

# The Glass Castle



by Jeannette Walls

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## The Glass Castle: eNotes Synopsis

Despite her fears that no one would speak to her after she wrote her memoir *The Glass Castle* (2005), Jeannette Walls has since learned that she is very popular. Her memoir is a huge success, selling millions of copies all over the world. People and critics are truly fascinated with her story.

Jeannette and her three siblings were raised by parents no fiction writer could have ever made up. They all but starved their children; told them leaky roofs and bitter cold would make them strong; and then otherwise ignored them. The family was often on the move, escaping from creditors in the middle of the night in cars that sputtered down the road at no better than 35 miles per hour. Each time they moved, the children were told they had to leave everything behind except for one special thing. With this, Jeannette packed away her favorite rock. It was the only item she carried with her from Arizona house to desert cabin to West Virginia shack.

The author grew up skinny and neglected, painting her skin with ink markers to camouflage the holes in her clothes. She went to school hungry and at lunch sat with her brother and read books. After lunch, they would search trashcans for discarded food. Jeannette's maternal grandmother sometimes came to their rescue, putting them up in her home and feeding them. But Jeannette's father, Rex, was a stubborn man who had trouble holding down a job, and when his mother-in-law called him worthless, he uprooted his family again. When the older woman died, Jeannette's mother, Rose Mary, inherited the house, which was filled with expensive furnishings. But Rose Mary refused to sell any of the goods even when they went days unable to afford food. What money they did have, Rex tended to whittle away at bars, where he spent many of his days and nights.

Enthusiastic readers have consistently kept Walls's memoir on the best-seller lists and critics have praised her writing. Prior to completing her memoir, Walls wrote a gossip column, so she knew how to tell a good story. She told her own story, critics have concluded, without over-analyzing her parents and without falling into the

trap of begging for pity. Reviewers have found that Walls tells her story objectively and even manages to keep her sense of humor.

## The Glass Castle: eNotes Essentials

### Summary

Jeannette Walls's memoir *The Glass Castle* begins with Jeannette as an adult, living in New York City. As she rides in the back of a taxi, she notices what looks like a homeless woman on the sidewalk. When Jeannette turns to look back, she realizes that woman is her mother. Jeannette slips down lower in her seat, not wanting her mother to see her. She also admits that she does not want anyone else to know that that woman who is rummaging through the trash is her mother. Jeannette is ashamed of these feelings, and later she contacts her mother and plans a meeting. When she is face to face with her mother, Jeannette offers money, but her mother, Rose Mary, refuses it. Rose Mary insists that she is doing well and needs no assistance. It is at this point that Jeannette then relates the story of how she was raised, explaining her relationship with her mother and father, and how her mother ended up living on the street.

When she was three, Jeannette was burned seriously enough to require a skin graft. When doctors ask how the burn happened, Jeannette tells them that she was cooking a hot dog when her dress erupted in flames. Her mother was busy painting, this three-year-old child tells the doctors. Shortly afterward, Jeannette's father, Rex, comes to the hospital and steals his child away. Rex does not believe his daughter needs any more medical help. She will be all right. She is strong and the experience will make her even stronger. Through this story of the hot dog and the burns, Jeannette sets the stage for a pattern of neglect and other poor parenting skills that would go on to shape her childhood.

Jeannette portrays her mother as a woman who felt her own career was devastated because she had had children. Rose Mary complains about having to take care of children even though she rarely appears to do much for them. Rose Mary's attention is most often focused on herself. She has been trained as a teacher but seldom works. When she does land a job at a school desperate enough to hire her, she claims she is overwhelmed by the paperwork of grading and evaluating and turns much of this chore over to her two oldest daughters, Lori and Jeannette, who are not yet teens. Rose Mary only goes to work when the family is desperately hungry because Rex has either lost another job or has blown his salary on gambling and alcohol.

The family often leaves its last abode in the middle of the night, moving from California to Arizona and later to West Virginia. They travel in cars that break down in the middle of the desert, forcing them to walk. Once Rex stashed his children in the back of a moving van and nearly lost them when the back door opened and he did not know it. He never explains why they must leave their homes so abruptly, but Jeannette insinuates that her father seemed to always be in trouble, mostly due to unpaid bills.

Rex and Rose Mary have one good trait. They encourage education. They teach the children to read and to do math. They inspire reading. Rose Mary teaches them to draw. Rex has a good mind for physics and science. Fortunately for the children, their parents are intelligent. However, the children rarely go to school when they are young. Instead they are often left on their own and told to entertain themselves. Jeannette and her brother Brian both like to explore. While they are still the age of elementary school students, they often go off into the desert by themselves to search for rocks. At one time, they find their father's pistol and shoot it at a neighborhood bully. This is also the time when Rex comes home one day in a drunken stupor and all but throws his wife out of a second-floor window.

Despite her father's antics and her mother's lack of care, Jeannette espouses love for her parents. Her father once throws Jeannette into a deep pool of water and tells her to learn to swim. Jeannette feels as if she could have drowned, but she still loves her father. Her mother, Brian discovers one day, is eating a large candy bar

behind the children's back even though the children have not eaten in several days. Jeannette's response is not outright anger and disgust; rather, she feels sorry for her mother's weaknesses.

Much of the latter part of the story takes place in a mountain town called Welch located in West Virginia. The family goes there in desperation. Rex's drinking was growing worse, with him abandoning the family for several days each week. Rose Mary hopes that in returning to Rex's hometown, things will get better. So they leave the large Phoenix, Arizona, house that Rose Mary inherited after her wealthy mother dies, and they travel in yet another broken down car to Rex's parents' house in Welch.

Erma and Ted Walls are not happy to see the family, and they let the children know this. When Rex and Rose Mary leave the children there and return to Arizona to pick up some things they left behind, Erma abuses the children. When their parents return, Rex's mother tells him that he must find a new place for his family to live in. What Rex finds is a shack that sits haphazardly on the top of a steep hill on the outskirts of town. The roof leaks. The toilet does not work. And when winter comes around, they have no money to pay for electricity or to buy fuel for the heating stove.

The children go to school in Welch, but they more often than not go without food. To fill their empty stomachs, Jeannette and Brian raid the trashcans at school, finding leftover lunches that other students have discarded. By the time Jeannette and Lori are in high school, they are determined to get out of Welch and away from their parents as soon as they can. They work hard at jobs that pay little money. But they save every penny for a year. Just before Lori graduates and plans to move to New York City, Rex discovers their piggy bank and steals all their hard-earned cash.

By the end of the story, readers learn that all four children make it to New York, only to find, one day, that their parents have decided to follow them. Lori, Brian, and Jeannette have their own apartments and have started new lives. They are successful. Rex and Rose Mary first live on the streets then live as squatters in a rundown building. When the children offer to help them, the parents refuse, much as Rose Mary had refused help at the beginning of the memoir.

### **Characters**

Jeannette Walls is the author, the narrator, and the main character of this story. She is an adult when the memoir begins, but shortly after the first chapter, she starts telling the story of her life beginning with when she was three years old. By the end of the story, Jeannette has journeyed through her childhood, into adolescence, and then returns to her adult self, a career woman working in New York City.

Jeannette is the second oldest of four children. As a youth, she did not find herself attractive. She was very tall, very thin, and had somewhat large, protruding teeth. Her classmates often teased her about her looks. She was also self-conscious, as a teen, about a large, puckered scar on her abdomen, the result of the bad burn and the resultant skin graft she had to have when she was three. Though her parents often kept her out of school because they moved around so much, when she did attend, Jeannette did well.

Her parents were often negligent in their care of Jeannette and her siblings. However, Jeannette found a way to love them. She retells her story without anger and judgment of her mother and father. She found strength within herself to counteract her parent's lack of maturity and substance. She worked hard to bring in money for food before she was legally old enough to hold a job. When she was seventeen, she left home and together with her older sister, Lori, made a life for herself, earning a scholarship from an Ivy League college and gaining a bachelor's degree.

Rose Mary Walls is Jeannette's mother. She is a painter. Many of the stories that Jeannette tells of her mother reflect her mother's attitude of always wanting to paint rather than to tend to her children. Rose Mary appears to be a selfish woman and is, at one point, caught eating a candy bar in secret when her children have not had

food for several days. Rose Mary is emotionally detached from her children. Her attitude is one of leaving the children to fend for themselves. She believed that by encouraging self-sufficiency, she was making her children stronger. Though she herself was raised in comfort, Rose Mary professes the benefits of anti-capitalism to the point that she is willing to live in a shack without running water and little or no heat.

Rex Walls is Jeannette's father. Through Jeanette's eyes, her father is a genius. He is very clever, has a wealth of information about a wide range of topics, but he is also an alcoholic. Rex manipulates everyone in the family, especially Jeannette. Though he steals from her and uses her to distract men he is gambling with, Jeannette loves him. She loves that he tells her she is special, when no one else in the world seems to pay any attention to her. Rex takes on a variety of jobs throughout Jeannette's childhood, working as an electrician, and later as an engineer at a mine, but he loses every job he starts. He is stubborn and believes he knows how to do things better than those around him. By the time Jeannette is a teen, Rex no longer attempts to find a job. Instead he spends his days and nights at a local bar. To pay for his drinking habit, he forces his wife to give him money. Before the end of the memoir, Rex dies of a heart attack.

Lori Walls is the oldest child of the family. She is two years older than Jeannette but is more reticent. In her youth, Lori had trouble seeing, but she did not know it. She thought everyone saw things blurry. Later, when she gets eyeglasses, she marvels at how clear everything is. She becomes a gifted artist while in high school, winning a scholarship to an art camp. This experience makes her realize how different life is outside of her home and she decides to get away as soon as she can. Without any experience of big city life, she goes to New York City immediately after high school. There she finds a way to sustain herself with her art and encourages Jeannette to follow her. As an adult, she works as an illustrator.

Brian Walls is Jeannette's brother. Throughout their childhood, Brian and Jeannette are very good friends. They have a lot of interests in common, such as enjoying explorations into the desert by themselves. Brian often comes to Jeannette's rescue when she has trouble at school or with neighborhood bullies. Brian also ends up living in New York City, and eventually finds a job working for the police force. He marries and becomes a father.

Maureen is the baby of the family. Not much information is offered about her except that she was considered the beauty of the family and was often taken in by neighborhood families who believed she was neglected. At one time in West Virginia, Maureen is heavily influenced by families who go to religious revivals that involve handling snakes as part of their practice. Maureen also ends up in New York City, but she does not fare as well as her siblings. She leaves for California and has very little contact with the rest of her family after that.

Grandma Smith is Rose Mary's mother. She has a lot of money and Rose Mary often turns to her when she needs financial support. Jeannette loves spending time with her grandmother, who feeds her well. However, the woman dies while Jeannette is still very young. Rose Mary inherits her mother's home in Arizona. The family lives there for a short time. Jeannette has written a second book based on her Grandma Smith's life.

### **Themes**

Forgiveness is the major theme of this memoir. The author proves over and over again how she holds no bad feelings toward her parents and the horrendous childhood she endured through their neglect. No matter how many times her parents either betray, frustrate, belittle, or scare her half to death, Walls finds some way of turning their actions into deeds of love. She never points fingers at her parents, blaming them for their neglect. Even though she sometimes would like to tell them what she honestly thinks of them, she holds these thoughts to herself and continues to nod her head in their favor. Her mother and father both squander money on themselves, often leaving their children with no food or warm clothes. And still, Walls does not wallow in self pity. She sees who her parents are and moves on, finding solutions for her problems through pure determination to survive.

Unconditional love is another theme, one that is closely related to forgiveness. Though she is anxious to get away from her parents and the life they have made her suffer through, Walls still loves her parents. She is disappointed when her parents follow her and her siblings to New York, and yet she loves them enough to want to help them better their living conditions. She never turns her back on them, though she certainly has enough reasons to do so. The only time that she pushes her father away is when she graduates from college and does not invite him to her commencement. She is afraid that he will show up drunk and begin to argue with the valedictorian. She carries some guilt inside of her because of this and later apologizes to Rex. But that is the only time she comes close to faltering in her love, especially for her father.

Hunger floats through this memoir, sometimes so desperately that readers begin to feel as if they too were starving. The children seldom have enough food to eat. But it is not just the hunger of the body that is expressed in this memoir. There is also the hunger for affection; the hunger for friends and acceptance; and the hunger for warmth and clean clothes.

Rose Mary and Rex stressed the need for their children to attain self-reliance, though readers might argue that neither of the parents were capable of it. The parents often stressed this value at times when they were incapable or unwilling to give their children the guidance and nurturing that all young children need. When one goes hungry, Rose Mary could well have said, one finds food wherever it is available. And thus Jeannette and Brian scrounge for tidbits of apples and bread crusts in the trashcans when there is no food at home. Jeannette takes a job at thirteen when she is legally too young to work so that she and her siblings can eat. The children walk miles into the woods to find branches they can burn in the stove to give them heat. This is the self-reliance the children have learned and how Rose Mary and Rex taught it to their children.

### **Literary Criticism and Significance**

*The Glass Castle*, published in 2005, enjoyed best-seller list status for over two years. The book has proven to be quite popular with readers as well as with reviewers. The writing style as well as Walls's overall mood (which is surprisingly uplifting) has made a story that could have been downright morose into something that has captured the reader's empathy and interest. As Francine Prose, writing for the *New York Times Book Review* put it, what is best about this memoir is the author's "deceptive ease with which she makes us see just how she and her siblings were convinced that their turbulent life was a glorious adventure."

An adventure, after all, was how Walls's mother defined her children's morbid childhoods. Emma Unsworth, writing for the *Sunday Times* (London) also went with the sense of adventure theme. Unsworth writes: "While such a story might suggest lives full of fragility, Walls is made of tough stuff and has clearly inherited a sense of adventure."

Another reviewer, Helen Ubinas, writing for the *Hartford Courant*, praises Walls's objective style, stating that it is easy "to admire the deft way she [Walls] sidesteps the sappy and/or searing pitfalls of memoir writing to present a clear sometimes hysterical, sometimes heartbreaking account of a family that in many ways defies definition."

There have been a few reviewers who have questioned whether Walls has written the truth about her family and background. But there are just as many who have claimed that no one could have made up the bizarre experiences that the author and her siblings went through. But Kathleen Parker, writing for the *Charleston Daily Mail* in West Virginia found reasons to praise Walls's strength and courage to write this memoir. Parker writes, "Her book is a testament to the resilience of the human spirit, the power of forgiveness." Many critics agree. The stories that Walls recounts are difficult to believe. But as Olivia Glazebrook, writing for the *London Spectator*, puts it: "[*The Glass Castle*] is full of astonishing episodes, but the book is a success beyond its ability to shock."