

Vance, J.D. – Hillbilly Elegy

William Collins, 2016, [Surrounding Knowledge] Grade ★★★★★

Wow, where to start? This elegy is a touching cocktail of one part gripping family saga spanning three generations, one part intimate account of the emotional maturing of the author plus finally a sociological study of the Scots-Irish decedents in the Appalachian mountains and surrounding states that the author calls hillbillies. Political pundits, experts and commentators who have awakened to the new reality of Donald Trump's presidency have focused on the latter part but at heart *Hillbilly Elegy* is the very personal story of young J.D. Vance born in Middleton, Ohio but with his roots in the mountain town Jackson, Kentucky.

The account of J.D.'s family history is dramatic, tragic, fascinating and often totally absurd. It contains violence, drug abuse and an acute lack of father figures but also love, support and pride. While the author is the storyteller and there are several important and colorful characters like for example his sister Lindsey, his mom and J.D.'s grandfather Papaw, the towering figure of the family and of the author's upbringing is his grandmother Mamaw – a crazy hillbilly by her own account. And this is meant in a positive sense.

My feeling is that *Hillbilly Elegy* as much as anything is a piece of self-therapy for the author – a way to analyze and understand his persona and how it is shaped by his upbringing. With all skeletons out in the open daylight, they are significantly less daunting. We are invited to follow the transformation from a person fostered into and culture of “learned helplessness” characterized by low trust (as people always fail you), honor culture, a feeling of victimization and a fair amount of ignorance of the outside world, to a person married to a Asian immigrant, living in “Silicon-everything-is-possible-Valley” working with the super entrepreneur Peter Thiel.

It's a journey from what Carol S. Dweck calls a fixed mindset to a growth mindset and it is made possible by Mamaw's and Papaw's insistence on education, the possibility of a refuge (and pure

physical protection) at Mamaw's house during the most chaotic periods and the transformative experience of joining the US Marine that instilled a sense that effort pays, that later resulted in a law degree from Yale. Still, no one can fully escape his upbringing and even today J.D. has to actively control his violent reflexes when it comes to minor injustices and he has had to learn how to handle domestic disputes without destructive fighting.

However, the journey shouldn't unequivocally be seen as originating in bad and ending in good. Yes, the hillbilly culture includes suspicion towards outsiders, sexism and a lack of agency, i.e. a feeling that nothing a person does matters for how his life will turn out. But it is also an environment of loyalty, toughness, courage, independence, frank hillbilly justice and a deep love of both the extended family and of country. Unfortunately, it is the author's view that the negative traits increasingly are gaining the upper hand. In a knowledge-economy manliness is defined as aggressiveness and good grades in school are for sissies and fagots. Those that try to make a better life elsewhere are seen as outcasts. There is a cynical feeling of isolation and being left out but also an inwardly culture that discourages doing anything about it. No wonder the social mobility of the US Scots-Irish group is the lowest of any in the US. Problems are psychologically suppressed, drug use is rampaging and with no confidence in media at all conspiracy theories set the agenda.

Globalization has created a divide between an international and increasingly speed-blinded liberal elite and a western world blue color population that cannot compete on a global manufacturing market and therefore hardly appreciates the long-term structural wealth creation that comes with global trade. Hence, increasingly western world politics is influenced by the working class' feelings of fear and anger and a sense of being under attack. However, this story isn't just a melancholic, plaintive elegy, it advocates a culture revolution from within: “We hillbillies must wake the hell up”.

Mats Larsson, July 05, 2017