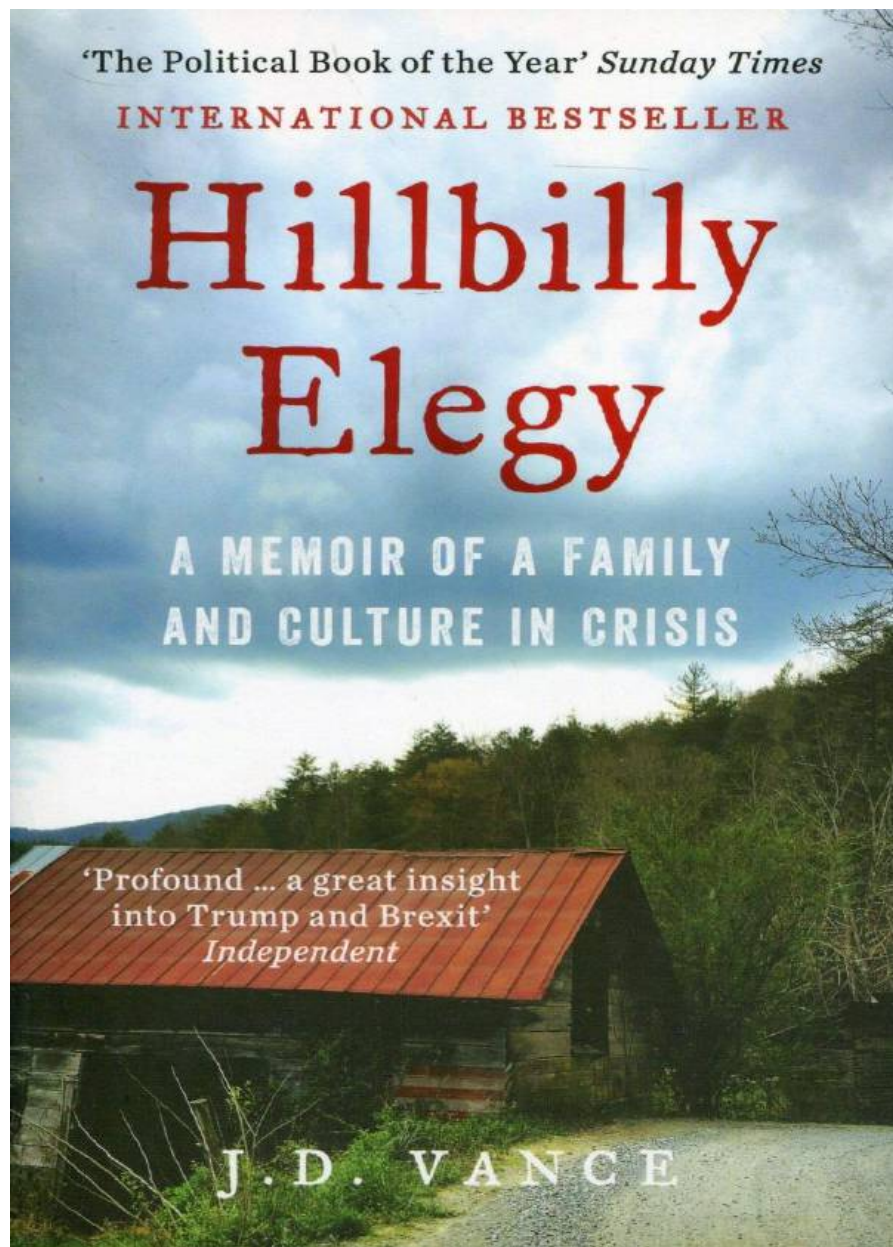


Hillbilly Elogy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis

by J.D. Vance (2016)

Chapter (1-15) Summaries



Chapter 1 Summary

Although J.D. may have lived primarily in Middletown, Ohio, he considers Jackson, Kentucky, his home. He visits the small Appalachian town frequently with "Mamaw," his grandmother, and his half sister, Lindsay. When his mother, Bev, joins them, Mamaw forbids her to bring any drama or men along. J.D. loves staying at his great-grandmother's home and playing outside with his cousins. In Ohio, he has to adapt to the demands of whichever man is currently in his mother's life, but in Kentucky he feels he can be himself. He adores his uncles, the Blanton men. J.D. is intensely proud of his family, whom he thinks of as "hillbilly royalty." They are notoriously violent, but always on the side of good. When Mamaw was 12 years old, she grabbed a shotgun and wounded a man in the act of stealing the family cow. In Jackson, "hillbilly justice" was often carried out by the people, rather than the law, and there were many family stories of Blanton men exacting vengeance to defend the family honor, including beating a man to unconsciousness and using an electric saw on his body for insulting his mother.

Despite his fond memories of Jackson, J.D. concedes that one third of its people live in poverty. The region is plagued by opioid addiction and inadequate schools. News reports on the phenomenon of "Mountain Dew mouth" (dental decay from sugary beverages) have led some to decry stereotyping, but J.D. claims the cultural coping mechanism of avoidance makes it difficult for the community to address problems. He admits, "We hill people aren't doing very well."

Chapter 2 Summary

J.D. credits his grandparents with giving him a good start in life. Their childhoods were spent in Jackson where both had family histories of notorious feuds. The two married in their teens and left Jackson to seek better jobs in the industrial Midwest. J.D. found out later that his grandmother had been pregnant at the time, only to lose the child in infancy.

Papaw, J.D.'s grandfather, had worked for Armco, an industrial steel manufacturer. Companies like Armco actively recruited entire families in Appalachia, setting off two large waves of migration, the first after World War I and the second in the 1940s and 1950s when J.D.'s grandparents joined thousands of others on the metaphorical "hillbilly highway." In the 1950s, 13 percent of Kentucky residents emigrated. In the Midwest, many hillbillies were viewed with suspicion and failed to fit into their new cultural surroundings.

J.D. recalls his grandmother's dream of becoming an attorney to protect at-risk kids, a career she was never able to pursue. Although Papaw and Mamaw believed in the value of hard work, they also knew they were at a disadvantage. They distrusted the

rich, who had more opportunities. Despite their hopes to build a better life for their children in Middletown, things didn't go as planned.

Chapter 3 Summary

After the birth of their son Jimmy, Mamaw endured a series of miscarriages before having two more children. The stress of transitioning to life in Ohio, as well as Papaw's heavy drinking, took a toll on Mamaw. She became increasingly reclusive and the home filled with clutter. Although intensely loyal, hillbilly culture is undeniably sexist, and none of Mamaw's family said anything to Papaw about his behavior. He was a violent drunk, and Mamaw didn't take it quietly. When he ignored her ultimatum to quit drinking, she poured gasoline over him as he slept on the couch and lit him on fire. He somehow escaped with minor injuries. The kids knew better than to let anyone outside the family know about their home life. J.D. learned at a young age never to speak about his family to outsiders.

J.D.'s grandparents had high hopes for their children, but Jim, Lori, and Bev were negatively impacted by their chaotic, violent home life. Jim went to work for Armco instead of pursuing education just so he wouldn't have to continue living at home. Lori got involved with drugs and had a violent marriage. Although Bev was an excellent student, when she became pregnant at 18, she married instead of going to college and soon found herself a divorced single mother. Mamaw and Papaw separated even after Papaw

quit drinking for good. They remained close and spent the rest of their lives trying to make up for the mistakes they made with their kids.

Chapter 4 Summary

Over the years, J.D.'s family witnessed the slow but steady decline of Middletown, Ohio. The town is full of boarded-up mansions and shuttered businesses. Middletown is an example of how bad neighborhoods are no longer confined to inner cities but have spread to the suburbs. The poor are caught in rundown neighborhoods they cannot afford to leave.

In the wake of the impact of globalization on manufacturing in the late 1980s, Armco merged with Kawasaki, a Japanese company, to survive. Children of J.D.'s generation took Armco for granted, and no one dreamed of going to work for the steel manufacturer. Their parents and grandparents wanted better for them, too, which usually implied a college education, yet few actually attended. An unspoken belief that successful people were either lucky or born with innate abilities led to low expectations for most kids. In contrast, J.D.'s grandparents taught him the importance of hard work. When he became discouraged because he didn't know multiplication, his grandfather taught him at home. Their math sessions became a regular occurrence. His mother took him to the library as well. J.D. claims the "different message at home [about hard work] ... just might have saved me."

Chapter 5 Summary

When J.D. is six years old, his mother, Bev, tells him his biological father, Don Bowman, doesn't want him anymore and is placing him for adoption. She also changes his last name to that of her third husband, Bob Hamel. Bev earns a nursing degree and instills her son with a love of learning. Bev and Bob move away from Middletown to a neighboring county, and their marriage deteriorates into violence and screaming. With so much stress and uncertainty at home, J.D.'s grades begin to suffer, he puts on weight, and he visits the school nurse often with signs of childhood trauma.

After Bev is hospitalized following a suicide attempt, she and J.D. moved back to Middletown without Bob. She remains unstable, though, and one day offers to take J.D. on a trip as a treat to make up for things. During the car ride, she becomes angry and threatens to crash the car to kill them both. J.D. escapes the vehicle and runs to the nearest home for help. The homeowner quickly calls the police. In a court hearing, J.D. lies, denying his mother threatened him in order to protect his family from the interference of outsiders. He recognizes the officers in the courtroom are not like him, but all the people being tried are.

Chapter 6 Summary

J.D. has two half siblings from his biological father, Don, in addition to his half sister, Lindsay, from his mother's first marriage, and many stepsiblings for subsequent ones. Given Bev's emotional instability, it falls to Lindsay to parent J.D. Lindsay dreams of becoming a model and wants to travel to New York to start her modeling career. J.D. recalls the look of devastation on Lindsay's face when her dream is dashed after Bev loses her temper over the cost of a trip to New York.

Mamaw's faith is very important to her although she doesn't believe in "organized religion." J.D. questions God's love, especially amidst the disruption of the "revolving door of father figures" his mother brings into their lives.

J.D. eventually reconnects with Don. Don's home in Kentucky is a peaceful place. He tells J.D. his side of the story of how J.D. was placed for adoption. After much deliberation and many signs from God, Don chose to give J.D. up for adoption to ensure J.D.'s welfare. The revelation brings the two closer together. J.D. grows to love not only his father but also his father's Pentecostal church. Through involvement with the church, he becomes versed in conservative Christian hot topics like gay marriage, creationism, and "the war on Christmas." He also learns to be suspicious of other people's faiths. J.D. observes that sociologists have shown that church attendance is over-reported in the Midwest, yet church has also been shown to make people happier. He claims churches offer the support system so many in Appalachia and the Rust Belt desperately need.

Chapter 7 Summary

When J.D. is 13, Papaw dies. J.D. is given the task of telling Lindsay, and the two are devastated. Lindsay regrets taking advantage of Papaw's help with her car, and J.D. realizes that what they saw as taking advantage of their grandparents was really just accepting the help a parent should offer their children. The extended family attends the funeral in Jackson. J.D. stands up to speak at the service and calls Papaw "the best dad that anyone could ever ask for."

J.D.'s mother seems to think she is the only one with a right to grieve Papaw's passing, and her temper gets even shorter. One day shortly after the funeral, she has a public meltdown where she swears and verbally abuses everyone around her. The police take her away, and J.D. notices blood on the porch. He realizes his mother has a drug problem and just never saw the signs. He isn't sure if addiction is a disease or an excuse, but he has to admit she was trying.

Chapter 8 Summary

Shortly after Papaw's funeral, Lindsay marries Kevin, a nice man who treats her well. The two have a son. Aunt Wee, whose real name is Lori, has two small children J.D. loves. By the end of J.D.'s eighth grade year, Bev has been sober for a year and is still dating Matt, a man J.D. likes.

When Bev announces she and J.D. are moving 45 minutes away to Dayton to live with Matt, J.D. refuses. He doesn't want to be far from family or leave his school. Bev sends him to a therapist for what she considers anger issues. J.D. feels trapped, so he decides to move in with his father. He loves his dad, but he always feels guarded around him. One day he calls Lindsay to come pick him up, and he stays with Mamaw the rest of the summer. Fearing being a burden to his grandmother, J.D. agrees to live with his mother if he can keep attending the same high school. Unexpectedly, Bev announces she is marrying a man named Ken. J.D. finds himself living with a stranger with three children, the eldest of whom fights with Bev, which means he had to defend her. J.D. nearly fails his freshman year of high school and notes the inability of schools to overcome the consequences of chaos at home. He also compares his life to that of Lindsay and feels they have drifted apart since she got married. However, he is happy that she is married and removed from the chaos he is forced to deal with on a daily basis: "I found myself mired in the things that both of us hated."

Chapter 9 Summary

J.D. hides his troubles from Mamaw, but she finds out one day when Bev demands he give her a urine sample in order to keep her nursing license. J.D. refuses but later admits to Mamaw that his urine might not be clean as he had smoked Ken's pot a few times. Mamaw convinces J.D. to help his mom in hopes it might inspire her to finally change. Mamaw demands that J.D. come and live with her permanently. The two grow closer as she makes him work hard at school, at home, and at his job. J.D. believes the years he spent with Mamaw saved him.

At his job at a grocery store, J.D. sees many examples of the class divide and vows one day to have a tab allowing him to buy groceries on credit. He witnesses people on welfare taking advantage of the system to turn their food stamps into money to buy items like cigarettes or alcohol. He is angry that taxes are taken from his paycheck to fund programs that enable his welfare neighbor to buy steak and have a cell phone, neither of which he can afford even though he works. Mamaw and her family worked all their lives to live in the same area where Section 8 housing now places their unemployed neighbor. These types of inequities are J.D.'s first indication that the Democrats, whom Mamaw used to call called the "party of the working man," are misguided.

J.D. knows his family's struggles are common in his neighborhood, but he also observes their absence in the neighborhoods of middle-class families like those of Aunt Wee and Uncle Jimmy. He wonders what accounts for this and read books on social policy and the working poor. He learns that when factories shut down,

those with means to leave do so, leaving poor communities without good jobs or the ability to leave. He finds that books like *The Truly Disadvantaged* (1987) by American sociologist William Julius Wilson about the plight of inner-city blacks remarkably mirrors his own experience in Middletown. J.D. lists the ways in which his community fails its children and all the things it does wrong. The unemployed sit at home all day watching TV but use food stamps to feed their kids unhealthy convenience foods. They spend their money on things they don't need and sink into debt. It is "a world of truly irrational behavior."

J.D. believes his grandparent's generation was the exception and that his grandmother saved him by showing him what was possible if he worked hard. The stability of his home life with Mamaw gave J.D. the freedom to turn his attention to his education, and from his achievements at school came the opportunities that led to his success.

Chapter 10 Summary

When J.D. reaches the end of high school he has done well enough on the SAT to be accepted at Ohio State, but he doesn't feel prepared for college. The financial aid forms alone are overwhelming to him and Mamaw. On the advice of a cousin, he looks into the Marine Corps, which promises to turn him into a disciplined man, and he enlists. During basic training, J.D. receives several letters a day from his family. Basic training teaches him that he has been underestimating himself. He is capable of accomplishing things he never thought he could do before, and the experience helps him overcome the "learned helplessness" of hillbilly culture. After completing training, J.D.'s perspective changes. With his small salary, he is able to cover Mamaw's rising health insurance costs and finds it very satisfying to act as her provider and protector.

While stationed in North Carolina, J.D. receives news of Mamaw's hospitalization. He makes the 13-hour trip in 11 hours to be by her side. After she dies, Bev has a similar reaction to the one she had when Papaw died: she berates her children for feeling too sad. But Lindsay speaks for both herself and J.D. when she claims that Mamaw was their mother, too. On his drive back to the base, J.D.'s car nearly slides off the road, and he believes his grandmother supernaturally intervened to save him.

While stationed in Iraq, J.D. witnesses extreme poverty, which makes him feel lucky by comparison. He finishes his enlistment period and claims, "The Marine Corps taught me how to live like an adult." From nutrition to finance, the corps taught J.D. the life skills

he needed to make intentional choices, which he now knows shaped his future.

Chapter 11 Summary

In the fall of 2007 J.D. begins taking classes at Ohio State. To cover his expenses, he works at the Ohio statehouse for a senator and takes a second job at a nonprofit, all while taking a full load of classes. J.D. is intent on law school and feels confident in his ability to achieve his goal. He studies and works hard but also spends many nights out drinking and ends the year quite ill. To cover his medical bills, he takes on a third job but has to quit the one at the statehouse. After he leaves, the state legislature considered legislation to regulate payday lenders, whom they viewed as predatory. J.D. knows from experience that these types of loans serve a useful function for the working class. He cited the legislation as one example of how "powerful people sometimes do things to help [the poor] without really understanding [them]." J.D. becomes focused on finishing college as quickly as possible after hearing a younger student mischaracterize soldiers in Iraq. He completes his degree in just over two years and moves home to Aunt Wee's for a year to save money for law school.

In Middletown J.D.'s optimism contrasts sharply with the community's cynicism. The people of the area have always been intensely patriotic, but they had come to mistrust media and fell prey to conspiracy theorists. Studies show working-class whites are the most pessimistic group when asked about their hopes for

their children's future, which indicates just how alienated they have become. J.D. claims it is no wonder they lack a sense of agency or hope. Their mindset enables them to shift the blame for their suffering to outside forces like government, while J.D. believes they need to take a harder look at their own role in their plight.

Chapter 12 Summary

J.D. applies to Yale University and Harvard University and is shocked by the generous financial aid offered by Yale when he is accepted. Few people know that expensive schools like Yale often offer more financial aid to low-income students than less expensive state schools, which can make a top tier school the more affordable choice. J.D. is awed by the buildings on campus, but finds himself on par with other students academically. However, he feels out of place where 95 percent of students come from the upper-middle class or higher. One faculty member believes the school should only admit students from Ivy League schools. Coming from a lower-income home in a small town and having served in the military makes J.D. quite an oddity to his peers.

Similarly, J.D. no longer fits in in Middletown. He feels an "inner conflict inspired by rapid upward mobility," a sense of disloyalty to his hometown. His new habits, like traveling internationally and shopping at expensive grocery stores, make his old way of life seem "unfashionable at best or unhealthy at worst." The social

discomfort J.D. feels in both places raises questions in his mind about his identity.

Chapter 13 Summary

At Yale, J.D. falls in love with a classmate named Usha, who helps him navigate the school's culture.

During the Fall Interview Program, a series of social events and interviews in which top law firms search for new hires among second-year law students, J.D. learns several important lessons. The first is the importance of a network. The prestige of being a Yale student and helpful recommendations from professors opens doors. He realizes "successful people are playing an entirely different game" in their job search. The benefit of the right network is social capital. The second is the potential costs of an information gap. He is fortunate in that others supply him with the information he needs. Usha tells him what fork to use at an important dinner. His professor explains the significance of getting into *The Yale Law Journal*. Without their help, J.D. would have made serious errors that could have cost him important opportunities. Amy Chua, one of J.D.'s professors, steers him away from a clerkship with a judge that would have taken him away from Usha. J.D. discovers how little he really knows about how to get ahead and how fortunate he is to have help.

Chapter 14 Summary

J.D. feels confident at the beginning of his third year at Yale. He claims, "I was better than where I came from." Usha points out his main weakness in their relationship: withdrawing to avoid conflict. J.D. admits he knows nothing about healthy conflict resolution. When on one occasion he doesn't withdraw during a disagreement with Usha, he screams at her or tries to break up with her. He realizes this is precisely what his mother had modeled. One night after running out on an argument, he finds Usha waiting for him. She accepts his apology, and he reflects on the importance of choosing a partner from a different background. Whereas J.D. had multiple adverse childhood experiences, like exposure to substance abuse, divorce, and violence, Usha had none of these things. Instead, she came from a loving, supportive family. J.D. notes that both Lindsay and Aunt Wee married people outside of hillbilly culture and have successful relationships. But their partners had to help them learn to deal with conflict in healthier ways and to let their guard down.

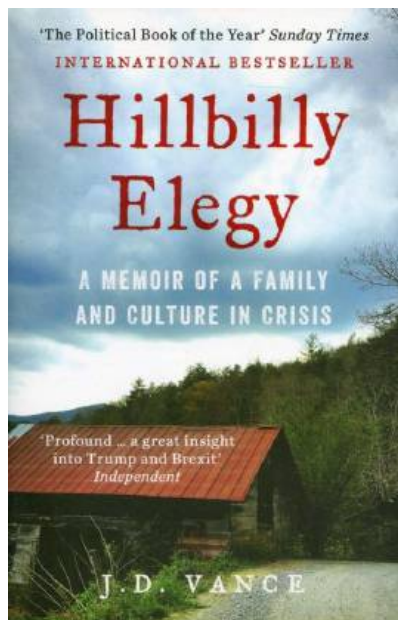
J.D. realizes he isn't better than his mother. At some point, Bev must claim responsibility for her actions, but J.D. admits she is not a villain. While her son is at Yale, Bev develops an addiction to heroin. J.D.'s entire family attends his graduation except for his mother. Usha's family is there as well, and the two families meet for the first time.

Chapter 15 Summary

J.D. and Usha marry, buy a home, and settle in Cincinnati with their two dogs. Both change their last name to "Vance." It seems J.D. has achieved the American Dream, but his old life could pull him back at any time. He learns his mother may become homeless after being kicked out by her fifth husband for stealing to support her drug habit. So J.D. returns to Middletown and rents her a room at a seedy motel. His Christian faith and an understanding of his mother's childhood leads J.D. to help her when he can.

Asked about solutions to working-class poverty, J.D. believes the best that can be done is to, in the words of a friend, "put your thumb on the scale a little for the people at the margins." He acknowledges the many people who have helped him along the way. Other people with his background have similar stories.

J.D. is unsurprised by studies revealing that opportunities for children are fewer in the Rust Belt and Appalachia than in other parts of the country. There are two reasons for this: single parents and income segregation. Social services need to change to prevent kids from being separated from their extended family. Section 8 housing would serve children better if it did not create pockets of poverty. Nevertheless, J.D. claims most of the dangers he faced as a child were "factors outside the government's control." He reflects that the habits he developed as a child for self-preservation are the same ones he must consciously suppress as an adult to be successful.



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