

# Book Club Kits!



**About the Author:** 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. A graduate of the Ohio State University and Yale Law School, he is a principal at a Silicon Valley investment firm.

In *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis* Vance recalls his own turbulent upbringing and comments on the current issues that affect the lives of the people with whom he grew up. In an NPR interview Vance discussed his arguments in the book, stating: "I'm not trying to say anything too explicit about race, but to note that poverty just goes back really, really far in the generational stories of these families. So the point I'm trying to make, ultimately, is that these folks have been poor for a very long time." He continued: "In a lot of ways, intergenerational poverty is something that they inherited and that they've lived with as part of a family tradition. I think part of that means they've grown up with a certain resentment at rich people. But it also means that, for them, the upward mobility that a lot of folks experienced right after World War II was their first real taste of economic optimism, and I think that's something that really gave them a lot of hope. And ultimately, as I write later in the book, that hope didn't really materialize."

## Hillbilly Elegy

*A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*

J. D. VANCE



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### Inside the kit:

- (8) book copies
- (1) book club guide

### About the Book *From Goodreads*

*Hillbilly Elegy* is a poignant account of growing up in a poor Appalachian town, that offers a broader, probing look at the struggles of America's white working class. Part memoir, part historical and social analysis, J. D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy* is a fascinating consideration of class, culture, and the American dream.

Vance's grandparents were "dirt poor and in love." They got married and moved north from Kentucky to Ohio in the hopes of escaping the dreadful poverty around them. Their grandchild (the author) graduated from Yale Law School, a conventional marker of their success in achieving upward mobility for their family. But Vance cautions that is only the short version. The slightly longer version is that his grandparents, aunt, uncle, and mother struggled to varying degrees with the demands of their new middle class life and they, and Vance himself, still carry around the demons of their chaotic family history.

Delving into his own personal story and drawing on a wide array of sociological studies, Vance takes us deep into working class life in the Appalachian region. This demographic of our country has been slowly disintegrating over forty years, and Vance provides a searching and clear-eyed attempt to understand when and how "hillbillies" lost faith in any hope of upward mobility, and in opportunities to come.

At times funny, disturbing, and deeply moving, this is a family history that is also a troubling meditation on the loss of the American dream for a large portion of this country.

### Suggested Reads available at Burlington Public Library:

Scott McClanahan *Crapalachia* (available as an eAudiobook)

Matthew Desmond *Evicted*

David K. Shipler *The working poor*

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?