

Author Spotlight

J.D. VANCE



J.D. Vance grew up in the Rust Belt city of Middletown, Ohio, and spent many summers in the Appalachian town of Jackson, Kentucky. He enlisted in the Marine Corps after high school and served in Iraq. He received a B.A. from Ohio State University and graduated from Yale Law School. He has contributed to the *National Review* and the *New York Times*. He works as an investor at a leading Silicon Valley investment firm. Vance lives in Columbus, Ohio, with his family.

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. 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 in postwar America. Vance'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.

Prepared by Maureen Socha

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Discussion Questions for *Hillbilly Elegy*

1. In what way is the Appalachian culture described in *Hillbilly Elegy* a "culture in trouble"? Do you agree with the author's description of the book's premise:

The book is about what goes on in the lives of real people when the industrial economy goes south. It's about reacting to bad circumstances in the worst way possible. It's about a culture that increasingly encourages social decay instead of counteracting it.

2. *Follow-up to Question 1:* Vance suggests that unemployment and addiction are self-inflicted and that the Appalachian culture is one of "learned helplessness"—individuals feel they can do nothing to improve their circumstances. Do you agree with Vance's assessment? What could individuals do to improve their circumstances? Or are the problems so overwhelming they can't be surmounted?

3. What are the positive values of the culture Vance talks about in *Hillbilly Elegy*?

4. The author's mother is arguably the book's most powerful figure. Describe her and her struggle with addiction. How did the violence between her own parents, Mamaw and Papaw, affect her own adulthood?

5. To What—or to whom—does Vance attribute this escape from the cycle of addiction and poverty?

6. Talk about Vance's own resentment toward his neighbors who were on welfare but owned cellphones.

7. *Follow-up to Question 6:* Vance writes—

Political scientists have spent millions of words trying to explain how Appalachia and the South went from staunchly Democratic to staunchly Republican in less than a generation.... I could never understand why our lives felt like a struggle while those living off of government largess enjoyed trinkets that I only dreamed about.

Does his book address those two separate but related issues satisfactorily?

8. Critics of *Hillbilly Elegy* accuse Vance of "blaming the victim" rather than providing a sound analysis of the structural issues left unaddressed by government. What do you think?

9. What does this book bring to the national conversation about poverty—its roots and its persistence? Does Vance raise the tone of discourse or lower it?

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Hillbilly Elegy Readalikes

All Over But the Shoutin' by Rick Bragg

When childhood is complicated by poverty and an abusive, alcoholic father, it becomes focused on survival. Were it not for the dedication and strength of his mother, Rick Bragg may have never left northeast Alabama and become a Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter. His memoir captures the essence of the South, explores the bonds and responsibilities of family, and, in the end, celebrates his own coming-of-age.

Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City by Matthew Desmond

From Harvard sociologist and MacArthur "Genius" Matthew Desmond, a landmark work of scholarship and reportage that will forever change the way we look at poverty in America. In this brilliant, heartbreaking book, Matthew Desmond takes us into the poorest neighborhoods of Milwaukee to tell the story of eight families on the edge.

Hand to Mouth: Living in Bootstrap America by Linda Tirado

A personal perspective that outlines poverty and abolishes stereotypes about poor in America. In each chapter of this book, Tirado unforgivably explains the struggles of living in today's poverty through different areas of life.

Maid: Hard Work, Low Pay, and a Mother's Will to Survive by Stephanie Land

Maid explores the underbelly of upper-middle class America and the reality of what it's like to be in service to them. Land's compassionate, unflinching writing as a journalist gives voice to the "servant" worker, and those pursuing the American Dream from below the poverty line. It is an inspiring testament to the strength, determination, and ultimate triumph of the human spirit.

Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By In Boom-Time America by Barbara Ehrenreich

Nickel and Dimed reveals low-wage America in all its tenacity, anxiety, and surprising generosity—a land of Big Boxes, fast food, and a thousand desperate strategies for survival. Instantly acclaimed for its insight, humor, and passion, this book is changing the way America perceives its working poor.

