimes it takes her too far, like continuing to go into the coal mine even though she has all the information she needs. Furthermore, she ends up purchasing two guns at an Arizona gun shop. (In an interesting contrast, she thinks she has purchased a gun a child could use when in Arizona, but when she returns to Pennsylvania, all she can think about is that she has a GUN in her purse.) She details this emotion exquisitely. She really understands why someone would work in a coal mine or want to buy a gun.

Even though many of the topics were fascinating, such as the coal mines or the gun shop, some of the areas she covered were not all that interesting. She could have gone deeper on some of the topics and one would wonder if she chose some areas based on convenience and access. Overall, it's a fascinating look at how the people we rely on everyday but certainly take for granted.

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### **Caren says**

This is a quick, easy-to-read look at the sort of jobs I have never even thought about, but which are necessary to making our society function. Ms. Laskas really gets to know people in each of the chosen professions and it is truly interesting for us to get to know them too. She actually spends time with these people, asking lots of questions, really befriending them. She spends time with coal miners in Ohio, migrant farm workers in blueberry fields in Maine, Cincinnati Bengals cheerleaders (or "Ben-gals"), air traffic controllers in New York, gun store clerks in Arizona, cowboys in Texas, oil rig workers in Alaska, a female long-haul truck driver in Iowa, and an "environmental engineer" (that is, the manager of a garbage dump) in California. In each case, she reveals them to us as real people, making their work come alive. She never goes in with preconceived ideas and is very open to what these people share with her. We are the beneficiaries of her apparent charm, since she shares it all with us, and it is fascinating. I had read one of her memoirs, "Fifty Acres and a Poodle", years ago and really enjoyed her writing style then. She has a direct, journalistic manner of presentation which works well for this type of book.

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