



Books for Women's History Month By Miranda Ericsson

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Hello, I'm Miranda Ericsson, Readers Librarian for the Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library. Reading stories of strong women throughout history is my favorite way to learn more about women's experiences, challenges, and triumphs.

The Four Winds by Kristin Hannah is the story of Elsa Martinelli, a farmer and mother who survives unimaginable hardships during the dust bowl era. The story is set in Texas, but the people of Kansas and other states in the Great Plains suffered the same miseries. Crops died and families were hungry. The dust was so thick that people wore gas masks, and many suffered or died from dust pneumonia. Elsa and her family face the choice that many families faced in that time: Would they stay with the family land and tough it out, or would they give up everything to start over out West?

I'll be honest, this is not a happy book. It's gritty. People and animals suffer. For many people, the dust bowl meant the loss of family, home, security, and their American dream. Landowners became migrant farmers, vulnerable to wealthy men who sought to exploit them for cheap labor. There is hope in this book, though, and it's empowering to remember what our foremothers were able to overcome. We're made of the same strong stuff, and we carry their stories, onward and upward.

For a nonfiction pairing from a Kansas author, check out Heartland: A Memoir of Working Hard and Being Broke in the Richest Country on Earth, by Sarah Smarsh. It's the true story of three generations of women struggling to survive while working hard to make a living. Smarsh wrote her memoir as a sort of letter to the daughter that she never had, to articulate for that child "what it means to be a poor child in a rich country founded on the promise of equality." She delves into the personal stories of rural poverty, then ties those stories to state and federal policy, the big picture that the poor are often too busy surviving to see, even as it shapes their lives. It's a book that resonates deeply with readers who feel as though Smarsh has held up a mirror to their own lived experience. Smarsh was quoted in the New York Times as saying: "[...] this less-common narrative has prompted thousands of people to find me at speaking events and book signings. They tell me this: Our stories are different but the same. I know the world you wrote about — it's deep in me, and I care about it."

You can find The Four Winds, by Kristin Hannah, and Heartland, by Sarah Smarsh, at your local library. Your librarians would love to help you find a print or digital copy, and recommend more titles. Or, check out the State Library of Kansas digital library. These titles are available through their Cloud Library as ebook and digital audiobook to all residents of Kansas.

This transcript of "Books for Women's History Month" is part of the Humanities Kansas Humanities Hotline, a series of bite-sized micropresentations about Kansas stories – both serious and light-hearted – that are researched and presented by experts across the state. Humanities Hotline topics change monthly. For more information about Humanities Kansas and the Humanities Hotline, visit humanitieskansas.org or call 1-888-416-2018.