

Screen Review: Hillbilly Elegy
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I have waited three-years, I knew it was going to be awful, and still I yearned, despite what was sure to include stereotypes of shotguns and moonshine and yodeling, a real hootenanny, I ached for *Hillbilly Elegy*. The story of a low-brow, beat-down family who left the hills in search of something more, but instead finds the working class existence is the same everywhere. The memoir, released in 2017, is a collection of poorly strung together vignettes. Vance's family story is interspersed with refuted and debunked research which supports the racist and . It captivated so strongly it was more than [24 weeks](#) on the NYT best sellers list. The book exasperated us who're *of this place*. Multiple pieces denounced the poverty culture portrayal of Appalachia, including that of public historian, Elizabeth Catts, who released the treatise in defense of mountain culture, [What You're Getting Wrong About Appalachia](#) in 2018. The rights to *Elegy* were scooped up by [Ron Howard and Brian Grazer in 2017](#). After a bidding war, [Netflix announced its intention to finance](#) the movie to the tune of \$45 million in 2019. Vance said [Howard won him over](#) on the adaptation by persuading him the core of the story would be about family. [J.D. said](#) he, "really wanted there to be positive portrayals of the region's people and not just dysfunction." A spectacular failure to reach a disingenuous goal. Vance has made his true intentions clear in remarks about the book, the "[Trump phenomenon](#)", and his need to be the [White Working-class Whisperer™](#)

It's in the casting--a clear Oscar bid given their star-power--that we find the best of the movie. The casting, costuming, and make-up for Glenn Close and Amy Adams as Mamaw (Bonnie Blanton) and Bev (Vance) respectively are impressive. The family photos, possibly the most interesting thing about the movie, that show during the credits, highlight the resemblance. The family look like folks who've worked and struggled and aged hard. Unfortunately, that's where both the watchability and what might pass for hillbilly ends.

The movie is all over the place. The timeline is non-linear and confusing, arguably non-existent. Bev's addiction lacks context; there's no explanation of the migration on the Hillbilly Highway to the industrial north, and Vance never explains his identity as a hillbilly. Unless Mamaw's "because we are hill people" is a sufficient answer, which it's not. A low-effort reach for classics like *Stand by Me*, *Steel Magnolias*, and *The Pursuit of Happyness*, it's really a vanity project produced by a [venture capitalist](#) turned author using his platform to [springboard a political career](#) founded on right-wing ideology covered in a false narrative of "hillbilly" or hill culture.

The writing and dialogue are lazy, even comical. The narration alone gave me pause. "Things could get tough in a hurry in Jackson," and viewers are supposed to take seriously 14 year old kids bullying each other as "tough" in an area and family that has continually been characterized as violent, solving problems through "hill justice." The characters are stereotyped as lazy, addicted, and violent, the way regular people, living and dying as working-class, working-poor, and underclass, [so often are](#), but there's nothing inherently hillbilly about the movie or its stereotypes. The same tired, predictable invocation of the Hatfields and McCoys, "Like hillbilly royalty" (eyeroll), is there to pull the title along. Even the pull-on-the-heartstrings moment between Lindsey and J.D. is contrived. "Don't make us your excuse," she says to J.D. who struggles to leave back to Connecticut, his girlfriend, and an important interview with a law firm that could be (and was) life changing. The admonition from an older sister to her baby brother is a word-for-word quote from a 1994 novel about addiction, *Paradise Overdose*. No one plagiarized; they phoned it in. For a director who spent considerable time "researching" the culture, the dialogue is just a grouping of cliches that aren't even specific to Appalachia.

I watched three times with the same question, “Where are the hillbillies?” Jackson, Kentucky and references to hillbillies are couple-few, but it’s no central theme. In the opening, Vance says he spends “every summer” in the holler. This is his hillbilly birthright. But that annual summer reunion never...reunites with us. Jackson is absolutely Appalachia and its people hillbilly aplenty, but we don’t spend time there with the mountains or his kinfolk. Instead, the extended family from the book are absent, leaving us with Mamaw and Papaw, the only actual hillbillies present on screen.

The problem with no hillbillies in an elegy supposedly for or about us is that America will still refuse to know us. We’ve been called everything but a Child of God, Lorde knows that. This place, this [peculiar place full of strange people](#), has rarely been represented in any factual form, even if that form were all the negatives. It’s never for Affrilachians, as the *Black in Appalachia* podcast, brings to focus when they discuss the Hillbilly Highway that started in Alabama and worked its way further into the mountains, a different migration. One that flies in the face of an all white Appalachian narrative. Where are the queers? For a place labeled as queer, weird, peculiar for four centuries, the only time I’ve ever seen a queer Appalachian story is in a [documentary](#) or when [I tell my own](#). These mountains are a mirror of this country. If we are poor and uneducated, then it is America that is morally bankrupt and ignorant. If we put Mountain Dew in a baby’s bottle, with teeth rotted by the age of 4, it is because this country refuses to provide clean drinking water for every place touched by failing infrastructure and corporate pollution. When all y’all see is this caricature, boring though it may be, you don’t see this country for what it is, for what we *are*.

The film can’t get a handle on location or providing actual context rather than leaning into stereotypes and assumptions that can be made by viewers. The “Hillbilly Highway,” a migratory event of miners and other workers fleeing labor strife in Appalachia to Rust-Belt industrial towns, could have been quite interesting and impactful, but is never explained. We are just...suddenly in Ohio. Middletown was one of many towns that recruited Appalachian workers with good, blue-collar, unionized factory jobs, which includes the steel mill jobs that lured the Vance family away from the hills, and the jobs that allowed Mamaw and Papaw to live long term in their own homes until Papaw’s death in 1997. Instead of diving into this, we spend more time with stereotypes that, again, act as award bait rather than provide real nuance to the people we’re meant to better understand as a result of the film.

Take, for example, Bev. Bev’s struggle with opioids serves as a stand-in for an incredibly complicated, 40-year saga of [one paragraph](#) written by one doctor and [one pharmaceutical company that misled doctors](#) beginning in the 90s that turned into an epidemic.. Bev’s story, I’d argue, is the most important, moving, and underdeveloped. A victim of domestic violence and child abuse, there is no acknowledgment of how structural failures impacted her and the family; no mention of broken systems or how they affect life-course outcomes. Only individual moral failings. Bev and Mamaw are bitches, bad mothers both who’ve failed the family. [“You’re a shitty mom and so are you!”](#) J.D. screams when Bev asks him to take her drug test so she can regain her nursing license. Incredibly, unsurprisingly, the abusive men are conveniently absent in character and responsibility.

By and large, the most offensive thing about this movie, the book, and Vance as a person, is the complete hypocrisy of it all. The book put his political career into overdrive, and the film is little more than an exercise in vanity. In terms of impact, *Elegy* has sold more than a [million](#) copies to

date. He's credited as an [executive producer](#) on the film. As a venture capitalist, his entire world is profit. In contrast, his mother, and the character that Vance spun her into for his own gain, serves as a white trash version of junkie welfare-queen. Her intelligence and education are downplayed, even ignored, in favor of Vance's own goals as a storyteller. The text that comes at the film's end comforts viewers with the information Bev is sober and now working two poverty-wage jobs, but the movie doesn't let us know if her son's wealth was a factor in her recovery, though her sobriety does coincide with his book's release; For a person so wrapped up in the "code" of "hill families," I find it both odd and completely unsurprising his own mother must engage in menial labor.

Vance has dramatically revealed his white supremacist ideology since the book's release. In the text, Vance cites [Charles Murray](#), well-known for his racist pseudoscience. It cites [Robert Putnam](#), known for the unethical suppression of adverse analysis outcomes and "research" on how diversity is an asset, but only through assimilation. It cites the work of [William Julius Wilson](#), whose work has been continually critiqued as de-emphasizing the role of race in the lives of (some) Black Americans, rather than acknowledging the intersectional relationship between race, class, and labor. His [Twitter feed](#) is a crash course in how [eugenics, nationalism, white supremacy, and fundamentalist religion](#) are aligned with a craven conservatism focused on profit at the expense of the oppressed for whom he purports to speak. Rags to riches, [temporarily embarrassed millionaires](#), "see, fellers, I got out, y'all'kin, too." Right on the money for a vapid cultural understanding of the "hillbilly mindset."

Hillbilly Elegy is objectively terrible. Unlike other adaptations like *Coal Miner's Daughter*, where Sissy Spacek brought us into the home of a backwoods family and showed us how that family took their culture with them even as they moved across the country and around the world, *Elegy* plods along using clichés and tropes hoping the big names will pull it along. It doesn't tell anyone anything about "hill people," Appalachia, or the White Working Class™. *Elegy* isn't a serious movie, and I wish we didn't have to take Vance, his book, or this movie seriously. Unfortunately, I must take it seriously, not just because I'm a hillbilly and a scholar of Appalachia and the South. It has become another dystopian, non-inclusive view of the working-class, in a moment where we attempt to break the shackles of [Trumpism](#) and start calling bigotry by its name. Vance isn't a hillbilly and this movie isn't about us. This country refuses to acknowledge who we really are and until it does, we will continue to get the hillbilly we want, but not the one we deserve.