

An Oracle Set Book Club Review of

J. D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy*
A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis

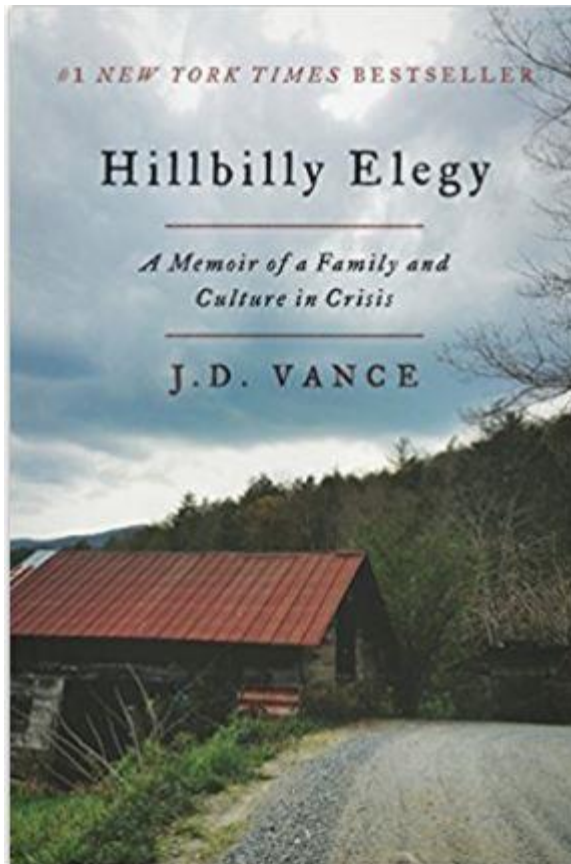
By Dolores Dunmore Greene



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H*illbilly Elegy*, as the sub- title denotes, is a memoir of a family and culture in crisis. It is the personal story of a young man who grew up in Middletown, Ohio—a city in the rust belt of America, populated by what the writer calls white, working class hillbillies. The author, J. D. Vance, is in his early 30s, a premature age to pen a memoir. But Vance is a product of this culture and has the “street creds” to write authoritatively about “his people”—their lives

and beliefs. Moreover, this book was published during the 2016 Presidential Election cycle. Many political analysts credit the large voter turnout of the white working class for Donald Trump’s victory; thereby, adding timely significance to the book. The convergence of these events was the motivation for me to read this book.



Vance describes his family as dysfunctional and his childhood as chaotic and painful. He spent relatively short periods of time with his biological father, who agreed to give him up for adoption. His mother was addicted to drugs, married multiple times, engaged in numerous affairs, and relied on her parents for financial support and to rear her children. Vance credits his older sister with being more of a parent than his mother.

Vance spent much of his youth living with his maternal grandparents. His grandfather had come to Ohio from rural Kentucky to work in the steel industry. Vance considered his grandfather, known as Papaw, as his real father. Papaw was

the only male who was a constant in his life. His grandmother, who is referred to as Mamaw, was also a stable presence. However, he witnessed his grandparents, his mother, and many other relatives and neighbors exhibiting violent behavior and using profane language throughout his childhood. This situation created an unsettling environment for the young boy. Nevertheless, Vance knew he could depend on his grandparents for unwavering love and support. He credits them for much of his professional success.

Throughout the memoir, Vance sometimes writes as a sociologist or psychologist when discussing the culture of the hillbilly. He speaks about the negative lifestyles ingrained in the culture—addiction to drugs and opioids, alcoholism, domestic violence, families in disarray, reliance on welfare, extended unemployment, and a lost work ethic. He discusses how this destructive behavior has been passed down from generation to generation, from Appalachia to Ohio.

After completing a stint in the Marine Corps and graduating from Ohio State University, Vance was on his way to Yale Law School. A summa cum laude college graduate, he felt good about achieving the personal and professional goals that he had set for himself. He was optimistic about his life, but contrasted his feelings with the pessimism that most Middletown residents felt. They experienced “... the Great Recession and the not-so-great recovery.” They believed that they were left behind because their jobs and livelihoods were taken from them. They adopted the right-wing radio and television pundits’ political arguments and conspiracy theories that others were responsible for the failures of the white working class, especially the Obama administration. In their view, they have been left without jobs when factories closed in Ohio and opened overseas, and the government has done nothing.

However, according to Vance’s analysis, these people are looking for public policy to solve their problems, and have disregarded the reality that their lifestyle and culture are the primary reasons they have been left behind economically. Vance stresses that they are not pursuing higher education. They refuse to move away to where the jobs are. They criticize the meritocracy, instead of becoming part of it. They are not holding themselves accountable and setting personal goals for themselves and their children. In sum, he believes that the despair and pessimism that has infected this segment of the populace will continue unless the culture changes.

Vance acknowledges that he does not have all the answers, and he offers his criticism cloaked in love for the Hillbilly people. He says that his goal in writing *Hillbilly Elegy* is to demonstrate that a child, who grew up poor with the odds stacked against him, can become a success and live the American dream. As a reader, I found the book’s publication to be an especially timely and welcome addition to the discussion of what was happening in America during the 2016 Presidential Election. This book is a must read for those who want to gain a better understanding of the white working class and what propelled them to embrace and vote for Trump.

Dolores Dunmore Greene has been a member of the Oracle Set Book Club for more than 20 years and serves as Scholarship Chair for the Oracle Set Foundation. She is the author of “The Mount Zion Story: Washington’s Oldest Black Church Turns 200!” *Washington History Magazine*, Fall 2016, D. C. Historical Society of Washington.