

## Hillbilly Elegy (Vance) - Discussion Questions

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### Discussion Questions

*We'll add publisher questions if and when they're available; in the meantime, consider these LitLovers talking points for Hillbilly Elegy...then take off on your own:*

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?

7. 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?

8. 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?

*(Questions by LitLovers. Please feel free to use them, online or off, with attribution. Thanks.)*

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Reading guide for *Hillbilly Elegy* by J.D. Vance

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## Hillbilly Elegy

A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis

by J.D. Vance



Critics' Opinion:

**First Published:**

Jun 2016, 272 pages

**Paperback:**

May 2018, 288 pages

**Genres**

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by Anthony McCann

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## About this Book

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### Reading Guide Questions



Please be aware that this discussion guide may contain spoilers!

#### CHAPTER 1

- What is Jackson, Kentucky like? Why does Vance have such an affection for the place?
- Class disloyalty is something Vance's grandmother, Mamaw, dislikes. How does she define class disloyalty?
- Why does Vance revere the Blanton men? What are they like, and why does Vance find them so appealing?
- What are some of the contradictions apparent in Jackson, Kentucky? How do these contradictions shape the town?

#### CHAPTER 2

- What are Vance's grandparents, Mamaw and Papaw, like?
- How did Vance's grandparents get to Ohio? What are the two versions of the story of how and why they moved out of Kentucky?
- In this chapter, we learn about the migration of people out of Appalachia in search of jobs. What does this migration do for communities?
- In what ways do Vance's grandparents adapt, and not adapt, to their new life in Ohio? Do they see these changes positively or negatively?

#### CHAPTER 3

- What are the ways in which Mamaw and Papaw lead two lives? Why is there such a split?
- In addition to class disloyalty, Mamaw 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?
- In what ways do Mamaw and Papaw try to correct past mistakes they made? Do you think they end up correcting them?
- 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?



## Readers Recommend



**Ellie and the Harp Maker**  
by Hazel Prior

A rich, heartwarming and charming debut novel about finding love in unexpected places.  
[Reader Reviews](#)



**The Last List of Miss Judith Kratt**  
by Andrea Bobotis

A thoughtful and quintessentially Southern debut that unfolds like a magnolia.  
[Reader Reviews](#)

#### CHAPTER 4

• Compared to Jackson, Kentucky what is Middletown, Ohio like? In what ways is it similar? And in what ways is it different?

• Why did Middletown experience an economic decline?

• What are some ways in which there are conflicts in attitudes towards work among the people of Middletown?

• If the American Dream does require forward momentum, could the people of Middletown achieve it?

#### CHAPTER 5

• How do Mamaw's views on fighting evolve? Why do you think they change?

• What are the circumstances surrounding Vance's adoption?

• In spite of their shared love of books and learning, and the nurturing relationship they seem to have, Vance's relationship with his mother begins to change. What is the catalyst for this change, and what is its outcome so far?

#### CHAPTER 6

• Describe the kind of relationship that Vance and his sister Lindsay have. • What are the various ways in which this chapter discusses religion? Is religion something that is important to Vance?

• In what ways is the absence of a father figure significant to the ways in which Vance constructs and learns masculinity?

• When Vance reconnects with his biological father, he learns his side of the story surrounding his adoption. How does hearing his account change J.D.'s views? Do you think Vance manages to forgive his biological father?

• Does religion become a grounding force for Vance? If so, how? CHAPTER 7 • How big of a gap does Papaw's death leave in the family? How do different members of the family react to his death?

• 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?

• Vance's family goes through another reconfiguration when his mother enters rehab. Are you surprised at how Vance and Lindsay adapt?

#### CHAPTER 8

• What are the ways in this chapter in which Vance's home life becomes more tumultuous?

• This chapter talks in some detail about education reform to help kids in poor Appalachia communities. How do you fix the issues in these school systems when the problems these kids face also stem from their lives at home?

• 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?

#### CHAPTER 9

• How does living with Mamaw help Vance understand her better? How does he get to know her in ways he didn't previously?

• Working at the grocery store, Vance is exposed to how class difference and work ethic manifests itself in Middletown. The kinds of contradictions he brings up in Chapter 4 are evident here. Do you think Vance is justified in the anger he feels at what he sees?

• In what ways is the eternal hope Vance feels for his mother a series of complex emotions? Given the trajectory of their relationship, would you also feel hopeful if you were in Vance's position?

• Living with Mamaw gives Vance a chance at a stable home life. Do you think this stability is what manages to change Vance's life around? Why or why not?

#### CHAPTER 10

• How self-aware is Vance when he decides he isn't ready for college? Are you surprised by that amount of self-awareness from him?

• In what ways does the family split anew following Mamaw's death?

• How does the Marine Corps change Vance? What does it teach him?

#### CHAPTER 11

• What is Vance's experience like in college? How is it similar and different to his peers?

• 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 the anxieties of the people of Middletown? • How do these perceptions and views feed into attitudes towards government and aspects of American society?

## Book Club



**The Overstory**  
by Richard Powers

"Monumental... A gigantic fable of genuine truths."—  
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Book Review

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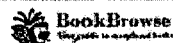


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• What is critique of modern conservatism does Vance offer? Do you agree with how he formed his theory?

#### CHAPTER 12

• 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?

• We learn of an incident at a gas station where Vance lies to a woman about not going to Yale. Is his lie an example of protecting against the class disloyalty Mamaw despised so much? Why or why not?

• How is seeing social mobility as a lifestyle change, in addition to a change in money and economics, significant? How does that recontextualize how we think about social mobility?

#### CHAPTER 13

• How did Vance's experience during FIP highlight his class difference from his peers?

• What is social capital? In what ways did social capital come to help Vance?

#### CHAPTER 14

• From what you know of Vance's life, what kind of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) did he have?

• How would you describe Vance and Usha's relationship? What kinds of behaviors does Vance notice in his relationship that he traces back to his upbringing? What kinds of things does he want to change?

• 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?

• Do you think Vance has come to terms with his feelings for his mother? Or do you think his feelings for and about her will constantly evolve?

#### CHAPTER 15

• What is the "uneasy truce" Vance strikes in caring for his mother?

• When J.D. and Usha get married, they both change their last name to Vance. Why is the change significant for both of them?

• What public policy lessons does Vance outline from his experiences? How could they help the hillbilly community?

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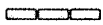
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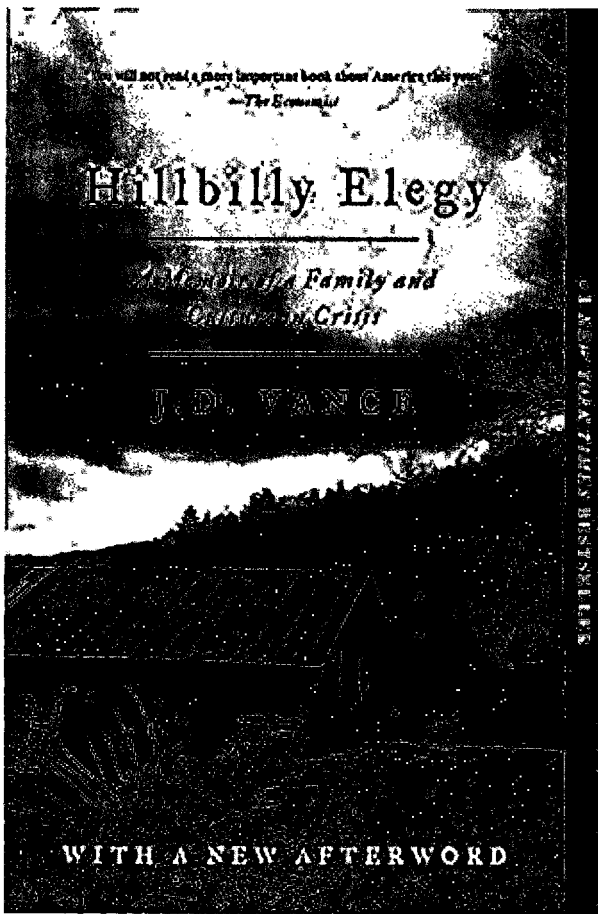
## Book Club Kit: 'Hillbilly Elegy' by J. D. Vance

By [Kristina Wright](#) | March 27, 2019



*If your book club is looking for a compelling memoir about class, family, and the American dream, we recommend [Hillbilly Elegy](#) by [J. D. Vance](#). We've rounded up everything you'll need to host a successful book club gathering, including:*

- An overview of what to expect from *Hillbilly Elegy*
  - Reviews from fellow bookworms
  - Hillbilly Elegy* book club questions
  - Hosting tips and recipes
-



[Hillbilly Elegy](#)

[J. D. Vance](#)

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J. D. Vance's *New York Times* bestseller, *Hillbilly Elegy*, is a compelling memoir about what it's like growing up poor in the Rust Belt. A Marine veteran and Yale graduate, Vance tells the story of his family's rise out of poverty in Appalachia and their struggle to claim a middle-class life in a slowly fading Ohio steel town. Through the lens of personal experience, Vance explores the lasting effects of poverty, substance abuse, and domestic violence on future generations. He shines a light on the hopelessness and despair of people who were promised the American dream only to watch it slip beyond their grasp.

*Hillbilly Elegy* is perfect for fans of [Educated](#) by [Tara Westover](#), [Evicted](#) by [Matthew Desmond](#), and [The Glass Castle](#) by [Jeannette Walls](#).

## What Fellow Bookworms Have to Say

*Hillbilly Elegy* is most often described by [BookBub](#) readers as "informative," "realistic," "original," "inspirational," and "easy-to-read." Here's a sample of comments from readers:

**Diane's recommendation:** "I laughed, I cried, I cheered for J. D. Vance. J. D. states in his introduction that he's 'accomplished nothing great,' I tend to disagree. First of all, he did something amazing in 257 pages that a lot of authors can't do — he stole my heart."

**Joy's recommendation:** "This book is the story of a boy who grew up in Middletown, Ohio, to transplanted hillbillies from Appalachia. Because of the influence of his grandparents, he was able to break the cycle, leave Middletown, and pursue a career in law. A good read for anyone who wants to study chronic poverty first-hand."



## *Hillbilly Elegy* Book Club Questions

1. How would you describe Appalachian or “hillbilly” culture? Why does Vance believe it’s a culture in crisis?
2. According to Vance, why does drug and alcohol addiction have such a stronghold in Appalachia?
3. Vance paints a vivid portrait of his mother’s spiraling addiction. How does Vance link her addiction to her upbringing?
4. Mamaw and Papaw are two powerful characters in Vance’s childhood. What was their relationship like? Why did Vance’s relationship with Mamaw become such a driving force in his life?
5. Contrast Vance’s life in Middletown, Ohio, with his grandparents’ life in Jackson, Kentucky. How did moving to Middletown change his family’s identity?
6. What role does family play in Appalachian culture? Does “family” mean the same thing to Vance as it does to the rest of his family?
7. Vance paints a portrait of people who believe their situation is unchangeable and calls it “learned helplessness.” Do you agree with him? Why or why not? Why do think Vance was able to change his situation?
8. Why did Vance resent his neighbors who were on welfare? How does Vance portray people on government assistance?
9. What does Vance think will help resolve the crisis of Appalachian culture?
10. What does the title *Hillbilly Elegy* mean to you? What images are conjured by the word “hillbilly?” Why do you think the author chose this title?



# Hosting Inspiration for *Hillbilly Elegy*

## Cocktail

In honor of J. D. Vance's Kentucky roots, we've selected this recipe for the Kentucky Mule. The Kentucky Mule is a variation of the Moscow Mule, substituting Kentucky bourbon for vodka. This is a drink with a kick, so we're pairing it with the sweetness of a classic Ohio candy below.

How to Make a Kentucky Mule - Liquor.com



## Dessert

Author J. D. Vance grew up in Middletown, Ohio, and attended Ohio State University, home of the Buckeyes. So what better treat to offer your book group than the chocolate-dipped peanut butter candy of the same name? We've selected this traditional Buckeye recipe from Sugar Spun Run.

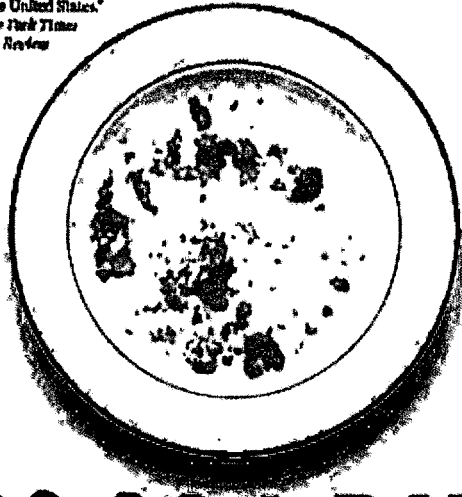
How to Make Buckeyes



If you enjoyed *Hillbilly Elegy*, check out these other inspiring reads:

KATHRYN J. EDIN AND H. LUKE SHAEFER

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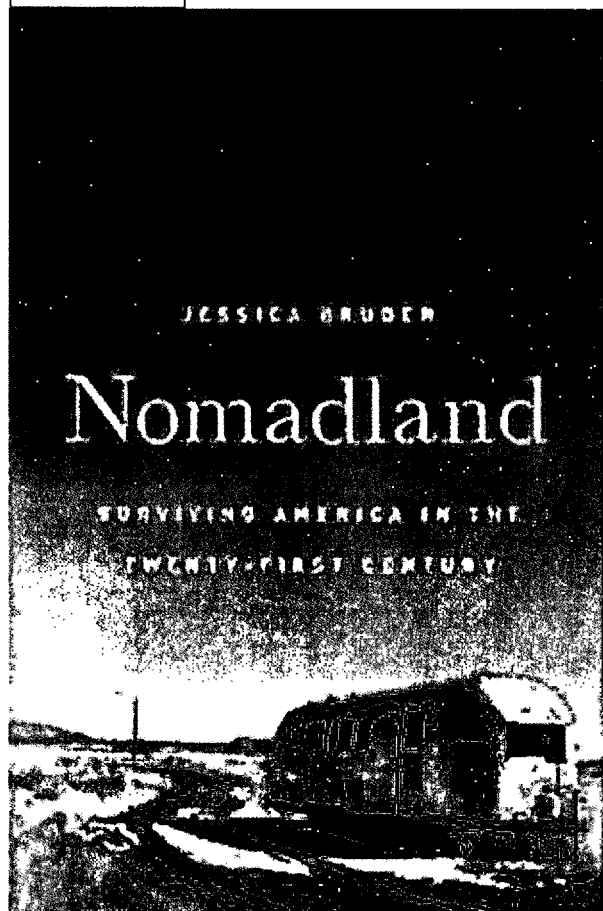
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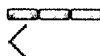
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