

The Opium of the Masses: Hillbilly Elegy

by Robert Bruce (June 2018)



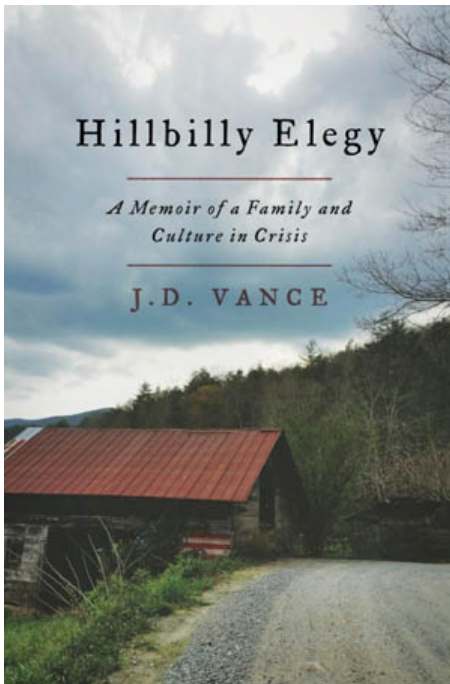
Smoking Boy, David Bromley

I know that rich white people call poor white people trash. And the only reason I know that is because I made so much money last year, the rich whites told me; they say it at a cocktail party. Dave Chappelle

[Hillbilly Elegy](#), let us whisper it, is not a good book and if J. D. Vance intended this sickly memoir as a plea for a greater understanding of the trials of the rustbelt proletariat, he must by now have realised all it has done is layer a few therapeutic clichés on the usual redneck canards. Oprah, I understand, is one of the biggest fans and, given the leaden psychodrama that pervades it, one can well understand why. Narcissism seeps through every confession-wracked chapter and lest we credit Vance with more filial piety than he has earned, it is worth noting how unpleasant it is. To be privately hated by a resentful son is one thing, to you have your shortcomings exhumed in a confessional and be publicly forgiven is an infinitely weightier and nastier revenge, and it is a mystery why anyone should not see it for what it is. The impulse is understandable, I wouldn't have wanted a mother like that either, but it is not a mild one and, when Vance trails off from these dark tea parties of the soul, it doesn't get any better.

After Charles Murray's [Coming Apart](#), we really didn't need a sequel to this kind of thing, and anyone watching the drug epidemic play out in America's post-industrial wilderness didn't need educating on the crisis of the American working class. If you did yet hadn't noticed the fact that poor whites in West Virginia now live lives almost as short as men in Carlton where decadent Scots live to a whopping 54, you were clearly preoccupied with gender pronouns and DACA, and very much a part of the problem. That's no small problem and Vance's silence on this is surprising particularly when more informed voices on the left have been sounding the alarm for decades.

As a critic of the degenerate identity politics of the Left, Thomas Frank is unsurpassed, and Vance never had a chance of adding anything more than the imaginative sympathy for blue collar values Frank lacks. This would have been something. For all its acuity, Frank's '[What's the Matter with Kansas?](#)' still has a reliably condescending Marxist tone, in which the deproletarianisation of the Left is still to be explained by



the intellectual's favourite alibi of false consciousness; a surfeit of God and country turning workers from *their real interests* and throwing the Democrats back on trendy teachers' unions and other constituencies of infantile leftism. There's a lot of truth to this but note for a moment the double standard: when the rich trade a small slice of materialism for nebulous new age spirituality, its an ostentatious virtue. When the poor make a larger trade-off for infinitely

weightier ideals, they're useful idiots. Vance did an honourable stint in the marine corps, he knows better, and could have borne witness with a better book. All he manages is prole porn, a subject which in his hands he can't even turn to comedy. There is at least a morbid joke to be made out of a naked woman who runs a bath, pops a pill and then rings up three hours later about a leaking roof, but even this chip shop anecdote bored me, and it speaks volumes about the moral tone of our political debate that the nicest thing he could say about 'his community' is that they are victims. This is a high fall from the ancestral honour cult of the Scotch-Irish forbears that he labours so affectionately, and it is worthy of a book of its own. This isn't it, and even as a claim on the precious currency of victimhood it fails the acid test of PC etiquette

Vance's memoir is full of feckless welfare queens like the one above, and the zoned-out deadbeats of the Appalachian trailer parks. The suffering is real but, as Vance knows, its passé to people in his circle who need their victims a bit more exotic. They are rednecks after all, and one of the most curious features of American political debate is how the most privileged sections of American society have been climbing on top of these deplorables to brandish their oppression, not least those ghastly shrieking feminists and their hideous martyr Hilary Clinton. By any stretch of the imagination they live gilded lives under the patriarchy but in a country run by vegan millionaires farting their gaunt frames through Silicon Valley on electric scooters, it's always the micro-aggressing truck drivers that hold the white privilege. Vance might have made something of this, it takes a lot to miss the smell of the hypocrisy, but in the end the best he could produce was some pop psychology soundbites. Speaking with faux nostalgia about his blighted Ohio hometown, Vance eventually comes up with some high praise and says it is as worthy an object of pity as a poor black one. Oxycontin seems a small price to pay to blur out writing like that, and I would recommend it to anyone in a trailer park thinking of reading this.

Robert Bruce is a low ranking and over-credentialled functionary of the British welfare state.

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