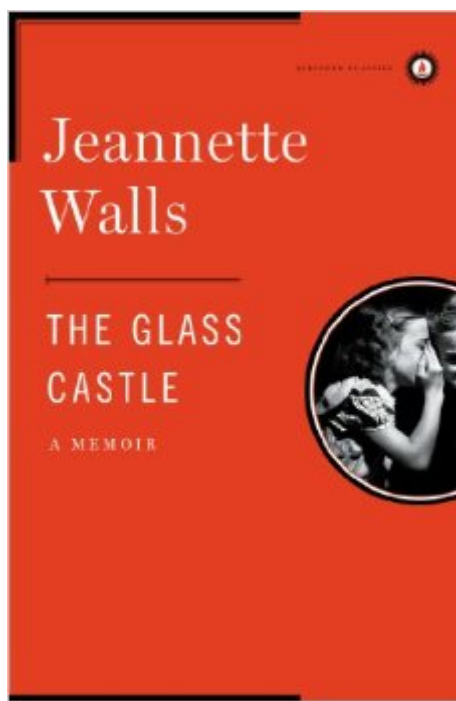


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The Glass Castle: A Memoir



Synopsis

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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Customer Reviews

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 Jeannette 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!

I was grateful that the chapters are short in this disturbing memoir, because I could only take in a little at a time. It's difficult to imagine a more dysfunctional household than the one in which Walls grew up. What sets her book apart is the distinctive voice in which she narrates that dysfunction, and her growing awareness that she's entitled to a decent life. We meet the fiery Jeannette as a toddler, badly burned while cooking hot dogs on a stove for herself. No, she wasn't defying her mother's orders. She was simply taking care of herself in a household where both parents thumbed their noses at such simple conventions as regular meals, sound shelter, decent clothing, running hot water and protection from sexual predators. On one thing, though, they didn't scrimp: the children were taught to read at an early age. I'm convinced that held the key to their survival. Thanks to public libraries, Jeannette read the entire Laura Ingalls Wilder prairie series before she entered school. It must have helped normalize the survivalist lifestyle that her parents adopted. The difference is that it wasn't necessary. Rex, her father, was when sober an accomplished electrician and science maven. Her mother, Rose Mary, had a college degree but found teaching, like motherhood, an imposition on her life as an artist. The three older children--Lori, Jeannette and

Bryan--functioned as a family within the family. The youngest, Maureen, grew dependent on the kindness of strangers and eventually set out on her own. This is a uniquely American story that wanders all over the landscape from California and Arizona to West Virginia and New York.

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