

Smarsh, Sarah (2018) *Heartland: A Memoir of Working Hard and Being Broke in the Richest Country on Earth*, Scribner, New York, NY.

Review by Christie Launius

Having been a fan of her journalistic writing about [class inequality](#), working-class [politics](#), [people](#), and culture, it was with great anticipation that I approached Sarah Smarsh's memoir *Heartland*. Researched, written and revised over the course of fifteen years (starting when she was an undergraduate student), Smarsh offers up the story of her own life, woven together with the stories of multiple generations of her working-class family in Kansas.

The broad contours of this moving and powerful memoir will be familiar to those of us in working-class studies who are ourselves from working-class backgrounds and/or have spent time reading narratives about the experience of obtaining upward class mobility via education. I will confess at the outset that I am far from a neutral reviewer; many of the details of her early life resonate deeply with mine, and her fiercely loving renderings of the people and places of her rural, working-class childhood brought a lump to my throat that persisted long after I finished the book.

Smarsh is, to use Al Lubrano's term, a class straddler, and like many who tell the story of their upward class mobility, she grapples with what that means and strives to articulate the complexity and ambiguity that having such an identity entails. She is grateful to live a life materially different than the generations of women before her, even as she is proud to and insistent upon claiming her place in that lineage. She devotes her youth to escaping poverty even as she recognizes 'a loss in success' at achieving her goal (286).

Though steeped in it as a child, Smarsh consistently and persistently rejects the bootstraps myth, both when discussing her family members and herself: 'How can you talk about the poor child without addressing the country that let her be so? It's a relatively new way of thinking for me. I was raised to put all responsibility on the individual, on the bootstraps with which she ought to pull herself up. But it's the way of things that environment changes outcomes' (3). Or as she translates into her 'first language:' 'The crop depends on the weather, dudnit? A good seed'll do'er job and sprout, but come hail 'n' yer plumb outta luck regardless' (3).

But class is not the only analytical lens that holds explanatory power in the telling of Smarsh's life story. Gender is always there, too, as can be seen clearly in many of her chapter titles: 'The body of a poor girl', 'A working-class woman;' and 'A penny in a purse,' which is a reference to her mother's pregnancy with her ('I was in a poor girl's lining like a penny in a purse—not worth much, according to the economy, but kept in production').

Most fundamentally, though less overtly in its title, her opening chapter, ‘Dear August,’ reveals this dual focus on class and gender as defining features of her life. On her maternal side, Smarsh comes from a long line of teen mothers, and Smarsh is determined from a young age to break that cycle. In telling the story of that quest and its eventual success, Smarsh joins a long line of working-class young women who, when seeking upward mobility via education, see sex, marriage, and motherhood with working-class men as an impediment to their desire for a different life, a life of education and movement out of poverty.

The August of the chapter title is a name, and refers to ‘a baby that I either would or wouldn’t have’ (1). Smarsh addresses her words to this child not only in her opening chapter, but throughout the memoir. In the closing chapter, she describes their painful parting, occasioned by her realization that ‘You were the poor child I would never have—not because I would never have a child, but because I was no longer poor’ (285). Throughout her childhood and early adulthood, she is guided by the presence of this unborn child, charting a course away from rural poverty by repeatedly asking and answering the question ‘what would I tell my daughter to do?’ By the book’s end, addressing August, she reflects, ‘You weren’t my daughter, of course, but my highest self—less a guardian angel than my own power emanating, necessarily disembodied from a body and mind I had been told by society had little worth’ (286).

Smarsh entrusts her readers with her warts-and-all family history, but perhaps in exchange for revealing so much and making herself (and her family members) so vulnerable, she provides the reader with a lot of guidance in how to think about and understand it. This guidance comes in two, related forms. First, from the beginning and throughout her memoir, Smarsh tells her family story against a broader historical and political backdrop: ‘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’ (39). Second, this contextual information is combined with her present-day commentary on both the past and our current societal situation. So, for example, Smarsh matter-of-factly states that ‘Every adult I knew was addicted to something—mostly cigarettes or booze. Also pills, both prescribed and gotten by other means’ (50). She follows that statement with an empathetic framework for understanding that addiction, as well as information about changes in the U.S. health care system and changes to the economy that have resulted in poorer health outcomes for people of her family’s social class.

Put differently, Smarsh notes the deficits of her upbringing that were wrought by poverty, even as she refuses to characterize it as a deficit culture. She also balances the cataloging of those deficits with a keen appreciation for the ‘riches that shaped me—the wildness of a childhood untended, freedom from expectation, a robust, learned understanding of my own capabilities’ (281). I would add to that list a deeply-engrained work ethic and ingenuity in creating and producing consumer products that most Americans take for granted, food and shelter first and foremost.

Narratives like Smarsh’s are sorely needed in this hyper-partisan political climate. She is not just from but is more fundamentally *of* so-called red-state flyover country even as she now is also a member of what she refers to as the ‘chattering classes.’ She stands as a bridge between those two worlds, fully aware of the divide between them because she has crossed it. Through her writing, both in *Heartland* and elsewhere, she strives to lessen that divide.

Reviewer Bio

Christie Launius is Associate Professor and Head of the Gender, Women, and Sexuality Studies Department at Kansas State University. With Michele Fazio and Tim Strangleman, she is co-editing the forthcoming *Routledge International Handbook of Working-Class Studies*.