Without spoiling it, and in as few words as possible (so that you may rush off to grab a copy all the sooner), I am going to explain why I believe that *The Road to Wigan Pier* by George Orwell is not only still relevant, but direly needed for our country’s survival, even 80 years after it was first published.

A group called the Left Book Club, who sought to promote socialist ideas throughout Europe in the 1930s and 40s, commissioned the original edition of *The Road to Wigan Pier* in 1937 as part of a series on the proletariat throughout Northern England. In part a portrait of the abhorrent working conditions of coal miners, in part a declaration of Orwell’s belief in socialist principles, this piece joins a legion of other great novels which have been vital in improving living and working conditions for the lower classes. But what makes this book different?

The first half covers Mr. Orwell’s experience in the coal mining communities of Northern England, such as Wigan, the titular town. The living and working conditions, and the general sense of oppression which Mr. Orwell describes is horrendous: space constrictions (usually four or more to a room), food and clean water shortages, lack of medical and family care, illiteracy, disease, decrepit structures and death. Essentially, we are treated to a first hand glimpse, without illusions, at something which, by today’s standards, is truly horrifying, and inhumane.

This is where I will stop the summary, as the second half of the book consists mostly of Mr. Orwell’s personal experiences and beliefs, namely those on socialism. This is not my making a comment on Mr. Orwell’s political views, either in affirmation or denial: nor promoting my own views. It is also not suggesting you skip the latter half of the book because, although biased, it is important to note the distinction in tone between the first and second half of the book, to see that in his non-fiction Orwell is able to split his opinion from his observation.

The first half of the book is important for two, seemingly opposed reasons. The first is that the account of life in a truly hellish working environment has the ability to tear a modern person away from the more petty complaints about work, and life in general. Whether you are rich or
poor, in today’s world you are almost certainly better off in terms of materials and resources than the workers in England, 1937: this book makes you realize that less than a century ago, everyday people were being abused more severely than any first world citizen in any job, anywhere today. It makes you realize that there is a lot of things to be happy for in our lives, that we have many privileges, as Americans, which have not been afforded to others.

Do not worry: that was only the first reason, and I promise this isn’t going to turn into some lecture on privilege. In fact, it aims in the opposite direction: because the second reason this book is so important is that it reminds you, whether or not you like your job, whether or not you are being mistreated at work, whether or not you are well off, that everything is always in flux, ready to be changed. The book gets you thinking, or at least it got me thinking, “Gee, if this level of worker mistreatment could be construed to the workers in Wigan as being an improvement upon the conditions of previous generations, is it possible that we are being tricked in the same way, only 80 years later?” This book will teach you that, because things improve incrementally, everything can and is always being made better: just as well, it reminds you that just because we feel things are well off now, doesn’t mean that they actually are, and certainly doesn’t mean they have to stay this way. It reminds you that letting our guards down means slipping backwards, further into the traps of wage slavery, debt slavery, and living as a piece of equipment instead of a thinking, breathing human being. It also teaches you that some, in fact, a lot, of your complaints are valid: that having to work multiple jobs, 40+ hours a week, having to suffer under hierarchical power structures, wage inequality, discrimination, etc., is neither moral, healthy, friendly nor fun. The book reminds you that, while a lot of what we complain about as workers and as citizens is trivial, most of it is also very serious, and should be dealt with as such.

This book is a tightrope walk between the rich, and the poor: affirming the complaints which are worthy and true, and nixing any extraneous, harmful privileges. In an economic and political climate as polarized and multifarious as America’s, the one thing which will unite us is our reaction to working conditions: this universal bond has transcended racial, gender, and social
lines in the past, and is exactly what we need now in order to overcome an oppression which is eating us alive from inside. Without remembering our roots in labor, we will forget why we instituted important laws such as minimum wage and the 8 hour day in the first place, resulting in even worse working conditions and income disparity than have ever been experienced.