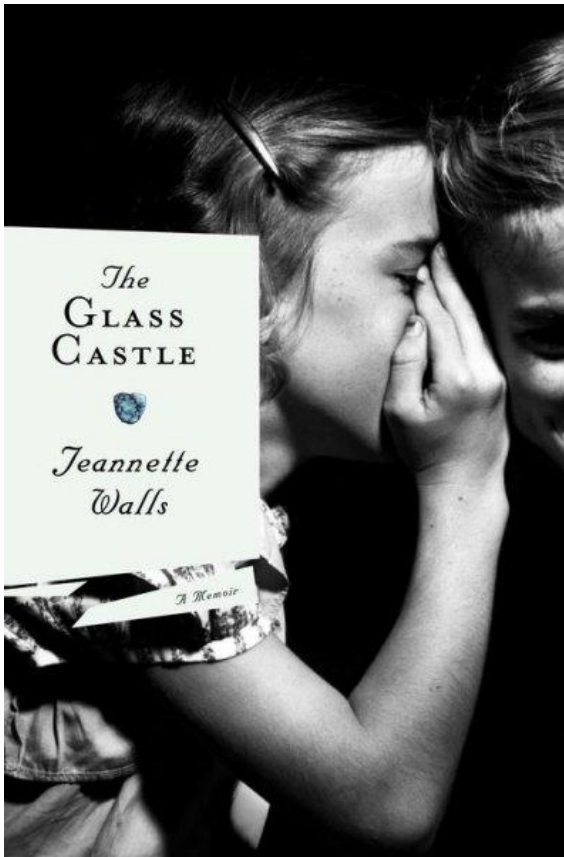


About the book...



Jeannette Walls grew up with parents whose ideals and stubborn nonconformity were both their curse and their salvation. Rex and Rose Mary Walls had four children. In the beginning, they lived like nomads, moving among Southwest desert towns, camping in the mountains. Rex was a charismatic, brilliant man who, when sober, captured his children's imagination, teaching them physics, geology, and above all, how to embrace life fearlessly. Rose Mary, who painted and wrote and couldn't stand the responsibility of providing for her family, called herself an "excitement addict." Cooking a meal that would be consumed in fifteen minutes had no appeal when she could make a painting that might last forever.

Later, when the money ran out, or the romance of the wandering life faded, the Walls retreated to the dismal West Virginia mining town -- and the family -- Rex Walls had done everything he could to escape. He drank. He stole the grocery money and disappeared for days. As the dysfunction of the family escalated, Jeannette and her brother and sisters had to fend for themselves, supporting one another as they weathered their parents' betrayals and, finally, found the resources and will to leave home

What is so astonishing about Jeannette Walls is not just that she had the guts and tenacity and intelligence to get out, but that she describes her parents with such deep affection and generosity. Hers is a story of triumph against all odds, but also a tender, moving 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.

For two decades, Jeannette Walls hid her roots. Now she tells her own story. A regular contributor to MSNBC.com, she lives in New York and Long Island and is married to the writer John Taylor.

About the author...



One of four siblings, Jeannette Walls was born in Phoenix, Arizona in 1960. Her family lived in various southwestern towns before settling in Welch, West Virginia when she was ten. She moved to New York City at aged 17 and graduated from Columbia University's Barnard College with honors in 1984. She went on to become a reporter for New York magazine, *Esquire* and *USA Today*. She has appeared regularly on television, including the Today Show, CNN and PrimeTimeLive and is widely known as a former gossip columnist for MSNBC.com.

She currently lives in northern Virginia and is married to writer John Taylor. Her memoir, *The Glass Castle* (2005) was a New York Times bestseller with movie rights optioned by Paramount (but as of October 2009 there is no sign of the movie entering production). Her next book, *Half Broke Horses: A True-Life Novel*, was published in October 2009.

Reviews

Booklist Reviews /*Starred Review*/

Walls, who spent years trying to hide her childhood experiences, allows the story to spill out in this remarkable recollection of growing up. From her current perspective as a contributor to MSNBC online, she remembers the poverty, hunger, jokes, and bullying she and her siblings endured, and she looks back at her parents: her flighty, self-indulgent mother, a Pollyanna unwilling to assume the responsibilities of parenting, and her father, troubled, brilliant Rex, whose ability to turn his family's downward-spiraling circumstances into adventures allowed his children to excuse his imperfections until they grew old enough to understand what he had done to them--and to himself. His grand plans to build a home for the family never evolved: the hole for the foundation of the "The Glass Castle," as the dream house was called, became the family garbage dump, and, of course, a metaphor for Rex Walls' life. Shocking, sad, and occasionally bitter, this gracefully written account speaks candidly, yet with surprising affection, about parents and about the strength of family ties--for both good and ill.

Library Journal

MSNBC gossip columnist Walls (Dish: The Inside Story on the World of Gossip) wants to set the record straight about her background. Writing from a child's perspective, she relates the peripatetic lifestyle of her family, brought on by an alcoholic father and an artist mother who feels that rules and discipline hold people back. Neither parent holds a job for long, which forces the family either to skedaddle when the bills mount up or to move in with in-laws. The kids end up having to fend for themselves, endure the teasing of their schoolmates, sleep on cardboard boxes, and scrounge for food. This is an extreme example of a dysfunctional family, and Walls does not shrink from exposing every detail. With one parental relapse after another, the reader begins to wonder how Walls will break out. Finally, she does so by joining her school newspaper and finding her calling, then moving to New York City to pursue it. Walls, who openly expresses

her shame and embarrassment about her parents, seems to have written this memoir to forgive herself for hiding her background. While she may be glad to get it off her chest, the reader is none the better for it. For large public libraries only.

Kirkus Reviews

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 hotdogs 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.

Publishers Weekly

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."

Literary Criticism

Title: A Child's Poverty Is the Reality of *Glass Castle*

Author(s): Linda Gampert

Publication Details: America's Intelligence Wire. (Apr. 6, 2006):

Source: **Contemporary Literary Criticism**. Ed. Jeffrey W. Hunter. Vol. 299. Detroit: Gale. From *Literature Resource Center*.

Document Type: Critical essay

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[(review date 6 April 2006) *In the following review, Gampert praises Walls for creating, in her memoir The Glass Castle, a "world that both shocks and saddens through prose marked by witty humor and clever dialogue."*]

Clever dialogue and sharp and touching humor make Jeannette Walls' nonfiction memoir one to remember. Rarely does a book come along that can be finished in one night. **The Glass Castle** is one of these rare gems that keeps the reader awake and guessing into the late hours of the night.

"I was sitting in a taxi, wondering if I had overdressed for the evening, when I looked out the window and saw Mom rooting through a Dumpster." So begins Jeannette Walls' haunting autobiography of her uncanny and often tragic childhood. The reader is immediately drawn into a world that both shocks and saddens through prose marked by witty humor and clever dialogue.

Walls begins her journey by remembering when she was just 3 years old cooking a hot dog on her own. Her mother Rose Mary was too consumed with her latest painting to notice her daughter standing over a stove with a pot of boiling water. As she is cooking, Walls looks down to see flames creeping up her best pink dress.

She is brought to the hospital in a neighbor's car (her family did not own one at the time) and ends up with third-degree burns on her body. The nurse at the hospital asks why a 3-year-old was making herself hot dogs, and Walls responds "Mom says I'm mature for my age and she lets me cook for myself a lot." Six weeks into her hospital stay, her father Rex comes and kidnaps her from the hospital to avoid paying the bill.

The Glass Castle retells how Walls, her two sisters and her one brother moved around from Southwest desert towns to escape the constant threat of bill collectors. Her father was a smart man who taught his children about physics and geology, but had a "little bit of a drinking situation." When he was sober, Rex was a kind and charming man who captured Walls' young heart the way every good father should. But when he drank, Rex turned into a monster. Her eccentric mother Rose Mary believed in being self-sufficient and that cooking a meal that took too much time was a waste. A painting was a much more important thing to spend time on because a good one lasted a lifetime.

The Walls children did not receive presents for Christmas, partly because they had no money for gifts and partly because her parents did not believe in buying useless junk. They often went to bed hungry and resorted to digging through the garbage at school to find leftovers from their classmates. As they got older, some of the Walls children, including the author, faced sexual abuse from family members. Her mother asked her if

she's been hurt and Walls responded with a sheepish "No." Rose Mary tells her daughter abuse is a matter of perception and that too many women make a big deal out of sexual assault anyway.

The hardships that Walls and her siblings face as they grow up are at times unbelievable and repulsive. From resorting to eating butter for dinner, to living in a house with no running water, to cold winter nights huddled in a bed with all her siblings, to having to paint their legs with marker to cover holes in tattered pants, Walls keeps readers on their toes. Her natural gift for storytelling and her ability to keep any bitterness toward her parents from diluting the story is both refreshing and moving.

"We were always supposed to pretend our life was one long and incredibly fun adventure," Walls writes about her childhood.

Author Walls may seem like a surprising candidate for such a heartbreaking and poverty-stricken childhood. She is a regular contributor for MSNBC.com as the gossip columnist, dishing out the latest juice on Britney Spears and Paris Hilton. Her childhood was a secret that only a few close friends knew about until she wrote the memoir.

"I hadn't told people about my past; when people asked, I'd demur or lie a little bit," Walls admitted in an interview posted on one New York Web site, the Gothamist. "Some people think my parents are absolute monsters and should've had their children taken away from them. Some think they were these great free-spirited creatures who had a lot of wisdom that a lot of parents today don't." Walls debated about writing her memoir for almost 20 years while fear of failure kept her from completing it. She said that after writing the book, many people commented to her that aspects of their own childhood reminded them of her story and that she is not the only person with a weird family.

"I hate this word 'bonding,' but it is bonding--like oh my god, we're all freaks," Walls said in the interview.

The Glass Castle made the *New York Times* list of 100 notable books in 2005 and received encouraging reviews. *Publishers Weekly* also listed it as a "most memorable memoir." "I've never really felt bitter. I'm a really lucky person. I've got a great job, I've got a wonderful husband, I've got a great life," Walls said about her ability to overcome her past and make the most of what little she had been given. "I'm not going to say I don't have any scars from the whole thing, both figuratively and literally." Forget James Frey's controversial *A Million Little Pieces* and read this extremely moving memoir of loss and redemption.

Source Citation

Gampert, Linda. "A Child's Poverty Is the Reality of *Glass Castle*." *America's Intelligence Wire* (6 Apr. 2006). Rpt. in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Ed. Jeffrey W. Hunter. Vol. 299. Detroit: Gale, 2011. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 18 July 2011.

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Discussion questions

(http://www.bookbrowse.com/reviews/index.cfm/book_number/1560/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, 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?

Multimedia

CBS Interview: "The Glass Castle" by Jeanette Walls

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IW0XVno-0gM>

Readalikes (Skokie Public Library)

Bragg, Rick. *All Over but the Shoutin'*. 1997
Burroughs, Augusten. *Running With Scissors: A Memoir*. 2002.
Dobie, Kathy. *The Only Girl in the Car*. 2003.
Fuller, Alexandra. *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight: An African Childhood*. 2001.
Helget, Nicole Lea. *The Summer of Ordinary Ways*. 2005.
Karr, Mary. *The Liars' Club*. 1995.
Kayson, Susanna. *Girl, Interrupted*. 1993.
Kotlowitz, Alex. *There Are No Children Here*. 1991.
Lauck, Jennifer. *Blackbird: A Childhood Lost and Found*. 2000.
Lyden, Jacki. *Daughter of the Queen of Sheba*. 1997.
MacDonald, Michael P. *All Souls: A Family Story from Southie*. 1999.
Mah, Adeline Yen. *Falling Leaves: A True Story of an Unwanted Chinese Daughter*. 1997
Moss, Barbara Robinette. *Change Me Into Zeus' Daughter*. 1999.
Pelzer, David. *A Child Called "It"*. 1995.
Rhodes, Richard. *A Hole in the World: An American Boyhood*. 1990.
Smith, Alison. *Name All the Animals*. 2004.
Summer, Lauralee. *Learning Joy from Dogs Without Collars*. 2003.
Wolff, Tobias. *This Boy's Life*. 1989.

Activity

Have each person in the group share something artistic or creative that their parents did when they were children. Take a minute to think back to your own childhood and any projects they may have been working on.



Ann Arbor District Library