Hillbilly Elegy BY J.D. Vance

READING GROUP GUIDE

Use these questions to guide your book club's discussion of *Hillbilly Elegy* by J.D. Vance.

1. What is Jackson, Kentucky like? Why does Vance have such an affection for the place? How is Middletown, Ohio similar and different?

2. In Chapter Two, we learn about the migration of people out of Appalachia in search of jobs. What does this migration do for communities?

3. Class disloyalty is something Vance's grandmother, Mamaw, dislikes. How does she define class disloyalty? She 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? Thematically, in what ways is loyalty celebrated in *Hillbilly Elegy*? In what ways is loyalty problematic?

4. 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?

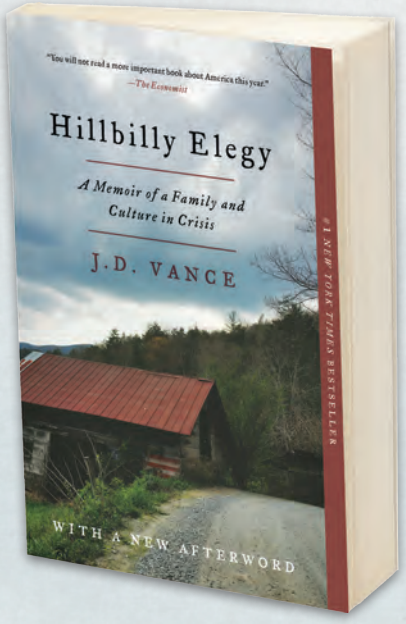
5. Is religion something that is important to Vance? Does it eventually become a grounding force for him? If so, how?

6. 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?

7. In Chapter Eight, Vance discusses education reform to help children in poor Appalachia communities. How do you fix the issues in these school systems when the problems these children face also stem from their lives at home?

8. 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?

9. 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 these anxieties? How do these perceptions and views feed into attitudes towards government and aspects of American society?



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

11. 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?

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

13. 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?

14. 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?

15. The ability to adapt is a significant theme in *Hillbilly Elegy*. 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?

16. In what ways does *Hillbilly Elegy* encourage sympathy for conditions in which the hillbilly community finds itself, while simultaneously refusing to accept excuses for it?

17. 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 Elegy*? How does it deepen the crisis for this What public policy lessons does Vance outline from his experiences? How could they help the hillbilly community?

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