

J.D. Vance. 2016. *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*. Harper Collins. 264 pages.

People have been asking, “what’s the matter with Kansas?” since 2005 when Thomas Frank wrote his book about how the people of Kansas seem to vote against their economic self-interest. The case of Kansas has loomed large in the mind of Oklahomans as our state has followed our neighbor to the north down the path of cutting taxes in the name of economic prosperity. Similarly, J.D. Vance’s memoir about the people of Ohio offers Oklahomans parallel lessons. We might ask ourselves, “What’s the matter with hillbillies?”

Vance was born in Ohio and raised by his mother and extended family, self-described “hillbillies.” As a child he witnessed family members struggle with drug abuse, homelessness, and physical abuse. The love and attention of a sister and grandmother helped him escape a downward spiral into a life of violence, drugs, and manual labor. He enlisted in the Marine Corps and was sent to Iraq, an experience which he says made him a responsible man. However, after his service ended he returned to his previous ways of itinerant work and alcohol. In time, Vance enrolled at Ohio State University where he eventually graduated. As a student, he felt like he was living in a world apart because of his life experiences and his conservative political outlook. Vance applied to Yale Law School and was admitted. If he felt out of place at Ohio State, he felt like a total fraud at Yale. He had more in common with the waiters who would serve him at fancy dinners than his fellow students. Although he didn’t feel he belonged, he forced himself to maintain the charade and he successfully graduated.

After law school, Vance took a job with Peter Thiel at his venture capital firm. Another notable person who affected Vance’s life is Amy Chua who wrote *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*. As a Yale Law professor, Chua mentored Vance and put him in touch with her literary agent. The popularity of his book has given Vance a platform and he is a frequent guest on news shows, especially as the media seeks to understand the political mind of people like Vance’s hillbilly family.

*Hillbilly Elegy* gives outsiders a rare glance into a section of the United States that few are able to access. There are several different narratives interesting to the student of Oklahoma politics. First, Vance claims that his academic and economic success is available to anyone in the United States. His story demonstrates that there are people from diverse backgrounds who could benefit from and excel in the Ivy League. Indeed, from Vance's telling, just a few bits of well-placed advice from family members and professors enabled him to thrive and choose his own path in life. Second, *Hillbilly Elegy* would not be a notable book if his success was not unusual. The increasing stratification of the United States makes successes like Vance the exception rather than the rule.

Are the means to "success" available to all people in the United States? Even this basic question is fraught with difficulty because there is deep disagreement on what success means to different people. Many people might look at the "hillbilly" and declare him to be a failure on the basis that he is less educated, is less healthy, and less likely to be fully employed. Vance writes, "Mamaw always resented the hillbilly stereotype—the idea that our people were a bunch of slobbering morons. But the fact is that I was remarkably ignorant of how to get ahead. Not knowing things that many others do often has serious economic consequences" (p. 222).

People in the hillbilly group do not see themselves as failures. They lament the loss of rust belt jobs as a means to economic security but on the whole Vance's family is satisfied with their lives. They are happy with their loving families and slower way of life. They feel spiritual but don't actually attend church most of the time. They see themselves as hard-working but most do not have full time jobs. They are patriotic but they don't vote—the most common form of patriotism is military service.

Vance didn't think his journey was an easy one. He writes, "There were many thumbs put on my scale. When I look back at my life, what jumps out is how many variables had to fall in place in order to give me a chance" (p. 239). He had a slim margin of error. People from more secure backgrounds may not know what it's like to have one's entire life crumble because of mom's recent bout with heroin

addiction or a blown tire on dad's truck. When you are forced to live on the margins every setback may be calamitous.

What can these lessons teach us about the citizens of Oklahoma? Oklahomans too are fiercely patriotic by self-definition, but they have some of the lowest rates of voter turnout in the country. One might expect that with most state programs and agencies under threat of budget cuts, the people of Oklahoma would mobilize to protect the government services that they depend on. In fact, there have been a few days of intense mobilization by teachers or other narrow interests. However, by and large, most Oklahomans seem content to allow the State of Oklahoma to make its decisions without their input.

Vance's hillbillies are politically passive. Maybe they never felt efficacious to the point of voting in the first place, but they certainly are not voting now. They are also economically passive, relying on underemployment, disability payments, payday loans, and assistance from friends and family. They have opted out of the economic system that provides very little benefit for unskilled labor. Why hold an unfulfilling and backbreaking job when receiving disability payments or being supported by family is incentivized. Is it too strong to call hillbillies a permanent underclass?

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