

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

by *Jeanne Marie Laskas*

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Reviewed by

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In our fields of orientation and transition, we are tasked with introducing students to our institutions. We find ways to take students beyond what they want to know and integrate it with what they need to know: what makes us tick—the processes and policies that are most relevant to their overall experience, however hidden from view they may be.

Jeanne Marie Laskas took on the task of taking her readers beyond what we typically know about America and shined the light on hidden areas of productivity and purpose. What happens to the trash that you put out on your curbside? If you recycle, how is your waste sorted? Ever sat on the runway in an airplane and wondered why you boarded just to sit at a standstill? You might already know the answers to these questions, but more of us don't, and then even more of us have never bothered to ask. Laskas has written eight chapters that shed real and helpful light on several American industries that our country would be crippled without should its workers not show up to work tomorrow.

Just what industries make America livable all the while being hidden from view? Laskas focused on coal mining, migrant farming, NFL cheerleading, air traffic control, gun sales, beef production, oil rigging, truck driving, and waste management. Laskas did what we hope to achieve in our orientation programming: she highlighted the experiences and voices within each of these professions to teach us about what we might take for granted every day. She also did so in a way that purposely didn't have "new slogans to add... [and] offers no charged rhetoric..." (pg. 8). Some chapters focus more on the individual, and others are a conglomeration of voices. Each chapter is a new world with new characters with no tie to the world or chapter before it. On average, a chapter is 38 pages. This is a journalistic work; the tone and language of each chapter fluctuates with each new voice. Overall, it is entertaining and accessible for new students.

Students in transition become empowered when they understand a complete system and their ability to affect outcomes within that system. New students on our campuses are entering a whole new world filled with, among other things, our policies and our values. They find their niche and often without examining the underpinnings of our campuses. *Hidden America* takes them out of their daily life and entrenches them in something possibly new and foreign. This could spark great interest in students to search for a more in-depth understanding of their new campus and their new community. With encouragement, they might seek out opportunities to explore our facilities in new ways. They could get curious enough to engage in conversation with staff and faculty. It might bolster them to be more mindful of the new rules and policies before them, as they might recognize the possibility of hidden value or purpose. Because this is a journalistic work, students can also learn how to dig deeper into their new surroundings using the framework of this book. They can dissect that framework and identify the actions that Laskas had to take in order to present each chapter. Laskas takes us right into the world, letting us know how difficult she might have found the task of gaining entry, such as the oil rig, or how the politics of those whose voices she listened to can alter opinions, as in the air traffic control chapter. A possible cross-departmental partner would be a journalism, social science, or English department. Students could examine the ways in which one conducts outreach into communities, whose voices take precedence, and how to capture stories of everyday lived experiences.

If your campus struggles with encouraging students to value the benefits of general education coursework and principles, this book can assist students with making connections in broad disciplines. As a whole, the book offers exploration across disciplines. For example, there is a great deal of geological information in the oil rigging and coal mining chapters. The waste management chapter is really successful in emphasizing engineering and, to a lesser extent, environmental science. In these cases, students with little science aptitude or interest can build connections to scientific disciplines in the world around them.

Other areas for possible cross-departmental partnership could focus on the critical examination of this text, especially regarding gender, race, and class. Jeanne Marie Laskas is a correspondent for *GQ*, which is billed as “the definitive men’s magazine.” The chapters on coal mining, migrant farming, NFL cheerleading, air traffic control, oil rigging, and waste management were previously published in *GQ*. This represents 75% of the book. Most alienating for me as a female reader was the inclusion of NFL cheerleading, but not as one might expect. It is worth asking how this profession met the criteria of making America livable. It seemed especially gratuitous to include because Adrienne—the main character—makes her living not as an NFL cheerleader, but as a full-time construction worker. However dedicated and disciplined Adrienne may be in order to be a successful cheerleader, her work as a construction worker in a male-dominated industry is peripherally mentioned, so this too provides an opportunity to examine gender in America.

There are other issues of gender and race that can be facilitated with this text. Laskas seems to make special note when her characters are people of color, so the reader is led to presume that the majority of voices are White. Also, the choice to

feature dialogue about one coal miner's purchase of a "mail-order bride" and the evenings spent in strip clubs may be warranted and may not be. Similarly, because actual language used by those she interviewed is used, some chapters are especially heavy in crude four-letter words and very light on college-level vocabulary. Depending on the values of your institution and the goals of new student texts, this book might not be a strong contender for a general student reader based on its vernacular.

Although Laskas did note the occasional college-educated character, issues of class will be prominent in discussions around this book, and this is a very rich area for dialogue, yet without purposeful facilitation on this topic, students who are just embarking on their college careers could immediately experience the pitfall of reading these characters as "others" and non-pertinent to their new college-going journey. Class-based experiences among students in the classroom could easily become prominent.

Nevertheless, Laskas' voice is a witty one. She entertains in this book, and she encourages readership on topics that many of us and our students know little to nothing about and will not actively seek knowledge about. Because each chapter is standalone and incredibly readable, chapters in this book can be assigned out of order, and a single chapter or multiple chapters can be assigned for a night's assignment. This book can offer your institution a great deal of flexibility in how and what you facilitate discussion around. Learning communities or special interest groups might benefit from focusing in much greater depth on a selection of chapters rather than the text as a whole. For a campus like Humboldt State, where there is a strong focus on environmental sustainability, the chapters on waste management or the beef industry could be strong conversation starters within a special environmental interest group.

Depending on your region, students will likely read the chapter on gun sales quite differently. Laskas herself addresses this in the book. She, as an urban northeasterner, approached the gun industry from a historically anti-gun perspective. Readers in other geographic regions or campuses in rural settings might read this chapter critically, asking oneself about her criteria of "hidden" America or the lack of depth within that chapter as compared to later chapters. Similarly, students at urban campuses who themselves were raised in urban environments will likely find what they learn in the beef industry chapter to be quite outside of their own lived experiences, whereas campuses whose enrollment of students from family farms might find the picture of the "American cowboy" topical.

The unique perspectives that are included in this book are a real strength of this text as a new student reader. The chapters can serve as great introductions into worlds that can easily be explored in greater depth throughout a first semester or first year at university. There are eight chapters to choose from that might lend themselves individually to institutional values and themes for that year, or as a whole, the book could be incorporated into new student programming with the goal of introducing students to one of our goals in liberal arts education: the value of multiple disciplines serving as the foundation for our specialized studies. As

Laskas notes in her introduction, "I'm inviting America to steal a glance into these worlds...to wander with me and consider the everyday anew" (pg. 4). Our students entering university are bringing fresh perspectives and more questions than answers about their new world, and a reminder that other hidden Americans have contributed to their present experience could uniquely be explored and broadened: what is their place within and how might they contribute to America?