

## The Glass Castle

Jeanette Walls

Scribner, 2005

### Reviews

- [Kirkus](#) (15 Dec 2004. Starred Review): “An account of growing up nomadic, starry-eyed, and dirt poor in the ’60s and ’70s, by gossip journalist Walls (Dish, 2000). From her first memory, of catching fire while boiling hotdogs by herself in the trailer park her family was passing through, to her last glimpse of her mother, picking through a New York City Dumpster, Walls’s detached, direct, and unflinching account of her rags-to-riches life proves a troubling ride. Her parents, Rex Walls, from the poor mining town of Welch, West Virginia, and Rose Mary, a well-educated artist from Phoenix, love a good adventure and usually don’t take into account the care of the children who keep arriving—Lori, Jeannette, Brian, and Maureen—leaving them largely to fend for themselves. For entrepreneur and drinker Rex, “Doing the skedaddle” means getting out of town fast, pursued by creditors. Rex is a dreamer, and someday his gold-digging tool (the Prospector), or, better, his ingenious ideas for energy-efficiency, will fund the building of his desert dream house, the Glass Castle. But moving from Las Vegas to San Francisco to Nevada and back to rock-bottom Welch provides a precarious existence for the kids—on-and-off schooling, living with exposed wiring and no heat or plumbing, having little or nothing to eat. Protesting their paranoia toward authority and their insistence on “true values” for their children (“What doesn’t kill you will make you stronger,” chirps Mom), these parents have some dubious nurturing practices, such as teaching the children to con and shoplift. The deprivations do sharpen the wits of the children—leading to the family’s collective escape to New York City, where they all make good, even the parents, who are content to live homeless. The author’s tell-it-like-it-was memoir is moving because it’s unsentimental; she neither demonizes nor idealizes her parents, and there remains an admirable libertarian quality about them, though it justifiably elicits the children’s exasperation and disgust. Walls’s journalistic bare-bones style makes for a chilling, wrenching, incredible testimony of childhood neglect. A pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps, thoroughly American story.
- [Booklist](#) (1 Feb 2005): “Walls, who spent years trying to hide her childhood experiences, allows the story to spill out in this remarkable recollection of growing up. From her current perspective as a contributor to MSNBC online, she remembers the poverty, hunger, jokes, and bullying she and her siblings endured, and she looks back at her parents: her flighty, self-indulgent mother, a Pollyanna unwilling to assume the responsibilities of parenting, and her father, troubled, brilliant Rex, whose ability to turn his family’s downward-spiraling circumstances into adventures allowed his children to excuse his imperfections until they grew old enough to understand what he had done to them—and to himself. His grand plans to build a home for the family never evolved: the hole for the foundation of the “The Glass Castle,” as the dream house was called, became the family garbage dump, and, of course, a metaphor for Rex Walls’ life. Shocking, sad, and occasionally bitter, this gracefully written account speaks candidly, yet with surprising affection, about parents and about the strength of family ties—for both good and ill.”

- [Publishers Weekly](#) (17 Jan 2005. Starred Review). “Freelance writer Walls doesn’t pull her punches. She opens her memoir by describing looking out the window of her taxi, wondering if she’s “overdressed for the evening” and spotting her mother on the sidewalk, “rooting through a Dumpster.” Walls’s parents—just two of the unforgettable characters in this excellent, unusual book—were a matched pair of eccentrics, and raising four children didn’t conventionalize either of them. Her father was a self-taught man, a would-be inventor who could stay longer at a poker table than at most jobs and had “a little bit of a drinking situation,” as her mother put it. With a fantastic storytelling knack, Walls describes her artist mom’s great gift for rationalizing. Apartment walls so thin they heard all their neighbors? What a bonus—they’d “pick up a little Spanish without even studying.” Why feed their pets? They’d be helping them “by not allowing them to become dependent.” While Walls’s father’s version of Christmas presents—walking each child into the Arizona desert at night and letting each one claim a star—was delightful, he wasn’t so dear when he stole the kids’ hard-earned savings to go on a bender. The Walls children learned to support themselves, eating out of trashcans at school or painting their skin so the holes in their pants didn’t show. Buck-toothed Jeannette even tried making her own braces when she heard what orthodontia cost. One by one, each child escaped to New York City. Still, it wasn’t long before their parents appeared on their doorsteps. “Why not?” Mom said. “Being homeless is an adventure.”
- [New York Times](#) (13 March 2005). “MEMOIRS are our modern fairy tales, the harrowing fables of the Brothers Grimm reimaged from the perspective of the plucky child who has, against all odds, evaded the fate of being chopped up, cooked and served to the family for dinner. What the memoir writer knows is what readers of Grimm intuit: the loving parent and the evil stepparent may in reality be the same person viewed at successive moments and in different lights. And so the autobiographer is faced with the daunting challenge of describing the narrow escape from being baked into gingerbread while at the same time attempting to understand, forgive and even love the witch. How fitting, then, that the title of Jeannette Walls’s chilling memoir, “The Glass Castle,” should evoke the architecture of fantasy and magic. The transparent palace that Walls’s father often promised to build for his children functions as a metaphor for another fanciful construct, the carefree facade with which two people who were (to say the least) unsuited to raise children camouflaged their struggle to survive in a world for which they were likewise ill equipped. The Glass Castle” falls short of being art, but it’s a very good memoir. At one point, describing her early literary tastes, Walls mentions that “my favorite books all involved people dealing with hardships.” And she has succeeded in doing what most writers set out to do -- to write the kind of book they themselves most want to read.”

### Awards

- [ALA Alex Award](#), 2006
- [Lincoln Award Nominee](#), 2008

### Lists

- [Booklist Editors' Choice: Adult Books for Young Adults, 2005](#)
- [Notable Books, 2006](#)

## Response to challenges

- [Indian River Public Schools, Florida](#) (2021): Title mentioned in list of books deemed inappropriate for schools. Removed from shelf originally pending investigation, at this time the book appears to have been put back on the shelf. (See [Hometown News](#) article for more information). No available press releases regarding issue on school website.
- [Fredericksburg ISD, Texas](#) (2022): Title mentioned in list of books deemed inappropriate for schools. Removed from shelf originally pending investigation, at this time the book appears to have been put back on the shelf. (See [list of titles](#) for more information). No available press releases regarding issue on school website.

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