

# Heart to Heart

*Heartland:*

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

By Sarah Smarsh

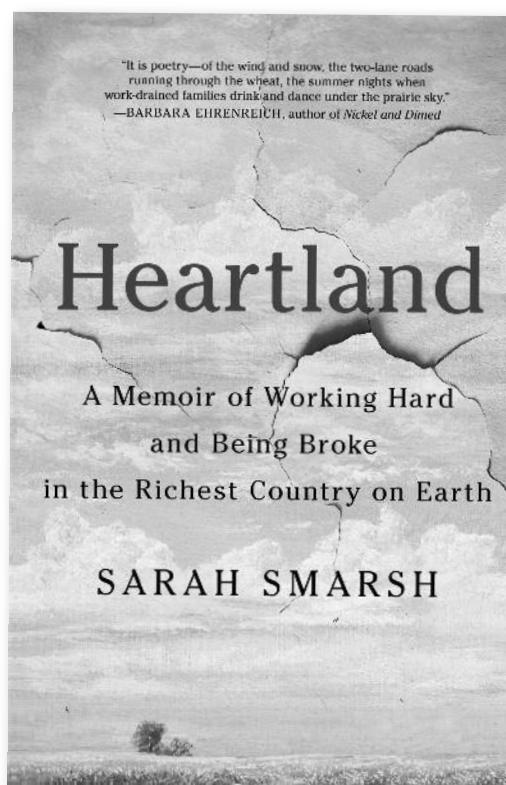
New York, NY; Scribner, 2018, 290 pp., \$26.00, hardcover

*Reviewed by Carole DeSanti*

Sarah Smarsh's *Heartland*, a National Book Award finalist in nonfiction for 2018, reflects on epic issues and injustices of class, poverty, work, and coming-of-age in the hollowed-out rural Midwestern US of the mid-20th and early 21st century. Exploring themes familiar from George Packer's *The Unwinding*, George Hodgman's *Bettyville*, and Thomas Frank's *What's the Matter with Kansas?*, among other works, Smarsh expands the conversation into the intimate territory of women's lives, examining the tribe of struggling, wounded, defiant, and strong Kansans into which she was born. In her account, the accretion of economic shifts, poor policies, and divisive politics during a period of resource-degrading change across the Midwest marries male violence and the ways women tend to adapt to it. The result is a particularly toxic chain of consequences, which Smarsh manages to transmute, refashion, and employ finally to free herself.

*Heartland* excels in its study of macro-to-micro events. Smarsh sketches out how the intimacies of domestic life dovetail with clever political messaging that systematically undermines those who take it on faith. One turning point in this history was Jimmy Carter's 1979 "crisis of confidence" speech, that despite its truths failed to appeal to the national mood. Smarsh's mom, Jeannie, at seventeen, had just received her GED, become engaged, and gotten pregnant. She herself cast her first ballot for Carter's re-election. Smarsh writes, "Ronald Reagan won, of course, and got to work cutting taxes ... [saying] that big, private money would 'trickle down' to us through the economy, as though we were standing outside with our mouths open praying for money to rain."

That rain never came, but the next time around, her mother, pregnant again and selling fireworks by the side of the road—trading American pride for ready cash—swung with the national mood and voted for Reagan. Smarsh writes of that era,



We would be able to map our lives against the destruction of the working class: the demise of the family farm, the dismantling of public health care, the defunding of public schools, wages so stagnant that full-time workers could no longer pay the bills. Historic wealth-inequality was old news to us by the time it hit newspapers in the new millennium. That's the difference among the persons selling the fireworks, and the one watching them sparkle from the sky ... you live in different Americas.

For Smarsh's women, events like having a gun pulled on her or a jaw broken when a man doesn't get something he wants are woven into the daily

fabric of living. Abuse, of course, incubates in conditions of economic vulnerability and is aggravated by addiction, domestic crises, and toxic mythologies. The common remedy for the women Smarsh knew was getting out of town in a beat-up junker car with a couple of bucks and a kid in tow. These moves reflected a kind of all-American defiance (one unavailable, for example, to Elena Ferrante's world of mothers and grandmothers that explore some similar themes)—but also set the stage for further violation and privation. The flight to the new town leads to the next dead-end job. Another marriage or relationship becomes the next black eye or broken jaw. Smarsh heard these stories and logged these catastrophes.

In charting these journeys across the Midwest—from the farm to Wichita, to Chicago, or in the other direction to Oklahoma, back to the countryside; the moves from trailer to apartment to the occasional house, fleeting toeholds that felt almost like home; getting a better job for a while, finding a kinder man, embarking on a brave business venture—Smarsh also documents her own emotional trajectory and how it led her to choose not to raise a child. "The poverties that threatened my safety forced me to find the safest place. Eventually I would think of that realm as where we come from, and where we return when we die. That's where I heard you. That's the calm center where my most important assignment [was] received, and the body of a poor girl bound for a different life: to make sure you were never born."

Smarsh works hard to re-infuse heart to a land that has been cruelly treated; stripped, exploited, and then ignored. Yet, as she expresses throughout *Heartland*, our cherished values abide there as well, just as they do in the bodies of the women who have been treated the same way. She writes of wild fun and remnants of a kinder and more helpful world, such as a rural doctor who continued to serve the community and her gentle, caring father, Nick, whom she never had to fear. By getting educated, getting out, and as she puts it, keeping

her “jeans zipped,” she develops a vision that does not leave behind loved ones or the harsh terrain on which they have lived. This is a notable feat. *Heartland* finds beauty, merit, and emotional possibility in our abandoned landscapes. These are places that even while inhabited are flown-over and ignored by a culture incapable of accommodating those to whom it is most indebted.

Smarsh’s narrative circumambulates in long-looping spirals though generations—grandmother, mother, daughter, and the daughter Smarsh never had, and to whom some of her reflections are addressed. This device is a little jarring (“Forgive the baby,” writes *New York Times* reviewer Francesca Mari) but does serve as a poignant reminder of Smarsh’s understanding of the karmic wheel that tainted and stunted the women of her family. Of the many wrenching scenes in *Heartland*, some of the most affecting reflect the author’s understanding of her own mother’s deprivation, that her intellect and talent would never be fully developed or realized:

She had a mind that wanted books, ideas, and sketch pads—things she sat with privately but didn’t get to share with the world.... I think that sometimes my mom didn’t really hate having children as a young woman she hated her life, and the children who came into it would feel that.

Smarsh’s mother was trapped by the cycle, no matter how many apartment walls she defiantly painted red. She withheld from her daughter the love and care she never experienced herself. Smarsh realized along the way that she might do the same.

This absent presence of the child is a reminder of the logic Smarsh applied to find an exit from her situation. She is not only the daughter Smarsh did not have but also a guiding spirit and reminder of a potent desire for selfhood—a power fusing from within and protecting the author even from her own weaknesses. Smarsh alludes, too, to the

challenge of articulating one’s own complicated truth in a world that commonly doesn’t want to hear it. If all that one is has been unseen, effaced, scrubbed, and erased—then who is the listener for such a story? When all else fails, turn inward, Smarsh says; for that unborn potential is always there.

A tough filament of spiritual quest is woven within the stories of her family and the broader political and social background. Smarsh remembers reading “what you don’t transmute, you will transmit.”

That is how a person changes not just herself but the stuff of her life, including the trappings and outcomes of socioeconomic class. I know what it feels like to transmute the sorrow, anger and fear of good-hearted people. It’s usually at nighttime, alone and awake in bed. It feels like swallowing something bitter with your soul, where it hurts and then dissolves, and then you wake up a little more okay in the morning.

She finds perspective through prayer. While she learns to speak with God in a Catholic church, it is her own personal cosmology that guides her most, especially as it comes to unify her sense of purpose in the social world.

My family assumed I was doing what they’d done, what most teenagers do—sex, cigarettes, alcohol, drugs. But they were wrong and it had far less to do with “morals” or Catholicism than it did with my intention to graduate and get a full ride to college with no baby or addiction or controlling partner. This was such a foreign turn in our family that they looked at me with a deeper suspicion than if I’d been more like them.

She managed to draw on that inner focus when a boy who wanted her to be his girlfriend drove her down a dirt road and pulled out a handgun. “I sat



in the passenger seat, scared but refusing to let him know it, and told him to take me home until he did.” Stripping abstinence of prudishness and repositioning it as a tool of liberation certainly cuts against received wisdoms of the left and the politics of second-wave American feminism, but for Smarsh it was the pragmatic course and the only one available. Hers was a different and perhaps more radical approach to liberation than is customarily understood: Keep ‘em zipped. Don’t rely on anyone’s promises, even the ones you want to believe. Then think, live, and learn as you choose.

In her case, to a rather magnificent result. 

**Carole DeSanti** was an editor at Viking Penguin, a Division of Penguin Random House, and is the author of a novel, *The Unruly Passions of Eugénie R.* She’s at work on a new novel, *Plunder*.



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