



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

Sarah Smarsh

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A perfect companion to *Evicted* and *Nickel and Dimed*, *Heartland* reveals one woman's experience of working-class poverty with a startlingly observed, eye-opening, and topical personal story.

During Sarah Smarsh's turbulent childhood in Kansas in the 1980s and 1990s, the forces of cyclical poverty and the country's changing economic policies solidified her family's place among the working poor. By telling the story of her life and the lives of the people she loves, Smarsh challenges us to look more closely at the class divide in our country and examine the myths about people thought to *be* less because they *earn* less. Her personal history affirms the corrosive impact intergenerational poverty can have on individuals, families, and communities, and she explores this idea as lived experience, metaphor, and level of consciousness.

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 as the daughter of a dissatisfied young mother and raised predominantly by her grandmother 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. Combining memoir with powerful analysis and cultural commentary, *Heartland* is an uncompromising look at class, identity, and the particular perils of having less in a country known for its excess.

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

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From Reader Review Heartland: A Memoir of Working Hard and Being Broke in the Richest Country on Earth for online ebook

Alison says

In a sense it's a shame that this book is being marketed as a window into understanding the white working class. Lumping this title in with crappy, moralistic screeds (I'm thinking mainly here of Hillbilly Elegy) in order to sell more books doesn't do Smarsh's work justice. It's a beautifully written memoir, you could teach it in an English class, and it explores so much more than just the white working class as we "understand" it through repetitive New York Times feature stories. (And it was the few times that the book fell out of personal storytelling and into generalization and moralizing that knocked it down to four stars for me.)

This book has some of the smartest feminist thought I've read in years. Smarsh writes gorgeously and brilliantly about being a creative, artistic woman caught in the country with no way out (cause you've got no money!), about becoming a mother when you're seventeen and how that might make you really hate motherhood. About the pain of being the daughter of a woman who hates motherhood.

She writes about the deep, dangerous flaws in this society of ours: an education system that lets poor kids slip through the cracks, a justice system that punishes the poor for being poor, a healthcare system that makes it so the people whose bodies work the hardest and are the most likely to be injured have the hardest time getting affordable care, or any care at all.

And the book's main narrative device--Smarsh writes to the unborn child she's always known is real but that she never wanted to bring into the world and never will--broke my heart in two at certain points.

This is really worth reading.

Elizabeth says

tl;dr: I was really excited about Heartland but a gimmick makes it fall flat.

I was giddy when I heard about Heartland--finally, a book had come along with the power of Nickled and Dimed!

Sadly, despite the glowing blurb from Barbara Ehrenreich, Heartland is not that powerful. Even for a memoir, it lacks impact

There is one thing Dr Smarsh does well in Heartland, and that's provide a nuanced look into the women of her immediate family. She's clear on their weaknesses and also very clearly proud of their strengths.*

Problems in Heartland are:

-- Weirdly jarring choice to address the book to a supposed daughter Dr Smarsh might have borne as a teenager. It doesn't work for two reasons. The first, and biggest, is that it's very clear that there wasn't even the slightest chance of said child ever happening to Dr Smarsh as a teen, so the device comes off as affected. The second reason is that all the "you"s are also intended to engage you, the reader. That might have worked

except for reason one. Dr Smarsh would have been better to simply address the reader directly

-- Gaps in the narrative. Not in the stories of the women of her family, although they are there, but in her own. If Dr. Smarsh was, as she alleges early on, a surrogate mother to her brother, why is so little information given about this? In fact, once her father remarries and she leaves her mother to live with her grandmother almost full time, Matt simply vanishes from the narrative. The same is true of her father, who she clearly adores, but who also essentially vanishes once he remarries.

Finally, after much detail about her early years, Dr Smarsh basically glosses over her own existence past middle school. Readers are told she worked many jobs, went to college and worked many jobs, and then, boom! She's a professor.

In fact, *Heartland* felt like it started off as a personal memoir that was abandoned in favor of a partial family history. It's frustrating because there's some really compelling stuff in there, but there's no overall framework.

It's like being told you're going to see a historic landmark, but when you get there, all there is to see is the outline of what might have been something and a faded plaque with half the words missing.

There have been several recent memoirs purporting to be reflections of what it's like to grow up poor in America. So far, all they've provided are partial portraits that, in the case of *Heartland*, offer you a few stories that (in her relatives' cases, not her own) while interesting, are certainly not groundbreaking.

*Except for her mother. Dr Smarsh clearly has a lot of anger still a brewing there.

Overall, disappointing.

The ARC note: I received an ARC of this.

Brandi says

I like reading about lives that are very different from my own. Sarah Smarsh is a good writer, and it was interesting to learn her family history and her views on the world. But I really wish this book had been organized chronologically instead of thematically. She jumped around in time, which made it hard to keep track of her many relatives and what they were doing. And I'm not really sure what each chapter's theme was supposed to be, since they were each so long and had multiple messages. There was a lot of repetition in general that got tiresome. With better organization, the book could have been 50 pages shorter.

Brad says

As a lifelong Kansan who came from a working class family in Topeka but knew nothing of the life of the rural parts of my state, I declare this essential reading. Essential not just for Kansans like me, but for so many who have no idea what rural poverty looks like.

Sarah Smarsh recounts the story of her family--most notably the women who held the family together--while also weaving it into the larger dynamics of an increasingly crueler American capitalism that began with

Reagan and continues to present day. Bold, honest storytelling and cultural critique, I hope this book finds the audience it deserves.

Laurie's Lit Picks says

For those of you who loved My Name is Lucy Barton, or Nickled and Dimed, or Hillbilly Elegy, you will need to add this book to your TBR pile. Debut author Sarah Smarsh chronicles her life, and generations of her family, as they try and survive living and toiling in Kansas during the past century. The difference in this story for me was the fact that it is told from a female perspective, as well as focusing on the matriarchal struggles of generations of teenage motherhood, abusive marriages, and the lack of education. The idea that one can pull oneself up by the bootstraps is turned upside down when one does not even own any boots. This is an engrossing book that I read voraciously in just 24 hours, unable to put it down, unable to relate in many ways, and also seeing many of my former students in her stories. I wish I had known years ago what I have spent the last few years learning: that the chance of skin color, economic class, and geography has more to do with a person's ability to 'make it' than just about anything else. Yes, there are those anomalies, the poor kid who hits it big like Andrew Carnegie, but they are fewer and fewer than in years past. This book will provide any book club with some provocative conversation and food for thought in our own communities.

Paul says

Heartland belongs on the shelf next to books like Desmond's Evicted, Vance's Hillbilly Elegy, and Ehrenreich's Nickle and Dimed. Smarsh's book provides a strong voice for and about breaking the destructive cycles of families, the economics of class, and the fact that birth should not be the reigning mark of future prospects. Smarsh is a talented writer who tells the story of her grandparents, parents, and extended family with clarity and warmth.

For the full review: <https://paulspicks.blog/2018/08/18/he...>

For all my reviews: <https://paulspicks.blog>

Clif Hostetler says

This is a very well written memoir that not only recounts memories of growing up in Kansas (30 miles west of Wichita), but ponders the plight of working class poor with a deeply humane sensitivity that offers clarifying insight into social conditions of the heartland. In addition to the intimate details of family history the book's narrative reviews the history of the Homestead Act, the progressive politics of early Kansas statehood, the farming crisis of the 80s, the Reaganomic swerve toward conservatism, and the home mortgage crisis of 2008.

Much of the book's narrative is directed to the author's unborn child—who remains unborn and indeed may never be born. But it provides an introspective second person voice that the author has found motivated her to escape the pitfalls of teenage pregnancy. By asking the question, "What would I tell my daughter?" the author found a means of summoning the purest of intentions and aspirations. The second person voice also provides a tone of reflection and commentary that can almost pass for free verse poetry spoken to the reader.

(view spoiler)

This memoir is an exploration of poor working class life up close and personal—a view from the inside by an author born into its implied destiny. But it is also written from the perspective of one who has managed to transcend its claim, and one who still retains sympathy for those who remain in poverty but also with a critical eye for the political and economic forces that make poverty so difficult to escape.

America didn't talk about class when I was growing up. I had no idea why my life looked the way it did, why my parent's young bodies ached, why some opportunities were closed off to me. I suppose we never do completely know even with hindsight. But the hard economies of a family, a town, a region, a country, a world were shaping my relationship to creation. ...

I was on a mission to make a life unlike the one I was handed, and things worked out as I intended. ...

Probabilities and statistics predicted a different outcome for me—a poor rural kid born the year the country began a sharp turn toward greater economic inequality. Chances were that I would stay in that hard life....(p 2)

Regarding the above, the author was born in 1980, the year Reagan was elected and the year politics turned toward economic policies that brought tax cuts for the wealthy and stagnation of real income for the working poor.

Early in the book the author makes it clear that this book's narrative was going to place the experiences of her life into the context of societal forces that were evolving concurrently.

When I was growing up, the United States had convinced itself that class didn't exist here. I'm not sure I even encountered the concept until I read some old British novel in high school. This lack of acknowledgment at once invalidated what we were experiencing and shamed us if we tried to express it. Class was not discussed, let alone understood. This meant that, for a child of my disposition—given to prodding every family secret, to sifting through old drawers for clues about the mysterious people I loved—every day had the quiet underpinning of frustration. The defining feeling of my childhood was that of being told there wasn't a problem when I knew damn well there was. (p14)

She addresses the persistent question I've asked many times, why do the poor vote against their own best interests? In the following the author is commenting on how her mother voted in the 1984 presidential election.

She was not given to apathy and tried her best to stay on top of the news. Based on what she could glean, Reagan was a good man. The Republican Party would hurt women like my mother in direct and indirect ways that decade—removing the Equal Rights Amendment from the Party's Platform, dismantling aid programs that helped poor women feed their children, eroding reproductive health rights. Unbeknownst to my mom the Republican Party was turning deeply socially conservative, different from the moderate fiscally conservative party that people in my area respected. Mom didn't think women on welfare were lazy or that feminists were militant monsters. She voted for Reagan because a cultural tide told her it was the right thing to do, and she had little time or resources to question the wave of sentiment the country was riding.

The country was swinging right, and working people were changing party allegiance. My mom was one of them, part of a national trend that I have found said more about political messaging than about what people truly know or think about the issues. Meanwhile poor rural mothers like her were receding from view in both political parties if they'd ever been in view at all.

In the last chapter of the book addressing the same subject during a more recent election the author said the following:

People on welfare were presumed "lazy," and for us there was no more hurtful word. Within that framework, financially comfortable liberals may rest assured that their fortunes result from personal merit while generously insisting they be taxed to help the "needy." Impoverished people, then, must do one of two things: Concede personal failure and vote for the party more inclined to assist them, or vote for the other party, whose rhetoric conveys hope that the labor of their lives is what will compensate them. (view spoiler)

The author knew that if she was going to break out of the cycle of poverty that she would need to do more than get straight A's—she mustn't get pregnant.

Grandma noticed my straight A's, but couldn't offer much about the path that lay ahead except for the most important advice of all for women like us. "Be careful," she'd say, "you don't get tied down."

Like her and mom, I had been a poor girl's baby and I knew exactly what she meant. For many poor women there is a violence to merely existing—the pregnancies without healthcare, the unchecked harassment while waiting tables, the repetitive physical jobs that can cause back and foot pain. Then there are the men, whose violence I'm convinced isn't any worse than the middle and upper class men, but whom a woman without economic means will have a harder time escaping.

I was initially drawn to this book because I grew up on a farm about thirty miles south of the author's childhood farm home. It was a happy accident for me that the book ended up being such a well written book.

Kathleen says

National Book Award for Nonfiction Longlist 2018. Smarsh has chosen to write about her own family's multigenerational struggle in Kansas to get ahead by working any way that they could to make ends meet. She focuses particularly on her female relatives and how their decisions contributed to their poverty—her mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother all had their first child at 16-years-old. Having children at such a young age causes them to drop out of school, assume financial responsibilities when they are still children themselves, and often enter into unwise marriages. Smarsh vows to not repeat this cycle and adopts a literary device of talking to her imaginary baby about how she will live her life differently from her female forbearers.

The weight of never having enough money causes a lot of dislocation. Her Grandma Betty married seven times, and several of those husbands proved to be abusive. Her children learned to adjust to multiple moves. Smarsh's mother, Jeannie, moved 48 times before starting high school. Smarsh's own mother encouraged Smarsh to move in with Grandma Betty—and it did provide Smarsh with a constant residence which she benefited from.

Poverty pounds people into submission on so many levels. Smarsh's relatives were smokers and abused alcohol. Visits to the dentist or doctor were avoided as they cost too much. Smarsh's father took a job transporting used cleaning solvent at one point and nearly died from chemical poisoning one week into the job. The farming crisis of the '80s and Reaganomics was hard on small family farms. Farmers lost their land to big agribusiness, and the social safety net that could have helped them suffered budget cuts or elimination altogether. Ironically, the poor of Kansas often voted against their own interests. They did not want to admit that they needed help; they preferred to believe that their labor would eventually be rewarded—not realizing that the societal system they lived under was stacked against them. Highly recommend.

Suzanne says

Strong initial effort by author Sarah Smart combines memoir with facts and figures to further explain her family's hardships over the last century. This combination approach is a difficult one to pull off because readers are constantly pulled from the engaging family narrative and flung head first into demographic data explaining the larger state/national issues. But the most disruptive element of the book is the almost constant reference to the author's imaginary daughter. The first time the author uses the imaginary daughter, and explains her role for the author, the device works well. But as a continuing device for the book, it is tiring and annoying. I understand this was the lodestar for the author; but it doesn't work that way for readers. An editor should have realized that distinction. A good editor would have helped this tale really shine. I had a difficult time finding it. I received my copy from the publisher through NetGalley.

Marian says

I had hoped to be keener on this one. Best feature for me were the stories of the grandmothers and mother.

Kayo says

Wasn't what I was expecting. Not up to Nickel and Dimed, not that I compared. Not thrilled that I could't give a review for months after I got it from Netgalley!

Thanks to author, publisher and Netgalley for the chance to read this book. While I got the book for free, it had no bearing on the rating I gave it.

Stephanie says

Many years ago, I read Barbara Ehrenreich's Nickel and Dimed and it knocked my socks off. When I saw Sarah Smarsh's Heartland had been favorably compared to it and recommended to people who liked it, I jumped at the opportunity (provided by Scribner and NetGalley) to read it in exchange for my honest review.

First of all, thanks a LOT, Sarah! I was awake most of the night reading, then thinking about this book! Like

The Glass Castle, so many things in it resonated strongly with me while it both entertained me and made me THINK. (My favorite kind of book)

Sarah had a chaotic childhood in Kansas in the 1980s and 1990s, when the changing economic policies in the U.S. solidified the her family's position as part of "the working poor." The ginormous issue here is the class divide in the U.S., and Smarsh lays out the horrors in (as the subtitle says) "A Memoir of Working Hard and Being Broke in the Richest Country on Earth."

Sarah's family "consisted mostly of single moms and their daughters." For generations, teenage girls in the family have given birth and then endured mostly horrific marriages/relationships: "Every woman who helped raise me, on my mom's side of the family, had been a teenage mother who brought a baby into a dangerous place." For Sarah, that meant being keenly aware that something was wrong: "The defining feeling of my childhood was that of being told there wasn't a problem when I knew damn well there was."

Sarah's determination to get out, to break the cycle, is clear: she relates that she "looked at my family then and felt I had two choices: be a relentless worker with a chance at building her own financial foundation or live the carefree way..." which reminded me so much of my own thought processes many years ago. She prepared to go to college, and during the application process the "...specifics were unclear and fell to me to organize and decide, as is usually the case for a college-hopeful teenager whose family never went."

On an individual level, her story (like that of Jeannette Walls in The Glass Castle) is inspiring. But it's so damn depressing to realize that so many people are trapped in a cycle of poverty. Even worse, as she did research in her graduate studies, she "...found that...if you are poor, you are likely to stay poor, no matter how hard you work." A kneejerk response might be, "well, she worked her way out, so anyone can." But reading the reality for poor people, especially women, provides insight as to why this just isn't so.

Much of the story is told to the daughter she might have had if she had followed the family pattern of teen pregnancy. It was slightly confusing at first, until I stopped thinking so much about my own history and focused on what she was saying.

It's pretty stunning, and I am eager to bring it to one of my book clubs, to see if it is as deeply affecting to women who grew up without knowing what it's like to grow up poor is as it was for me. Five stars.

Janilyn Kocher says

Heartland is a great read. I enjoyed Smarsh's family history immensely. However, I'm not buying her assertion that she grew up in poverty. I suppose my definition of poverty differs from hers. She always had a roof over her head and food to eat. Smarsh never had to live in a car or under a bridge as many people have. From my perspective, Smarsh was rich in love and perseverance that she learned from her family. Various family members spent a fortune on booze and smokes over the years, which belies her poverty premise. The author also has a tendency to circumvent a person's accountability for his/her own actions. Instead she assigned blame like it was the government's fault, or the system, or a doctor; such as the case of her stepmother's situation. She avoids stating the obvious: each person is responsible for his/her own actions. I also don't agree with some of her reflections pertaining to history and politics. Overall, it's a very good memoir. Thanks to NetGalley for the advance read.

Michelle says

“Heartland: A Memoir of Working Hard and Being Broke in The Richest Country on Earth” is a resounding story by Sarah Smarsh of her family life, heritage and farming culture on the Kansas prairie. With the passage of the Homestead Act (1862) over 270 million acres of land was available for settlement on the American plains. Settlers could receive up to 160 acres of land at no cost if they lived and cultivated their land for a period of five years. Smarsh, raised on family farmland, wrote that her Pennsylvania Dutch ancestors arrived on the frontier in the 19th century to stake a land claim. This way of life was brutal on the vast prairie, the dust, the unforgiving climate, and lack of natural and financial resources.

It was necessary for Sarah’s father to work away from the family homestead to support his family. Perhaps unprepared for the unrelenting harsh conditions of being a farm wife, Jeannie, Sarah’s mother had an underlying sense of anger and resentment, her depression and poor attitude may have had a lasting impact on her two children. The rates of domestic violence and divorce in their community near Wichita were high and incomes were low; Sarah’s grandmother consoled battered wives at her kitchen table. The funding from the popular televised “Farm Aid” raised by celebrity musicians in the 1980’s never reached the farmers in Sarah’s community; government programs and aid to assist struggling families were scarce.

“For all my family’s emphasis on hard work, on some (level) we’d done away with the idea it always paid off. It was obvious that that the problems small family farms had was related more to commodities markets, big business connected to Wall Street and corporate interests.”

When her father suffered from “toxic psychosis” after he was chemically poisoned from a work related accident, his healthy respect for rural women wasn’t enough save his marriage. Following the death of her grandfather, Smarsh’s parents divorced, and her mother left the farm for good. Her parents remarried to new spouses. Chris, her stepmother likely needed treatment for substance use disorder, though no affordable medical care was available. Smarsh studied hard, and did well in school, her goal was to attend college.

A great storyteller, Smarsh is a keen observer of the hardship faced by people living in the heartland, and blends the truth of her gritty family story narrative with economic facts and conditions. Now a college professor, Smarsh shifted from blindly following a sociopolitical agenda that hurt the poor and vulnerable population first, the American Dream is currently unattainable for too many people regardless of economic status. Smarsh mourned for the daughter she never had, yet remains hopeful for an honest and fair system that supports economic justice, a dream and goal worth having and most certainly voting for. With thanks and appreciation to Simon and Schuster via NetGalley for the DDC for the purpose of review.

Casey Wheeler says

I received a free Kindle copy of Heartland by Sarah Smarsh courtesy of Net Galley and Scribner, the publisher. It was with the understanding that I would post a review on Net Galley, Goodreads, Amazon, Barnes and Noble and my fiction book review blog. I also posted it to my Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and Google Plus pages.

I requested this book as I work in a nonprofit and the subject of the book deals with poverty which is important in the work that I do. This is the first book by Sarah Smarsh that I have read.

This book presents a clear picture of growing up in a multigenerational situation of poverty and the attempt to break out of the cycle when the political/economic structure of the country goes counter to what you are trying to achieve. The author's writing style is a bit unpolished which adds to the understanding of the situation.

Eventually this book will be as important to understanding what people in poverty experience as in "Evicted".

I recommend this book to anyone who has an interest in learning more about the struggles in trying to escape poverty in a less than supporting environment.
