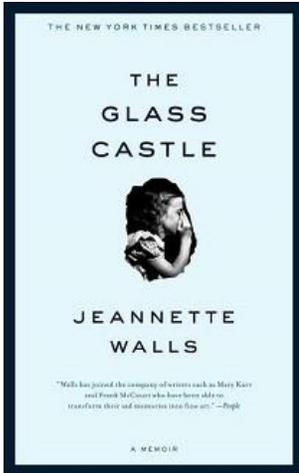


The Glass Castle

By Jeannette Walls



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ABOUT THIS 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.

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.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

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?

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How Jeannette Walls Spins Good Stories Out of Bad Memories

By Alex Witchel | Published: May 24, 2013



Ilona Szwarc for The New York Times

Walls and her mother, Rose Mary, in the cottage on Walls's farm where Rose Mary lives.



When it comes to branding — the kind that marks you for life — corporations have nothing on families. Jeannette Walls's mother branded her children this way: Lori, the oldest, was the smart one. Maureen, the youngest, was the pretty one. Brian, the boy, was the brave one. And Jeannette? "The only thing going for you," her mother informed her, "was that you worked hard."

Ilona Szwarc for The New York Times

Walls on her property in Virginia.

As I drove onto Walls's 205-acre farm in Virginia and the Technicolor green grass and trees unfurled to reveal horses in their paddocks, it seemed clear that hard work had lost its power as a put-down.

When Walls published her memoir, "The Glass Castle," in 2005, it became an instant classic. It tells the story of her outrageous upbringing by Rex, her alcoholic father who was probably bipolar, and Rose Mary, her mother, a self-described "excitement addict" who is a hoarder and also probably bipolar. The book has sold 4.2 million copies and been translated into 31 languages. Hollywood has threatened a movie version for years; Jennifer Lawrence was recently announced to play Walls.

“No one ever uses the front door!” Walls called, tearing out from behind the house. She is almost six feet tall, whipper thin, with a mane of dark red hair, wild at the possibility that I might enter her home the wrong way. Given her background, it’s no surprise that her default instinct is to impose order. Walls’s childhood was peripatetic, to say the least — her parents had 27 addresses in the first five years of their marriage. They were not only running out on the rent, but her father was convinced that the F.B.I. was after them. They finally landed in Rex’s Appalachian hometown, Welch, W.Va., in a three-room house without plumbing or heat, infested with snakes and rats. Walls says she still has nightmares about the yellow bucket the six of them used each night as a toilet.

“The Glass Castle,” beautifully written in deceptively simple prose, gets its name from the dream house Rex promised to build his family. He drew up the blueprints; he just needed to discover gold so he could pay for it. Here’s how the book begins: At 3, Walls is on a chair in front of the stove in the family’s trailer, boiling hot dogs, because her mother is painting and can’t be bothered to cook. Walls’s pink-tutu dress catches fire, and her stomach, ribs and chest are badly burned. She is hospitalized for six weeks, until her father, irritated with the uppity doctors, breaks her out and takes her home. When she returns to the chair to cook more hot dogs, her mother says to her approvingly: “Good for you. You’ve got to get right back in the saddle.” Then she continues painting.

As Walls, 53, led me around back, the right way, into her tastefully restored farmhouse — salvaged pine floors, soapstone counters, wood-burning fireplaces — she chatted nonstop. That antic energy suited her well for the 29 years she lived in New York, having fled Welch at 17, to join Lori in the Bronx (Brian and Maureen came later). She finished high school in the city, and with grants, loans, scholarships and a year spent answering phones at a Wall Street law firm, put herself through Barnard. (Rex contributed \$950 and a mink coat that he won at poker.) In 1987, at 27, Walls took over the *Intelligencer* gossip column at New York magazine, and later covered gossip for [msnbc.com](https://www.msnbc.com). She was married to an entrepreneur for eight years and lived on Park Avenue. Life was good, except that Rex and Rose Mary had followed their children to New York. Homeless at first, her parents eventually became squatters.

While Walls wrote about “the skinny dames and the fat cats,” as her father called them, she was careful to hide her background, though her parents kept turning up on the local news, mouthing off about squatters’ rights. Then she published an inflammatory item concerning Scientology and learned that the church was beginning an investigation into her life. That, combined with a cab ride one night when she caught sight of her mother rooting through a Dumpster, made her decide it was time to tell the truth.

After “The Glass Castle,” Walls wrote “Half-Broke Horses,” based on her maternal grandmother’s life in the West and marketed as fiction. “The Silver Star,” to be published on June 11, is actually her first novel. But beyond discussing the books, I was curious to see how Walls survived a childhood that would have flattened most people.

As we sat in the kitchen, she continued her animated monologue, punctuated by frequent bursts of laughter. At the fourth mention of her mother, I realized this was the source of her anxiety; I would soon be meeting Rose Mary, who lives in a cottage on the farm. She is more of a conundrum than Rex, who died in 1994, at 59. Even though in “The Glass Castle” Jeannette writes about his stealing her piggy-bank savings to buy booze, she had a special relationship with him that she believes gave her the confidence to succeed. Rose Mary is more of an opaque figure; laser-sharp one day, maddeningly obtuse the next. Not to mention stunningly selfish. Once, when her children went hungry, as they often did, she saved a Hershey bar for herself. Readers were ready to crucify her for that alone, so I could understand her daughter’s trepidation.

Though Walls's new book is fiction, the plot feels familiar: a flaky single mother of two girls, 15 and 12, takes off, so the girls ditch California to visit their uncle in Virginia. Horrors ensue. While the older sister tries to be the protector, it is Bean, the younger sister, whose sanity and smarts prevail.

Walls has spent the last eight years insisting in interviews that she "can't make anything up." That's a problem if you're writing fiction. She shrieked with laughter: "I've got to do some serious backpedaling now. I've got no wacky relatives left to exploit!" It seems inevitable that one of her themes would be a mother who abandons her children. Walls nodded. "So many people ask, 'How could you forgive your mother for the way you were raised?' It's really not forgiveness in my opinion. It's acceptance. She's never going to be the sort of mother who wants to take care of me. "Another theme," she went on, "is when people take advantage of you, is it smart to fight back? One of the blessings of my childhood was being a fighter and a scrapper, but being a fighter and a scrapper is a curse too. I'm just learning you don't always have to fight. That's been the revelation with 'The Glass Castle,' the kindness of people. It's completely defanged and disarmed me. It's one of the reasons I quit doing gossip. It's so ironic. I was campaigning, crusading and exposing other people while I was hiding my own secret. Shame on me. I was convinced that if people knew the truth about me, I would lose my job. The revelation is if you're willing to discuss what you've been through, people become unashamed of their own secrets."

Walls realized this with the help of John Taylor, a former colleague at New York, who has been her husband for 12 years. "We were best buddies for a long time before we were married," she recalled. "He would say: 'There's something about you that doesn't add up, Jeannette. When I ask about your past, you change the topic. Why is that?' I knew his dad was a diplomat, and I said, 'If you knew the truth about me, I don't think you'd want to be my friend.' And he said: 'That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard. Do you think we're in high school?' So I swore him to secrecy. His very first reaction was, 'That would make an incredible book.' "

Once the book was written and Walls left New York for Virginia, she seemed to make a clean break from her mother, who was still living in an East Village squat. But when it was damaged by a fire, Walls, alone among her siblings, took Rose Mary in. Her brother, Brian, a retired policeman who lives in Brooklyn, finds it hard to be around their mother, Walls said. Her younger sister, Maureen, stabbed Rose Mary in the back 20 years ago, before being given a diagnosis of schizophrenia; she now lives in California and claims she has no mother. Lori remains close to Rose Mary, Walls said, though she lives in Manhattan, where she works at a law firm to support herself as an artist.

"Mom is Mom," Walls said matter-of-factly. "She couldn't take care of herself, how could she take care of me? Taking care of myself is central to my personality. I'm pathologically independent. There's no doubt that's one reason I never had children. None of the girls have." Well, a mother content to let her children scavenge food from garbage bins isn't much of a role model. And by the way, it was lunchtime. Why wasn't Walls eating?

"Old habits die hard," she said, cheerily. "You know, I'll go to a nice hotel, and my entire bill including room service will be picked up, and I'll still be looking at the trays in the hallway like, 'Hey, they're not going to eat that?' I have an entirely different approach to food than most people. For years it was just fuel for the machine, a tasteless blob you put into your mouth so you don't go hungry. I always find eating — I don't want to say shameful — but a neediness I don't particularly like. I can go for a day, sometimes two without eating. John cooks for us — stews and chilies. But food is not comfort for me. John at one point thought it would be romantic to eat something off my plate. Whoa! He almost lost his hand. I was like: 'What the hell are you doing? That's my food, your food is over there.' I'm not that good at sharing."

She grew quieter. “We all have our baggage, and I think the trick is not resisting it but accepting it, understanding that the worst experience has a valuable gift wrapped inside if you’re willing to receive it.” She met my eye. “So, O.K., Mom kept the chocolate bar. But she gave me a lot of good material.”

As we walked toward Rose Mary’s cottage, I admired how idyllic it looked — white clapboard with a white-picketed porch and a flower garden. When the door opened, we were instantly transported to the squat. The stench of cat urine was an almost-physical entity, pushing against the piles of garbage and crusted-over cat food in myriad dishes. One room was so filled with junk that it was impossible to enter. I remembered Walls writing that when her mother had money to buy food, she always bought the dented cans “because they need love, too.”

Rose Mary, who is 78, was an amiable hostess, though we stood to talk. Her aqua jacket was coated in dust; her light blue T-shirt was heavily stained, as were her bluejeans. The filth, the stink, the boxes and the piles were like a force field separating her from the world.

“I’m enjoying it here,” Rose Mary said. “I moved an awful lot when I was married. We were one jump ahead of the landlord.” She glanced sideways at her daughter. “This landlord’s not kicking me out.” She showed me photographs of her paintings, which are stored in the barn. “The TV is pretty sorry,” she let me know. “And my cellphone doesn’t work. I’ve got to get in the car to the main road, and then it works.” Her aggrieved tone did not allow for the fact that her daughter had built her a house and bought her a car, a TV and a cellphone. Not to mention a horse. Is she proud of Jeannette? “Oh, yes, naturally,” she said. “I have other children I’m proud of too. I don’t want her to be too bigheaded about it.” Jeannette rolled her eyes.

I asked Rose Mary what she thought of “The Glass Castle.” “I enjoyed it,” she said. “Though it has a completely different perspective from me.” It suddenly seemed to occur to her to apologize for the mess. “I’m in the process of getting straightened out,” she said. “I’m a natural-born collector, a lot of artists are. Picasso died in a 23-room castle. He went regularly to the dump, a man after my own soul.” She smiled. “Everything rotates around my art, isn’t that ridiculous?” We left her to get straightened out and walked back to the house. The fresh air was welcome. “That was nothing to the smell I grew up with,” Walls said. “She smelled like that on ‘Oprah.’ When I asked her to take a shower, she said: ‘Nothing is ever good enough for you. You’re a perfectionist.’ ” She sighed, deflated. “To be ashamed of your people is a bad thing.”

As we walked, Walls’s voltage dimmed. All the laughing and rushing, the sheer momentum she wills into being each day, is enormous. When I asked if she felt vulnerable living in such an isolated setting, her answer was serious. “No,” she said. “My nightmares are more that I hurt other people.”

Taylor joined us then, and we climbed into the station wagon to pick up seedlings for their vegetable garden. Taylor, who has published five books of his own, including “Falling,” a searing memoir of his failed first marriage, has a dry wit and a long fuse; the nurturing world he makes with Walls is the antithesis of her mother’s. Before they moved to the farm in 2011, they lived in nearby Culpeper, with Rose Mary in a mobile home out back.

“When we were moving, I got into this big argument with her,” Walls recalled. “There were maggots on the coffee table, and she had a whole barn filled with stuff she wanted to bring. I sort of laid into her, because she was like, ‘My art career!’ and I got a little candid about her art career. Afterward I said: ‘Mom, I’m sorry. I can be a little nasty.’ And she said, ‘Don’t ever apologize for who you are.’ I said, ‘I have an ugly mouth on me,’ and she said, ‘That ugly mouth has gotten you far.’ Of course I stole that line and put it in ‘The Silver Star.’ ” She smiled weakly. “You know, she’s not a bad person. She’s really not.”

We drove a while longer before she asked what I thought of Rose Mary. “I thought she’d be more” — I searched for the word — “aware,” I said finally. Walls covered her face with her hands and didn’t speak for a while. But it wasn’t because she was ashamed. Even though her mother didn’t protect her, she still wants to protect her mother. She wants to connect with her. To have someone else see that she can’t just makes it more painful.

Earlier, Walls talked about the fun she was having on the farm, calling it “a little bit of arrested development” — riding horses, learning piano. She is close to Taylor’s 29-year-old daughter, his granddaughter and the rest of his family who visit on holidays. But hard work is still what defines her. As we’d discussed, Rex may have imagined the glass castle, but Walls is the one who built it.

“He’d be so proud,” she crowed. “That’s why I can’t be bitter or angry, because I got the damn castle, didn’t I? And he and my mother gave me the tools to do it. I’ve got four flush toilets in this house, O.K.? Push the little lever, life is good. I got heat, push the little buttons, life is really good. I will never take anything for granted. It is a miracle to me that I can go to a grocery store and don’t have to stop counting at \$3. I can also live without too much fear because I know I could survive without these things. I was at this event once, and somebody said, ‘I can’t believe that you survived — it’s superhuman.’ And a woman in the front row shyly raised her hand and said, ‘I’m from Liberia, and she didn’t have it so bad.’ There was a gasp in the audience, as though I was going to get upset that this chickie-poo dared to have a worse childhood than me. To the contrary. The thermostat and hot running water are luxuries. I would never want to go back, but I know I can. I don’t understand Outward Bound, having to pay for all that, but if that’s what you need to figure out you’re tougher than you realize, that’s O.K.”

Going back seems unlikely, certainly. And with Taylor as her family, she has tremendous support. “The fact that John accepted me so fully was huge,” she said, “because he’s Mr. Handsome, upper-middle-class WASP. He went to Outward Bound, all that sort of stuff.”

Wait. *He* went to Outward Bound? That’s actually funny.

“It is, it’s hilarious,” Walls agreed, hooting her laughter. “He had to pay for it. I got it for free.”