

Author Spotlight

JEANNETTE WALLS



Jeannette Walls was born in Phoenix, Arizona. She grew up in the southwest and in Welch, West Virginia. She graduated from Barnard College and was a journalist in New York City for 20 years. Her memoir, *The Glass Castle*, was on the *New York Times* bestseller list for more than five years and won several awards. She is also the author of two additional nonfiction books, *Dish: The Inside Story on the World of Gossip* (2001) and *Half Broke Horses* (2009) as well as the fiction book *The Silver Star* (2013). Walls lives in rural Virginia with her husband, the writer John Taylor.

Published in 2009, *The Glass Castle* is a remarkable memoir of resilience and redemption, and gives the reader a revelatory look into a family at once deeply dysfunctional and uniquely vibrant. When sober, Rex, Jeannette's brilliant and charismatic father, captured his children's imagination, teaching them physics, geology, and how to embrace life fearlessly. But when he drank, he was dishonest and destructive. Her mother, Rose Mary, was a free spirit who abhorred the idea of domesticity and didn't want the responsibility of raising a family.

As the dysfunction of the family escalated, the children—Jeannette, Lori, Maureen and Brian—learned to take care of themselves. They fed, clothed, and protected one another, and eventually found their way to New York. Their parents followed them, choosing to be homeless even as their children prospered as adults. By the memoir's end, Jeannette has finally reconciled her past and present and no longer feels the need to hide behind lies or half-truths. The memoir liberates her and it's her writing, which allows her to do what she enjoys most about being an author; communicating truthfully with the world.

In a 2005 column for *Publisher's Weekly*, Walls wrote of her surprise that many thought her memoir was largely fictionalized and exaggerated. She goes on to say, "The most important goal of a memoir writer is to tell the truth...my brother, my sisters and my mother have all said that while they felt my book was substantially true, any memoir they would have written would have been entirely different".

The Glass Castle is truly astonishing—a memoir permeated by the intense love of a peculiar but loyal family. Walls' story is one of triumph against all odds, as well as a tale of unconditional love in a family that despite its profound flaws gave her the fiery determination to carve out a successful life on her own terms.

Prepared by Maureen Socha

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Discussion Questions *The Glass Castle*

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. Her father dramatically takes her from the hospital, saying "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 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 set in the desert and one 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,--Jeannette Walls refuses to condemn her parents. Were you able to be equally nonjudgmental?
14. Like Mary Karr's *Liar's 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 from the other memoirs you've read?

Source: www.readinggroupguides.com