

Reading Guide

A #1 BookSense Reading Group Pick! ***The Glass Castle*, by Jeannette Walls**

Reading Group Guide

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 their other comparable memoirs that came to mind? What distinguishes this book?

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The Glass Castle: A Memoir
by Jeannette Walls

Caution! It is likely that the following reading guide will reveal, or at least allude to, key plot details. Therefore, if you haven't yet read this book, but are planning on doing so, you may wish to proceed with caution to avoid spoiling your later enjoyment.

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Transcript: Jeannette Walls on Poverty and Homelessness

January 2, 2007

HINOJOSA: Hello, everyone and welcome to the program, I'm Maria Hinojosa. This week we're speaking to Jeannette Walls, author of "The Glass Castle," a memoir chronicling her youth and conditions of extreme poverty and occasional homelessness that she endured. Her book has won numerous awards and spent over a year on the New York Times Best Seller list. You might also recognize Jeannette for her entertainment reporting for The Scoop on MSNBC. Welcome, Jeannette.

WALLS: Thank you.

HINOJOSA: You know, Jeannette, one of the things that fascinated me is how people can essentially dismiss other people if they don't seem "quote unquote" normal or right, you know, if they're the other, if they're homeless. And you wrote this incredible memoir because, in essence, you were one of those people. You were one of the people that people dismissed.

WALLS: Yeah, Maria, and it's very complicated. You know, one of the reasons that I wanted to write this book is to give a face to homelessness. As you—it's very easy to—to think of somebody who's on the street as different from us. "Oh, that's a—~~that—that would never~~ happen to me. This—these people bring it on themselves." Or, there just sort of anonymous.

But, this is something that I lived with it—as—with a secret for a long time. I didn't tell anybody that—that my mother was living on the street, and in fact, that I had been homeless from time to time. And it—it was a source of shame, but also one of the reasons I didn't explain it is because I think it's so complex. But, I wanted to—to say, "You know, there's a story behind each of these people." Every time you see somebody on the street, there's a reason that this person is here. And the reasons are as varied as the people themselves. But, don't dismiss people as being different from you and—and that—I think that peo—one of the reasons that people can and try to distance themselves from people is to sort of anesthetize themselves to think, "Oh, that could never happen to me, I'm so unlike that person."

But, I think one of the things that I tried to do in my book is to say, "You know, we're not all that different," you know. One of the great shockers to me has been the number of people who've come up to me and read my story and said, "You know, the details of our lives are very different, but we have a lot in common." And it's actually been the great gift the readers have given me in exchange for coming clean about my story, is they've taken me out of isolation and made me see what we all have in common.

HINOJOSA: So, now, Jeannette when you're walking down the street and you see someone who's homeless, or you see a little kid who's, you know, the way you were—maybe not dressed alright, maybe not so clean—what do you do in those moments?

WALLS: Well, the thing that I do the most is—is I just try to smile at the person. I—I believe that the thing that people in those situations need more than anything is dignity and a sense of pride. And I think if you speak to just about any homeless person, one of the things that they'll tell you is people look right past them. They—try not to see them. And if you just smile and nod at the person, I think that just means the world to them.

HINOJOSA: You mean, making the invisible visible just with simple kind of eye recognition, a smile—

WALLS: Exactly.

HINOJOSA: I see you.

WALLS: Exactly—and—and just maybe a little nod, and the person is just invariably grateful that—that they haven't been, as you said, made invisible.

HINOJOSA: Talk to me about feeling powerless, because there were moments when I felt that you as a child growing up with—with your parents, who we'll talk about a little bit later on—but there were moments when, you know, I wanted to scream at the people who were treating you badly when you were growing up. Because, I felt bad that you were powerless as, you know, as a kid who was sometimes homeless and living in these, you know, very difficult situation.

WALLS: I suppose I was powerless in—in one way. You know, kids—and—and I think that that's—that's a whole problem with homelessness, again, it's easy to dismiss people who are homeless, or they ask for it, they brought it on themselves—but, the kids of the homeless, that's the real heartbreaker. They—they're not in a situation to change their lives. I personally feel that I was luckier than—than many people in our financial circumstances that my parents gave me hope, which I think a lot of kids in the same circumstances don't have.

But, one of the wonderful things that's happened—in talking to people about my story is—is, I think—a number of people have come up to me and said, "After having read your story, I will never look at the shabby kids in my class the same way."

HINOJOSA: Oh, that must be amazing for you.

WALLS: It's—I—you know, I feel like I could get struck by lightning and it would be fine now that I've gone my job on this planet. Because, you know—my—my fondest hope for the book while I was writing it—which, I have to tell you, it was—it was not an easy decision to write it because I was so ashamed about the details of my life, and I think that that's—I think that that's the worst thing about homeless is the shame and the embarrassment and the humiliation. And it was just very difficult for me to come out and say, "This is who I am."

But, while I was writing it, I hoped that people who read it, who didn't know about—about people like me, would read it and say, "Hey, you know, she's not that different from me." And, then while I was writing it, I got an even fonder hope for the book, and that was that people who were like me would read it and say, "Hey, you know, she's not that different from me," and would understand, "This is what it takes to try to change your situation."

And, you know, the first—the first hope came—has come true numerous times when people tell me that they gave the book to a friend, who give it to a friend who gave it to a popular kid in the class who said, you know, "Oh, my gosh, there's a girl in my class who has greasy hair and always wears the same outfit and I always make fun of her. And now I understand." But, that second hope came true—a number of occasions where—kids have told me that, "Oh, my God, my life is just like yours and now I see there is a way for me to change it."

HINOJOSA: The interesting thing, though, is because even when you had power, you know, as—a columnist with New York Magazine, E! Entertainment Network, Esquire Magazine, now as—with MSNBC, you said that you thought that if you came clean and revealed your life, that you would lose everything.

WALLS: There was no doubt in my mind. There was no doubt in my mind that once people knew the truth about me that I was gonna be ostracized, that people would throw rocks at me. And, I realize now that part of that was taking these—these old fears and experiences from my childhood when—when people found out how poor we really were, they would throw rocks at me. And—and so, I think that you carry along some of those old—those residual feelings with you, some of those residual fears.

It's interesting because after I came clean about my story, I thought, "Oh, my gosh, everybody's treated me so well and has only greeted me with love and—and warmth, and embracement." But, then, it's interesting—somebody who I worked with at one of these magazines came up and she said, "I think you were right to keep it all sec—a secret because, you would have been stereotyped. If you'd revealed this early in your career, you—people would have thought of you differently."

So, I—I don't really know what the answer is right now. I—I'm—I'm embarrassed that I was as embarrassed as I was. But, at the same time, people do stereotype. And, I think it's very easy for people, first of all, to blame themselves the way that I did—to think that these bad things happen to you because you're somehow inferior.

But, I think that despite my wonderful experiences since having come clean about my life, I think that people also do tend to blame the victim and say, "Oh, something was wrong with you. You're this type of person." The fact that I revealed after I'd completely changed my life has made people say, "Oh, great, she's turned around her life." But, if I'd revealed it early on in my career—you know, when—when I was still, sort of trying to make a name for myself, I think it would have labeled me in—in a certain way. And I think that people are very quick to stereotype and to—and to say, "Oh, well this person belongs in this category."

HINOJOSA: Now we're gonna have a—a link to a little segment of your book so our—our pod cast listeners can look at that. But, you know, there—there is, of course, when I first started reading it and I—we should come clean, we went to school together at (NOISE) Barnard, though we didn't really know each other at Barnard. And—and I—I happen to think that you were the most extraordinary and sophisticated and best dressed, wealthiest woman in all of Barnard, and I was the one that was struggling to get the—the next meal. So, we had no idea about each other at—at the time in Barnard.

WALLS: Bless your heart, I was an impostor. I worked very hard at it too, honey.

HINOJOSA: Well, you worked—you worked it, girl, cause it was working. So, this part of your book that you start out—and when I started reading this I was like, "Oh, my God—" you say, you know, you're sitting in this taxi wondering if you had overdressed for this fabulous evening out when you looked out the—the window and you see your mom rooting through a dumpster. And—and for the people who haven't read the book, I'm gonna fast forward to when you were now eight or nine years old.

You're growing up in this small town and—and I love the way you say it. You said you were the poorest people in a very poor town. You caught water in a rain bucket, you had no bathroom. You had a roof with lots of holes in it. I found in your story that the strength that you had—and your brothers and sisters to just, (NOISE) I don't know, make it was phenomenal. Where did that come from?

WALLS: You know, I didn't have a whole lotta choice, you know, you—you just gotta survive. And—I honestly do believe that some of us kids who had tough childhoods are at—in some ways, an advantage over the more privileged kids in this world. I really do believe that. We're fighters, we know how to—how to make a situation work for us.

The—the trick is knowing when to stop fighting. And I think that that's something I'm just now starting to learn is—

HINOJOSA: What do you mean?

WALLS: —is that, you know, I mean I was—I went to great lengths to—to hide the extent of our poverty. Even when I was living down there I would—you know, wash my face—when we couldn't catch rain water, I'd wash my face in snow, or with ice cycles, cause I just didn't want people to know how poor we were. And, when I came to New York, I was just so determined to make it. I was not going to be looked down on for the rest of my life and having people make fun of me. And—I thought I'd escaped my past, but the past has a funny way of catching up with you and my parents ended up moving to New York as well and—and did end up homeless.

You know, and—and when I saw my mother on the street that day, you know, to my shame to this day I'm—I'm very ashamed that I—I didn't acknowledge her. I slid down in the back of the taxi and asked the driver to take me home. I got together with her a couple days later and I said, "What am I supposed to tell people when they ask me about you, Mom?" And she looked at me as though I'd just asked the silliest question in the world and she said, "Tell them the truth."

HINOJOSA: Love your mom. Your mom's amazing.

WALLS: The woman has a lot of wisdom to her. And—at the time it seemed impossible. "How could I possibly explain to people the truth?" But, it also seemed unavoidable.

You know, here I'm a journalist. I write about other people's lives and other people's secrets, and for so long I've been hiding my own truth. I've been running from my own truth and—and, you might call that ironic, you might call it hypocritical. Whatever it was, I had to confront my past.

I hugely underestimated people's capacity for understanding a story if you're willing to come clean and really be honest about it. And I think that that's one of the great challenges we really face right now is—is explaining the story completely. I think that people are good and kind if they understand. But, I think that the impulse is to not understand because it does—it shields you and anesthetizes you. And, if you're able to blame the people on the street, "Oh, they—they belong there for a reason because they're drug addicts or irresponsible," then that's easier to think that, "Oh, they're different from us, and that would never happen to me."

HINOJOSA: So, I want to know about your mom, right now. How's she doing? Is she still in New York? Is—is she homeless at this point? Is she—

WALLS: You know, one of the funny things about my mother is that, if you asked her—she would say—in fact, I did ask her this—and she said, "Oh, I was never homeless." I said, "Mom, you lived under the George Washington Bridge for three months." And she said, "Right, that was my home." And some people would—some people would say she's in denial, you know, she would deny that, but, that was her way of def—defining and coping with it.

HINOJOSA: Coping? Is that—I mean, is it coping or it that she's saying, "Jeanette, that was my home."

WALLS: "That was my home. That was my home." And, you know—but, even when she was homeless from time to time, she would acknowledge being homeless but—and she said while she was reading my book she said, "I'd forgotten some of these things when they happened at time. But, when I read them you were right."

But, my mother, you know—she's—many people have asked me if I think that she's mentally ill. I—I don't know, she's never been diagnosed as that. She certainly does not have the same values that most people do. She's a highly educated woman, she's very resourceful—and I hesitate to say that she chose to be homeless. Because, I don't know—you know, do drug addicts choose to be homeless? Whatever bent of her personality, she wasn't willing to make the compromises that many people are to have—I mean, to say to get her back into the system. She would resist that.

HINOJOSA: So, when people say they choose it, and you know that your mom, you know, has basically resisted your—your efforts to help and pay the bills or whatever—help our listeners figure that one out.

WALLS: It's—it's just—it's very tough, but I—I think that there are no simple answers with somebody like my mother. My mother enjoys the struggle. But, I will tell you also, her building—you know, she moved into an abandoned building and she just loved the fight. She loved the struggle. But it—the building caught on fire not that long ago and she got displaced again. And—the woman is 72 years old and—I—my husband and I twisted her arm and she's actually now living with me and my husband.

HINOJOSA: You're kidding?

WALLS: And she says it's a temporary situation, she's—she's—every time we go through, you know, a town with abandoned buildings, she always eyes them very, "Oh, that's a nice one, maybe I'll move there." But—

HINOJOSA: The reality is that, you know, that at any moment your mom could just walk out and say, "Okay, Jeannette it was nice being in your home—my home for three months, but it's time to go."

WALLS: She could any moment. Right now, I've never seen her happier. So, we'll see what happens. I mean—she's—she's living here. I think it's quite wonderful, I think it's a wonderful situation. She doesn't live in our house, but we have a little outbuilding that she stays in and it—and it's worked very, very well.

I think one of the great tragedies of modern life is that they're aren't more extended families, that you can't take in, you know, that—so many people—when I was living in New York City, there was no way I could take her in. But, I think that, you know, with my living situation now it's—it's very easy. But, I think with—with life today, we don't have the extended families that we used to of, you know, the nineteenth century where we could just take in somebody who doesn't quite fit into the system.

HINOJOSA: You know, there were times, of course, when I was reading the book—and in—and in processing the book—where I really, you know—as—as erratic as your mom is, and—and it was hard, you know, when she'd be—hoarding her chocolate bars, although I'm the one that hoards the chocolate bars in my home, but anyway—you know, I—I felt like your mom was really, like, the sanest of us all. She has no trappings. She doesn't fight for status. She's not, you know, she's not a consumer. She lives her life fully. She trusts her gut. She's—

WALLS: Well, bless your heart for saying that, because I—you know, it's very interesting to me how people react very differently to my mother when they read the book. Some people thought she was a criminal and should have been thrown—locked up and thrown away, really, and—and should have been committed. Other people think that she's an unique American character of free spirit and an artist who certainly had her flaws, but who doesn't? But, I—you know, I—I think it's been fascinating to hear people's reactions to her.

And, you know, when I—when I confronted her about being homeless, she confronted me back in saying, "Whose values are screwed up? You're the one who won't acknowledge your mother in public," and it gave me a lot to think about.

HINOJOSA: And at the same time, at the end—how do I—I don't want to reveal this for those who don't—who haven't yet read the book, but, you know, if—if you're gonna read the book, then, you know, pause on this part and move on the next question—because your mom reveals that, in fact, she had a plot of land worth lots and lots of money. And that the point where, actually, for me as a reader, that's when I got mad at her.

WALLS: Well, you know, it's interesting because—readers are very smart. I—I—you know, one of the things that has shocked me is—is how sometimes readers are smarter than—than I am about my own life. And my initial reaction to finding out, "Oh, my gosh, you mean all of this deprivation that we went through was—was caprice on your part? You could have just sold that," and one reader was—was arguing that point, and then another reader at an event that I attended said, "No, if she would have sold that, her husband, your father, would have just got them—his hands on the money and it would have all been gone in one drunker bender, and she'd have nothing to pass on to her children." So, you know, it's just made me think, "You know, nothing in life is simple and just don't point the finger and blame other people."

HINOJOSA: How do you make that—that idea—that notion, that possibility of humanity—how do you translate that into public policy? I mean, I'm sure you've thought about this, you're, you know, super-smart. But, how do you make it into something that works in terms of public policy?

WALLS: You know, I think that ignorance is—is our biggest enemy and—and just trying to understand people's situations—understand what we can do, what we can't do. As far as I'm concerned, the best public policies are the ones that help people help themselves—that have the resources out there. You know, you give somebody a fish and you give 'em a meal. But, you give 'em a—you teach him how to fish, and—and you feed them for life and so I'm—I'm a big advocate of—of education, of opportunities.

You know, I'm speaking at this one organization that—that helps homeless people, and one of the things that try to do is get them back into the work force. And this lawyer was telling me that she hired a woman who'd been homeless and she thought she would be taking on a burden. She said she thought she was gonna be taking on this basket case, this woman who was constantly be in need of help. And this woman told me, she said, "I end up asking this woman for advice, for help. She has been a pillar in my life."

But, this woman, because she's such a scrapper and a street fighter and a survivor—I used to think and mea culpa—I was very guilty of this—I used to think that in helping in other people, you pull yourself down. But, I—I only recently begin to understand the extent to which, you know, you really put everybody up. You really elevate everybody when you pull somebody else up.

HINOJOSA: And you could at this point in your career, Jeannette, you could walk away from going into homeless shelters and addressing homeless groups. You don't have to be doing that.

WALLS: Oh, these are the kindest, most wonderful, interesting people that I have ever met. I mean, I think that, you know,

anybody who hasn't done this, should. And it's not giving of yourself, like I said, you get so much more back than you ever give—kind, funny, smart people who have so much to offer, and we are ignoring a huge resource if we—if we think—if we try to cut these people off because they're—they're for the most part, good and strong and kind people. And you lose so much more—I mean, the idea that, you know, we can't afford to help them, we can't afford not to help them because we'll—it's an investment that you get many returns on.

HINOJOSA: Okay, Jeannette, so the reality is that right now you make your—your living as an entertainment reporter, you know, you're into gossip. You're dealing with people who have wealth beyond means. I mean, so, you've been asked this a lot, and—and I think it was interesting that you said, "Look, yeah I deal with a lot of people who've got everything except that sometimes they're not really happy."

WALLS: Well, you know, I am questioned many times why on earth I went into this—this particular field, because there—there is such—it's a little insane, to tell you the truth, that I'm sitting here reporting on (NOISE) celebrities and all that. And I do wonder the extent to which it was my saying, you know, "Oh, my goodness—everybody has something." It's easy to think that people who look poor are poor. But, you know, everybody has problems.

If you wanta put this in a less flattering light it might be, you know, I still might be the unpopular, little, shabby kid in class saying, "Nicole Kidman's got her problems too." So, you—you know, to what degree was I just trying to expose that everybody has problems and to what degree am I trying to get back at the haves?

So, I—I don't—I don't really know, but I think that one of the things that this—that this whole experience has taught me is that—poor people have not cornered the market on unhappiness. And—that some of the—some wealthy people are the most miserable people in the world that—that I know. And I—I would—I would include myself in that category.

When I was living on Park Avenue and had kept my past a secret, I—I think I was very ha—unhappy. I think I—I was convinced, among other things that I was a fraud and a phony. I think that maybe I had some survivors guilt, but I also was convinced that I was inferior to all these people I was hanging around.

HINOJOSA: When you see that homeless kid who looks like you, maybe different race, but you can just tell, what do you say to him or her? Do you take him? Do you hold him? Do you look at them? What do you say?

WALLS: What I would say to anybody who was in the situation that I was is, "It will work out in the end if you believe in yourself." And I think that that's what these kids need more than anything in the world is a belief in themselves and a belief in the future, and that they can change things. I mean, I think that that's why I was so much luckier than so many kids in similar circumstances is that my—my parents put a very high emphasis on education which I'm a big, big fan of—education is a great equalizer—but also, hope and belief in yourself. And then you can get through just about anything.

HINOJOSA: Jeannette Walls, thank you so much for speaking with us on the Now On the News pod cast.

WALLS: Thank you.

HINOJOSA: To read an excerpt of Jeannette's memoir, *The Glass Castle*, visit Now's website at www.pbs.org/now. Thanks again, Jeannette, it's been wonderful to reconnect and thank you so much for your book.

WALLS: It's my pleasure.



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Photo: John Taylor

Jeannette Walls

Jeanette Walls is the former gossip correspondent for E! Channel and New York Magazine's "Intelligencer". She can now be seen on MSNBC three mornings a week and appears on MSNBC online four days a week. Ms. Walls lives in New York City.

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(Published by Virago Press)

★★★★★

The Glass Castle is Jeannette Walls' memoir. Jeannette and her three siblings had a childhood that was far from normal. Her father was an alcoholic dreamer and her mother was a schoolteacher-come-painter. Her parents' ideals and stubborn nonconformity were both their curse and their salvation.



Jeannette's father Rex was a charismatic and perhaps brilliant man who, when sober, taught his children physics, geology and how to embrace life. Rose Mary painted and wrote and couldn't handle the responsibility of being a mother. She described herself as an excitement addict and couldn't understand why anyone would spend time cooking a meal that would be consumed in fifteen minutes when they could paint a picture that would last forever.

The Walls family spent ten years leading a somewhat nomadic existence. They roamed around central America, moving on from town to town when the money or food ran out. Rex described the exodus from these towns in the middle of the night as doing the 'skeddadle'. The children, used to living this way, didn't place a huge value on forging friendships as they very rarely would get to say goodbye to those friends they had managed to make. Instead they played together and supported each other. Eventually the family settled in a small mining town, called Welch, and their wandering life faded.

However, life in Welch would prove to be worse than the wandering life. Rex's drinking grew worse, Rose Mary found it hard to even get out of bed in the morning and the children became subject to the merciless taunting of the locals. Everyone in Welch was poor but the Walls were definitely on the bottom rung of the ladder.

In this heartbreaking story, Jeannette describes hiding in the bathroom during lunch break at school so nobody would notice she didn't have any lunch to eat. After the other kids had finished eating and gone out to play she would rummage through the bins and eat whatever they had thrown away.

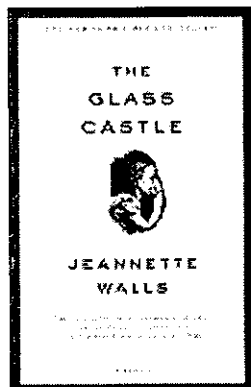
Jeannette and her siblings were fending for themselves from a young age. They assumed the responsibility of running the house and, on the rare occasion that Rose Mary had a job, they would make sure she got to work on time and spent her salary as sparingly as possible.

The Glass Castle is an incredible book. Told with heartbreaking honesty, there are moments when you will laugh aloud. What is most amazing is Jeannette's voice, which is so matter of fact yet also contains affection towards her parents. For decades Jeannette has hidden the truth about her past, graduating from Barnard and with a successful career as a journalist. She has now decided to tell her story. The result is a tale of triumph

The Glass Castle: a Memoir

by Jeannette Walls

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Synopses & Reviews

Publisher Comments:

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.

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Review:

"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.' *Agent, Jennifer Rudolph Walsh. (Apr.) Publishers Weekly* (Copyright Reed Business Information, Inc.)

Review:

"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." *Kirkus Reviews*

Review:

"Jeannette Walls has carved a story with precision and grace out of one of the most chaotic, heartbreaking childhoods ever to be set down on the page. This deeply affecting memoir is a triumph in every possible way, and it does what all good books should: it affirms our faith in the human spirit." *Dani Shapiro, author of Family History*

Review:

"*The Glass Castle* is the saga of the restless, indomitable Walls family, led by a grand eccentric and his tempestuous artist wife. Jeannette Walls has survived poverty, fires, and near starvation to triumph. She has written this amazing tale with honesty and love." *Patricia Bosworth, author of Anything Your Little Heart Desires and Diane Arbus: A Biography*

Review:

"Just read the first pages of *The Glass Castle* by Jeannette Walls, and I defy you not to go on. It's funny and sad and quirky and loving. I was incredibly touched by it." *Dominick Dunne, author of The Way We Lived Then: Recollections of a Well-Known Name Dropper*

Synopsis:

The Glass Castle is a remarkable memoir of resilience and redemption, and a revelatory look into a family at once deeply dysfunctional and uniquely vibrant. When sober, 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 was a free spirit who abhorred the idea of domesticity and didn't want the responsibility of raising a family.

The Walls children 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.

The Glass Castle is truly astonishing — a memoir permeated by the intense love of a peculiar, but loyal, family. Jeannette Walls has a story to tell, and tells it brilliantly, without an ounce of self-pity.

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About the Author

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.

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★★★★★

★★★★★ **Rowena, July 3, 2007** ([view all comments by Rowena](#))

I can't rate this honestly. First, I think Jeannette Wells is an excellent writer, very clear eyed. But having grown up poor, though not quite in her circumstances, I think this story appeals to generations who have never known poverty. They look at a world they only know at a distance, where they can close the book and look back on lives untouched by the reality of Well's story. I admire her for a survivor, but this is a world I know too well.

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★★★★★ **ladybug079, April 17, 2007** ([view all comments by ladybug079](#))

I just finished your book. I had to keep reminding myself throughout your story that this was "real". I am shocked at how sunny your attitude was. I had my ups and downs as a child, but reading what you have been through makes me realize how fortunate I am. I am going to use your book as a tool to help me be a better parent. I don't agree with almost anything your parents did to or for you, except for giving you the ability to take care of yourself. I can see now that maybe I need to free up on my kids just a little to give them some room. Thank you so much for telling me your story.

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★★★★★ **muss821, February 14, 2007** ([view all comments by muss821](#))

As the adult daughter of an alcoholic father, I can identify with Miss Walls' feelings for her father. My father did not live up to his potential either because of alcohol, but I have always known that he loves me. I may



Jeannette Walls Answers Your Questions

A Q + A With the Chronicler of New York's Power Elite

March 15, 2005 —

Jeannette Walls has reported for years on the movers and shakers in the most powerful city in the world. It's a world she knows from the inside. With her husband, John Taylor, a successful novelist, they have been called a New York power couple.

But for years, Walls hid the fact that she had a much humbler upbringing than many of the people she now associates with. Now her secret is out -- in her memoir, "The Glass Castle."

She answered questions about her new book and her life for the ABCNEWS.com audience.

1. Loye Smith, of Jefferson City, Tenn., writes:

How did you support yourself when you first went to New York? How did you get accepted to an Ivy League school, and how did you pay college expenses and support yourself? You have a wonderful, amazing and inspiring story. Thank you.

Jeannette responds:

Why, thank you so much for your kind words. I got a job at a burger joint the day after I arrived in New York. My sister and I shared an apartment in a not terribly nice -- but very cheap -- section of the Bronx, and when my brother joined us a year later, he lived there too, so we split the rent three ways. I finished high school during the day, worked evenings and weekends, and our expenses weren't that high. While I was in high school, I got an internship at a local paper in Brooklyn, and they hired me after I graduated. I thought I'd died and gone to heaven, but eventually the editor of the paper took me aside and told me that I really should go to college. One of the things about my parents is that they always emphasized reading and learning, so I didn't have any trouble with the admissions tests. I covered tuition with grants and loans and scholarships; I arranged all my classes into three days and worked the other four days to support myself; I also moved into the maid's room of a big Upper West Side apartment and looked after a woman's two children in exchange for the room. I was able to piece together enough for each year, until my senior year, when I was \$1,000 short. I thought I was going to have to drop out. But then my father somehow came up with the money. He and mom had moved to New York City while I was in college, and they were living on the street at the time. I told him I couldn't take his money, and he said there was no way that his daughter was going to drop out of college.

2. Virginia Carter, of Lexington, Ky., writes:

What has happened to your siblings? Did their lives turn out as well as yours? You are amazing!

Jeannette responds:

My older sister achieved her dream of being an artist. She's an illustrator living in Manhattan. My brother Brian, who you saw in the segment, also achieved his dream of becoming a police officer. He actually retired a few years ago and he's enrolled in college and studying to become a teacher. My kid sister, who was the great beauty and the most sensitive of us kids, hit a rough patch. We're working on getting her back on track.

3. David Benway, of Kingston, Mass., writes:

I was wondering if you ever considered getting some of your mother's paintings into an art gallery or is she not open to that? Would she be open to selling any paintings? Also, I'm really glad that you're living out the life of your dreams. Venus is definitely yours!

Jeannette responds:

What a lovely thing to say! Thanks so much. Mom has shown a couple of her paintings before, but she's never had her own gallery show before. It looks like all the attention that the book has generated might make that happen. That would be just too wonderful for words.

4. Pam Webb, of Lawrenceville, Ga., writes:

I teach in a middle school which is almost 80 percent poverty. We try to give our students the things needed to succeed & but many of them don't even plan on attending college. What is the one piece of advice that I can give my faculty to help these students achieve success in the future?

Jeannette responds:

Hi Pam. My husband's sister teaches in Lawrenceville. First, I'd like to say how much I admire you and all teachers who care about their students. Honestly, I think that a good teacher can change a student's life. I know that there's only so much a teacher can do, but so often that something makes all the difference. I was named after one of my father's teachers -- he said she was the first person who really believed in him. And then when my family moved to Welch, W.Va., she was my teacher, too. My advice to anyone is to figure out what you're good at -- what it is that you love doing the most in life -- and figure out a way to make a living from it. It might be fixing things, caring for people, finding out information, cooking, whatever. Even if it's a field where there aren't a lot of job opportunities -- say fashion or sports -- you can have a career in a related field, perhaps as a clothing store owner or a gym teacher. I believe that everyone has some huge talent in them; the really lucky ones discover what it is. But the students have to believe in themselves. That's not always easy if they've got a tough situation at home -- I was lucky because, despite our circumstances, my parents believed in me -- but the human spirit can be very resilient.

5. Janice Scherman, of Welch, W.Va., writes:

I have to tell you, the hair on the back of my neck is standing up!!! I don't know when you left the area, but Welch used to be a great place when I was a kid. What is your favorite memory of growing up there?

Jeannette responds:

Hi Janice! I wonder if we bumped into each other in Welch. I was a bit of a tomboy and my brother, his best friend, Jack Renko, and I used to go exploring up around Wilson farm. I also used to love to go swinging on wild grape vines on the hillside beneath our house. When I got a little older, I started writing for the high school newspaper, The Maroon Wave, and that's when I fell in love with journalism.

6. Joe Stimac, of Ellington, Conn., writes:

Your story is absolutely amazing and inspiring. Have you thought about turning it into a movie?

Jeannette responds:

There definitely has been some movie interest, but no deal has been signed. The Hollywood Reporter did something alerting movie makers about my memoir, saying that it was "catnip for serious actors looking to play charismatic scoundrels." That really made me chuckle.

7. Venus Branson, of Bullhead City, Ariz., writes:

I was inspired by your story of rising up from such struggle. But more than that, I was more amazed at what your parents had given you in terms of love and self confidence. As a mother of two young girls, what were the most valuable lessons your parents taught you as a child and how did they go about doing so?

Jeannette responds:

I'm so glad that came across! I originally wrote "The Glass Castle" as an homage to my parents -- even though there are some passages where they come across as rather flawed. It's been interesting to see how people react to them; some think they were wonderful, some see them as unfit parents. They did a lot to help me believe in myself, but there's one incident in particular that I wrote about that stands out. When I was very young and I thought I heard a monster under my bed, but instead of telling me there were no such thing as monsters -- which wouldn't have made me feel any safer -- Dad and I got weapons and went out looking for the monster. He called it Demon Hunting. He said that demons like to scare people but in face-to-face combat, they're big cowards. It was a metaphor, of course, for confronting your own fears. It breaks my heart that dad wasn't able to conquer all of his own demons, but he did raise some fairly fearless kids. Though it's ironic that it took me this long to face the truth -- which once I confronted it wasn't really scary at all. (P.S. I love your name.)

8. Cindy C., of Kelso, Wash., writes:

If I could change anything, it would be that I wish my parents could have taught me love the way yours did. I had to learn that on my own, mother to son. My question to you is this: If you could change but ONE thing in your former years, what would it be?

Jeannette responds:

That my father didn't drink.

9. Debbie Teubert, of Irvine, Calif., writes:

First of all, I have to comment that your life-loving, positive attitude is absolutely refreshing. What worries me is that, I might not have recognized you (or your brother) as kids in need. You are probably sensitive to those signs. What are some of those signs? Would you have wanted any "outside" assistance? And if so, how would you TODAY approach a kid in the same situation? I wouldn't want to offend or interfere with the parents either.

Jeannette responds:

That is such an interesting, intelligent, sensitive question -- and I'm not sure how to answer it. I'm not certain that some well-meaning person's interference would have helped. I honestly don't know. The times I was most insulted when I was growing up were when someone called us needy or poor or tried to help in a heavy-handed way. One time, a teacher announced in front of a class full of students that I needed to dress better and she handed me a bag full of clothes from a church drive. It was just awful. On the other hand, there was another teacher, the one I was named for (see question 4), who stepped in and made sure that I wasn't kicked off the high school newspaper when some people felt that someone like me shouldn't be allowed into the newspaper offices. I'll never forget that act of kindness. There's such a fine line between help that makes someone feel inferior and assistance that genuinely improves someone's life. Thank you so much for caring enough to ask.

10. Lexie Conner, of Pittsfield, Ill., writes:

Would you have told your story if your mother had not moved to New York? Do you think that when we tell our story, we embellish?

Jeannette responds:

I absolutely would have told my story if my mother hadn't moved to New York. I hope I haven't embellished anything, but it's interesting -- I think we all interpret things differently. My brother Brian remembers the facts behind any given incident almost exactly as I do -- but sometimes his take on it is quite different. For example, there's a scene in my book that involves a cheetah. I remember it as a noble, gorgeous creature; Brian says it was sort of scrawny and mangy. I mentioned that to mom, and she said it was sort of both.

11. Curtis Graham, of Spokane, Wash., writes:

As a child, my parents were not always able to give us all the things we may have wanted or needed at times -- but we were rich with love and taught to reach for our dreams and to work for what we wanted. Do you feel you would be as successful as you are if you had more as a child?

Jeannette responds:

I don't mean to pass judgment on anyone -- and as I'm childless, I'm hardly an expert on the subject -- but I do think it's possible that some children today are given too much. A very smart woman who was interviewing me about "The Glass Castle" said that there's a school of thought that the most common form of child abuse in America these days is overindulgence. I find that just fascinating. A friend of mine who actually grew up with great privilege, told me that when she first started reading my book, she felt really sorry for me. Halfway through, she said, she started getting jealous. She explained to me that I had a sense of independence and self-reliance and was able to prove that I could do things on my own -- something she never had. A couple of people have reacted that way. (Not all, of course. Some, however, merely think my childhood was awful and deprived.) Isn't life odd?

12. Deb Scesa, of Rockville, Md., writes:

Would you be willing to come and speak to my students about your life and how you were able to overcome its obstacles?

Jeannette responds:

I hope this doesn't sound diva-like, but I'm sort of booked up for the next couple of months. Please contact my publicist, Lucy Kenyon at Scribners, and if I'm in the Rockville area, I'd be honored to speak to your students.

13. Sandy Richardson, of Fairmont, W.Va., writes:

What do you think was the turning point for you when you left home and moved to New York? Have you lost any friends since this story has come out?

Jeannette responds:

There were a number of turning points: Getting into college, getting my job at New York magazine. But perhaps the biggest was meeting John Taylor, the man who I ended up marrying and who convinced me to write "The Glass Castle."

I thought I would lose friends as a result of the book, but the opposite has happened. People I knew from years ago have looked me up and we've reconnected, people I've known casually for years have opened up to me and we've bonded, and complete strangers have started telling me intimate details of their lives -- and I feel like I've known them for years. I don't know of anyone who has decided to drop me as a friend because the story is out, but if there are any -- they weren't really friends in the first place.

14. Janice Wadas, of Largo, Fla., writes:

<http://abcnews.go.com/print?id=552776>

I admire you. I too want to write, not about my past but about my struggle to raise my two kids and my failure. How did you write the book without feeling like you were turning on your mother? What do your other two sisters think of the book? Do they agree?

Jeannette responds:

That's a really good question, Janice, and if you're considering writing about your life, I'm guessing that you've been grappling with those issues yourself. The toughest part of writing "The Glass Castle" was trying to be fair to everyone, not to condemn the people around me, but not whitewash the story either -- and to tell the truth without intruding too much on their lives. It's one thing to reveal my own secrets; it's another to reveal those of the people around me. For that reason, I decided cut a lot about my kid sister that was originally in the book. My mother has actually been great. She's taken issue with some of the things I wrote, but not many, and she's completely supportive of it. My older sister was very ambivalent about the book. She finds the past much more painful than I do, but ultimately, she felt that I should just go ahead and write it. She told me, however, that she wasn't going to read it because she didn't want to relive it. Finally, largely at mom's urging, she quite recently decided to read it. (Mom told her, "You'll like it. You come across as a hero.") She's only read about 100 pages, but she told me that so far she loves it.

15. Michele Redman, of Long Island, N.Y., writes:

Why now did you decide to share your story with the world? What did you hope to gain? What did you learn about yourself now that you've made a success out of your life? Now that you've disclosed your personal life do you feel liberated and/or more vulnerable?

Jeannette responds:

Gosh, these are all really good questions. I'd tried to tell my story a number of times. I wrote the first version of this book when I was about 19. I hammered out more than 200 pages on a weekend, then threw it in the garbage. I made several other attempts, and never even read what I wrote before I trashed them all. Then, there was that conversation I had with my mother that was mentioned in the "Primetime Live" piece, when I asked her: What am I supposed to tell people when they ask about you? And she said: "Tell them the truth." It seemed so simple. Yet it was so incredibly complex. If there was one deciding factor that made me write "The Glass Castle," it was my husband, John Taylor. He thought it was a great story, that I would be more at peace with myself if I wrote it, and that -- contrary to what I thought -- people wouldn't be appalled by me if they learned the truth. He said they'd be impressed. He also kept me honest; sometimes when I'd gloss over something painful, he'd force me back to the word processor and made me get a little deeper.

I have to say, John was right. For the most part, people have been absolutely amazing. The people at "Primetime Live," for example, who worked on the piece (and no, they didn't put me up to this). I was just stunned by how deeply they understood the story and how interested they were in doing a smart, compassionate story. I feel a little like Alice who just stepped through the looking glass and the alternate world she enters isn't weird or unpleasant; instead, it's filled with kind, sympathetic, compassionate, smart people.

16. Rosemary Shively, of Terreton, Idaho, writes:

Do you ever wish for a domestic life? I can't seem to understand, how a woman can even exist, without the nurturing side of herself fulfilled. I am amazed at your tenacity in life. I was very touched by your truthfulness. Thank you for sharing yourself with me.

Jeannette responds:

John has a daughter, and I'm quite close to her, though she's pretty grown up at this point. I believe I started discovering my domestic side only recently. For example, I loved animals when I was growing up, but I had completely let that side of me go numb. While I was writing "The Glass Castle," I was overcome with a yearning to own dogs. It was weird. I'd reward myself for finishing a chapter by visiting Web sites of animal shelters; I recently adopted two former racing

greyhounds (you may remember seeing them in the show). I'm irrationally devoted to them. But I do find myself getting more interested in the domestic side of things. I'm a late bloomer in that department, I guess.

17. Shana Hunt, of Ottawa, Ontario My true passion in life is information. I dream of a career in journalism. Jeannette, if you have any advice for an aspiring journalist, I would be grateful to hear from you.

Jeannette responds:

Shana, if information is your passion, in my opinion, half your battle is already won. My advice is to get journalism experience -- however you can, even if it's unpaid. You don't say whether you're a student, but if you are, get an internship. If you're not a student, there are still plenty of ways to get your foot in the door. Offer to open mail and sharpen pencils. If you hear an interesting story, mention it to an editor. If you have an area of particular interest, start an online blog. One of my former assistants was a typesetter who kept dropping by my desk mentioning things she heard. I hired her and she was great and now she has a very high-profile column at the New York Daily News. Another former assistant came up to me, introduced herself and told me she would do whatever it took to work with me, even if she had to do it unpaid and in her free time. She worked her tail off for me and was just wonderful. She now lives in England, where she has her own column and appears regularly on television. Be tenacious, be creative. And good luck.

18. Shemena Campbell, of San Francisco, writes:

Do you think that keeping your situation a secret for as long as you did, until you'd "made it," made the difference, and how hard was it to keep that secret?

Jeannette responds:

Keeping my past secret wasn't difficult at all. There were a few times when the story did almost get out -- my parents were becoming sort of high-profile squatters and kept on being interviewed in newspapers and on television -- but for a variety of reasons, it didn't.

I never set out to pass myself off as a Rockefeller or anything, and because I had gone to an Ivy League college and lived on Park Avenue, everyone just assumed I had a privileged background. I don't know if telling the truth would have hurt my career. I often wonder that myself. Some guy who was interviewing me for a New York City publication the other day said he completely understood why I did it and how the New York media is filled with a bunch of social snobs who are overly concerned with pedigree. But seeing the reaction now that the story is out, I'm not so sure. People are much wiser and kinder than I had realized.

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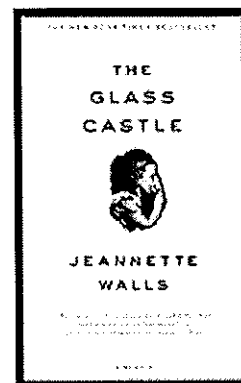
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A Memoir
by Jeannette Walls

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About This Book

The Glass Castle is a remarkable memoir of resilience and redemption, and a revelatory look into a family at once deeply dysfunctional and uniquely vibrant. When sober, 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 was a free spirit who abhorred the idea of domesticity and didn't want the responsibility of raising a family.

The Walls children 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.

The Glass Castle is truly astonishing -- a memoir permeated by the intense love of a peculiar, but loyal, family. Jeannette Walls has a story to tell, and tells it brilliantly, without an ounce of self-pity.

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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?

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Critical Praise

"Walls has joined the company of writers such as Mary Karr and Frank McCourt who have been able to transform their sad memories into fine art."

—*People*

"**The Glass Castle** is nothing short of spectacular."

—*Entertainment Weekly*

"Memoirs are our modern fairy tales.... The autobiographer is faced with the daunting challenge of attempting to understand, forgive, and even love the witch.... Readers will marvel at the intelligence and resilience of the Walls kids."

—*Francine Prose, The New York Times Book Review, front page*

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