

**Title:** Heartland  
**Author:** Sarah Smarsh  
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“Why do tornadoes always hit trailers?” (204) A common joke among U.S. citizens – and for some, a genuine question – Sarah Smarsh’s book, *Heartland*, takes a look into this question. The answer, she explains, is not that sentient forces of weather seek out those with mobile homes. Rather, residents of mobile homes (read: those in poverty) stand more to lose as their homes offer less stability to weather the storm. Although the same tornado can reach multiple towns of varying socioeconomic status, news channels find their way to the trailer parks – the areas showing the most severe damage and reporting the highest death tolls.

*Heartland* is a memoir recounting the details of Smarsh’s family history. Much like tornadoes’ effects on trailer parks, Smarsh describes life in rural Kansas to show the disparate ways economic policy, nation-wide hardships, and common life setbacks that affect those in poverty. Addressed to Smarsh’s unborn child, August, her memoir follows the origins of her five-generation farming family. Their stories are told out of order, often jumping back and forth between timelines, sorted by topic and theme. The first (and recurring) topic Smarsh touches on is teenage pregnancy – a common beginning for families in poverty. In telling her family’s story, Smarsh addresses her hypothetical baby August. From her grandmother to her mother, Smarsh tells of each woman’s dreams being cut short by an unplanned pregnancy and the proceeding marriage. Their marriages were marked by domestic abuse and eventually ended in divorce. Often, the end of the marriage was followed by the start of another marriage, another child, more abuse, and another divorce. Smarsh emphasizes the cycle she broke from in addressing August, the baby she never conceived, using her family as an example of why it is so hard for so many women in poverty to escape the same cycle.

Although Smarsh was never physically a parent, she also uses August to illustrate the fact that she learned to parent herself – a situation all too common for children born in poverty. Before she labeled August as a figurative baby, August was an even more abstract concept. She was the intuition that would answer the question Smarsh often asked herself, “What would I tell my daughter?” (166) Questions of this nature guided Smarsh throughout childhood, as her parents were often too physically or emotionally absent to solve the problems she faced. Smarsh’s ingenuity reflects that of her family’s, and how they navigated poverty for many generations. While Smarsh found more and more ways to care for herself, her family members creatively exploited firework laws, real-estate tactics, and door-to-door selling when their paychecks didn’t cover that month’s bills. Smarsh’s stories give the reader a first-hand account of the resourcefulness required of each member of a family in poverty just to survive.

Smarsh intricately weaves these accounts, as well as the political actions of the time, to craft her memoir. However, organizing the memoir in such a manner sometimes makes it difficult to follow. Storylines jump person to person, following no chronological order. This makes it difficult to keep track of dates, locations, specific story details, and even the order of events in even a single person’s life. The fact that the characters move so often – “By the time

Jeannie [Smarsh's mom] had started high school, they had changed their address forty-eight times" (7) – make it even more difficult to keep track of the stories. This organization also hinders the reader's ability to correctly relate the characters to each other, as the memoir could jump from a story of her grandma's sister as a child to her mom's cousin as an adult. A few important characters, such as her younger brother and step mom, aren't mentioned until the last two chapters of the book (despite being present from an early point in her life through the present day), but even these characters are easier to keep straight as their timelines remain in chronological order while the timelines of the other characters continue to jump around.

Along with topical organization, Smarsh also relies on repetition to emphasize certain points. Sometimes, this makes a strong impact on the reader. The repetition of the phrase "for her nerves" (182) in the 5<sup>th</sup> chapter of the book makes a deep connection to mention of prescription drugs in the first chapter that uses the same wording. Other times, it felt as if phrases were repeated just so the reader remembers what other events happened in the same time frame – another downfall of not using chronological organization. Yet another use of repetition by Smarsh sometimes weakens the point she is making. For example, a common motif is that elements of poverty are generational – an important lesson from the book. After directly stating multiple times that poverty is passed down, Smarsh states again, "Violence like that is passed down from parent to child just like poverty and so many things." (150) The vagueness of the phrase, "and so many things" makes it appear unimportant, and in turn, the statement would've been more impactful if left implied. Smarsh also repeats the motif, "For many poor women, there is a violence to merely existing: the pregnancies without health care..." (236) to start a section of the book about her own experience with violence in dating. Repeating the lack of healthcare and the topic of teen pregnancy at a point in the book where it is not part of the story weakens the effect of the repetition of various points at which teen pregnancy is actually brought up.

Despite the abandonment of chronological order and overuse of repetition, the memoir can be followed with some effort – a worthy effort for the insights gained from this book. In *Heartland*, Sarah Smarsh gives readers a first-hand account of poverty from a perspective unknown by most of the nation. Her vivid descriptions allow the reader to live each heartbreaking and beautiful memory in real time. I recommend that everyone wanting to know more about class, especially poverty in the Midwest, seizes the opportunity Smarsh gives. The readers who come from a farming family, be warned: the times at which this book hits too close to home will warrant tears. For those both familiar and unfamiliar with the life she lived, Smarsh invites readers to take a look into her childhood, a childhood of which she writes: "I'm grateful for my early life, and I wouldn't wish it on any child" (25).

Reviewed by Demi Wilhelm.