

The Glass Castle by Jeanette Walls

Study Guide



“Children begin by loving their parents; as they grow older they judge them; sometimes, they forgive them.” ~ Oscar Wilde

About *The Glass Castle*

Jeanette Walls’ 2005 memoir *The Glass Castle* details the joys and struggles of her childhood. A memoir is an account of the personal experiences of an author. It offers a look into her life and that of her highly charismatic yet frequently dysfunctional family. Walls’ first memoir and second non-fiction work, *The Glass Castle* was received well by critics and the public. *The Glass Castle* remained on the *New York Times Bestseller’s List* for 100 weeks and received The Christopher Award, the American Library Association’s Alex Award and the Books for Better Living Award. In only two years the book had sold over 1.5 million copies and had been translated into six other languages. Paramount Pictures purchased the rights to produce a film based on the memoir but the project has yet to conclude.

In an article for *Publisher’s Weekly*, Walls wrote of her surprise that many thought her memoir was largely fictionalized and exaggerated. She contested the claims of some reviewers and readers, claiming that her work was based entirely on her memory. Truth, Walls says is “the most important goal of a memoir writer”. But she also writes that truth varies based on the person telling it, memories she has growing up are recounted different by her other family members, “my brother, my sisters and my mother have all said that while they felt my book was substantially true, any memoir they would have written would have been entirely different”.

Part I – A Woman on the Street

1.) When the narrator returns to her apartment after seeing the “woman on the street”, how does she feel when she looks around her apartment and sees all her beautiful things? Why does she feel this way?

2.) How does Jeannette feel about Rose Mary's appearance by the dumpster? Why does she feel this way?

3.) What is the effect of Rose Mary's final words to Jeannette during their meal together?

Part II – The Desert (pgs 9-14)

1.) What is the most vivid of Jeannette's early memories?

2.) What do we learn about Jeanette's family values through the “burned while cooking hotdogs” incident?

3.) Explain the clash of the Walls family with the hospital and how it is a telling contrast between “them” and society.

(pgs 19-28)

4.) Why does the family move around so much?

5.) How does Rex Walls convince people to hire him? What does this suggest about his character?

6.) What is the Prospector? What are your reactions to this?

7.) Describe Jeannette’s education.

8.) On page 21, explain Rose Mary’s knowledge of and attitude toward the natural world.

9.) Page 22: Does “a little bit of a drinking situation” truly characterize Rex’s behavior? Why does Rose Mary choose to describe his alcoholism in this manner?

10.) Page 25: What is the glass castle and what does it symbolize?

11.) In your opinion, so far are Jeanette’s parents “good parents?” Explain

12.) Why do you think the father dislikes talking about his own family?

13.) What is the story of the Walls’ courtship? What does this story reveal about their relationship?

14.) Describe the birth of each child and what each story may signify for each child.

15.) On page 28, we get the mother's philosophy of child rearing. What values are reflected in her philosophy? What do you think of her attitudes?

(pgs 29-38)

16.) Why does Jeannette just sit and wait for the family to return after she falls out of the car? Why doesn't she seek help?

17.) Pages 36-37: How does the father deal with Jeannette's fears? Does this help or hurt her? What do you think of his method?

18.) Page 38: What does the Joshua Tree symbolize?

(pgs 39-47)

19.) Why didn't the parents believe in telling their children the Christmas/Santa Claus fantasy?

20.) What does father give his kids for Christmas? What do you think of his gifts?

21.) What is your opinion of Rose Mary and how long she thinks she has been pregnant? What does it say about her relationship with Rex after he chases her down?

22.) Why does Jeannette act tough for her father?

23.) Why does Brian, in solidarity, try to fight for Jeannette? How and why does his reaction differ from their father's?

(pgs 48-57)

24.) What causes the Walls to leave Blythe?

25.) What does the U-Haul scene show us about the Walls' parenting?

26.) Describe their new home in Battle Mountain – what is Battle Mountain like and what are their living conditions in the old train depot?

27.) What is surprising about the Walls children despite not having a formal education? What does this show?

28.) What does it suggest that they have no beds or tables in their new home, but the mother must have a piano?

29.) What does Rose Mary's attitude toward the piano outside suggest about her character?

30.) What do the games played suggest about the family?

31.) What do you think of the mother's attitude toward cooking? How does it affect her children?

The Desert cont. (p58-66)

32.) What is your opinion of Rose Mary and Rex's "rules" for their kids (page 59)? What could go wrong with these rules?

33.) What is the Green Lantern?

34.) Why does Rose Mary believe she's doing animals a favor by not allowing them to become dependent on humans? How does this connect with her attitude towards raising children?

35.) How does the manner in which Rex teaches Jeannette to swim, reflect his character? What is your opinion of his teaching method? How does Jeannette react to her swimming lesson?

(p67-80)

36.) What is Rex's new excuse for getting fired? Why can't he keep a job? Does he want to?

37.) How does the lack of food affect family unity?

38.) Why does Rose Mary decide to get a teaching job?

39.) Why does teaching make Rose Mary hate her own mother?

40.) Why does Rose Mary not want to go to work in the morning? What do you think this says about her character?

41.) Why does the author (Jeanette) point out that her mother is more upset about having to work than she is about leaving Maureen with the wife of a convicted drug dealer?

42.) What is Brian's attitude toward their father during this time period? Why?

43.) Why does Rex show up with groceries in the cafeteria?

45.) Why does Rex ask Jeannette if she still has faith in him?

(p81-90)

46.) In what way is Billy's upbringing worse than that of the Walls children? What types of things does Billy do that the Walls children never would?

47.) How does Jeannette react to Billy's assault? Why doesn't she tell her father about it?

48.) How do the other children react to Billy's assertion that he has raped Jeannette? What does this show about the family?

The Desert cont. (p91-101)

49.) What impact did Grandma Smith's rules have on her daughter, Rose Mary?

50.) How does Jeannette react to the news that her grandmother has died? How does Rose Mary react? Why?

51.) Describe the Walls' new neighborhood in Phoenix. How does it compare with Battle Mountain?

52) What is Rose Mary's reaction to her daughter Lori's, need for glasses? What do you think of this reaction and what does it suggest about Rose Mary?

53.) On what does Rose Mary spend her inheritance? Why?

54.) What is Rose Mary's attitude toward cleaning? What does this tell us about her?

(p102-115)

55.) What reason do the parents give for leaving the house open at night?

56.) What happens to Jeannette during the night?

57.) How does the incident affect Maureen?

58.) Rex Walls get so angry about a mountain lion being shot that he puts his fist through a wall. Is this the real reason for his anger? If not, what is?

59.) Do you believe, as Rex asserts, that wild animals will act tame if you don't show fear? What does this further show us about his character?

60.) What does Brian think of his father's assertion?

61.) What do you think of Rex's willingness to risk the lives of his children in order to prove his point?

62.) How does Rose Mary rationalize shoplifting? Is this attitude consistent with her belief in self-reliance and in not accepting welfare and handouts?

63.) How does Rex justify stealing from banks? Is this attitude consistent with his other beliefs?

64.) Describe Christmas this year for the family. How does this incident affect the family unit?

(p116-125)

65.) What gift does Jeannette want for her tenth birthday? Why?

66.) What happens to Rex when he locks himself into the bedroom?

67.) How does each family member react to Rex's attempt to get sober?

68.) Why doesn't the Walls family ever get to the Grand Canyon?

69.) Why does Jeannette react so strongly to the lady's description of the Walls as poor?

70.) Why does Rose Mary decide the family needs to move to West Virginia?

71.) In what state does the family leave the house in Phoenix? Why?

72.) Why does Rex force his children to beg him to come with them to West Virginia?

Part III – Welch (p129-139)

73.) What is Rex's family like? How does Jeannette react to them?

74.) How is Rex Walls like or not like his family members?

75.) Why does Rose Mary see the destitution of the town of Welch as an opportunity to establish herself as an artist?

76.) Why doesn't the principal believe Rose Mary's assertion that her children are gifted?

77.) Describe Jeannette's history class. What does it imply about the quality of public education in West Virginia?

78.) Why do the girls beat up Jeannette?

(p140-154)

79.) Why doesn't Jeannette tell her parents about the bullying? What do you think they'd do if they did know?

80.) Why does Dinita finally stop bullying Jeannette?

81.) What do you think of Rose Mary Walls' assertion that everyone possesses redeeming qualities?

82.) Does the fact that Hitler loved dogs redeem him in our eyes? Why or why not?

83.) What reason does Rex give for refusing to work in the mines, the only place where locals can find work? Do you believe him?

84.) What does Rose Mary tell her children about Erma's childhood? Why do you think she shares this information with them?

85.) Why do Erma and Lori get into a fight?

86.) Why don't Rex and Rose Mary take the kids' side against Erma? What does this suggest about Rex's childhood with Erma?

87.) How does Rex Walls plan to turn the house on Little Hobart Street into a glass castle? How realistic is he being?

88.) Why don't the Walls go back to Phoenix?

Welch cont. (p155-170)

89.) What happens to the foundation that Rex digs for the glass castle? What does this symbolize?

90.) Why does Jeannette try to paint the house? What happens to her efforts? Why don't the other family members help her?

91.) Is the parents' refusal to accept handouts consistent with some of their previous behaviors? Why or why not?

92.) What reasons are given for the hardness of life in Welch?

93.) What is illustrated by the feud between the Walls and the Goads? Why do you think the author includes this story?

94.) Why does the family no longer have the sense of solidarity they had in Battle Mountain? What has changed?

95.) Why does Jeannette love the novel, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*?

96.) Why is it getting harder for Jeannette to believe in her father?

97.) When Jeannette sews up her father's wound, what could this suggest symbolically? What cannot be so easily mended in her own life?

(p171-185)

98.) With neither parent working, how does the family survive financially?

99.) What were some of the Walls children's strategies for finding food?

100.) What do you think of the Rose Mary's action of secretly eating chocolate while her children are hungry? What does it reveal about her character?

101.) Why does Rose Mary compare her act of eating chocolate to Rex's drinking? Are they the same?

102.) How does Brian react to Rose Mary's request for forgiveness? Do you think that this is the first time she's done this? Why or why not?

103.) How does Jeannette react to being described as the daughter of the town drunk? Why does she react this way?

104.) Why does Rose Mary send Jeannette out to find her father, and not one of the other children?

105.) Why do you think Erma spent so much time preparing for her own funeral?

106.) What is your opinion of Rose Mary's assertion that sexual assault is a matter of perception? What burden does this statement place on Jeannette?

(p186-198)

107.) What does Rose Mary do with the diamond? What does this reveal about her? What should she have done?

108.) What is ironic about Rose Mary's assertion that welfare will psychologically damage her children?

109.) Why is Jeannette more comfortable with Dinita than she is with white children?

110.) Why would the Walls children be raised to be suspicious of government officers?

111.) Why does Jeannette hate the man from child welfare, even though her own parents don't take proper care of her?

112.) Why does Rose Mary decide to get a job?

113.) How do children react to Rose Mary's weekly refusal to go to work?

114.) What effect does Rose Mary's job have on their standard of living? Why don't things improve more than they do?

(p199-213)

115.) How does Dinita's behavior change? What do you think is the reason behind the change?

116.) What aspect of her appearance most preoccupies Jeannette? What does she do about it? What do her attempts to fix this aspect reveal about her character?

117.) How does Rex react to Jeannette's attempts to create her own braces? What do you think of his reaction?

118.) Why does Jeannette start working for the school newspaper?

119.) What does Jeannette learn about her father's past experiences?

120.) Why does Jeannette feel that she is not protecting her little sister, Maureen?

121.) Why is Maureen attracted to Pentecostalism?

122.) Why does Maureen idealize California?

123.) Looking at Rose Mary's mood swings, what do you think a psychologist might label her condition?

124.) How does Jeannette react to her mother's breakdown (208)?

125.) Why can't Jeannette be honest with her father regarding his behavior?

126.) What happens at the bar?

127.) Why isn't Rex more protective of his daughter?

128.) Do you agree with Rex's assertion that Jeannette can take care of herself? How does this point of view reflect earlier incidents in Jeannette's relationship with her father?

Welch cont. (p214-225)

129.) Why doesn't Rex just take Rose Mary's check outright? Why must he be devious?

130.) What kind of harassment does Jeannette put up with at her job in the jewelry store?

131.) Why does Jeannette want a watch?

132.) Why does Jeannette steal the watch and how does she rationalize her actions? Where do you think this attitude comes from? Why does she eventually return the watch?

133.) What conclusion does Rose Mary come to from her summer spent reading self-help books? Has she learned anything about herself?

134.) Why does Rose Mary react with anger when Jeannette tells her she doesn't behave like a mother?

135.) What does Jeannette resolve to do?

136.) Why do the parents side against Jeannette?

137.) Describe Lori at this point in her life.

138.) Why do the New York City visitors appeal to her?

139.) What plan do Lori and Jeannette hatch as a result of these visitors?

140.) Why do they name their piggy bank "Oz"?

141.) Why does Rex choose to buy a car rather than pay for an indoor toilet? What do you think of his decision and what does it suggest about him?

(p226-241)

142.) In what ways does poverty interfere with Lori's attempts to get a scholarship?

143.) What do you think is the real reason behind Rex's destruction of Lori's Shakespeare sculpture?

144.) What happens to "Oz"? Why does Rex deny the obvious?

145.) How does Lori get out of Welch after the money is stolen?

146.) Why doesn't Rex's charm work on Jeannette anymore?

147.) How does Jeannette make sure that her money won't be stolen in the future?

148.) What is Jeannette's professional goal?

149.) What advice does Jeannette get from the college guidance counselor regarding college? What is her reaction to this advice?

150.) Why is Rose Mary sad when Jeannette says that she is planning on moving to New York City?

151.) How does her father react to her decision? Why does he resurrect his dream at that point in time?

152.) What reasons does Rose Mary give for not seeing Jeannette off at the bus station? Do you believe these excuses are the real reasons? Why or why not?

153.) Why does Rex give Jeannette his jackknife? Why is this ironic?

Part IV – New York City (p245-257)

154.) Why does Jeannette find her job at *The Phoenix* rewarding? How is the newspaper's title symbolic (i.e. what is a phoenix)?

155.) Why is Jeannette fearful about Brian moving to NYC?

156.) Why does Jeannette finally decide to go to college? Who helps her make that decision?

157.) What obstacles does Jeannette overcome in going to college? How does she do it?

158.) Why doesn't Rose Mary even think about the effect holding up traffic might have on others?

159.) What can you infer from Rose Mary's statements that the murals at Rockefeller Center aren't as good as her own paintings?

160.) How do you think the children feel about their parents coming to NYC to bring the family together again?

161.) Brian and Lori take their parents in, but Jeannette does not. Why do they react differently?

162.) What does Rose Mary say when her daughter, Lori, finally kicks her out? What does this reveal about Mary?

163.) How do Rex and Mary spend their days in NYC?

164.) Why does Jeannette feel guilty about her parents' homelessness?

165.) When Jeannette and Professor Fuchs talk about homelessness, why do they disagree? Do you think Jeannette lacks sympathy for homeless people?

(p258-268)

166.) Why does Jeannette consider dropping out of college?

167.) What is Rose Mary's reaction when Jeannette suggests ways she could make or raise money? How is her answer ironic?

168.) Why is Rex proud of Jeannette? How has she lived up to his expectations?

169.) Why is Rex now questioning his lifelong atheism? Is it really only because of the physics he's reading?

170.) What does Jeannette make her father promise?

171.) Why does Rex manage to stay sober when he is living upstate?

172.) How does Rose Mary get Rex to come back to NYC? Why doesn't she want him to continue a life where he has been able to be sober?

173.) How does Rex react to Jeannette's Christmas gifts? Why?

174.) What do the different reactions of the parents to the gifts reveal about each of them?

175.) How does Mary manage to blame NYC for her homelessness?

176.) Is the Walls' homelessness really a matter of choice?

177.) How does Rex manage to share in Jeannette's college education?

178.) Why does Rex give Jeannette the money he raised?

179.) What values do the Walls share with other squatters? Why is the squatters' building truly a home for Rex and Mary?

180.) Why doesn't Jeannette invite her father to her college graduation? Was this a good choice?

181.) What kind of man is Eric? Why is Jeannette attracted to him?

(p269-281)

182.) How do Jeannette's parents react to her new home on Park Avenue? Why do they react this way?

183.) What is Rose Mary worried her daughter will become?

184.) What does Rose Mary think Jeannette should be writing about?

185.) What is the real focus of Jeannette's journalism?

186.) What does Jeannette fear? Why?

187.) What does Rose Mary ask Jeannette to do for her?

188.) What does Jeannette discover about her mother's family property and what questions about her life are raised?

189.) Why does Rose Mary refuse to sell her property? Is this a logical decision? How does it connect with the diamond ring incident from Jeannette's childhood?

190.) Why does Jeannette refuse to buy the family land for her mother?

191.) How does her mother react to this decision? Why does she react this way?

192.) What does Rex think of Brian's career as a police officer? What childhood behaviors exhibited by Brian indicated that he might go into law enforcement?

193.) What kind of life is Maureen living? Where do you think she learned this behavior?

194.) Why do you think Maureen looks for men who will take care of her? How does this connect with the way Maureen lived in West Virginia?

195.) Why does Jeannette think that Maureen is mentally ill?

196.) Why does Rose Mary deny that Maureen tried to kill her?

197.) Explain how each family member reacts to Maureen's arraignment. What do these reactions reveal about each?

198.) Why does Jeannette feel responsible for Maureen's breakdown?

199.) Why does the family get together after Maureen's arraignment?

200.) Why does Rex make up a story about his illness?

201.) What is the only way Jeannette can answer Rex's question?

202.) How do Rex and Jeannette feel about each other?

203.) How would Rex Walls have preferred to die? Why?

204.) How does Jeannette react to her father's death?

205.) Why does Jeannette divorce Eric? Do you think that this is connected to her father's death? Why?

Part V – Thanksgiving (p285-end)

206.) Why does Jeannette close her memoir with a Thanksgiving reunion? What does the holiday suggest about life and family?

207.) Why does Brian react with anger to the abundance of food at the dinner table?

208.) What do you think of their toast to their father?

209.) What does the fluttering of the candle flames suggest? Why does Jeanette end her memoir with this thought?

