

HIDDEN AMERICA

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

by **Jeanne Marie Laskas**

“[Laskas] succeeds in capturing the attitudes, concerns, experiences and sometimes the private lives of workers that most readers are unlikely to come into contact with.

Highly informative and thoroughly entertaining.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“Jeanne Marie Laskas is a reporting and writing powerhouse. She doesn’t just interview the people who dig our coal and extract our oil, she goes deep into the mines and tundra with them. She goes to work nationwide to find the hidden soul of America, the people we depend on most but know the least. Along the way, she reminds us that it’s not *what* makes our lives function smoothly, but *who*, how, and at what cost. With beauty, wit, curiosity, and grace, Laskas tells the story of the United States from deep inside the machinery that makes it work. *Hidden America* is essential reading for anyone who’s ever turned on a light, started a car, thrown away trash, flown on a plane, or eaten a vegetable.”

—**Rebecca Skloot**, author of *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*

“Who are the people who pick our vegetables, grow our beef, haul our stuff to the marketplace, make our trash disappear? Moreover, how did *that* become such a difficult question to answer?”

Jeanne Marie Laskas, one of our most gifted and honored journalists, asks and answers those unexpectedly fascinating and revealing questions in **HIDDEN AMERICA: *From Coal Miners to Cowboys, an Extraordinary Exploration of the Unseen People Who Make This Country Work*** (G. P. Putnam’s Sons; ISBN 978-0-399-15900-8; Publication Date: September 13, 2012; Price: \$25.95).

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Laskas went deep into a coal mine in Ohio, traveled to an Alaskan oil rig 250 miles above the Arctic Circle, and tumbled atop a mighty machine rolling down steep cliffs of garbage at California a landfill. She lived in a camp for migrant blueberry pickers in Maine, spent days in the control tower at New York's LaGuardia Airport, and discovered a distinctively female kind of invisibility among the Ben-Gals, the cheerleading squad for Cincinnati's NFL team. Hauling tractor parts across the Midwest with an African-American woman trucker named Sputter opened an unanticipated examination of motherhood and turned into a surprisingly personal journey for Laskas. She found a living cowboy culture at a Texas ranch devoted to breeding the perfect beef cattle. And with no agenda to push, Laskas tried to make sense of America's growing political and cultural divide by working as a clerk in an Arizona gun store.

In today's highly polarized political climate, Laskas has no new slogans to add to the shouting, no charged rhetoric to contribute to the cause of the 99 percenters or the 1 percent. If she takes any position at all, it is from the sidelines, underneath, above, or deep within. She speaks eloquently from these vantage points by capturing the quiet, nuanced conversations that the shouting and the sloganeering drown out.

HIDDEN AMERICA is a rare look at America from the inside out—the opposite of the view we've become accustomed to in our celebrity-driven culture. *Get on TV! Make millions! Win awards!* Indeed, we've become so obsessed with the fame narrative that it's easy to forget that there are any others happening at all. But Laskas shows us a different America, where pride in doing an excellent job, satisfaction in providing a vital service to others, private acts of heroism, and above all, teamwork—brotherhood, sisterhood—are paramount.

Laskas writes: "I'm inviting America to steal a glance into these worlds, some hugely complicated industries, some tiny and private contributions, to wander with me and consider the everyday anew. Everything you know about America—all the history, all the politics, all the lessons from all the economic indicators, all the arguments from the red states and the blue—is irrelevant when you are sitting in a coal mine, or staring at a radar screen showing thousands of airplanes flying at once, or wrangling five hundred pregnant Red Angus cows beneath a blazing-hot desert sunrise."

As Laskas discovered, opening one's eyes to the hidden America behind these everyday miracles makes the country a vastly more interesting, pleasurable, and inspiring place. "Pull the curtain back and show the action backstage," she writes, "how it's done and how much brain power and brawn and sacrifice goes into making the systems work, and it becomes remarkable and fabulous and awesome."

About the Author:

Jeanne Marie Laskas is Director of the Writing Program at the University of Pittsburgh, where she also teaches creative writing. She is the author of five previous books, including the memoirs *Fifty Acres and a Poodle*, *The Exact Same Moon*, and *Growing Girls*. For twenty years she has been writing for national magazines, among them *GQ*, *Esquire* (where she was a contributing editor), *Smithsonian*, *O: The Oprah Magazine*, *Good Housekeeping*, and *Glamour*, and she will

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soon be writing for *The New York Times Magazine*. She contributes a popular monthly column, "Ask Laskas," to *Reader's Digest*, and from 1994 to 2008 she wrote a syndicated column, "Significant Others," for *The Washington Post Magazine*. She has also written a column for *Ladies' Home Journal*, "My Life as a Mother." Her work has appeared in numerous anthologies, including *The Best American Magazine Writing 2008* and *The Best American Sportswriting 2000, 2002, 2007, and 2008*. Laskas has won more than a dozen Gold Quill Awards for excellence in journalism, and "Underworld," her piece on coal mining, was a finalist for the 2007 National Magazine Awards.

Born in Philadelphia, Laskas earned a B.A. from Saint Joseph's University and an MFA from the University of Pittsburgh. She lives in Scenery Hill, Pennsylvania, on a fifty-acre farm with her husband and two daughters. Visit her at jeannemarielaskas.com.

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