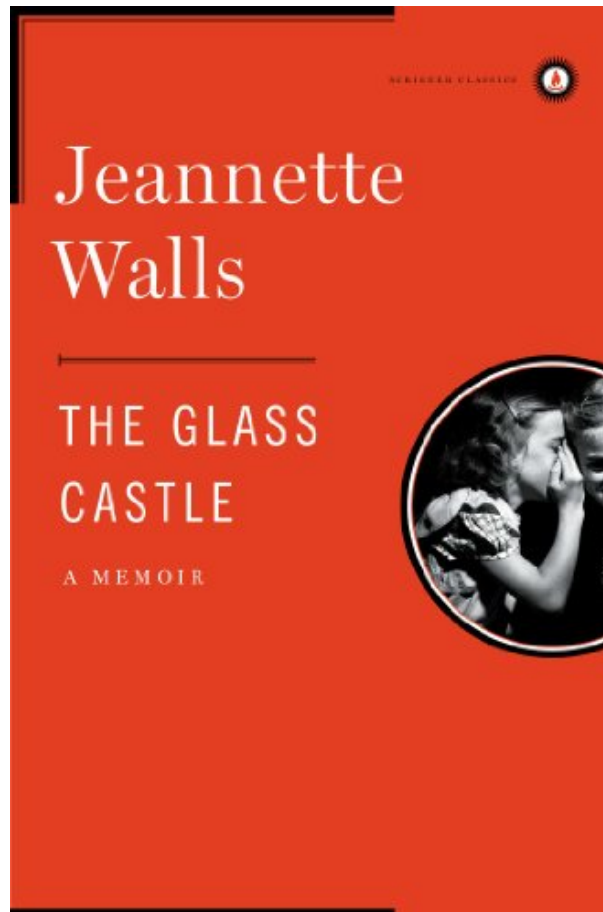


THE GLASS CASTLE: A MEMOIR BY JEANNETTE WALLS



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Jeannette Walls

THE GLASS CASTLE

A MEMOIR



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THE GLASS CASTLE: A MEMOIR BY JEANNETTE WALLS

PDF

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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1549 of 1609 people found the following review helpful.

True to Life Account

By beckybramer

I grew up in Welch, WV and was acquainted with Jeanette and Brian(Lori was older and Maureen was younger). I can attest that her harrowing account of growing up with an alcoholic father and mentally ill mother in the coalfields of WV was as she says. This was a compelling read, all the more so, because it was about people and places I knew so well. As I read, I was filled with sorrow and shame because I was one of those people who didn't want to have close association with them because they were so different from me. I try to asuage my guilt by telling myself I saw things from a child's maturity level. I wish I could apologize and find myself wondering what would have happened if I had befriended Jeanette. She could have enriched my life tremendously. For those of you who doubt things could not have happened like it was written, don't.

I knew it and I saw it, and to a degree, lived it. And as tragic as it was, it was true.

959 of 1022 people found the following review helpful.

WHAT A COURAGEOUS MEMOIR - - BRAVO!

By andy behrman

First, "The Glass Castle" is a real page turner - - I couldn't put it down and finished it in about four hours - - a record for me!

It's probably the most thoughtful and sensitive memoir I can ever remember reading - - told with such grace, kindness and fabulous sense of humor.

It's probably the best account ever written of a dysfunctional family -- and it must have taken Walls so much courage to put pen to paper and recount the details of her rather bizarre childhood - - which although it's like none other and is so dramatic - - any reader will relate to it. Readers will find bits and pieces of their own parents in Rex and Rose Mary Walls.

Her journey across the country, ending up in a poor mining town in West Virginia and then finally in New York City, is a fascinating tale of survival.

Her zest for life, even when eating margarine and sugar and bundled in a cardboard box with sweaters, coats and huddling with her pets, is unbelievably beautiful - - and motivating.

If I could give a book ten stars, it would be "The Glass Castle."

499 of 542 people found the following review helpful.

Inferno to Paradiso (or close enough)

By Thomas M. Seay

Jeannette Wall's trek, as depicted in "Glass Castle", recalls Dante's

journey through Hell and eventual ascension to Paradise. The comparison may seem risibly over-dramatic, but just as Dante had to go through the experience of the Netherworlds before he could be led to Heaven, so, too, is Jeannette's eventual triumph the FRUIT of a childhood filled with poverty and, what some would call, parental neglect or even abuse.

In the opening section about Jeannette's early childhood, sort of the outer rungs of hell, we are introduced to the author's quirky family. Her father, Rex, is a brainy underachiever who cannot keep a job and has a bit of a "drinking situation".

The mother is an eccentric artist who cannot be bothered too much

by mundane tasks- you know, like cooking or cleaning the house. The children, all extremely bright, are often underfed and left to fend for themselves. However, if the parents have failings, they also have redeeming qualities. The children are immersed in an environment that values art, music, intellectual pursuits, freedom and self-sufficiency and spurns racism and all forms of bourgeois superficiality. Above all, the reader never doubts that Rex and his wife truly love the children. One gets the feeling throughout that Jeanette never doubts that either.

In any case, the early years are bittersweet. If there is squalor and hunger there is also humor and magic. Most of all, there is hope. The family frequently moves and, although that is frustrating, it also provided the background for a myth: that the next town would provide prosperity.

But then to Welch they did go! And, it is in this West Virginia town where her father grew up, the "Nation's Coal Bin", that Jeannette and the rest of the family descend into the lower regions of hell. All the problems are exacerbated. The father, having returned to the place he said he never would, drinks with abandon and applies more and more of the family's slim resources toward his habit. Jeanette resorts to scavenging trash barrels for sustenance and is humiliated for her tattered clothing. There is not water in the house for bathing and no heat in Winter. Swallowed by the Appalachian mountains with only the two-lane US 52 out, you feel stuck. Even the pilgrim parents are unable to muster the strength to break the gravity of this place. With this immobility came the final destruction of the myth (that the family would move somewhere else and find prosperity) and, as a consequence, the destruction of hope. However, it is in this darkness that Jeannette finds her calling. She becomes a reporter for the "Maroon Wave", the Welch High School student newspaper. The rest of the book details how her dream to become a "high falutin" journalist led her to New York City and her current incarnation. Maybe not Paradiso, but close enough considering her formative years.

A number of components conflate to push Jeannette towards a successful resolution. Certainly the positive legacy of her parents: culture, books, self-sufficiency, etc. But also the dire situation gave her a sense of urgency and the focus that comes with it: She had nothing to lose. She was lucky enough to have discovered early on a career path and did not have the leisure to ruminate ENDLESSLY on it.. This latter often brings self-doubts that paralyze youth. Unlike so many memoirs about unhappy childhoods, the author never plays the John Bradshaw card by irately denouncing her parents, nor does she try to facilely excuse them. Life is more complex than that and she understands that syzygys cannot be tampered with, lest you destroy the whole. You can't take eggs out of the cake.

On a personal note, I grew up in Welch, went to Welch High School and knew Jeannette (though not very well) who was two grades behind me. I have not seen her since High School. For those reviewers who expressed doubts about the authenticity of her story, I can tell you that at least the Welch part of the story rings true to my memory.

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