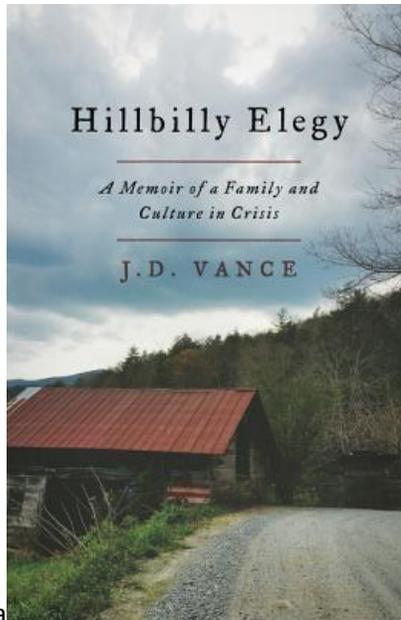


# Hillbilly Elegy

By Rod Fraser

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My upbringing in a poor rural area of Ontario was the reason I wanted to read J.D. Vance's memoir when it was first published in 2016. I wondered if my childhood was similar to Vance's early years in Appalachia. It seems it was not.

Leaving aside the many differences between Appalachia and rural Ontario, *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis* speaks of

poverty, drug abuse, joblessness, crime, domestic violence and welfare dependency as a significant part of the cultural fabric in rust-belt Ohio.

I never experienced such things. My mother was widowed in her early forties with three young children. She struggled to care for us, relying on public assistance to do so. But otherwise, our home life was stable and the local schools prepared us for the adult world. So while we were poor—it was only with respect to money.

My siblings and I grew up in the 1950s and early 1960s, when drugs weren't part of our life, work was readily available and social mobility possible. While wages were low and living a bit on the 'rough side,' our village (and family life) did not match the catastrophe that Vance describes in his book.

J.D. Vance was born in tougher times. His childhood spread over the 1980s and 1990s, when drugs were everywhere, jobs in middle America had disappeared and the 'white underclass' turned to joblessness and welfare.

One thing we do share is a certain pride in our background and a general wariness of elites. Vance states this clearly,

*"I do not identify with the WASPs of the Northeast. Instead, I identify with the millions of*

*working-class white Americans of Scots-Irish descent without college degrees..... [Many] Americans call them hillbillies, rednecks or white trash. I call them neighbors, friends and family."*

During his upbringing, Vance had approximately fifteen 'stepdads'. His mother was a drug addict — first with painkillers and then heroin. As Vance described it,

*He was the "abandoned son of a man I hardly knew and a woman I wished I didn't."*

*"During explosive fights between Mom and whatever man she let into our home, it was [always] Lindsay who ... placed a rescue call to Mamaw and Papaw." Although his half-sister Lindsay was only five years older, she was clearly "the only adult in the house."*

At some point, his grandmother ('Mamaw'), took responsibility for his care. Vance credits this change for his ability to break out of the cycle of poverty and joblessness, endemic in his community.

While Mamaw displayed violent tendencies of her own — from time to time — she was still Vance's champion.

*"Mamaw was the best thing that ever happened to me," Vance confides in his memoir, "showing me the value of love and stability."*

Vance goes on to tell the story of trying out for the varsity golf team in his final year of high school.

*"Mamaw never showed any interest in sports, but encouraged me to learn golf because 'that's where rich people do business.'" When Vance told her she probably didn't know much about rich people, she replied, "Shut up you fucker. Everyone knows rich people love to golf."*

Mamaw played a similar role in helping Vance make suitable friends. He writes,

*"All my friends planned to go to college; that I had such motivated friends was due to Mamaw's influence."*

*She told Vance — if he befriended any person on her "banned list", she would run them down with her car. "No one would ever find out", she whispered menacingly."*

Vance graduated from high school, did well on his SAT test and turned his mind to college. In the months leading up to graduation, he applied to Ohio State University and was soon filling out application forms and applying for financial aid. As the weeks passed, Vance decided he wasn't ready for college. He wanted to try his hand at something else.

A few weeks later, Vance joined the Marine Corps, completed his basic training and spent four years in the service, including a tour of duty in Iraq. Vance claimed this experience was transformative.

*"In the Marine Corps, my boss didn't just make sure I did a good job; he made sure I kept my room clean, kept my hair cut and ironed my uniforms."*

*"The Marine Corps [assumed] maximum ignorance from its enlisted folks." At the completion of boot camp, I had almost \$1,500 in savings. A senior marine drove me "to Navy Federal — a respected credit union" — to open an account. And when I became sick with strep throat, an officer quickly noticed and sent me to the infirmary.*



Vance tells another story that I found heart-warming. When buying his first car while in the Marines, an older marine was sent along to help. He suggested Vance buy a practical car "like a Toyota or a Honda" and helped with the negotiations.

When Vance was considering a loan from the car dealer, the marine told him to get a quote from Navy Federal ("it was less than half the rate of interest").

Vance felt the Marine Corps was a little like living

with Mamaw. It taught him things. It instilled confidence in his abilities. "In the Marine Corps, giving it your all was a way of life," Vance said.

Although Mamaw wasn't a drill sergeant, her diatribes from earlier years still rang in his ears,

*"You can do anything," she would often shout, "don't be like those fuckers who think the deck is stacked against them."*



In the late summer of 2007, with his discharge papers in hand, Vance enrolled as a freshman at Ohio State University. He was four years older than the other students and hoped to go to law school. The G.I. Bill covered many of his expenses, and part-time jobs paid the rest.

In his second year of college, Vance decided to take classes in the summer months and "more than double [his] full-time class load...." He wanted to finish college as quickly as possible and get on with his life. In late August of 2009, he "graduated with a double major, summa cum laude."

It wasn't until the fall of 2010 that Vance was able to enter Yale Law School. During the intervening year he worked locally in Middletown and stayed with his Aunt Wee. She had taken over as the family matriarch after the death of Mamaw.

Vance pointed out an interesting irony related to the cost of Ivy League schools. The fees to attend a prestigious college were often less than a comparable local school, for students with low-income parents. This was true for Vance. Coupled with his savings and financial aid, law school was not a financial burden.

During law school, Vance met his future wife, Usha, edited the "*Yale Law Journal*" and graduated in the spring of 2013. He clerked with a judge in northern Kentucky, then joined a law firm soon after qualifying as a lawyer.



This is a wonderful book. I recommend it for younger people who hope to make something of themselves — and for those who might like to read an inspiring story of a young man, who despite the odds, was able to forge a successful future.

Some reviews of *Hillbilly Elegy* were critical of Vance's portrayal of the people of Appalachia. They felt that economic disadvantages — rather than people failing to take responsibility for their lives — accounted for much of the misery of the region.

Part of this was politics. Vance is a white conservative and criticism often came from Democrats — in an election year featuring Donald Trump as the Republican candidate.

I think this is unfortunate: Vance's book is — at its heart — a personal memoir. Reviewers should keep that in mind. Surely he is entitled to reflect and comment on his younger years, as he saw them. Not everything in life is about politics.

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