

Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis

Harper Perennial

By J. D. Vance

ISBN: 9780062300553

Introduction

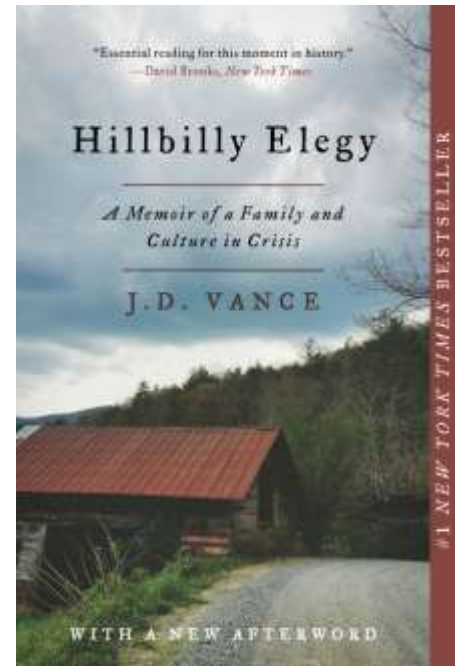
From a former marine and Yale Law School graduate, a powerful account of growing up in a poor Rust Belt town that offers a broader, probing look at the struggles of America's white working class

Hillbilly Elegy is a passionate and personal analysis of a culture in crisis—that of white working-class Americans. The decline of this group, a demographic of our country that has been slowly disintegrating over forty years, has been reported on with growing frequency and alarm, but has never before been written about as searingly from the inside. J. D. Vance tells the true story of what a social, regional, and class decline feels like when you were born with it hung around your neck.

The Vance family story begins hopefully in postwar America. J. D.'s grandparents were "dirt poor and in love," and moved north from Kentucky's Appalachia region to Ohio in the hopes of escaping the dreadful poverty around them. They raised a middle-class family, and eventually their grandchild (the author) would graduate from Yale Law School, a conventional marker of their success in achieving generational upward mobility.

But as the family saga of *Hillbilly Elegy* plays out, we learn that this is only the short, superficial version. Vance's grandparents, aunt, uncle, sister, and, most of all, his mother, struggled profoundly with the demands of their new middle-class life, and were never able to fully escape the legacy of abuse, alcoholism, poverty, and trauma so characteristic of their part of America. Vance piercingly shows how he himself still carries around the demons of their chaotic family history.

A deeply moving memoir with its share of humor and vividly colorful figures, *Hillbilly Elegy* is the story of how upward mobility really feels. And it is an urgent and troubling meditation on the loss of the American dream for a large segment of this country.



Questions for Discussion

1. What is Jackson, Kentucky like? Why does Vance have such an affection for the place? How is Middletown, Ohio similar and different?
2. In Chapter Two, we learn about the migration of people out of Appalachia in search of jobs. What does this migration do for communities?
3. Class disloyalty is something Vance's grandmother, Mamaw, dislikes. How does she define class disloyalty? She also strongly dislikes disloyalty as a more general practice. Why does she dislike it so much? Or, conversely, why does she think loyalty is so important? Thematically, in what ways is loyalty celebrated in *Hillbilly Elegy*? In what ways is loyalty problematic?
4. Are you surprised at the kinds of violence that Vance encounters at home? Do you think the family themselves consider some of their behaviors violent?
5. Is religion something that is important to Vance? Does it eventually become a grounding force for him? If so, how?
6. On page 104, Vance talks about his and his sister Lindsay's shared fear of imposing on other people. How do Vance and his sister think of themselves as burdens? Are they in any way justified thinking of themselves that way?
7. In Chapter Eight, Vance discusses education reform to help children in poor Appalachia communities. How do you fix the issues in these school systems when the problems these children face also stem from their lives at home?
8. How do you think not being able to feel like you can drop your guard feels? What would that be like for Vance and his sister?
9. From Vance's analysis, why are people in places like Middletown, Ohio so distrustful of contemporary America? In what ways does the media and internet feed into these anxieties? How do these perceptions and views feed into attitudes towards government and aspects of American society?
10. How does the Marine Corps change Vance? What does it teach him?
11. In what ways does being at Yale Law challenge Vance's identity? How does life at Yale make Vance more appreciative of his background and where he comes from in some ways?
12. What is social capital? In what ways did social capital come to help Vance?

13. On page 231, Vance talks about the difference between personal choice and cultural inheritance. How do you distinguish between actions and reactions based on personal choice versus cultural inheritance?
14. How would you describe the kind of effect Mamaw had on Vance? Do you see her as a larger-than-life presence in the book? Is there humor in her philosophies and ways of seeing, thinking, and talking about the world, in spite of any gruffness she may project?
15. The ability to adapt is a significant theme in *Hillbilly Elegy*. What are ways in which adaptability, or the success or failure of people or towns to adapt to circumstances or surroundings, is present in the book? What is significant about these adaptations and their respective successes or failures?
16. In what ways does *Hillbilly Elegy* encourage sympathy for conditions in which the hillbilly community finds itself, while simultaneously refusing to accept excuses for it?
17. Vance talks about hillbilly culture suffering from a lack of agency and a willingness to blame everyone but yourself. How do we see Seligman's "learned helplessness" in *Hillbilly Elegy*? How does it deepen the crisis for this community?
18. What public policy lessons does Vance outline from his experiences? How could they help the hillbilly community?