

Book Club Kit Discussion Guide

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

Author:

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. (from the *Publisher*.)

Summary:

During Sarah Smarsh's turbulent childhood in Kansas in the 1980s and 1990s, the country's wealth gap widened—with Smarsh's family of laborers on the losing end. Through this intergenerational story, 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 poverty can have on individuals, families, and communities, which she explores through intimate revelations.

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 poverty in a country known for its excess. (from the *Publisher*.)

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. 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 automotive wrecks in the author's life and in the lives of her family members, from cars to tractors to school buses. Why?
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. 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?

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. 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?

11. 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?

12. Consider the specific reality of Smarsh’s life as a high-achieving high school student. What pushed her to excel?

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

14. Smarsh argues that “this country has failed its children.” Do you agree? How does her story demonstrate that, or fail to? (*Questions issued by publisher.*)