

# The 2019 Loyola University Maryland Common Text: A Resource for Students

## *HEARTLAND: A Memoir of Working Hard and Being Broke in the Richest Country on Earth* by Sarah Smarsh

*Each year, Loyola chooses a common text for all first-year students to read before arriving on campus. During Fall Welcome Week, the entire Class of 2023 will convene, and you will discuss this text with your academic advisor and your fellow students in your Messina group. It is important that you read the text with care and come prepared to discuss the ideas presented in this study guide. The Common Text is considered “common reading” and may be included in Messina course discussions, tests, or assignments. We will also sponsor lectures and events throughout the year to address themes raised in the text.*

### Introduction

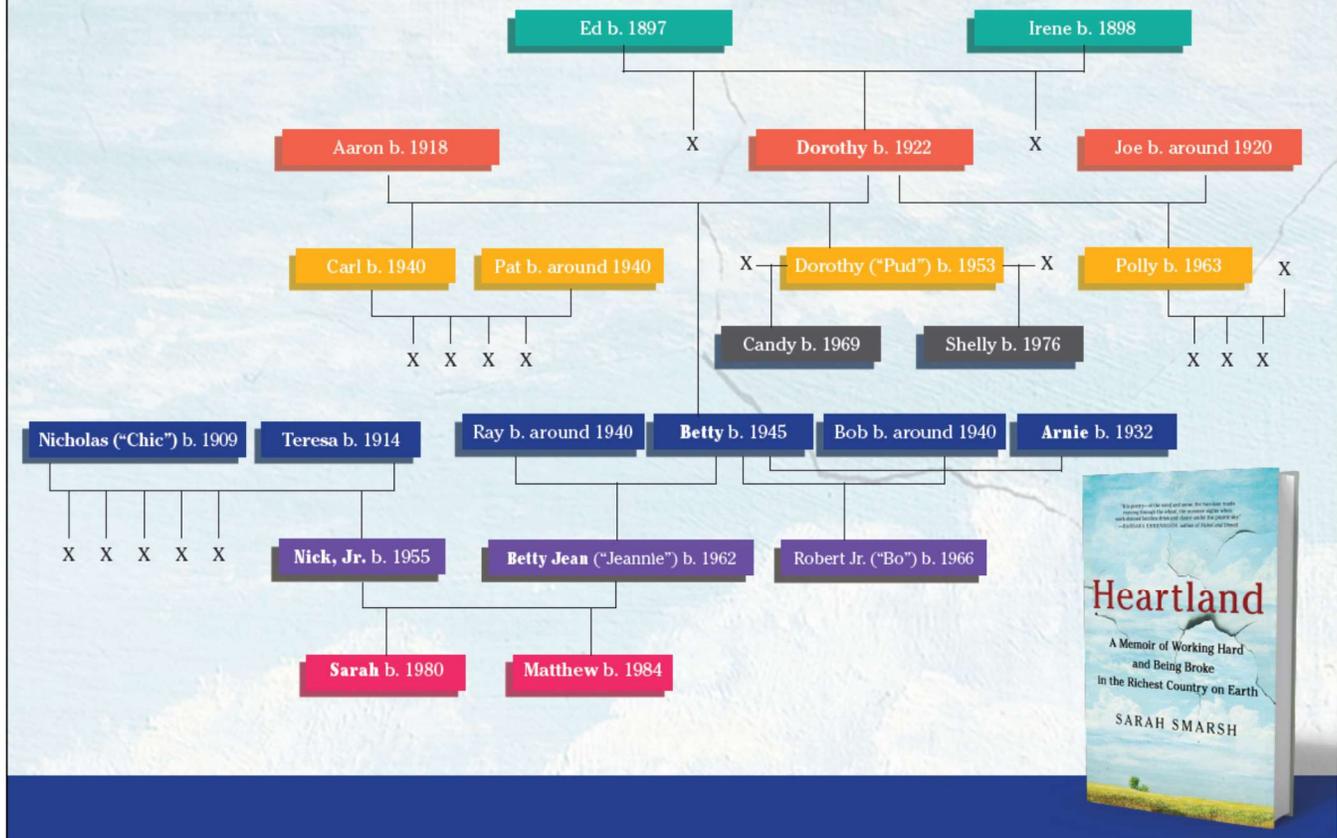
Published in 2018, *Heartland: A Memoir of Working Hard and Being Broke in the Richest Country on Earth* by Sarah Smarsh is a memoir/family history that explores the horror and misery as well as joy and beauty of growing up poor in rural Kansas. Loyola faculty members, administrators, and students chose this book largely because of the powerful questions it raises about the fundamental assumptions and underlying logic of American society. In her memoir, Smarsh recounts her experience with family, education, and the violence that defined many of the relationships between men and women she experienced while growing up in rural Kansas. She brings into focus what it means to grow up poor and invisible, to be forgotten Americans who live in what is called “flyover country.”

The common text program provides you with one of your first opportunities to have a shared academic experience with faculty and fellow classmates. This book will also help you to explore what it means to be Ignatian Citizens, that is, people who “think of themselves as something larger, as responsible for the betterment of our shared world, as men and women who think and act for the rights of others, especially for the disadvantaged and oppressed” (Loyola University Strategic Plan, 2017-2022). As Ignatian Citizens, we must recognize that we are a nation divided by class and that life is profoundly difficult for those born in poverty or impoverished by other means. The ability to develop empathy for others and gain an understanding of our neighbors become even more challenging when poverty is overlaid with differences in race, gender and the divide between rural and urban communities. As you navigate the text exploring the injustices, joys, and overall complexity of poverty, *Heartland* promises an introduction to the depth of thought, imagination, and challenge you can expect from your time at Loyola

### Before You Read

- Consider the title. What does the word “heartland” mean? How does the title work with and against the subtitle?
- Use a mapping app (Google Maps, for example) and search for Cheney, KS. Plot a course from your hometown to there. Click on the “Browse Street View images” and explore the roads of South Central Kansas.
- Listen to the Spotify playlist at: <https://open.spotify.com/playlist/3fzT1XpbZuJ98q5N7XNeHh>. This is a collection of songs—some mentioned in the book, the rest released during the author’s lifetime (1980 to the present)—curated to help build a context for understanding the experiences in *Heartland*.
- Look over the Smarsh family tree and get a sense of the numerous names and complicated relationships.

# Heartland Family Tree



## While You Read:

### Track Characters:

- The book starts as a letter to August. Who is August? Smarsh develops a mantra of sorts with the question: “What would I tell my daughter to do?” How does this mantra emerge? What is its relationship to August? Why do you think it is a successful strategy for Smarsh? Do you think that August is a replacement for something? What might August be replacing? When does her relationship to August change?
- By all accounts, Smarsh’s father Nick is an industrious and hard-working man. Why can’t he get ahead and leave poverty behind? What do you think Smarsh wants you to take away from his life experience? What makes Nick different from the other fathers, like Ray, in her mother’s and grandmother’s lives?
- Consider the moment when Smarsh’s mother, Jeannie, tells her to “Stop breathing” (Smarsh 136). How do Smarsh’s stories about mothers and mothering challenge the typical understanding of mothering? Many would consider her view about mothering controversial, or, at the very least, out of the ordinary. Do you? Why or why not?
- If there is a traditional hero or heroine in this book, it is Smarsh’s grandmother Betty, but she is not always heroic. How long does it take before she represents the values and traits of a traditional heroine? What helps her to achieve those values and traits?
- Smarsh’s paternal grandmother, Irene, plays a very important role in Smarsh’s understanding of herself, even if she doesn’t occupy the same amount of space in the book as her maternal grandmother and her mother. What role does she play?

### Track Policies:

- Smarsh relates her family history to a series of governmental policies from the Homestead Act of 1863 to the Equal Employment Opportunity Act of 1972 and more. How do these varying policies impact her family's lives? Why do you think Smarsh makes these connections?
- Smarsh says she grew up conservative which shocked many of her University of Kansas classmates when she got to college. What specifically did she discover that changed her political view? How did her discovery lead her to change?

### Track Positives:

- While there is much sadness and misery in the book, Smarsh makes sure to point out that her upbringing was not completely miserable. What are some of the positive, fun experiences she has?

### After You Read:

- In Chapter 2, titled "The Body of a Poor Girl," Smarsh examines the impact a life of poverty has on male and female bodies both young and old. What are the varying ways that poverty impacts bodies? What strategies does Smarsh develop for herself to deal with the impact?
- Chapter 2 also includes two references to the concept of metaphor. One is a reference about the church (60) and one in reference about a Bruce Springsteen song (60-61). What do you think Smarsh is saying about how her experience impacts her understanding of metaphor? How might this relate to the role of language as a sign of class status?
- In Chapter 3, "A Stretch of Gravel with Wheat on Either Side," Smarsh describes the rural space in which she lived as "an increasingly rare space to stand" (85). What are the reasons--historical, political, social--Smarsh offers for why rural living has diminished over the years?
- Also in Chapter 3, Smarsh defines the term country. What does she say country means? Which version of the term/idea is she challenging with her definition?
- In Chapter 4, "The Shame a Country Could Assign," Smarsh has her grandmother embody a way to get outside of the shame cycle. She prefaces this solution by writing about Betty: "She claimed to take the hard-punishment stance that both political parties were pushing then. But, as often happens when you're of a class that isn't groomed and formally educated to be a political creature, her behavior revealed a different perspective than her words" (147-8). Why is this intervention into the narrative necessary? What solution does Betty develop?
- Towards the end of Chapter 6, "A Working Class Woman," Smarsh suggests that "a blessing of class" is the ability to use intuition, "a knowing deeper than schooling can render and higher than the dogma of a church" (245). Smarsh goes even further writing that if they lived long enough, the people in her family developed "what you might call powers" (245). What are examples of these powers? Do you believe in the possibility of these powers? Why or why not? How might these powers relate to August, Smarsh's imaginary child? How ironic is it that Smarsh is explaining the reality of these powers to an imaginary child?
- More than a few critics of the book found the rhetorical device of Smarsh's unborn daughter a little too sentimental. However, a few found it a necessary addition to the text. Why does Smarsh develop this device (see the end of Chapter 4). Where do you stand on this issue? Do you think the device works? Why or why not?
- While the book is mostly about the impact of class on her family's life, Smarsh has a lot to say about the intersection between class and gender. What are some of the ways gender impacts class? Why do you think that is? How does Smarsh use the Dolly Parton song "He's a Go Getter" (see the Spotify playlist for a version of the song) to help develop that intersection?

- Smarsh also has much to say about the intersection of class and race, as she often admits to having a certain amount of privilege in her life. Where does that privilege come from? Is she always able to access it?

## **Common Text Essay Contest - Three prizes of \$350 each will be awarded!**

**Answer one of the two prompts below using only the Common Text and your intellect. That is, no outside resources are needed in this exercise in reflection and discernment. The goal is original thought inspired by careful reading. Your essay should be no longer than 5 double-spaced, typed pages.**

**To be eligible, please submit an original essay based on the prompt below to the Messina Office at [messina@loyola.edu](mailto:messina@loyola.edu) no later than midnight on August 14, 2019. We will celebrate the winners during Fall Welcome Weekend at the Common Text Convocation on August 30, 2019.**

### **Essay Contest Prompts (choose either A or B):**

#### **Essay A**

In discussions of the American Dream, a controversial issue is whether it is achievable by all. On the one hand, some say that our culture contains too many obstacles, such as prejudice, poverty, and social inequality. On the other hand, many argue that America is the “land of opportunity” and they offer up various “rags to riches” stories in our society, as well as people who have used hard work to find success. However, things like the American Dream are rarely so black and white. Sarah Smarsh, for example, suggests that there is something more insidious about the notion: “[i]t wasn’t that I’d been wrong to be suspicious of government programs, I realized, but that I’d been wrong to believe in the American Dream. They were two sides of the same trick coin—one promising a good life in exchange for your labor and the other keeping you just alive enough to go on laboring” (273). However, despite her skepticism about the idea of the American Dream, Sarah Smarsh did succeed. In an essay, drawing on the book as well as your own experience and understanding of the American Dream, construct an argument about what you think makes Smarsh successful. Smarsh admits to “hard work,” but what other factors impacted her achievement? Does this invalidate Smarsh’s criticism of the American Dream, or validate it? Please use specific reasons and examples to support your position.

#### **Essay B**

Sarah Smarsh has a vexed relationship with the idea of social class, or socioeconomic status. In Chapter 1, she recognizes “[s]omething about my family was peculiar and willfully ignored in the modern story of our country. My best attempt at explaining it was, “I grew up on a farm.” But it was much more than that. It was income, culture, access, language, work, education, food—the stuff of life itself” (Smarsh 14). In Chapter 4, Smarsh writes: “Class, like race and all the other ways we divide ourselves up to make life miserable, is what I’d later learn is a ‘social construct.’ That’s what my family calls bullshit, and there are places in a person that bullshit can’t touch” (136). By the end of the book, Smarsh states unequivocally that “[c]lass is an illusion with real consequences” (282). In an essay, work through these differing representations of class and describe what you think social class is and the impact it has on people’s lives. Does the definition of class change for Smarsh, or does it just become clearer? How can something that is an illusion have real consequences? Consider the specific elements that define social class and how one becomes identified with one class or another. **Do not use a dictionary definition**, use Smarsh’s text to develop your ideas. Of course, you should also draw on your personal experience to help develop your points.

Visit <https://www.loyola.edu/departments/messina/common-text/study-guide> for further resources to help you navigate the ideas developed in the text.