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Johnston Public Library Book Discussion Questions

Hillbilly Elegy by J D Vance

Summary

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.

Discussion Questions

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, Mawaw 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?

Summary from the publisher and Discussion Questions form www.litlovers.com.