

**HILLBILLY ELEGY, A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis**

J.D. Vance

How to explain all the Donald Trump supporters among the “white working-class” demographic is a puzzle to many. Who are these people and why are they so devoted to a man who is anathema to his detractors? This book, written by someone who grew up in a southern Ohio steel town where Trump supporters make up almost 100% of the population, offers a plausible explanation beyond the economic (factory-jobs-lost-to-globalization) or the psychological (racist/stupid) that are most often offered by those who have had little direct personal exposure to the people in those regions that are full of Trump signs.

J D Vance, a 31-year old Yale Law graduate, a principal at a Silicon Valley investment firm and self-described Republican, was born into that world to a single mother who struggled with drug addiction his whole life. He acknowledges he’s a bit young to be writing a “memoir”. But more than a gripping modern-day Horatio Alger story, it’s a thoughtful examination of a large segment of that “white working class,” those Appalachian hillbillies descended from the 18<sup>th</sup> Century Scots-Irish immigrants settling in the vast region surrounding the Appalachian Mountains from Alabama and Georgia in the south up through Kentucky in the north, bringing with them distinctive cultural attributes that remain largely unchanged to this day, both good (a sense of honor, intense loyalty and fierce dedication to family and country) and bad (a bizarre sexism, distrust of outsiders or people different from themselves, quick and often violent response to perceived threats). Vance’s Appalachian ancestors settled in the coal region of Eastern Kentucky, as “day laborers in the Southern slave economy, sharecroppers after that, coal miners after that.” Life was hard and poverty was common.

In the economic boom following World War II, the mills and factories of the Industrial Midwest looking for workers heavily recruited significant numbers of ambitious young people from the Appalachian region offering good paying jobs with good benefits. Significant numbers (up to 30% of some Kentucky counties), including Vance’s grandparents, seized this opportunity and for them, the American Dream was alive and well. His grandfather left an impoverished small town in Eastern Kentucky to spend the rest of his life in Middletown, a prosperous mill town in southwestern Ohio. He took pride in his 40 years in the steel mill.

But globalization affected Middletown as it did the rest of the Industrial Midwest. In 1989, a merger between the local steel mill and the Japanese company Kawasaki enabled the mill to survive for a few years, but far fewer employees were needed, marking a downward spiral for the town. As jobs fled Middletown, people who could afford to leave did so. But others whose houses were underwater found themselves stuck in declining neighborhoods, the lost jobs costing them their economic security and a stable home and family life. The resulting stress from not having enough money, the social isolation and pessimism about the future got passed down to their children, high rates of divorce, and prescription drug addiction reaching epidemic proportions. If only they had better access to jobs, goes the argument, the other parts of their lives would improve as well.

Though when he was younger he wanted to believe this, Vance now sees a more fundamental problem—“a culture that increasingly encourages social decay instead of counteracting it...”; too many men with children to support who decline to work in the good jobs that can still be found around Middletown; people who can’t admit that their drug addiction, divorces and other bad life choices harm not only themselves but also their children; people who feel that they have little control over their life and are willing to blame everyone but themselves; social decay not caused by “the government” or corporations or globalization but as a consequence of the choices people made in response to their changing circumstances. Though Vance believes that public policy solutions can help ease people’s short-term suffering, permanent improvement for those communities will happen only when people stop looking for someone to blame and ask themselves what they can do to make things better where they live, how they can give their children emotional and spiritual support and a sense that they can control their own destiny, encouraging them to engage with the world.

As chronicled in this book, Vance’s improbable journey didn’t lead to his accomplishing something extraordinary but allowed him to achieving something quite ordinary, a nice job, a happy marriage, a comfortable home, things that most kids who grew up like he did could never expect to have. He shines a light on a large, cohesive swath of society that many of us never thought much about. That may change after this election.