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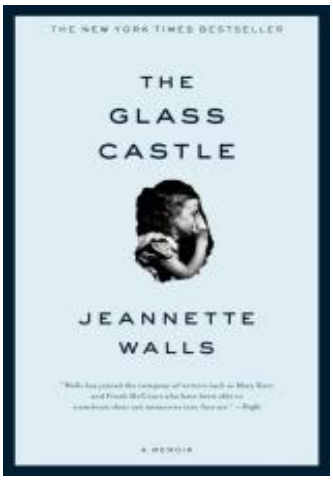
The Glass Castle: A Memoir

by Jeannette Walls



About the Book

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

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

Jeannette Walls not only 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 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.

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

Author Bio

Jeannette Walls graduated from Barnard College and was a journalist in New York. Her memoir, THE GLASS CASTLE, has been a *New York Times* bestseller for more than eight years. She is also the author of the instant *New York Times* bestsellers THE SILVER STAR and HALF BROKE HORSES, which was named one of the 10 best books of 2009 by the editors of *The New York Times Book Review*. Walls lives in rural Virginia with her husband, the writer John Taylor.

Critical Praise

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

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