

Reviews

Kirkus Reviews 2004 December #2 An account of growing up nomadic, starry-eyed, and dirt poor in the '60s and '70s, by gossip journalist Walls (Dish, 2000). From her first memory, of catching fire while boiling hot-dogs by herself in the trailer park her family was passing through, to her last glimpse of her mother, picking through a New York City Dumpster, Walls's detached, direct, and unflinching account of her rags-to-riches life proves a troubling ride. Her parents, Rex Walls, from the poor mining town of Welch, West Virginia, and Rose Mary, a well-educated artist from Phoenix, love a good adventure and usually don't take into account the care of the children who keep arriving-Lori, Jeannette, Brian, and Maureen-leaving them largely to fend for themselves. For entrepreneur and drinker Rex, "Doing the skedaddle" means getting out of town fast, pursued by creditors. Rex is a dreamer, and someday his gold-digging tool (the Prospector), or, better, his ingenious ideas for energy-efficiency, will fund the building of his desert dream house, the Glass Castle. But moving from Las Vegas to San Francisco to Nevada and back to rock-bottom Welch provides a precarious existence for the kids-on-and-off schooling, living with exposed wiring and no heat or plumbing, having little or nothing to eat. Protesting their paranoia toward authority and their insistence on "true values" for their children ("What doesn't kill you will make you stronger," chirps Mom), these parents have some dubious nurturing practices, such as teaching the children to con and shoplift. The deprivations do sharpen the wits of the children-leading to the family's collective escape to New York City, where they all make good, even the parents, who are content to live homeless. The author's tell-it-like-it-was memoir is moving because it's unsentimental; she neither demonizes nor idealizes her parents, and there remains an admirable libertarian quality about them, though it justifiably elicits the children's exasperation and disgust. Walls's journalistic bare-bones style makes for a chilling, wrenching, incredible testimony of childhood neglect. A pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps, thoroughly American story.

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PW Reviews 2005 January #3 Freelance writer Walls doesn't pull her punches. She opens her memoir by describing looking out the window of her taxi, wondering if she's "overdressed for the evening" and spotting her mother on the sidewalk, "rooting through a Dumpster." Walls's parents-just two of the unforgettable characters in this excellent, unusual book-were a matched pair of eccentrics, and raising four children didn't conventionalize either of them. Her father was a self-taught man, a would-be inventor who could stay longer at a poker table than at most jobs and had "a little bit of a drinking situation," as her mother put it. With a fantastic storytelling knack, Walls describes her artist mom's great gift for rationalizing. Apartment walls so thin they heard all their neighbors? What a bonus-they'd "pick up a little Spanish without even studying." Why feed their pets? They'd be helping them "by not allowing them to become dependent." While Walls's father's version of Christmas presents-walking each child into the Arizona desert at night and letting each one claim a star-was delightful, he wasn't so dear when he stole the kids' hard-earned savings to go on a bender. The Walls children learned to support themselves, eating out of trashcans at school or painting their skin so the holes in their pants didn't show. Buck-toothed Jeannette even tried making her own braces when she heard what orthodontia cost. One by one, each child escaped to New York City. Still, it wasn't long before their parents appeared on their doorsteps. "Why not?" Mom said. "Being homeless is an adventure." (Apr.) Copyright 2005 Reed Business Information.

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Caboodles Book Club Kits

The Glass Castle by Jeannette Walls



Author Biography

New York-based writer Jeannette Walls is a popular gossip columnist for magazines such as *New York* and *Esquire*, and online for MSNBC. Her first book, *Dish: The Inside Story on the World of Gossip*, analyzes the role of gossip in media and public perception, and traces its history from the 1950s up through its explosion in the 1990s. The book includes revealing tidbits as well, showing how Walls gained her reputation as a top gossip columnist. Charles Winecoff, writing for *Entertainment Weekly*, remarked that the book “is at its best when detailing the often-ignominious backgrounds of some of today’s most ubiquitous news figures.” Winecoff added, however, that it “never delivers any real bombshells, and its relentlessly garrulous tone eventually becomes anesthetizing.” *Library Journal* contributor Kelli N. Perkins called Walls’ book “both an entertaining insider’s look and a solid history of gossip.” Jonathan Bing, writing for *Variety*, stated that “Walls proves the quintessential insider, and a highly entertaining one at that. Her accounts of dueling Hollywood gossips Hedda Hopper and Louella Parsons, tabloid TV icons like Barbara Walters and Geraldo Rivera, and high-flying editrix Tina Brown, lay bare the inner workings of the major gossip outlets in their ongoing efforts to somehow balance dish, cronyism and actual news.”

In *The Glass Castle: A Memoir* Walls applies her fascination with people’s lives to herself, revealing her own painful, deprived childhood and a life she once viewed as a shameful secret. Told from Walls’ point of view as a child, the book describes her alcoholic father and artist mother, parents who seemed more intent on their next adventure than on providing basic necessities for their children. At the age of three, Walls caught her dress on fire while attempting to cook a hotdog because her mother was too busy painting to fix her a meal. The family often skipped town in the dead of night to avoid bill collectors or paying back rent on apartments that lacked heat or running water. When they ended up in Welch, Virginia, the small mining town where Walls’ father grew up, the children could add their grandmother’s abuse to their list of hardships. At age seventeen, Walls finally escaped to New York City with her older sister, and the two struggled to support themselves with jobs in the service industry while living in an apartment in the South Bronx. Eventually, Walls graduated from Barnard College, a degree paid for with scholarships, loans, and her own hard-earned money, then went on to a career in journalism.

The Glass Castle describes not only the hardships Walls overcame, but the guilt associated with improving her lot in life. When her parents moved to New York, they became squatters in lower Manhattan, digging through dumpsters and refusing to acknowledge that they needed assistance, their lives a sharp contrast to Walls’ own successful Park Avenue existence. *Spectator* reviewer Olivia Glazebrook remarked that Walls’ memoir “is full of astonishing episodes, but the book is a success beyond its ability to shock. Jeannette Walls ... has managed to balance her account with great precision: as she and her siblings did, we must both love and hate her parents.” In an *Entertainment Weekly* review of the memoir, Nicolas Fonesca noted, “it’s safe to say that none of her scoops could outshine the blunt truths on these pages.” Booklist reviewer Stephanie Zvirin commented: “shocking, sad, and occasionally bitter, this gracefully written account speaks candidly, yet with surprising affection.” A contributor for *Kirkus Reviews* observed that Walls’ “tell-it-like-it-was memoir is moving because it’s unsentimental; she neither demonizes nor idealizes her parents, and there remains an admirable libertarian quality about them, though it justifiably elicits the children’s exasperation and disgust.”

In an interview with *Entertainment Weekly* contributor Karen Valby, Walls explained her reluctance to tell people about her past: “I never set out to deceive anybody,” the journalist maintained. “I’m a bad liar. I just didn’t want to be ‘Oh, the girl with the homeless mom.’”

Author Biography

PERSONAL INFORMATION

Born c. 1960; daughter of Rex and Rose Marie (an artist) Walls; married John Taylor (a writer). Education: Barnard College, B.A., 1984. Addresses: Home: New York, NY; and Long Island, NY. Agent: c/o Author Mail, Scribner, Simon & Schuster, 1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020.

CAREER

Journalist. New York Magazine, New York, NY, gossip columnist, 1987-93; Esquire, New York, NY, gossip columnist, 1993-98; MSNBC.com, gossip columnist, beginning 1998.

WRITINGS:

- Dish: The Inside Story on the World of Gossip, Spike (New York, NY), 2000.
- The Glass Castle: A Memoir, Scribner (New York, NY), 2005.
- Half Broke Horses, Scribner (New York, NY), 2009.

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Discussion Questions

1. Though *The Glass Castle* is brimming with unforgettable stories, which scenes were the most memorable for you? Which were the most shocking, the most inspiring, the funniest?
2. Discuss the metaphor of a glass castle and what it signifies to Jeannette and her father. Why is it important that, just before leaving for New York, Jeannette tells her father that she doesn't believe he'll ever build it? (p. 238).
3. The first story Walls tells of her childhood is that of her burning herself severely at age three, and her father dramatically takes her from the hospital: "You're safe now" (p. 14). Why do you think she opens with that story, and how does it set the stage for the rest of the memoir?
4. Rex Walls often asked his children, "Have I ever let you down?" Why was this question (and the required "No, Dad" response) so important for him -- and for his kids? On what occasions did he actually come through for them?
5. Jeannette's mother insists that, no matter what, "life with your father was never boring" (p. 288). What kind of man was Rex Walls? What were his strengths and weaknesses, his flaws and contradictions?
6. Discuss Rose Mary Walls. What did you think about her description of herself as an "excitement addict"? (p. 93).
7. Though it portrays an incredibly hardscrabble life, *The Glass Castle* is never sad or depressing. Discuss the tone of the book, and how do you think that Walls achieved that effect?
8. Describe Jeannette's relationship to her siblings and discuss the role they played in one another's lives.
9. In college, Jeannette is singled out by a professor for not understanding the plight of homeless people; instead of defending herself, she keeps quiet. Why do you think she does this?
10. The two major pieces of the memoir -- one half set in the desert and one half in West Virginia -- feel distinct. What effect did such a big move have on the family -- and on your reading of the story? How would you describe the shift in the book's tone?
11. Were you surprised to learn that, as adults, Jeannette and her siblings remained close to their parents? Why do you think this is?
12. What character traits -- both good and bad -- do you think that Jeannette inherited from her parents? And how do you think those traits shaped Jeannette's life?
13. For many reviewers and readers, the most extraordinary thing about *The Glass Castle* is that, despite everything, Jeannette Walls refuses to condemn her parents. Were you able to be equally nonjudgmental?
14. Like Mary Karr's *Liars' Club* and Rick Bragg's *All Over But the Shoutin'*, Jeannette Walls' *The Glass Castle* tells the story of a wildly original (and wildly dysfunctional) family with humor and compassion. Were there other comparable memoirs that came to mind? What distinguishes this book?

Source: "The Glass Castle: A Memoir by Jeannette Walls." Reading Group Guides the Online Community for Reading Groups. Copyright 2001-2010. Reading Group-Guides.com, Web 16 Sept 2010. <http://www.readinggroupguides.com/guides3/glass_castle1.asp>.