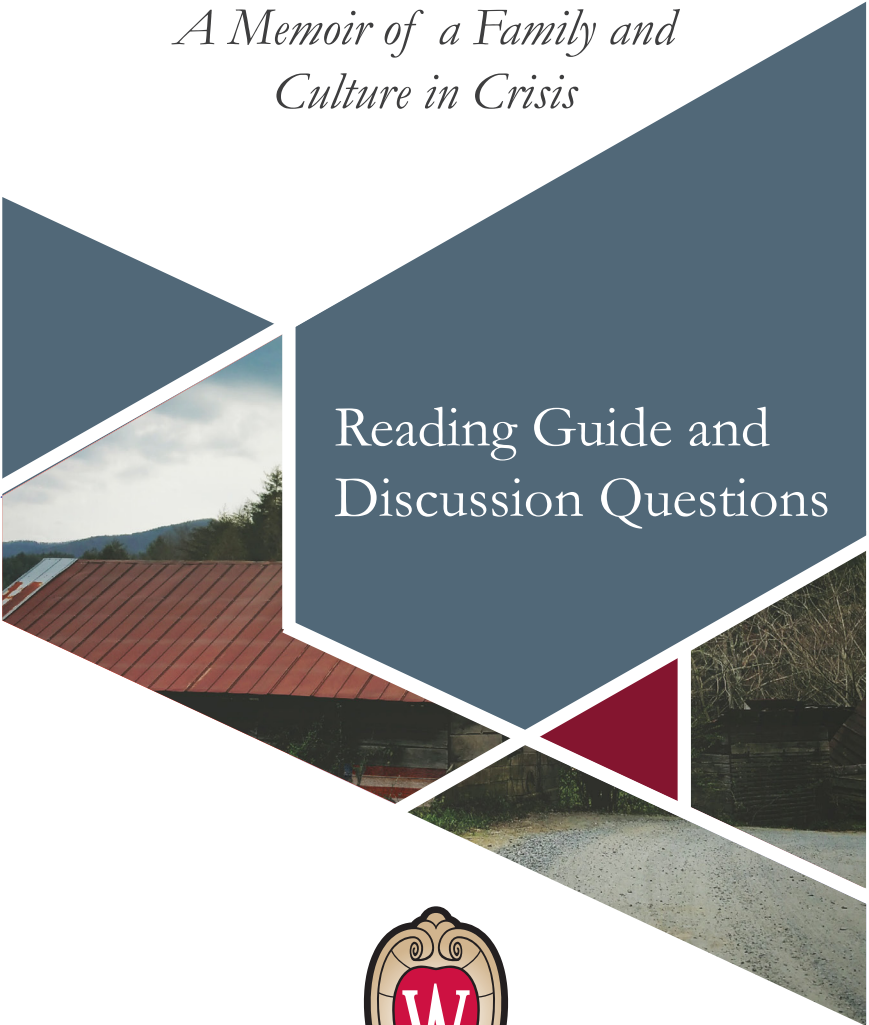


Hillbilly Elegy

*A Memoir of a Family and
Culture in Crisis*



Reading Guide and
Discussion Questions



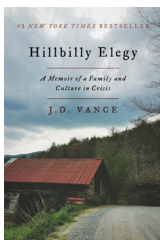
ABOUT THE PROGRAM

Go Big Read is an initiative of the Office of the Chancellor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The program engages members of the campus community and beyond in a shared, academically focused reading experience.

The aims of Go Big Read are to:

- Engage the campus community and beyond in an academically focused reading experience
- Generate vigorous discussions and exchanges of diverse ideas
- Promote connections among students, faculty, staff, alumni, and the wider community
- Tap into and promote the intellectual resources of the campus
- Promote educational initiatives and learning outcomes
- Bridge learning experiences inside and outside the classroom

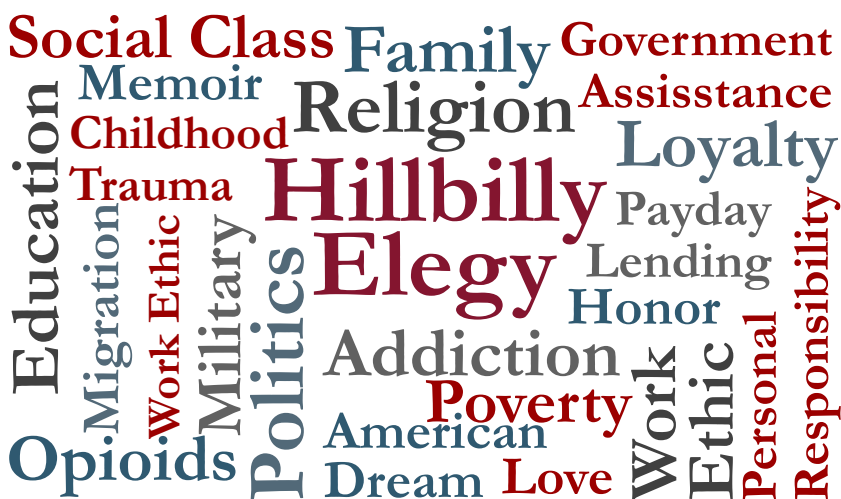
ABOUT THE BOOK



Hillbilly Elegy, by J.D. Vance, is a personal reflection on upward mobility in America seen through the lens of a white, working-class family in the Midwest. The memoir traces both Vance's family history and his own development from the hills of Jackson, Kentucky to the rustbelt town of Middletown, OH.

“I want people to understand the American Dream as my family and I encountered it. I want people to understand how upward mobility really feels. And I want people to understand something I learned only recently: that for those of us lucky enough to live the American Dream, the demons of the life we left behind continue to chase us.”

THEMES



RESOURCES

There are many resources to support readers in developing an understanding of the book's themes, including many on the UW-Madison campus. For additional resources, please visit the Go Big Read website: gobigread.wisc.edu/resources

- **Addiction Research Center**
dionysus.psych.wisc.edu
- **Applied Population Lab**
www.apl.wisc.edu
- **Center for Educational Opportunity**
ceo.wisc.edu
- **Institute for Research on Poverty**
www.irp.wisc.edu
- **State of WI Child Abuse & Neglect Prevention Board**
preventionboard.wi.gov
- **Veteran Services & Military Assistance Center**
veterans.wisc.edu

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- In the book's introduction, Vance states that his success had little to do with his own intelligence or extraordinary ability, and much more to do with "a handful of loving people" who rescued him (p. 2). Despite this, throughout the book Vance draws attention again and again to the element of personal responsibility, perhaps nowhere so clearly as in relating Mamaw's flood parable: "God helps those who help themselves" (p. 87). Where else do you see this tension between personal responsibility and the need for familial, governmental, or social support?
- Vance cites a report by the Wisconsin Children's Trust Fund stating that well over half of working-class people had suffered at least one adverse childhood experience (ACE), and over 40 percent had experienced several (p. 226-7). He writes extensively about his own traumatic childhood: his mother's drug addiction and arrest, the constant revolving door of father figures, and Papaw's alcoholism, among others. Which of these experiences appear to affect Vance most deeply, and why? How does the author cope with and eventually break free from such a difficult childhood? Although Vance acknowledges Mamaw's and Papaw's tumultuous marriage as a key factor in his mother's troubles—"Mom is the Vance child who lost the game of statistics" (p. 232)—in what ways do his grandparents' actions and attitude contribute to his success?
- Poverty drives many residents of Jackson and other Appalachian communities to migrate to industrialized towns with better employment opportunities, but those opportunities gradually erode. What role does globalization play in industrialized communities like Middletown? What factors cause some residents to stay, despite the economic warning signs?
- Vance discusses the inner conflict he feels as someone who has moved from poverty into a higher social class, musing that "Sometimes I view members of the elite with an almost primal

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

scorn... But I have to give it to them: Their children are happier and healthier, their divorce rates lower, their church attendance higher, their lives longer. These people are beating us at our own damned game” (p. 253). While Vance’s income bracket has presumably shifted, his statement indicates that his identity remains tied to his working-class roots. Is Vance now one of “these people,” or do his childhood experiences excuse him from acknowledging his current privilege? Do you think it’s possible to completely shift one’s identity from one class to another? What factors define social class, and how is class membership determined?

- Vance discusses education in a multitude of ways. At one point he states, “In Middletown, 20 percent of the public high school’s entering freshmen won’t make it to graduation. Most won’t graduate from college” (p. 56). Though Vance struggled in school through much of his childhood, when he stayed with his grandmother his senior year, he was able to focus on school and found teachers who inspired his love of learning (p. 151). He remembers when Mamaw spent \$180 on a graphing calculator when they had little money for other things like cell phones and nice clothes (p. 137). In the end, Vance goes on to earn a law degree from Yale. How does Vance view the role of education in society and its impact on his own life? What are the factors that allow someone to excel in school? And what is society’s role in ensuring external factors don’t impede educational opportunities?
- Throughout his memoir, Vance talks about government policy and programs. At one point in the story, he describes his experience working at a grocery store and his encounters with customers using food stamps: I “learned how people gamed the welfare system. They’d buy two dozen-packs of soda with food stamps and then sell them at a discount for cash. They’d ring up their orders separately, buying food with food stamps, and beer, wine, and cigarettes with cash” (p. 139). How does Vance portray people receiving government assistance? How does this compare

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

with his portrayal of his own family's poverty? What other factors might impact the way people prioritize their spending? Are there other issues and complexities that contribute to the poverty he witnesses?

- In spite of his identity as a tall, white, straight male, Vance felt out of place at Yale, noting, "A part of me had thought I'd finally be revealed as an intellectual fraud, that the administration would realize they'd made a terrible mistake and send me back to Middletown with their sincerest apologies" (p. 201). From confusing financial aid forms, to social class signifiers ("tap or sparkling" water), to critical steps for professional advancement (membership in law journals), first-generation college students often encounter intentional or unintentional gatekeeping mechanisms which can communicate to these students that they don't belong. What can be done to, as Vance puts it, "create a space for the J.D.s" (p. 256) of the world in higher education? How do systems work to discourage upward mobility and keep people within their social groups?
- A number of people have pointed to *Hillbilly Elegy* to explain the results of the 2016 election. In the memoir, Vance recalls how at the age of 17, he realized that the "party of the working man"—the Democrats—weren't all they were cracked up to be" (p. 140). He goes on to argue that people in Appalachia and the South "went from being staunchly Democratic to staunchly Republican in less than a generation" (p. 140), and attributes a big part of this shift to white working-class people seeing other poor people take advantage of government assistance. Do you agree with Vance's assertion? Are there challenges in using one individual's experience to explain larger social shifts? Do you think this book explains the results of the 2016 election?

For more questions, visit: gobigread.wisc.edu/resources

SELECTION PROCESS

Each winter, members of the campus community and beyond are invited to submit nominations for the next Go Big Read book. A committee of faculty, students, staff, and community partners then sifts through hundreds of nominations to arrive at a shortlist which they carefully read and evaluate for inclusion in the program. A select list is then shared with the Chancellor, who makes the final decision.

The ideal Go Big Read book should have the following qualities:

- Be readable, relevant, engaging, and well-written
- Appeal to people with diverse backgrounds and experiences
- Encompass sufficient depth and scope to generate discussions from different points of view
- Be conducive to teaching and learning, and offer opportunities for integration into academic programs
- Lend itself to a variety of activities and programming

The ideal book might also have a subject or author with a Wisconsin connection, an author who may be able to visit campus, cross-disciplinary appeal, and promote the Wisconsin Experience by engaging “issues that matter.”

NOTES

CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION

Go Big Read Expert Panel
Shannon Hall - Memorial Union Theater
Monday, October 9th, 2017
7:00 p.m.

Visit the Go Big Read events calendar for book discussions, programs, and events taking place throughout the academic year:
gobigread.wisc.edu/events

SPONSORS

Go Big Read is sponsored by the Office of the Chancellor in partnership with the Applied Population Lab; Center for the First-Year Experience; Center for the Humanities; College of Letters & Science; Distinguished Lecture Series; Division of Enrollment Management; Division of Student Life; Institute for Research on Poverty; Madison Public Library; Morgridge Center for Public Service; Office of the Vice Provost for Teaching and Learning; University Communications; University Housing; UW–Madison College of Agricultural & Life Sciences; UW–Madison Libraries; UW–Madison School of Education; Wisconsin Alumni Association; Wisconsin Book Festival; and Wisconsin Union Directorate.

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