

# Understanding the misunderstood

J.D. Vance's memoir sheds light on the long-suffering Rust Belt families and culture

Until the weeks following the 2016 presidential election, many Americans (especially those on the East and West coasts) were unfamiliar with the struggles the Rust Belt's rural working class have been facing for more than 40 years.

"Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture and Crisis" by J.D. Vance has opened the eyes of readers across the country to the economic hardships of the people in these "flyover states." This New York Times bestseller tells the story of Vance who grew up in the city of Middletown, Ohio, and the Appalachian town of Jackson, Kentucky. His memoir offers a powerful look at America's white working class told through his own family story.

He writes about his "dirt poor and in love" grandparents who traveled from Kentucky to Ohio in search of a better life, and continues with how the struggle to live a middle-class life impacted himself, his sister, mother, aunt and uncle.

Vance begins his story with a confession: that he finds the book's existence a bit absurd.

"I'll be the first to admit that I've accomplished nothing great in my life, certainly nothing that would justify a complete stranger paying money to read about it," said Vance.

"The coolest thing I've done, at least on paper, is graduate from Yale Law School, something thirteen-year-old J.D. Vance would have considered ludicrous. ... I am not a senator, a governor, or a former cabinet secretary. I haven't started a billion-dollar company or a world-changing nonprofit. I have a nice job, a happy marriage, a comfortable home and two lively dogs."

He continues to explain that he didn't write the book because of an extraordinary accomplishment. Instead, he wrote it because he achieved something very ordinary. That is, it's ordinary compared to the experience of most kids like Vance who grew up poor and living in a Rust Belt Ohio steel town. That powerful realization is perhaps what the essence of Vance's story is about. The mere act of escaping roots grown from pover-

ty is not ordinary, nor is it easy. For many readers, this is a difficult concept to grasp. Yet for people living in the Rust Belt states -- including those in Indiana -- this statement is all too familiar.

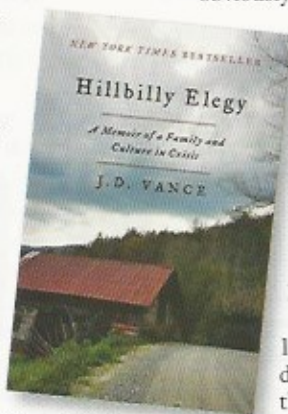
There is a reason "Hillbilly Elegy" was named by the New York Times as one of the best books to help understand President Trump's win. Most obviously because the story illuminates the life of the Rust Belt rural, middle class that is so rarely written about. But since the 2016 election, many have asked the question of "how" -- How did President Trump sweep the Rust Belt states to win the presidency when the working class traditionally voted for Democratic candidates?

Vance takes a personal look at this question when describing his Papaw (grandfather). He notes that Papaw was a Democrat because that party protected the working people. Yet in 1984, Papaw cast his first vote for a Republican candidate, Ronald Reagan.

"Winning large blocks of Rust Belt Democrats like Papaw, Reagan went on to the biggest electoral landslide in modern American history," Vance said. He noted that while Papaw never much cared for Reagan as a person, he vehemently disliked his Democratic opponent, Walter Mondale. Papaw and many others like him considered Mondale a well-educated Northern liberal, who "stood in stark cultural contrast to my hillbilly Papaw."

Vance continues to explore the question of the changing voting philosophy throughout "Hillbilly Elegy." Throughout the book, he offers some explanation when he looks at his surrounding neighbors and how the working class began feeling alienated from the political party that was traditionally its fierce protector.

"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," said Vance. "I could never understand why our lives felt like a struggle while those living off of



## Read it!

"Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture and Crisis" is available at the Vigo County Public Library. It retails for \$17.99 at Books-a-Million, Barnes and Noble and Amazon.



## Read-alikes

If you like "Hillbilly Elegy," check out these books with similar themes:

- "Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City," by Matthew Desmond
- "Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right," by Arlie Russell
- "White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America," by Nancy Isenberg
- "\$2.00 a Day: Living on Almost Nothing in America Paperback," by Kathryn J. Edin and H. Luke Shaefer

becomes clearer why Trump's message to "make America great again" resonates so strongly for the rural working class. Ultimately Vance explores the issue of how does one escape the circumstances from which they are born and raised. He details how he personally overcame obstacles to lead a "normal" life, and how others can do the same.

Politics aside, "Hillbilly Elegy" does a fantastic job of illuminating the very real circumstances that so many Rust Belt citizens have been facing for so many years. It is eye opening and a powerful read for anyone wanting to get to know their Midwest neighbor.

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