

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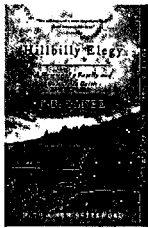
Reading guide for *Hillbilly Elegy* by J.D. Vance

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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

Debut Author

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Readers' Opinion:

Paperback:

May 2018, 288 pages

Genres



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Editor's Choice

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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?



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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



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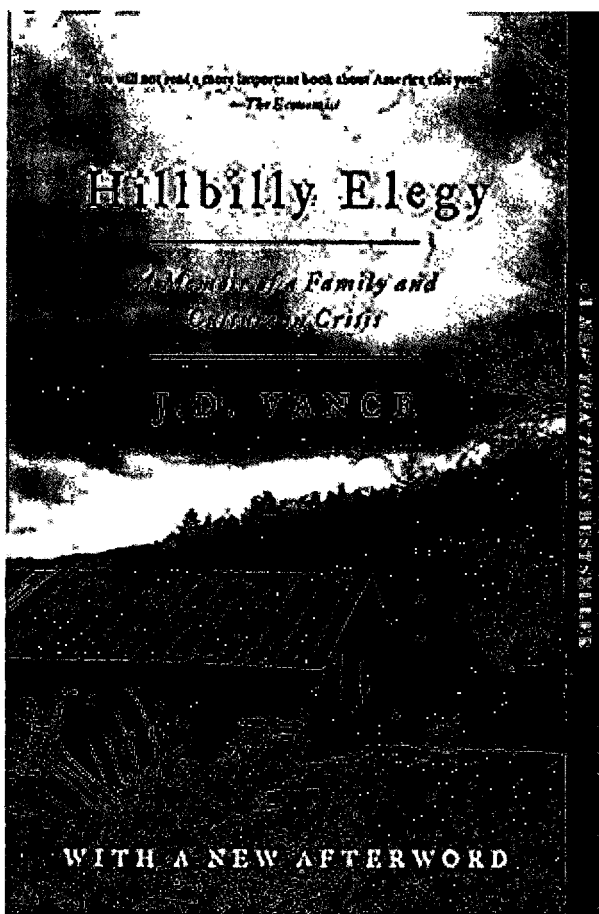
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Book Club Kit: 'Hillbilly Elegy' by J. D. Vance

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.

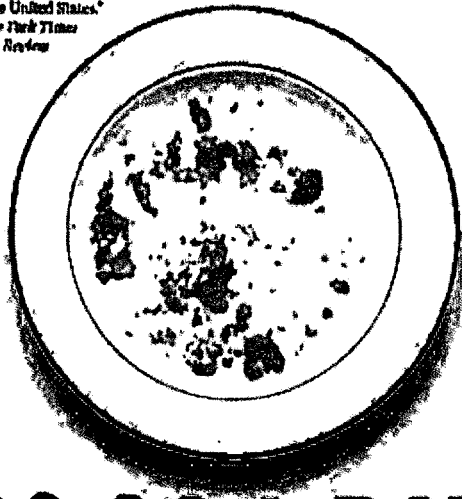
How to Make Buckeyes



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

KATHRYN J. EDIN AND H. LUKE SHAEFER

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could very well change the
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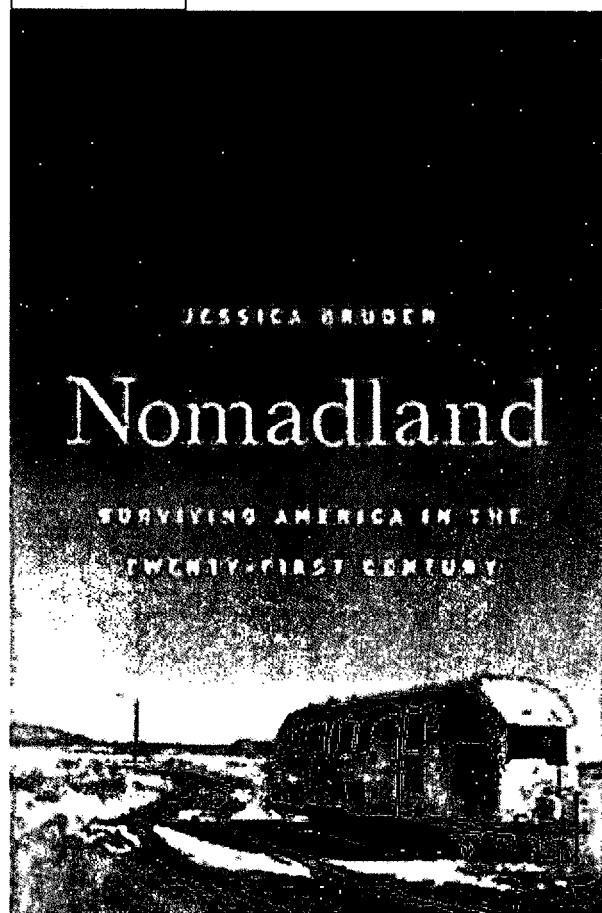
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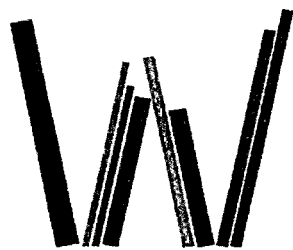
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UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON COMMON BOOK PROGRAM

Suggested Discussion Questions for J.D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy*: *A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*

1. In his introduction to *Hillbilly Elegy*, Vance writes, "I want people to understand what happens in the lives of the poor and the psychological impact that spiritual and material poverty has on their children" (p. 2) and states that for the people of Appalachia—the people with whom he identifies—"poverty is a family tradition" (p. 3). Certainly poverty is a nationwide epidemic, but why does Vance feel the cycle of generational poverty is persistent in the Appalachian region and the cities nearby? Why is the American Dream particularly elusive for the residents of Jackson and Middletown?
2. Vance discusses the inner conflict he feels as someone who has moved from poverty into a higher social class, musing that "Sometimes I view members of the elite with an almost primal scorn... But I have to give it to them: Their children are happier and healthier, their divorce rates lower, their church attendance higher, their lives longer. These people are beating us at our own damned game" (p. 253). While Vance's income bracket has presumably shifted, his statement indicates that his identity remains tied to his working-class roots. Is Vance now one of "these people," or do his childhood experiences excuse him from acknowledging his current privilege? Do you think it's possible to completely shift one's identity from one class to another? What factors define social class, and how is class membership determined?
3. In Vance's view, race and class seem to be two separate issues. In the book's introduction, he writes, "This is not a story about why white people have more to complain about than black people or any other group. That said, I do hope that readers of this book will be able to take from it an appreciation of how class and family affect the poor without filtering their views through a racial prism" (p. 7-8). At the same time, Vance discusses how people of different racial backgrounds experience the world. He cites controversial political scientist Charles Murray's 1984 book *Losing Ground*, calling it a "book about black folks that could have been written about hillbillies" (p. 144). What does this comparison say about

Vance's view of race and class? Is it possible to look at how class and family affect the poor without considering race? What does Vance mean when he says, "filtering their views through a racial prism"?

4. While working in the Ohio Senate, the senators and policy staff Vance worked with were debating a bill to curb payday-lending practices. Vance observed that these policymakers "had little appreciation for the role of payday lenders in the shadow economy that people like me occupied" (p. 185). Vance goes on to say that using payday lending once allowed him to avoid a significant bank overdraft fee, and that payday lending helped to "solve important financial problems" (p. 185). What is the role of payday lending? Is Vance's experience representative of payday lending clients? Why does Vance include this anecdote when discussing his own experience of poverty?

5. Vance cites a report by the Wisconsin Children's Trust Fund stating that well over half of working-class people had suffered at least one adverse childhood experience (ACE), and over 40 percent had experienced several (p. 226-7). He writes extensively about his own traumatic childhood: his mother's drug addiction and arrest, the constant revolving door of father figures, and Papaw's alcoholism, among others. Which of these experiences appear to affect Vance most deeply, and why? How does the author cope with and eventually break free from such a difficult childhood? Although Vance acknowledges Mamaw's and Papaw's tumultuous marriage as a key factor in his mother's troubles—"Mom is the Vance child who lost the game of statistics" (p. 232)—in what ways do his grandparents' actions and attitude contribute to his success?

6. Throughout his memoir, Vance talks about government policy and programs. At one point in the story, he describes his experience working at a grocery store and his encounters with customers using food stamps: I "learned how people gamed the welfare system. They'd buy two dozen-packs of soda with food stamps and then sell them at a discount for cash. They'd ring up their orders separately, buying food with food stamps, and beer, wine, and cigarettes with cash" (p. 139). How does Vance portray people receiving government assistance? How does this compare with his portrayal of his own family's poverty? What other factors might impact the way people prioritize their spending? Are there other issues and complexities that contribute to the poverty he witnesses?

7. Poverty drives many residents of Jackson and other Appalachian communities to migrate to industrialized towns with better employment opportunities, but those opportunities gradually erode. What role does globalization play in industrialized communities like Middletown? What factors cause some residents to stay, despite the economic warning signs?

8. Vance provides many examples of lives interrupted and plagued by addiction to alcohol and drugs, including his own mother's. Though his mother's drug addiction is ultimately what forces Vance to choose to permanently live with Mamaw instead of his mother, Mamaw persuades him to help his mother cheat on a drug test, saying, "I know this isn't right, honey. But she's your mother and she's my daughter. And maybe, if we help her this time, she'll finally learn her lesson" (p. 131). Throughout their lives, Vance's mother struggles with her drug addiction, and Vance struggles with how much to help her, financially and emotionally. Were Vance and Mamaw enabling his mother to continue using drugs by helping her pass the drug test? What are some other examples of drug use that Vance includes in the book? Does his analysis of the drug epidemic provide a clear portrait of the problems facing America?

9. In the book's introduction, Vance states that his success had little to do with his own intelligence or extraordinary ability, and much more to do with "a handful of loving people" who rescued him (p. 2). Despite this, throughout the book Vance draws attention again and again to the element of personal responsibility, perhaps nowhere so clearly as in relating Mamaw's flood parable: "God helps those who help themselves" (p. 87). Where else do you see this tension between personal responsibility and the need for familial, governmental, or social support?

10. According to Vance, Mamaw "loathed disloyalty, and there was no greater disloyalty than class betrayal" (p. 15). Later in the book, Vance relates a story in which he cannot bring himself to tell a stranger at a gas station that he is a student at Yale, acknowledging that this incident: "highlights the inner conflict inspired by rapid upward mobility: I had lied to a stranger to avoid feeling like a traitor" (p. 205). Vance has achieved everything Mamaw wished for him, so why does his success feel like a betrayal? In what way does Vance's success echo or conflict with the role models he encountered throughout his life (e.g., the Blanton men, Mamaw and Papaw, his biological father)?

11. Reflecting upon his service in the Marine Corps and his childhood, Vance states, "Psychologists call it 'learned helplessness' when a person believes, as I did during my youth, that the choices I made had no effect on the outcomes in my life... If I had learned helplessness at home, the Marines were teaching learned willfulness" (p. 163). What do you think Vance means by this statement? How did the Marine Corps change Vance? What life skills did he find especially valuable, and how did his service, particularly his time in Iraq, affect his college experience and his perception of fellow students at Ohio State?

12. Vance discusses education in a multitude of ways. At one point he states, "In Middletown, 20 percent of the public high school's entering freshmen won't make it to graduation. Most won't graduate from college" (p. 56). Though Vance struggled in school through much of his childhood, when he stayed with his grandmother his senior year, he was able to focus on school and found teachers who inspired his love of learning (p. 151). He remembers when Mamaw spent \$180 on a graphing calculator when they had little money for other things like cell phones and nice clothes (p. 137). In the end, Vance goes on to earn a law degree from Yale. How does Vance view the role of education in society and its impact on his own life? What are the factors that allow someone to excel in school? And what is society's role in ensuring external factors don't impede educational opportunities?

13. In spite of his identity as a tall, white, straight male, Vance felt out of place at Yale, noting, "A part of me had thought I'd finally be revealed as an intellectual fraud, that the administration would realize they'd made a terrible mistake and send me back to Middletown with their sincerest apologies" (p. 201). From confusing financial aid forms, to social class signifiers ("tap or sparkling" water), to critical steps for professional advancement (membership in law journals), first-generation college students often encounter intentional or unintentional gatekeeping mechanisms which can communicate to these students that they don't belong. What can be done to, as Vance puts it, "create a space for the J.D.s" (p. 256) of the world in higher education? How do systems work to discourage upward mobility and keep people within their social groups?

14. Given the examples he encountered throughout his life, Vance appears to associate religiosity and church attendance with success, and social isolation with poverty and poor choices. For Vance, religion also appears to be inextricably tied to familial acceptance. Reflecting on his inability to ask his father questions about evangelical theology, Vance notes: "I didn't know whether he'd tell me I was a spawn of Satan and send me away" (p. 124). In his conclusion, Vance positions the young man Brian's precarious fate with, among other things, "whether he can access a church that teaches him lessons of Christian love, family, and purpose" (p. 255). Does religion play a role in upward social mobility? Is participation in a religious group necessary for personal and economic success?

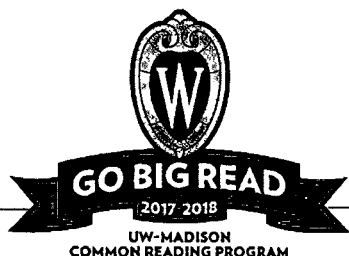
15. In chapter 11, Vance talks about conspiracy theories that he hears in his community. For example, he describes how people believe that President Barack Obama was neither born in the U.S. nor a Christian. Vance asserts that Obama "feels like an alien to many Middletonians for reasons that have nothing to do with skin color. Recall that not a single one of my high school classmates attended an Ivy League school. Barack Obama attended two of them and excelled at both" (p. 191). However, ten pages later, Vance then recounts that "Yale had educated two of the three most recent Supreme Court justices and two of the six most recent presidents, not to mention the sitting secretary of state (Hillary

Clinton)" (p. 202). This suggests that the questioning of President Obama's birthplace and religion was unique among high-level government officials. Why did Obama's success "strike at the heart of [this community's] deepest insecurities" (p. 191) in a way that other government officials' success did not? Does this narrative of "elitism" serve to mask other forms of exclusion, including racism?

16. In the introduction, Vance provides multiple reasons for writing his memoir and suggests that he wants people to understand the lives of poor people. When reading the book, do you see any tension between Vance's telling of his own story and his cultural analysis of the "hillbilly" way of life? Can one person's experience represent an entire group's? Is Vance's book more successful as a memoir, or as a cultural analysis? Why?

17. A number of people have pointed to *Hillbilly Elegy* to explain the results of the 2016 election. In the memoir, Vance recalls how at the age of 17, he realized that the "'party of the working man'—the Democrats—weren't all they were cracked up to be" (p. 140). He goes on to argue that people in Appalachia and the South "went from being staunchly Democratic to staunchly Republican in less than a generation" (p. 140), and attributes a big part of this shift to white working-class people seeing other poor people take advantage of government assistance. Do you agree with Vance's assertion? Are there challenges in using one individual's experience to explain larger social shifts? Do you think this book explains the results of the 2016 election?

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