

# Half Broke Horses

## by Jeannette Walls

### About the Book

"Those old cows knew trouble was coming before we did." So begins the story of Lily Casey Smith, Jeannette Walls's no-nonsense, resourceful, and spectacularly compelling grandmother. By age six, Lily was helping her father break horses. At fifteen, she left home to teach in a frontier town—riding five hundred miles on her pony, alone, to get to her job. She learned to drive a car and fly a plane. And, with her husband, Jim, she ran a vast ranch in Arizona. She raised two children, one of whom is Jeannette's memorable mother, Rosemary Smith Walls, unforgettably portrayed in *The Glass Castle*.

Lily survived tornadoes, droughts, floods, the Great Depression, and the most heartbreaking personal tragedy. She bristled at prejudice of all kinds—against women, Native Americans, and anyone else who didn't fit the mold. Rosemary Smith Walls always told Jeannette that she was like her grandmother, and in this true-life novel, Jeannette Walls channels that kindred spirit. *Half Broke Horses* is Laura Ingalls Wilder for adults, as riveting and dramatic as Isak Dinesen's *Out of Africa* or Beryl Markham's *West with the Night*. Destined to become a classic, it will transfix readers everywhere.

### Praise for the Book

"Jeannette Walls . . . once again proves that the combination of gifted storyteller with great stories is both rare and intoxicating."

— *The Cleveland Plain Dealer*

"[An] eloquent tribute to a pragmatic heroine . . . A powerhouse--fast-moving, fearless and impossible to forget."

— *Michelle Green, People*

[Jeannette Walls is] the third generation of a line of indomitable women whose paths she has inscribed on the permanent record, enriching the common legend of our American past."

— *Liesl Schillinger, 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.
- *Half Broke Horses*, Scribner (New York, NY), 2009.

## 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

One tough broad

*Remembering a grandmother who broke all the rules*

Interview by Alden Mudge

In her riveting memoir about her hardscrabble childhood, *The Glass Castle* (2005), Jeannette Walls described being severely burned while boiling hot dogs when she was three years old.

“I used to think being burned was my earliest memory,” Walls says during a call to the home she shares with her husband, writer John Taylor, in Culpepper, Virginia. “But I also remember going to a cafeteria with [my grandmother] Lily and her standing up, pointing to me, and shouting to the entire place: SHE’S ONLY TWO YEARS OLD AND SHE’S DRINKING FROM A STRAW! SHE’S A GENIUS!”

The loud, irrepressible and ever-resourceful Lily Casey Smith, who in later years took pleasure in brandishing both her “choppers” and her pearl-handled pistol in the air, is the subject of Wall’s captivating new “true-life novel,” *Half Broke Horses*.

Lily grew up in the vast, still-unpopulated reaches of the Southwest. As a child she helped her rancher father break horses. In her teens, she left home to become an itinerant schoolteacher, riding 500 miles to her first job on horseback. She later lived for a while in Chicago, where she worked as a housekeeper for a wealthy family and was seduced and wedded by a bigamist. Chastened, she returned to the Southwest and married Big Jim Smith, and together they managed a spacious ranch in Arizona. Hers is a story that evokes an American way of life that no longer exists. Lily died when Walls was only eight but her she left an indelible imprint on her granddaughter.

“She was a leathery woman and she would just pick you up and toss you in the air. She’d always yell. She’d enter a room and say HERE I AM! She loved to dance. Every time we’d go someplace where there was music, she’d just grab some guy from his seat and start dancing with him. She was always driving us around in this great big station wagon. She thought she was a brilliant driver but she was really quite reckless. There were always cars sort of crashing and screeching around us. But for all her sort of wild recklessness, she was very orderly,” Walls remembers.

“She had all these rules and was very bossy. My mother and she would clash very badly. My father and she would clash even worse. When I was growing up, my mother told me on a regular basis that I was just like her mother, and I don’t think she meant that as a compliment. Lily glommed onto me at an early age. She sensed a kindred spirit. She was a lot tougher and ballsier than I ever was, but I do think we’re similar in a lot of ways.”

Among the obvious similarities are Walls’ own loud, embracing laughter, a gift for storytelling and the sort of indomitable spirit that enabled Walls to overcome the dysfunctional childhood she describes in *The Glass Castle*.

These similarities explain why Walls found it so easy to slip into Lily's unusual voice in *Half Broke Horses*. "I remember Lily so vividly," Walls says. "I found it was much easier when I wrote in her voice than when I wrote in third person trying to capture her voice. When I was writing in the third person about Lily, I was just writing in my own voice." As she explains in an author's note in the book, Walls' decision to tell this story in her grandmother's distinctive voice rather than as an objective historian is one of the reasons she decided to call her book a "true-life novel."

"I'll bet most people in America have similar ancestors," Walls says. "The details might be different but the overall story is the same—some tough old broad or tough old coot who came to this country and did what had to be done to survive. I think most people are tougher than we realize and that we have this inner strength and resilience that we're not aware of. One of the ways to get in touch with that is to look at our ancestors."

But for Walls, writing *Half Broke Horses* was also at least as much about gaining an understanding of her own difficult, free-spirited mother, Rose Mary Smith Walls, as getting in touch with her ancestors. "When I was on book tour," she remembers, "readers of *The Glass Castle* would often ask me why, with a college education, my mother would choose the life she did. At the time I didn't know the answer. But writing about your parents and your ancestors is like going into intensive therapy. You really get at the roots. I now see that the time when she was growing up on the ranch without electricity and running water was the idyllic time of my mother's life. She's always tried to recreate it, the wildness and lack of discipline. Her life is very much a search for that freedom she had as a child."

Now at age 75, Rose Mary is living in a mobile home a hundred yards away from her daughter and son-in-law, surrounded by the menagerie of rescued dogs, feral cats and horses her daughter and son-in-law have collected since abandoning a tony life in New York City for a semi-rural one in northern Virginia. Rose Mary's vivid stories of her childhood and about her parents' lives in the Southwest 50-some years ago helped define her daughter's new book.

In fact, Walls interviewed her mother extensively for *Half Broke Horses*. She says with deep satisfaction, "My mom gave me these stories without reservations." And, she adds, "She is not a normal mom, whatever the heck that means. But she's a fascinating woman and she's given me a great deal of joy."

Among the most moving stories Rose Mary shared "so passionately and tenderly" with her daughter was the story of half-broke horses, the wild horses captured on the range that were only half broken by her father's ranch hands. "Hearing her describe their plight and the love and affinity she had with these creatures that don't belong anywhere really struck me," Walls says. "Mom really does see herself that way, as a creature who is a little too wild for civilization but broke enough, civilized enough, that she can't survive in the wild."

Reflecting on the experiences of her grandmother and mother, Walls says, “It’s a bit of an anachronism, but there’s a lot to be said for the tough pioneer spirit and the untamed wilderness. I think it’s important that we don’t forget our roots. And our own half-brokenness.”

*Half Broke Horses* is Walls’ evocation of that American legacy.

Alden Mudge writes from Berkley, California.

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## Discussion Questions

1. Jeannette Walls has said that she tried writing this book in the third person but that it didn't work for her. Do you think you are closer to Lily because you get her story in her own voice? Did you "see" Lily Casey Smith as real? What is your response to the first person voice of the book?
2. When Lily's father dies, she and Rosemary drive his body from Tucson back to the ranch in West Texas. Rosemary is embarrassed to be seen driving with a corpse and ducks down in the car when they stop at a red light (pg. 198). "Life's too short, honey," Lily tells Rosemary, "to worry what other people think of you." What does Lily's reaction to this behavior show about her character? Does she give much credence to what other people think of her? What effect do you think her mother's attitude had on Rosemary?
3. Following Helen's suicide, Lily says, "When people kill themselves, they think they're ending the pain, but all they're doing is passing it on to those they leave behind" (pg. 113). Do you agree with this statement?
4. Lily seems willing to sacrifice everything to defend her principles and the rights of others. On more than one occasion, she is fired from a teaching position for refusing to back down from what she believes in. Do you applaud Lily's moral conviction in these instances? Or did you hope that Lily would learn to compromise?
5. Lily has high expectations for her children, from sending them off to boarding school despite their protests to enforcing strict rules for keeping animals as pets. When Rosemary falls in love with a wild horse and asks her mother if she can keep it, Lily replies, "The last thing we need around here is another half-broke horse" (pg. 190). How might this statement apply to Lily's children as well? Are Lily's expectations of her children particularly high or rather a reflection of the times? Why do you think this phrase was chosen as the title of the book?
6. When a group of Brooklyn ladies visits the ranch, Rosemary and Lily take them for a car ride they'll never forget. Lily concludes their encounter by saying, "You ride, you got to know how to fall, and you drive, you got to know how to crash" (pg. 175). How does this statement apply to Lily's life as a whole? What does she mean by knowing "how to fall"?
7. Discuss Lily's husband Jim. How does his personality complement her strong nature?

8. While attempting to prevent the ranch from flooding, Lily tells Rosemary, “Do the best you can...That's all anyone can do.” Her instructions are echoed by Jim's declaration: “We did a good job—good as we could” (pg. 152). Why do you think Lily and Jim have both adopted this philosophy? To which other instances in their lives are they likely to have applied this rationale?
9. Lily comes off as tough and resilient, but there are moments in this book of vast heartbreak, where you see her façade crack. How does the author handle the death of Lily’s friend in Chicago? Her first husband’s duplicity? Her sister’s suicide? Her suspicions of her husband Jim?
10. Walls calls *Half Broke Horses* a “true life novel.” In her author’s note, she explains why. Do you agree with this label? What do you think of the “true life” genre?
11. “Helen’s beauty, as far as I was concerned, had been a curse, and I resolved that I would never tell Rosemary she was beautiful” (pg. 119). Examine Lily’s relationship with her daughter, Rosemary, and, in *The Glass Castle*, Rosemary’s relationship with Jeannette. How does each generation try to compensate for the one before? How does each mother try to avoid the mistakes or pain imposed upon her by her own mother?

*Courtesy of Scribner*