

A Conversation with Jeanne Marie Laskas Author of HIDDEN AMERICA

1. What do you mean by “Hidden America”?

I mean the people we rarely notice, who are doing the jobs that make our lives livable. They’re hidden from view, and we’re dependent on them. We *need* air traffic controllers. We *need* coal miners, oil-rig roughnecks, migrant farmworkers, and environmental engineers figuring out what the heck to do with our trash. We need all these people—they’re working like maniacs behind the scenes, all the time. So what I mean by Hidden America are these people, these communities laboring in these essential and decidedly unglamorous industries.

2. Why do we know so little about this hidden America? Why should we care about it?

I think of this historically, in the biggest picture, and geographically. America used to know these people. You know, Uncle Harry drove the milk truck, and Aunt Molly plucked the chickens. The guy hauling the corn to market had a name and a reputation and a dog you knew. We have romanticized that life, of course, but pre-industrial America was nothing if not *personal*. As society became industrialized and things became far more efficient, the personal disappeared. On the one hand it’s wonderful. It’s how we have our easy lives, it’s how we have our air-conditioning and our heat and our light switches. It’s why we don’t have to spend all morning beating out the stains on our shirts with rocks in the creek bed, for heaven’s sake. But there’s a price we’ve paid. Here we are, removed from the sources of food, water, light. We’re cut off. And we don’t even know what we’re missing. This notion was really brought to my attention when I moved out to the Pennsylvania farm I live on. You know, a lot of disgusting things happen on a farm. Like, we got chickens. One of them laid an egg. I was like, Gross! I wasn’t going to eat that thing coming out of the insides of that bird. But then I was like, Oh, *eggs!* Duh. Living on a farm brings you closer to the origins of a lot of the stuff of everyday life. I think the concept of *Hidden America* was really hatched, so to speak, with that stupid egg.

This journey has been good for me—and one of the things I’m trying to share with readers is that Hidden America really does make a difference. Think about this: A kid who grows up never having to help put dinner together. He never has to peel the cucumbers or slice the tomatoes or do the dishes afterward. Now take that same kid and involve him in that process, have him baste the brisket, show him that this is how a meal comes together. All of a sudden the kid becomes part of the family in a way he wasn’t before; he becomes part of the meal in a way he wasn’t before. The meal has more meaning and texture, more layers to it, than it did when he was a passive participant, was just . . . getting fed. Researching *Hidden America* had a similar effect on me.

3. How did you choose the industries and individuals you focused on?

Who are the people who pick our food, drill our oil, and haul our stuff in trucks? I kept asking questions like that. I wanted things that mattered to us, daily. I wanted a geographical spread. I wanted to write about more than just manufacturing in the Midwest; this was not simply a blue-collar book. I wanted to know what other folks were doing—not only men working in traditionally brawny industries, the cliché hard-hat guys. I wanted to see where and how women fit into the equation of Hidden America—did they fit in differently? I wanted to look at Hidden America as an object from all sides, and then *enter* it from those various sides. Take this one: Who are the people who pick our food? What issues or questions come up before we ever even meet them? We’re sort of taught to fear some of these people because they are not “legal citizens,” and yet we’re dependent on them. So let’s get off the question of legality and politics for a moment and ask, *Who* are these people? What do they look like, talk about, care about, need? What are their love stories? What? *What?* I looked for those types of essential communities and industries and went in with those sorts of questions.

4. Why are teamwork, and brotherhood and sisterhood, such prominent parts of the workplaces that make up Hidden America?

I love this question. Brotherhood was one of the most pleasant surprises I discovered, over and over, as I researched these chapters. We’re all brought up with the mythology of the American *individual* making it in the world. This is a land where you can do anything—which is certainly what I saw—but I didn’t get much of that sloganeering from these folks. Instead it was: *I’m here, doing this work, for and with these other people who make it work with me.* And people were really proud of that. The coal miners and Alaskan oil workers are the most dramatic example of this—these guys would be *dead* without one another. So it wasn’t: *I’m here to get ahead of these other guys.* I’m sure there’s plenty of that in any industry, but that was not the primary theme that repeated itself. This taught me a lot. It enriched the common mythology of individualism; it made that iconic American identity so much more interesting.

5. You note that the better the people of Hidden America become at their jobs, the more invisible they are. Is that simply a cruel irony? Or do some of the people in Hidden America really not want to be stars?

Oh my gosh, most of the people I met didn’t want to be stars. The most telling example was the air traffic controllers, and they would state this directly: *If you’re hearing about us, it’s because we screwed up. If you don’t hear about us, it’s because everything is running smoothly. Our best is when we don’t make headlines.* That was the other aspect of this—we think we live in a celebrity culture, and we do, but not for the 99 percent out there. We think everyone wants to be

on TV. I have to say that's not the case for the vast majority of the folks I spent time with. The only headlines that come out of Hidden America, typically, are of bad news: oil spill, plane crash, contaminated vegetables spreading some horrible disease. My goal was to look beside, on the periphery of breaking news. I wanted to find out about these people when they're not screwing up, when they're not in the news. What goes on the rest of the time?

6. What did the Ben-Gals, the cheerleaders for Cincinnati's professional football team, teach you about fame? And what do they get paid?

Smash through the stereotype you have about cheerleaders. The Ben-Gals get paid \$75 per game, and no, they don't date players (they'd be off the squad.) For this chapter I specifically went to look at the culture of American celebrity, the drive for fame and fortune, and even there, the motivation had nothing to do with fortune but rather *sisterhood*, and with that a kind of honor. These women had reached a goal and were basking in it. They didn't want to then become movie stars or have talk shows. They had regular jobs—everything from a woman who pours cement to a scientist with a Ph.D. working to solve medical mysteries. I discovered a richness that has nothing to do with any of the stereotypes. It's different from the American Dream of "Work hard, get rich, get famous." The cheerleaders worked hard to . . . work harder. Work was an end in itself. Work *was* the identity. Like soldiers.

7. Some people wonder why we even have coal miners, or coal mines, anymore. Does that surprise you? Why did you keep going back down into the mine at Cadiz, Ohio, even after your official research was over?

No, it doesn't surprise me. I started with the same thought. These are my neighbors in southwestern Pennsylvania, and I used to think, What a quaint way to make a living. The only time I heard much about coal mining was when there was an accident, and I would say, What a stupid thing to go down there. We have technology, we don't need coal miners. Ha! Well, yes we do. All day, every day.

I kept going back down into the coal mine because a coal mine is a place of great mystery and adventure. I think it was the miner Scotty who said to me, "It gets in your blood a little bit." That is so true. A coal mine is a scary place, where survival is your first goal. And if you survive it, you want to try it again; it tempts you.

8. How many migrant agricultural workers are there in the United States, like the Maine blueberry pickers you write about? How many are illegal? Are they actually taking jobs away from unemployed Americans? And why is Maine blueberry picking regarded as one of the very best of the migrant agricultural jobs?

It takes about a million people to pick the fruits and vegetables of the \$144 billion U.S. agricultural industry, and about half of those people are migrant workers in this country illegally. My research suggests that we could absolutely not do it without them. In the area where I was in Maine, farmers told me that when they grew up, everybody came out to help during the blueberry harvest—their brothers and sisters and parents, the neighbors. Everybody participated; it was a community event. I heard this story over and over. Now they can't get locals to come out. And this is an area with the highest unemployment in the state. If the migrant workers didn't come to pick the blueberries, the farmers would have no one and the fruit would fall to the ground and rot. So then you wonder: Why won't the locals do it anymore? What if the farmers

paid more? But what would that do to the price of blueberries? You can do the math with any crops. Are we willing to pay \$30 a pound for blueberries? No. We want cheap food; we're not going to pay higher prices. If we want a more equitable system, well, it's going to come out of our pockets. The migrant workers I met were grateful for the money they were making. *Grateful*. In the migrant stream, as you go north, blueberries are the highest-paying crop. Workers will go out of their way to make it up there for blueberry season.

9. How difficult was it for you to get permission to spend time with the air traffic controllers at LaGuardia Airport in New York City? The news often reports on tensions between the air traffic controllers' union and management in the FAA. What atmosphere did you find at LaGuardia?

It took me about a year to get permission from the FAA to get into a tower. The agency does not welcome outsiders, I'll say that. Tension between management and the union is fierce—and this dates back to the Reagan administration. Controllers have been working for years without a contract—they fight for better working conditions, more time to rest, more time off, more trained controllers to man the radar scopes—but the stalemate continues. And yet the people I met loved the work itself. They did not love management, but they loved doing the work. They saw it as a privilege. They saw themselves as cowboys on the edge of adventure. They saw their work as service to the flying public—and it is.

10. What did it feel like for you, never previously a gun owner, to buy a gun for the first time? Or to work in a gun store in Yuma, Arizona? Were you surprised by your reactions?

I expected to be afraid and shocked, because I'm not from a world where people are comfortable with guns. What surprised me was how normal everyone there thought guns were. It was like we were talking about shoes or golf clubs. Just something you needed or collected and saved your money for. The longer I was there, the more I could accept that.

I bought two guns. The first was absolutely ridiculous: an assault rifle. I have no use for an assault rifle. This was an experiment; I wanted to see how easy it was to buy one—and it was like buying a bowl of soup, except you had to sign a paper. Then I bought a Glock semiautomatic handgun, because that was the weapon of choice for self-protection and I wanted to know what that sort of security felt like, to try on the notion that if you're not armed, you're naive.

What I discovered was that the only way to be a responsible gun owner is to be a... *responsible* gun owner. That means you have to learn how to shoot the thing. That means you have to practice, get it in your muscle memory. You don't want to be fumbling to figure out the safety switch when the bad guy is about to kill you. I'm not willing to take on that responsibility. I don't have time to go to a shooting range once a week. I have to get my girls to piano lessons, you know? I don't have the discipline to clean my gun once a month, to change the rounds in the chamber, to make sure the gadgetry is oiled. I am bad at maintenance in general. I have no room in my life for more duty. So I can't be a gun owner, because I can't be a responsible gun owner—that was the completion of my learning curve.

11. Most Americans don't realize that gun store employees have the right to refuse to sell weapons or ammunition to someone on the basis of their own judgment, and that this

actually applied before the Tucson massacre that wounded Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords. Did you encounter anyone at the store to whom you would have denied weapons?

I wondered a lot about some people I saw come in. I saw scary tattoos about death on the arms of a few people. Is that a reason to deny them guns? How does anyone make that judgment? I had a conversation with a guy who volunteered information about his horrible temper and his anger and his willingness to blow somebody's face off. That was disturbing. So does a clerk decide, "I don't like you, I'm not going to sell you a gun"? The law allows it. But it's a judgment call. And a clerk doesn't have a badge to enforce anything. It can be a really uneasy position to be in. I did see people refused ammunition. It's clear—you have to be eighteen for this kind or twenty-one for that kind. You get carded, just like for alcohol. But there's no carding for a gun. There's a background check, and the clerk can stand behind that. The guy who shot Gabrielle Giffords and those other victims passed his background check; the Virginia Tech shooter passed his background check. The system we have is not catching the people it should be catching. Are we going to put that responsibility in the hands of clerks—who are sometimes teenage cashiers at Walmart scanning soccer balls and boxes of Tide?

12. As you discovered during your time at a Texas beef-breeding ranch, there is still an intact cowboy culture in America. What does it look like?

I felt like I was stepping into a Frederic Remington painting of the Old West. I had no idea what era I was in. It could have been 1892 if I looked at the sky, the horses, the cowboys—all with the exact same gear that you see in those paintings, except maybe one cowboy would pull out his cell phone. It was an experience traveling back in time, coupled with this mind-boggling science and genetics to make the perfect beef. You come riding home to the ranch after a cattle drive, and go into the barn, and it's a bunch of tubes of semen and metal tanks and microscopes and an ultrasound machine connected to a laptop. High tech and low tech back to back. And you think, Maybe the cowboy thing is kind of quaint. Really, why do you dudes have to look like this, and go on horses? Why don't you get a bunch of ATVs and helicopters? But I discovered there's no other way to ride that rocky terrain—it's a horse or nothing. And you need your lasso to tether calves, your chaps to protect your legs against the thorny mesquite, your wide-brimmed hat to shield your eyes from the constant sun or act as an umbrella in the rain. All that cowboy stuff—it's not a costume, it's necessary. I didn't know that life still existed. But it is very much a part of the new American West.

13. Why do we know so little about the oil-drilling operations on Alaska's North Slope, which provide 16 percent of our total domestic oil supply? What did you find most distinctive about the workers in this very alien and hostile environment, where in winter temperatures hover around forty-five degrees below zero and there is no daylight?

Again, we have a hidden world that's geographically—crazily—remote. This was an island in the frozen Arctic Ocean. At times I felt that I was on the moon or another planet. Nothing about that landscape in the middle of winter was like anything I'd ever seen. Solid white ocean. A big colorful sky with the Northern Lights moving like liquid fireworks. We know so little about the people working up here because they are tucked away into a remote corner of the planet and they're doing the kinds of jobs, working in environments that are so extreme, that few people are willing to do. They live in those temperatures for a minimum of two weeks at a time, and some of them are there for six months before returning home. What surprised me most—aside from the polar bear cages—is that these people *wanted* to be there. At the beginning of my research, I

spent a long time naively pitying them, thinking, What happened to you that you got stuck out here? And then someone pulled me aside and said, *Why do you keep asking these questions? You're acting like we're in prison. We're here because we want to be.* Everyone had a reason—but it always came back to family. These people had learned to depend on one another and they needed one another—emotionally. They had a family there that worked, and maybe they didn't have that at home. It gets at this question: What is *home*, anyway?

14. How many truck drivers are there in this country? How many are women? How much of the stuff we buy do they deliver? Why are there 400,000 trucking jobs open in this struggling economy?

There are 3.5 million truckers, who deliver 69 percent of the stuff we buy—\$670 billion worth of stuff. Approximately 200,000 truckers are women. And yes, right now 400,000 jobs are open. Why will no one apply? I ask that to anyone out there right now looking for work. It's never been a glamorous job, but how has it turned into such an unthinkable way to make a living? Certainly the conditions are no worse than in coal mines or some other places. I wonder what's happened that trucking isn't even an option for people right now. You can blame people, but honestly, what does the job offer? Is the money enough to make up for the lousy working conditions? Money. It's the same question that comes up with migrant labor. Money. Why aren't we willing to pay people more to do these jobs? Well, it comes back to us. We want cheap stuff. Shipping costs get factored into all those low prices we love at Walmart. If we pay truckers a fair wage—just as with fruit pickers—the price of stuff is going to rise astronomically. Are we willing to do that? Is it government's role to demand that we do that or control the margins of the corporations running the show? These are not simple questions.

15. During the time you spent with Sputter, an African-American woman truck driver, you were also dealing with the recent deaths of your parents. How did the two journeys intersect?

They intersected directly, immediately, and completely. I was between two funerals—my mother's and my father's—when I went on the road with Sputter. I had been utterly consumed with my own life, my own family—my parents died ten days apart. And when I met Sputter, I suppose I was partly looking at the adventure as a way to get away from all that. It was a release from that drama and that grieving. Of course, you never really walk away from grieving, so I ended up bringing it with me. I never mentioned it to Sputter; she had no idea what an extreme help she was to me. That is so Sputter—an overwhelmingly hospitable person who makes *everyone* feel welcome in her world. Truck stop after truck stop, there wasn't one where she didn't find somebody who needed her. For me, it was the luckiest timing for that adventure. I got great comfort in that truck because of Sputter.

16. The Puente Hills Landfill near Los Angeles is an astonishing operation, covering more than 1,300 acres and handling more than 250 million tons of garbage a year. What was it like to ride in a Bomag, a gigantic machine that drives over and crushes mountains of garbage?

Physically, it was one of the scariest things I did for the whole book. If you can imagine a roller coaster, slowed down, going over the edge and you can't see where it's going. You're on trash, not a track, and you're going straight down, diving into more trash. What Big Mike did was death-defying. He was so good at it, so nimble. And there were all these other tractors down

there that he could have landed on. Big Mike had won awards in the equivalent of a bulldozing rodeo for the way he rode that machine, so I knew I was in good hands, and I trusted him. But I was in awe.

17. Contrary to the gloom and doom of many environmental predictions, you found an optimistic, can-do spirit among the workers at Puente Hills. What reasons for hope did you find there?

The can-do spirit came from everyone, veterans as well as beginners. Think of a heavy-equipment operator who's used to seasonal work, large construction projects which have beginnings, middles, and ends. This was completely steady work; people got very good at it because they were working on the same kinds of machines and the same kinds of landscape. So they were very skilled, and needed. They had great jobs, and were grateful to have them, honestly. I heard very little complaining; no one ever said, "I hate my job." And at the management and professional levels, the engineers were very proud of the problems they had solved. So much technology that's used all over the world has been invented at that landfill, in particular, methods to convert landfill gases to energy, to run entire communities. The engineers have solved many of our sanitation problems. The sign of successful landfill engineers is that they can drink their own "leachate"—the water oozing out of the dump; the cleansing system at Puente Hills was so sophisticated they could drink the leachate. There was a lot of pride at every level. I left there grateful: Thank you for figuring this out. We walk around thinking of a landfill as this icky, stinky place, and blame the landfill for being there, even though it's *our trash*, you know? The people at Puente Hills were figuring out what to do with *my trash*. They were fully cognizant of that. They wanted that landfill to disappear by being beautiful and fitting in with the canyons.

18. What surprised you most during your work on this book?

Finding that Hidden America is infinite. I keep thinking of more and more and more worlds that I'd like to explore. Corn. Paper. Cotton. Anything in my life, I can find a Hidden America in it. That's the most wondrous thing to hold on to. It would take a lifetime to meet all the people in this country I'm dependent on.

19. Did you have a favorite experience while researching this book?

I have so many favorites. It's like asking me to compare people in my family. Do I have a favorite sibling? Do I have a favorite parent? Do I have a favorite child? I start thinking, Oh yeah, it was up there in that oil rig—no, no, no it was down in that coal mine—no, no, no it was with Sputter—no, no, no . . . Each person cancels the one before. My family just got giant.

20. What does your book add to the debate about the 99 percent and the 1 percent in this country?

The debate is abstract. The debate is a cartoon debate—rich people versus the workers, with the workers standing there grousing about the rich and having a view of themselves as somehow beneath. Well, no. *Hidden America* takes that abstract, broad-stroke conversation and enters the world of real characters, real people with real things to say. I found that the debate isn't even going on. Not as it is on the news. The people of Hidden America have a lot more to talk about than feelings of resentment toward the system. They're not living their lives to become part of the 1 percent. That is not the kind of conversation that goes on. That polarity is not what runs

their daily lives. For them to even enter the debate would be to view themselves as some sort of peasants longing to take over the throne. That is not the case. The Man has always been The Man. No big news, people. Corporate greed and dirty politics just aren't that interesting—it's the same old same old. Shut up, get to work, and don't put your faith in The Man any more than your father or your grandfather did. That's the conversation I heard. I'm not saying it's good or bad or smart or dumb. I'm reminded about the story of the frog in the pot of water. Throw a frog in boiling water and he'll try to jump out. But put him in tepid water, and turn the heat up, and up and up and up, and he won't even notice. Is America doing that sort of number on its workers? I wonder about *that*.

21. What do you hope readers take away from this book?

Well, stories have a life of their own. But I can tell you, for me, these stories made me confront my own inner spoiled brat. What if my power goes out, my trash isn't picked up, my air conditioner goes on the fritz? The outrage! You know, that's how we react. As if clean air, heat, or pasteurized food were *rights*. Well, they're not. They're privileges. And they're privileges built on the shoulders and maintained by the hands of millions of people like those in *Hidden America*. Working on this book has opened me to a more grateful place. That's a richer life.

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