

The Glass Castle

A Memoir

by Jeannette Walls

About the 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.

Praise for the Book

“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

Courtesy of Scribner

About the Author

Jeannette Walls

American writer (c. 1960–)

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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.

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Career: Journalist. *New York Magazine*, New York, NY, gossip columnist, 1987–93; *Esquire*, New York, NY, gossip columnist, 1993–98; *MSNBC.com*, gossip columnist, 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.

Sidelights

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.'"

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR

BOOKS

- Walls, Jeannette, *The Glass Castle: A Memoir*, Scribner (New York, NY), 2005.

PERIODICALS

- *Booklist*, February 1, 2000, Ilene Cooper, review of *Dish: The Inside Story on the World of Gossip*, p. 995; October 1, 2000, Candace Smith, review of *Dish*, p. 367; February 1, 2005, Stephanie Zvirin, review of *The Glass Castle*, p. 923.
- *Columbia Journalism Review*, July, 2000, Andie Tucher, review of *Dish*, p. 66.

- *Entertainment Weekly*, March 10, 2000, Charles Winecoff, review of *Dish*, p. 64; March 11, 2005, Nicholas Fonseca, review of *The Glass Castle*, p. 107; March 18, 2005, Karen Valby, "Coming up for Air: In Her Blistering New Memoir, *The Glass Castle*, Gossip Columnist Jeannette Walls Dredges up Her Own Long-Buried Secrets and Lies," p. 32.
- *Kirkus Reviews*, December 15, 2004, review of *The Glass Castle*, p. 1195.
- *Library Journal*, April 1, 2000, Kelli N. Perkins, review of *Dish*, p. 119; February 15, 2005, Gina Kaiser, review of *The Glass Castle*, p. 141.
- *Newsweek*, March 7, 2005, Barbara Kantrowitz, review of *The Glass Castle*, p. 55.
- *People*, April 4, 2005, Edward Nawotka, review of *The Glass Castle*, p. 45.
- *Psychology Today*, May-June, 2005, review of *The Glass Castle*, p. 36.
- *Publishers Weekly*, May 1, 2000, review of *Dish*, p. 32; January 17, 2005, review of *The Glass Castle*, p. 41; February 7, 2005, Bridget Kinsella, "Media Flocks to Scribner's *The Glass Castle*," p. 20.
- *Spectator*, April 30, 2005, Olivia Glazebrook, review of *The Glass Castle*, p. 38.
- *Vanity Fair*, April, 2005, Jim Windolf, review of *The Glass Castle*, p. 184.
- *Variety*, June 5, 2000, Jonathan Bing, review of *Dish*, p. 31.

ONLINE

- *MSNBC.com*, <http://www.msnbc.com/> (July 16, 2005), Denise Hazlick, review of *The Glass Castle*.
- *Village Voice Online*, <http://www.villagevoice.com/> (July 16, 2005), Joy Press, review of *The Glass Castle*.

Source: *Contemporary Authors Online*, Detroit: Gale, 2006.

Source Database: Literature Resource Center

Author Interview

Q: What motivates you every day?

Jeannette Walls: I'm going to scare myself and quote my mother, but life is an adventure. I think people are only capable of giving what they know.

Q: What kind of upbringing did your parents have? We get a bit of your grandmother in the book. Not pleasant.

JW: That's so incredibly well said. I think what's stunning about my father is not that he was a shiftless drunk — but rather that he had as much good in him as he did, given where he came from. He was drinking heavily by the time that he was 15 and as best I can tell, got no real love or support from home. The only person who really gave him any faith in himself while he was growing up was an English teacher, the one I was named after.

My mother's upbringing was actually rather upper middle class, but I think she suffered from too much discipline and spent the rest of her life seeking out freedom and adventure.

Q: At what age did you finally get braces? I admired how you tried to fix your own teeth.

JW: When I was 24. I had graduated from college and got my first well-paying full time job, the FIRST thing I did with the first paycheck was get real, store-bought braces. They cost me \$3,600 (I paid in installments) and it was the best money I ever spent. I no longer felt the need to cover my mouth when I smiled.

Q: Did you ever think about running away? Doing a “skidaddle” of your own?

JW: I think I did, actually. I didn't run away, but I walked away very, very quickly.

Q: When the truant officer came to the door, you turned him away. Was this because you were afraid to be separated from your siblings?

JW: YES. Absolutely.

Q: What was your first item of luxury when you made it to New York?

JW: I will always consider a hot bath to be one of the world's greatest luxuries. People who've never lived without running water cannot understand how miraculous it is to simply turn on a couple of faucets and be able to step into a tub of warm water. That, and a flush toilet. Push the handle, WHOOSH! It's just gone.

Q: When you arrived in New York, did you feel a sense of relief? Guilt?

JW: YES! Both. Constantly. I think that sometimes I still have bouts of survivor's guilt.

Q: Do you plan on writing a sequel to the book? I'd love to hear about your early life in New York and working to become who and what you are today.

JW: I'm kicking around a few ideas, but I'm sort of cool on the idea of a sequel about making it in New York. (Although a friend of mine who's urging me to do it has a great title: "Mountain Goat Does Manhattan.") Seriously, the country gal makes good with luck and pluck just doesn't carry much emotional wallop.

Q: I read you were afraid to tell your upper-class Park Avenue dwelling acquaintances about your childhood and where you came from. When the book came out, how did your friends react and did you lose any friendships over it? Did anyone look at you differently?

JW: I couldn't have been more wrong about how most people would respond. I hugely underestimated peoples' capacity for compassion. I've also been stunned by the number of people who've come forward and told me that, while the details of my life may have been more extreme, they had a lot in common with me. I didn't lose any friends, and I've become a lot closer to that I know of. Some Park Avenue types are probably mortified, but to hell with 'em.

Q: Growing up, what happened when you got sick? Did you go to the doctor? Your basic needs were not met. How did you avoid getting sick when you were living in such poverty?

JW: When we got sick we were pretty much ignored until we got better. Being sick was considered being weak and useless. Mom thought if kids were pampered when they were sick it would encourage hypochondria. Maybe she was right. For the most part we were very healthy kids, despite our rather sparse diet. And as an adult, I almost never get sick.

Q: Because the book is personal, how do you feel when you read a negative comment or review? Especially comments regarding your parents.

JW: That's a very perceptive question. I purposely didn't pass judgment on my parents in the book; I wanted to leave it up to the readers, but I'm sometimes shocked by how hard people come down on Mom and Dad. I understand it, of course, but it's a little startling — and very interesting. Then there was someone who wrote an online review and said that he just didn't believe that someone who was an alcoholic like my father could also be articulate and compassionate. I thought, Jeez, honey, you need to get out a little more, maybe do some volunteer work or something.

Q: What was your goal in writing the memoir? Was it cathartic? Did it help you understand your parents? Did you ever feel a need to understand them?

JW: It was HUGELY cathartic. And, yes, it helped me understand my parents, but that's not why I wrote it. I wrote it for a lot of reasons, partly because I knew I had to — as Mom challenged me — “Tell the truth.” I'd tried a couple of times when I was younger; I wrote a couple of hundred pages at a time on several occasions, then threw it all out. My husband was really instrumental in my finally sitting down to write it. He practically duct taped me to the desk and said, “You are writing this.”

The fascinating thing has been that even though I obviously knew all the things I wrote, sometimes you don't know what you know, but when you force yourself to examine it and really, really be honest with yourself, you can put together the pieces of the puzzle that were all jumbled in your head. I think that's what happened in my case.

Q: How were you able to put the past behind you as you walked the Red Carpet and lived a glamorous life? Was it always in the back of your mind — thoughts of your childhood?

JW: That's one of the things I loved the most about the job! It was always such a hoot thinking, I know I'm just a scrawny girl who grew up without indoor plumbing, and here I am wearing my fancy designer clothes asking Nicole Kidman questions. Life is so strange.

Q: Would you be the person you are today if you grew up in a house with hot water and a warm bed? Your parents heaped upon you lots of intelligence, creativity and I got a sense that you always felt loved.

JW: That's the whole nature/nurture question, and I'm afraid I'm not smart enough to answer it definitively. I used to think I'd have more confidence and a healthier sense of entitlement if I'd grown up with regular meals and all that, but now I'm not so sure. A very smart sociologist I spoke with said that every successful person he's studied had to overcome some huge obstacle in his or her life, and it's learning to navigate those rough patches that teaches you how to deal with

But yes, I actually think that in many ways I was incredibly lucky because I did feel loved and my parents both put a huge emphasis on education and self esteem. In that way, I was much more fortunate than many of the people I met while I was living on Park Avenue.

Q: Should your family have been on welfare? Did you know how bad you had it? Did you ever complain?

JW: At one time I urged my mother to go on welfare, and she refused. At the time I thought she was wrong, that we would have had it much better if we could have food stamps or something, but now I'm not so sure. Mom said she didn't want us to think of ourselves as charity cases, and there's something to be said for that. That being said, if I had four hungry kids with nothing to eat and no way of getting any money, I'd go on welfare in a heartbeat.

I had a pretty good idea how bad we had it, but no, I didn't complain. Not much, anyway. It didn't get me anywhere.

Q: Did you read *Angela's Ashes*, another wonderful book about growing up in extreme poverty? I can't help but draw comparisons between you and Frank McCourt. What are your thoughts, did you read it and see similarities?

JW: I loved *Angela's Ashes*. I think it would be pretty arrogant for me to compare my book to it, but if you want to, that's just dandy by me.

Q: How is your relationship with your siblings today? How do they feel about *The Glass Castle*? Do any of them live like your mother?

JW: I'm very close to my brother. He loves the book and was very supportive every step of the way. I showed him parts as I finished them because he has a steel trap memory and I wanted to make sure I remembered things correctly. It's interesting, because we remembered the same events, but had different takes on them. For example, I think of the cheetah as being a gorgeous, powerful beast with rippling muscles. Brian said, "As I remember, that was as a sort mangy creature." I ran that by Mom and she said, "It was both, but it wasn't inside a cage. It was just walking around the zoo." People remember the same things differently, and if Brian or my sisters had written the book, it would be entirely different.

Maureen and I lost touch when she moved to California, but after the book came out, we got together again. I'm very happy about that.

Lori and I are pretty close, but she sort of didn't want me to write the book, although she would never have asked me not to do it. At first, she didn't want to read it, but Mom urged her to. So she did and she said she found it sort of painful to relive some of those episodes, but she really liked it.

Q: Would your father have ever been capable of building the glass castle?

JW: As far as I'm concerned, he did build it. It wasn't a physical structure, but rather a dream: the hope of a better life.

Q: Moving on to lighter subjects — What are the best and worst parts of attending a Red Carpet function?

JW: I love trying to get a celeb who won't talk to any other reporter. There are all sorts of tricks — one interviewer told me she wears long chartreuse gloves. I haven't tried that one, but you have to be creative. If, for example, some star has a child who's trying to get into the movies, shout out a question about the kid's career. That one always works for me.

The worst part is that you know you can only use short, simple sound bites, so sometimes a celeb gives you a long, thoughtful response to a question, and you think, "Dang, that was smart. Too bad I can't use it." And you end up going with comments like "I love being part of Hollywood's most exciting night of the year!"

Q: Did you enjoy being on Oprah? I think *The Glass Castle* should have been an Oprah pick, I'm quite upset with Miss Oprah. Instead you are going to have to settle for a Cindy's Must Read. I've encouraged everyone I know to read this book.

JW: I loved being on Oprah. I think she's a magnificent woman who does so much good with her fame and power. The only greater honor than being an Oprah's pick is being a Cindy's Must Read!

Q: Casting the movie, who would play you? And your parents? Who could attempt to do them justice with a portrayal? I hear there is talk of bringing *The Glass Castle* to the big screen . . .

JW: It's been optioned by Plan B, Brad Pitt's production company, and I'm just thrilled about it, but nothing is ever certain in Hollywood, so I'm not counting on anything. I simply cannot cast myself. Can't do it! Just thinking about it is too weird.

I actually believe that my mother and father have the more interesting, challenging parts. The Hollywood Reporter said the roles are "catnip for serious actors looking to play charismatic scoundrels." I thought that was just about perfect. There are so many great actresses I could see playing my mother: Susan Sarandon, Emma Thompson, Kate Nelligan, Meryl Streep, etc. (I'm well aware that those are really pie in the sky choices, but we're just having fun here.)

Honestly, I think that any really good actress who spent any time with my mother (Mom would do it, of course) would "get" her. Dad's a little tougher to cast, but anyone who can capture his irresistible ne'er do well quality, his combination of charm and rage, could really take the role and run with it.

Q: Have you considered writing a work of fiction?

JW: I'm terrible at making up things. At one point, I tried to fictionalize *The Glass Castle* and I couldn't even make up fake names for the characters. I spent all day trying to decide what to call the members of my family. I settled on Doug for my brother Brian because Douglas is his middle name, but every time I wrote "Doug" it irritated me because that's not his name, dang it, and it felt all wrong.

Q: What is the best compliment someone has given you?

JW: I have been so stunned and overwhelmed and blown away by some reactions to the book that honestly, I don't know where to start. But the other day, someone told me that after she read the book, she rethought her whole relationship with her father and they had a long talk and now she sees him differently and now, for the first time, they really get along. I thought, "Wow, it doesn't get much better than that." Then someone else told me she gave the book to a friend who had her daughter, a who is a very popular cheerleader reader in high school, read it and the daughter said she's going to start treating the nerdy, outcast girls in her school differently. I thought, "Well, heck. Now I can die a happy woman."

Q: Where will you be in ten years from now? What is your legacy?

JW: I have no idea! Ten years ago, if you had told me where I'd be now, I'd tell you that you've lost your mind!

Courtesy of <http://conversationsfamouswriters.blogspot.com>

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?

Courtesy of Scribner