

## Book Club Questions for *Hillbilly Elegy*

### **Author:**

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*(from HarperCollins Publisher)*

### **Summary:**

J.D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy*, part memoir, part social analysis, is a fascinating examination of culture, class, and the American dream of working class white Americans in Appalachia. *Hillbilly Elegy* explores how and when "hillbillies" lost faith in the American dream and in any hope of upward mobility through the prism of Vance and his mother and grandparents.

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### **Questions:**

1. 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? What does this economic migration people out of Appalachia do for communities? In what ways to Vance's grandparents adapt, and not adapt, to their new life in Ohio? Do they see these changes positively or negatively?
2. 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?
3. In what ways is the absence of a father figure significant to the ways in which Vance constructs and learns masculinity?
4. Does religion become a grounding force for Vance? If so, how?
5. 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?
6. From Vance's analysis, why are people in places like Middletown, Ohio so distrustful of contemporary America? How do these perceptions and views feed into attitudes towards government and aspects of American society?
7. What is critique of modern conservatism does Vance offer? Do you agree with how he formed his theory?
8. 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?
9. What is social capital? In what ways did social capital come to help Vance?

10. 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?
11. What public policy lessons does Vance outline from his experiences? How could they help the hillbilly community?
12. How would you describe the kind of effect Mamaw had on Vance? Do you see her as a larger-than-life presence in the book? Is there humor in her philosophies and ways of seeing, thinking, and talking about the world, in spite of any gruffness she may project?
13. The ability to adapt is a significant theme in *Hillbilly Elogy*. What are ways in which adaptability, or the success or failure of people or towns to adapt to circumstances or surroundings, is present in the book? What is significant about these adaptations and their respective successes or failures?
14. In what ways does *Hillbilly Elogy* encourage sympathy for conditions in which the hillbilly community finds itself, while simultaneously refusing to accept excuses for it?
15. Vance talks about hillbilly culture suffering from a lack of agency and a willingness to blame everyone but yourself. How do we see Seligman's "learned helplessness" in *Hillbilly Elogy*? How does it deepen the crisis for this community?
16. Thematically, in what ways is loyalty celebrated in *Hillbilly Elogy*? In what ways is loyalty problematic?

(Questions adapted from the HarperCollins Teaching Guide for *Hillbilly Elogy*.)

**Other Titles That Might Interest You:**

*White Trash: The 400 Year Untold History of Class in America* by Nancy Isenberg

*Dopesick: Dealers, Doctors, and the Drug Company That Addicted America* by Beth Macy