



NON-FICTION BOOK CLUB

November 2019 Selection

***Heartland* by Sarah Smarsh**

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 and "a deeply humane memoir that crackles with clarifying insight".

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.

Beautifully written, in a distinctive voice, *Heartland* combines personal narrative with powerful analysis and cultural commentary, challenging the myths about people thought to be less because they earn less.

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Discussion Questions:

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 months or weeks before Reagan won an election, and his economic policies had a tremendous impact on her childhood. Clinton took office when she was an adolescent, further shaping her concept of "welfare." What did that impact look like?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. When Smarsh was a child, her grandma Betty sometimes 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 ideas were affected by the class system?
7. 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?
8. 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? What does Smarsh attribute to her own father's and grandfather's kindness and nonviolent demeanor?
9. 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?



10. What social realities did Smarsh meet in college? How was her life different from those of her fellow students, and how was it similar?

Review or Comment about this book:

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Recommendations:

- If you liked *Heartland*, you might like [*Hillibilly Elegy*](#)
- You might also enjoy [*Educated*](#)