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Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis. By J.D.Vance

Author: J.D.Vance Peter van der Walt

Appalachia.
No place like it.

A place often romanticised and, consequently, misunderstood. A place that holds deep secrets, unspeakable tragedy and a hundred million stories. A setting that bears the seeds of many germinating and flourishing developments in the American zeitgeist. Also, home base of a classic American archetype: the hillbilly.

J.D. Vance's memoir concerns itself with the trials and tribulations of one hilbilly family… his own.
As memoirs go, Vance's take is different in several ways. Firstly, his style is almost detached and he avoids vulgar appeals to sensationalism or sentimentality. It's as if he's next to you, just showing you around town – with no prejudice whatsoever as to what you should take out of the conversation. Yup, look at them folks there, threatening a shopkeeper with guns because they stepped on hill people's honour.

Vance's book earned eclectic praise. For a young man to write a memoir is questionable. But for that young man's memoir to earn glowing reviews in outlets that are considered political polar opposites is something else. How does a memoir earn punts in the New York Times, Slate, Vogue, People, NPR, Entertainment Weekly, Inc., the National Review and Christianity Today?

If you are searching for flowery descriptions of life in the rolling hills of Western North Carolina/East Tennessee or some other setting, you've come to the wrong place. Lived experience don't approach its own story that fancifully. A lot of things are just assumed.

Vance tells the tale of an entire segment of the population shifting locations, in one of those migrations that continue to this day across America's vast geography. The move from the mountains to company towns that would change fortunes and promised futures… and somehow failed to deliver on both.

The social problems and insularity of hill people make them easy to dismiss, ignore, fail, stereotype, caricature and mock. You can't say boo to anyone these days – not without offending some professional victim class and being called the worst manifestation of humanity by everyone with the platform to flash some tears around.

But people can, and do, make fun of hillbillies. All the time.

The world's last acceptable victims: Poor. White. Trash.

They have sacrificed more in human lives to the nation's wars – all of them – than any other people in the United States. To this day, they lose pastors to snake bites in tent revivals (between four and seven per year). They drink too much Mountain Dew and have dental problems because of it. They make moonshine and grow weed and play their banjos.
But Vance's book isn't about any of this. In fact, it would seem that what people take from the book is entirely up to them. It's a Southern thing... "Meant no offense, nor would I take any. This is how it is, and you'd pardon me for not giving one flying hoot what you 'feel' about it."

It's honest, but not raw. It's unapologetic, but doesn't intend to offend. It's a story about those who get lucky and those who don't. The lasting nature of kin. Having too much month left at the end of the money. The intertwine of identity, family, history and whatever the future will no doubt dream of dishing up.

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For those who prefer rose-tinted glasses or exotic disaster porn, the book offers little. For those who want to make up their own minds about what the author meant… well, guess they'd just have to pick it up.