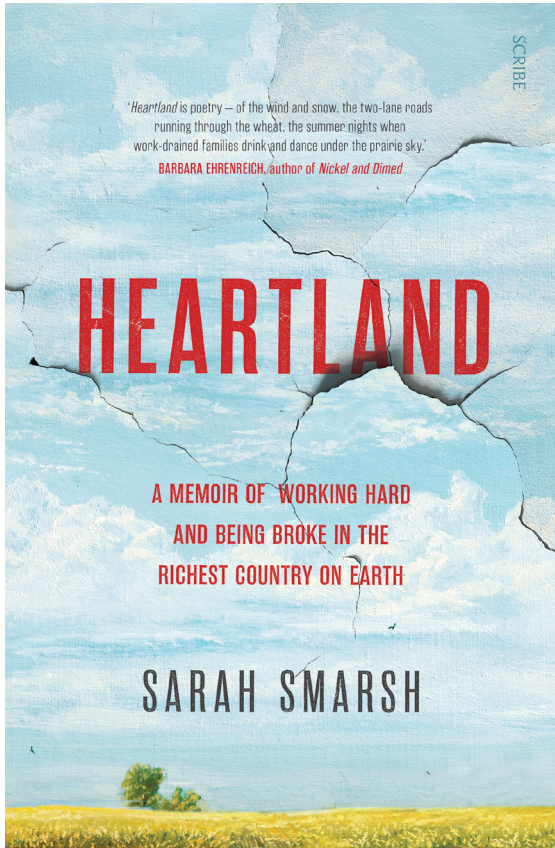


Heartland

SARAH SMARSH



An eye-opening, topical, and moving memoir of one woman's experience of working-class poverty in America.

Born a fifth-generation Kansas wheat farmer on her paternal side and the product of generations of teenage mothers on her maternal side, Smarsh grew up in a family of labourers trapped in a cycle of poverty. She learned about hard work, and also absorbed painful lessons about economic inequality, eventually coming to understand the powerful forces that have blighted the lives of poor and working-class Americans living in the heartland.

By sharing the story of her life and the lives of the people she loves, Smarsh challenges us to consider modern-day America from a different perspective. Combining memoir with powerful analysis and cultural commentary, *Heartland* is a searing, uncompromising look at class, identity, and the perils of having less in a country known for its excess.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. At the beginning of the memoir, Smarsh writes that, as a child, 'I heard a voice unlike the ones in my house or on the news that told me my place in the world.' What did this other voice tell her? What did the people in her house and on the news say about her?
2. Smarsh is the product of generations of teen pregnancy on her mother's side. She writes that she was like a penny in a purse, 'not worth much, according to the economy, but kept in production.' How did this legacy of teenage pregnancy affect her family's social and economic mobility?
3. Smarsh and her brother were each born just weeks before Reagan won an election, and his economic policies had a tremendous impact on her childhood. Can you describe what that impact looked like?

BOOK DETAILS

Format: Paperback
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AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Sarah Smarsh has covered socioeconomic class, politics, and public policy for *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, *NewYorker.com*, *Harpers.org*, *The Texas Observer*, and many others. She recently was a Joan Shorenstein Fellow at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government. A former professor of nonfiction writing, Smarsh is a frequent speaker on economic inequality and related media narratives. She lives in Kansas. *Heartland* is her first book.

REVIEWS

‘A deeply humane memoir with crackles of clarifying insight.’

— FRANCESCA MARI, *THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW*

‘[A] candid and courageous memoir.’

— *PUBLISHERS WEEKLY*, STARRED REVIEW

‘[A] powerful message of class bias ... A potent social and economic message [is] embedded within an affecting memoir.’

— *KIRKUS*, STARRED REVIEW

‘This book ... is poetry — of the wind and snow, the two-lane roads running through the wheat, the summer nights when work-drained families drink and dance under the prairie sky.’

— BARBARA EHRENREICH, AUTHOR OF *NICKEL AND DIMED*

‘*Heartland* offers a fresh and riveting perspective on the middle of the nation all too often told through the prism of men.’

— DALE MAHARIDGE, AUTHOR OF PULITZER PRIZE-WINNING *AND THEIR CHILDREN AFTER THEM*

‘Smarsh, as a writer, is Authentic with a capital A ... This is just what the world needs to hear.’

— GEORGE HODGMAN, AUTHOR OF *BETTYVILLE*

‘A searing indictment of how the poor are viewed and treated in this country.’

— CAREN NICHTER, *LIBRARY JOURNAL*

4. Smarsh describes an incident in which she, as a toddler, pulled a chest of drawers onto herself, forcing her barely postpartum mother to injure herself lifting it up. Smarsh’s father was at work. How does this accident demonstrate the dangers of rural poverty and the fault lines in Jeannie and Nick’s relationship? Are the two related?
5. There were many, many car wrecks in the author’s life and in the lives of members of her family. Why do you think that is?
6. Teresa, Smarsh’s paternal grandmother, had untreated ‘woman problems’ in her youth, according to Nick. What kinds of problems might he have been referring to? How was life in rural Kansas different for women than it was for their farmer husbands?
7. Smarsh writes, ‘When I was well into adulthood, the United States developed the notion that a dividing line of class and geography separated two essentially different kinds of people.’ Do you think that’s true? How does Smarsh straddle that line?
8. Betty often said that homeless people should ‘get a job,’ even though she and her family struggled economically — and even though she often gave money to those same people. How do you think her values were affected by the class system?
9. Do you believe, as Smarsh writes, that ‘in America ... the house is the ultimate status symbol, and ownership is a source of economic pride’? What do you think the family’s transience meant to Nick, Jeannie, Smarsh, and her brother?
10. How did Bob’s newspaper job and middle-class stability affect the family’s economic situation?



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AUSTRALIAN SMALL PUBLISHER OF THE YEAR 2011, 2010, 2008, 2006

‘Elucidating reading on the challenges many face in getting ahead.’

— JOAN CURBOW, *BOOKLIST*

‘Her project is shot through with compassion and pride for the screwed-over working class, even while narrating her emergence from it.’

— BORIS KACHKA, *VULTURE*

‘A poignant look at growing up in a town 30 miles from the nearest city; learning the value and satisfaction of hard, blue-collar work, and then learning that the rest of the country see that work as something to be pitied.’

— BUZZFEED

‘Blending memoir and reportage, a devastating and smart examination of class and the working poor in America, particularly the rural working poor. An excellent portrait of an often overlooked group.’

— JAIME HERNDON, *BOOKRIOT*

‘[A] memoir for our times.’

— MEDIUM

‘Her memoir doesn’t just focus on her own story; it also examines how multiple generations of her family were affected by economic policies and systems.’

— STEPHANIE TOPACIO LONG, *BUSTLE*

- II. Many of the women in Smarsh’s family endured physical violence at the hands of their boyfriends, husbands, and fathers. In what ways does gendered violence inhibit economic stability?
- I2. Smarsh writes that the women in her family had an ‘old wisdom’ that had more to do with intuition than knowledge or education. Where do you see this in action in the lives of female characters?
- I3. Consider the specific reality of Smarsh’s life as a high-achieving high school student. What pushed her to excel?
- I4. What social realities did Smarsh meet in college? How was her life different from those of her fellow students, and how was it similar?
- I5. 15. Smarsh argues that ‘this country has failed its children’. Do you agree? How does her story demonstrate that, or fail to?

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