

Heartland: A Memoir of Working Hard and Being Broke in the Richest Country on Earth

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Finalist for the National Book Award and the Kirkus Prize

Instant New York Times Bestseller

Named a Best Book of 2018 by NPR, The New York Post, BuzzFeed, Shelf Awareness, Bustle, and Publishers Weekly

An essential read for our times: an eye-opening memoir of working-class poverty in America that will deepen our understanding of the ways in which class shapes our country.

Sarah Smarsh was born a fifth generation Kansas wheat farmer on her paternal side, and the product of generations of teen mothers on her maternal side. Through her experiences growing up on a farm thirty miles west of Wichita, we are given a unique and essential look into the lives of poor and working class Americans living in the heartland.

During Sarah's turbulent childhood in Kansas in the 1980s and 1990s, she enjoyed the freedom of a country childhood, but observed the painful challenges of the poverty around her; untreated medical conditions for lack of insurance or consistent care, unsafe job conditions, abusive relationships, and limited resources and information that would provide for the upward mobility that is the American Dream. By telling the story of her life and the lives of the people she loves with clarity and precision but without judgement, Smarsh challenges us to look more closely at the class divide in our country.

A beautifully written memoir that combines personal narrative with powerful analysis and cultural commentary, Heartland examines the myths about people thought to be less because they earn less.

"A deeply humane memoir that crackles with clarifying insight, Heartland is one of a growing number of important works-including Matthew Desmond's *Evicted* and Amy Goldstein's *Janesville*-that together merit their own section in nonfiction aisles across the country: America's postindustrial decline...Smarsh shows how the false promise of the 'American dream' was used to subjugate the poor. It's a powerful mantra" (The New York Times Book Review).

An Amazon Best Book of September 2018:

In this furious, regretful, and loving memoir, Sarah Smarsh examines the life of America's rural poor through the microcosm of her extended family. Growing up working-class white on the Kansas plains, Smarsh enjoyed the freedom of a country childhood, but witnessed the hideous legacy of poverty in her relatives' untreated illnesses, unsafe job conditions, abusive marriages, and addictions to everything from cigarettes to opioids. Smarsh, now a writer and professor, created a stable professional life for herself using the same work ethic she saw in her parents, with talents they themselves might have developed had they been able to continue in school. What made the biggest difference: federal grants for first-generation students, and her determination to avoid early pregnancy. Her life's work, she felt, "was to be heard," rather than to become a mother, though the daughter she might have had feels so real that Heartland takes the form of an anguished letter to her.

For Smarsh, one of the cruelest blows the poor suffer is society's assessment that they somehow deserve less than others. "People of all backgrounds experience a sense of poorness-not enough of this or that thing that money can't buy. But financial poverty is the one shamed by society, culture, unchecked capitalism, public policy, our very way of speaking." Heartland will make you check your privilege before you refer to anyone as "white trash" or "red neck," and if you're standing at a polling station, you might hear Smarsh's voice in your ear. Her portrayal of what it feels like to be poor in America will persuade you that it's not a fate any child should be born into. -Sarah Harrison Smith, Amazon Book Review

Sarah Smarsh has written about socioeconomic class, politics, and public policy for the Guardian, the New York Times, the Texas Observer, Pacific Standard, the Economic Hardship Reporting Project, and many other publications. A recent Joan Shorenstein Fellow at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government and a former professor of nonfiction writing, Smarsh is a frequent speaker on economic inequality and media narratives relating this topic. She lives in Kansas. Heartland is her first book.

Other Books

Repositioning the Rural: Contemporary Representations of Gender and Rurality in American Media and Memoir, Drawing on scholarship in the burgeoning field of rural studies, this project examines contemporary representations of rurality and gender in American media and memoir. Rather than attempting to identify a single "authentic" rurality, this project centers on Heartland: A Memoir of Working Hard and Being Broke in the Richest Country on Earth by journalist Sarah Smarsh, the documentary-reality television series FarmHer hosted by photographer Marji Guylar-Alaniz, and the music of contemporary female country artists to interrogate the variegated ruralities that exist across genres. The following questions underpin this project: How does the shifting definition of "rural" affect how we define rurality? Why is the idea of the "rural" so difficult to work with in and of itself, and why does it take a backseat relative to other frames of reference in scholarship dealing with gender? What happens to rurality when we also consider class and race? What does an examination of rurality and all these intersections tell us about America's collective understanding of the "rural"? Ultimately, this project aims to cast the rural as a legitimate category of literary and cultural study by providing a portrait that takes the complexity of the concept as its starting point. By shedding light on the often-competing representations of women in rural spaces across genres, this project puts forth the notion that rurality and its gendered intersections are far from predictable and known.

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