

# **The Glass Castle Study Guide**

## **The Glass Castle by Jeannette Walls**

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# Plot Summary

*The Glass Castle* is a memoir written by journalist, Jeannette Walls. Jeannette writes about her unique childhood, sharing her fond memories of her father and mother. She tells how they refused to conform to society's ideas of responsibility, leaving their children to fend for themselves for even the most basic of needs, such as food and shelter. Jeannette tells her story in a straightforward fashion that is not touched with anger or self-pity, belying events that often shock her readers with her almost innocent presentation of the facts. *The Glass Castle* is an astonishing memoir that will leave the reader both stunned by the tragic circumstances of Jeannette's childhood and awed by her strength.

Jeannette was three when she burned herself boiling hotdogs for her lunch. Jeannette's mother took her to the hospital for treatment despite her father's protests. Jeannette enjoyed the hospital because it was so clean. There was television and all the nurses were very nice to her. However, her father no longer thought she belonged there. One night simply picked her up and stole her away against medical advice. This was the way her father did things. He simply picked up and moved on when he did not like the situation.

The Walls family moved often. Jeannette's father, Rex Walls, did not like to stay in one place too long because of the government officials he always claimed were looking for him. The family would often move in the middle of the night, leaving behind many of their possessions. Jeannette, her sister and brother saw this as an adventure when they were young, finding something exciting about each place where they lived. There was the desert of California, the small towns along the Arizona border and Battle Mountain, where they lived in an old train depot. Jeannette loved living in Battle Mountain because there was always something to do. Despite the fact the children did not have that many toys, they entertained themselves regularly by tobogganing down the stairs or jumping off the roof with an old blanket as their parachute.

However, the fun never lasted. Jeannette's father would have to quit his job because of some trouble with the local unions. Or perhaps he would just concoct some other wild story for the family. Money would be in short supply and food would become scarce. After a while, bill collectors would start asking for their money and the utilities would be shut off. Jeannette and her siblings, including a new baby sister, would often have to find food on their own, sometimes making a meal out of a stick of butter left over in the refrigerator. Then the family would move on, often into a situation worse than the one they left behind.

When Jeannette's grandmother died, her mother inherited a house and some land in Texas. The family moved into the house, the mother deciding to turn it into a gallery to showcase her art. The family lived in this house for more than a year, and for that year things seemed to settle down for the family. Jeannette entered a school that provided more structure and discipline than she had known for most of her short life. Rex stopped drinking for a short time and Rose Mary received checks for the mineral rights on her



land in Texas that paid for winter clothing and food. Life could not have been better. However, again the family fell on hard times and decided to move once more, this time to West Virginia where Rex grew up.

Jeannette did not like her grandmother Walls from the first time she met her. This grandmother was so drastically different from her beloved Grandma Smith that Jeannette could not even imagine being related to this crass woman. Grandmother Walls was an angry woman who often sent the children into the unheated basement without their evening meal. She forced her racial prejudices on Jeannette by encouraging her not to spend time with her one new friend, a black girl from the wrong part of town. Jeannette disliked her grandmother and did not hesitate to stand up for herself and her siblings, especially when her grandmother attempted to touch her brother in an indecent fashion. Jeannette fought for her brother and ended up causing the entire family to get kicked out of the house.

The Walls family bought a rundown shack in the poor section of town. The house was in such poor shape that it did not have indoor plumbing or heat. Jeannette's father refused to get a job while living in this house and the only income the family had, the checks from Texas, barely paid the mortgage. Jeannette and her siblings slept on beds made from ropes and often foraged for food in the trashcans at school. Jeannette began to dream of escaping Welch and experiencing life in some big city, far from her parents. Lori, Jeannette's sister, was the first to escape, moving to New York to go to art school. Jeannette followed a year later and Brian shortly after that. Soon the whole family was in New York, including Rex and Rose Mary, who were so poor that they became homeless after only a few short months in the city. Rex and Rose Mary would become squatters in a rundown building where Rex would die from a heart attack. Jeannette would marry and divorce and marry again, finally finding some peace in her life.



# Part One, A Woman on the Street,

## Part One, A Woman on the Street, Summary and Analysis

*The Glass Castle* is a memoir written by journalist, Jeannette Walls. Jeannette writes about her unique childhood, sharing her fond memories of her father and mother. She tells how they refused to conform to society's ideas of responsibility, leaving their children to fend for themselves for even the most basic of needs, such as food and shelter. Jeannette tells her story in a straightforward fashion that is not touched with anger or self-pity, belying events that often shock her readers with her almost innocent presentation of the facts. *The Glass Castle* is an astonishing memoir that will leave the reader both stunned by the tragic circumstances of Jeannette's childhood and awed by her strength.

Jeannette was in the back of a taxi on her way to a party when she saw her mother on the street, digging through a dumpster. Jeannette was so ashamed by the sight of her mother that she had the taxi turn around and return her to her apartment on Park Avenue. Jeannette felt guilty for living in such luxury while her parents continued to live on the streets. However, Jeannette had frequently offered her parents help, as had her brother and sisters, and was refused every time. Still, Jeannette felt the guilt and decided to leave a message for her mother through a mutual friend to meet for lunch later in the week. Jeannette met her mother at a local restaurant she knew her mother enjoyed and told her what had happened the night of the party. Jeannette asked her mother directly what she should tell people when they see her on the street. Jeannette's mother told her to be honest. Jeannette's mother told her she should accept her parents as they were because this was who they were, and they were not going to change.

This part introduces Jeannette as an adult, and her mother, who is now homeless. Jeannette's reaction to seeing her mother rooting through the dumpster is typical of what anyone's reaction would likely be to seeing his or her mother searching through a dumpster. Jeannette is embarrassed and filled with guilt, wishing she could force her parents to take some of the help she can clearly offer. What is unusual is Jeannette's account of how her parents will not accept her help. Clearly it is not because of some sort of estrangement, since Jeannette's mother welcomes an opportunity to have lunch with her daughter. When Jeannette asks her mother what she should tell people when they see her on the street, like she was the other night, Jeannette's mother tells her to accept her and her husband as they are and to tell people the truth. The mother's reply is as logical as it is surprising. The mother's reply suggests she is perfectly happy living on the streets and rooting through dumpsters. This suggestion opens a door into the narration of the next section, as Jeannette introduces her family by returning to her childhood and recounting the unique style her parents had employed when raising her and her siblings.



## Part Two, The Desert, Pages 9-61 ,

### Part Two, The Desert, Pages 9-61 , Summary and Analysis

Jeannette was three and cooking hotdogs for herself when her dress caught fire. Jeannette's mother was painting in the next room and came when she heard her daughter's cries. Jeannette's mother had a neighbor take her to the hospital where she would remain for the next six weeks, despite her father's protests. Unable to take it a moment longer, Jeannette's father came one night and stole her from the hospital, against medical advice. Soon after, Jeannette became obsessed with fire and began playing with matches, often catching small things on fire simply to watch the flames.

A few months later, the family packed up in the middle of the night and moved on. This was a common occurrence in the Walls family, as they were often running from the government people their father was on constant watch for. They would often drive for hours at a time until Rex, Jeannette's father, would find some little town that tickled his fancy. They would rent a little house or trailer for a few weeks or months until the itch to move on hit again. Sometimes they would go to Arizona, where Jeannette's mother, Rose Mary, grew up. There they would stay with Grandma Smith. However, Rex disliked Grandma Smith because she always asked when he would settle down and care for his family properly. Conversely, Jeannette liked Grandma Smith because she would brush Jeannette's hair and always made hot cereal for breakfast.

Rex was an educated man who often worked as an engineer or electrician. Rex was also a dreamer, always inventing things and making big plans. This included his plans for the Glass Castle. The Glass Castle was to be a family home built completely out of glass, designed to be ergonomically efficient. However, Rex also had a drinking problem that often caused him to lose his job or lose interest in his latest invention. Rex was a violent drunk. He would take his anger out on his wife or anyone else who happened to be in the way. Rose Mary was an artist who preferred her art to providing structure for her children. Rose Mary refused the conventional approaches to child rearing, preferring to allow her children to run free and fend for themselves. Rose Mary was a trained teacher. Yet her philosophies on life also made it difficult for her to hold a job. If she could not discipline and structure her own children, how could she do the same with strangers' children?

Rex and Rose Mary met while Rex was in the Air Force and he was swimming with a group of fellow airmen near Rose Mary's home one summer afternoon. Rose Mary came across the group and dared them to jump off the cliff where they stood into the water below. When they hesitated, Rose Mary jumped. Rex always claimed he fell in love with her at that moment. They were married shortly thereafter and, within a year, Lori was born. Another baby came a year after Lori, Mary Charlene. However, Mary Charlene died when she was nine months old of what Rose Mary claimed was crib death. Rose Mary never seemed terribly emotional about the death, but she claimed



Rex was never the same. Jeannette was born two years later, followed by Brian. Brian was a blue baby and suffered seizures throughout his first years of life.

During the move that took place just a few months after Jeannette's burns, Rex and Rose Mary stopped at a little bar for some drinks. They left the children in the car for several hours. When they returned, they brought the kids candy and beef jerky. While eating her candy, Jeannette moved too close to the door. The door did not latch securely and burst open when Rex took a turn too fast. Jeannette went flying out the door and rolled down an embankment next to the road. Jeannette climbed back up to the side of the road and watched the taillights of her parents' car disappear down the road. It would be more than an hour before the car would return for her.

The family settled in Las Vegas for a month. Then Rex claimed the blackjack dealer had figured out his system and it was time to skid addle. They moved to a small hotel in San Francisco, where they survived a fire that destroyed the hotel. They lived on the beach in their car for a short time, before a cop forced them to move on. After that they rented a small house in a Mojave Desert town called Midland. Rose Mary became pregnant while they lived there. Rex got a job with a mining company just until it was time for Rose Mary to give birth. His plan was to then move to Blythe, a larger town that would have a good hospital. When Christmas came around that year, there was no money for presents. The Walls children did not believe in Santa Claus and knew their parents bought their gifts during the after Christmas sales every year. However, even that would not be possible this year. Therefore Rex gave each child a choice of a star for his or her gift. Jeannette chose Venus for her gift.

The family moved to Blythe a few months later. Living in a larger city meant that Jeannette had to go to school. Since she could read so much better than the other students, Jeannette stood out in the classroom. This caused her some trouble with bullies, including one group of kids who followed her home and beat her up in an alley. The next day, Brian, who was a year younger than Jeannette, came to her rescue when the same group of kids tried to hurt her again, helping Jeannette get the better of the bullies. Two months later, Rose Mary gave birth to a baby girl, escaping from the hospital the same way Rex has stolen Jeannette from the hospital a few years before. The new baby was to be called Lilly Ruth Maureen, after both grandmothers.

A few months later, Rex decided it was time to move on after a cop tried to pull them over while driving in their unregistered car. Rex rented a U-Haul truck and piled the kids in the back of the truck along with their belongings, since there was not enough room in the cab of the truck for the whole family. Jeannette and Lori took charge of the baby. During the trip a particularly hard bump caused the back door of the truck to pop open. The children rode for several miles with the door open before another car alerted their father to what was happening.

The family settled in Battle Mountain, where they rented a house that was once a train depot. There was no money for furniture, so the children made beds and tables out of abandoned boxes and industrial cable spools. There were not many toys; so the kids would use cardboard to toboggan down the stairs and old blankets to parachute off the



roof, the way their dad taught them to. Rex had a job at a local mine. On the weekends it was possible to go to the local club for dinner, where the children were often praised for their exceptional manners. The mine had a commissary; so every week Rose Mary would buy a large number of groceries and charge it to Rex's salary, often causing Rex's weekly paycheck to be small or nonexistent.

The children began school. Jeannette was careful not to show off her knowledge, so she would not be picked on like she had been at the last school. When not in school, Jeannette and Brian would often play in the neighborhood, exploring the surrounding desert and the local dump. Once, while playing in an old abandoned shed, Jeannette and Brian played laboratory with a bunch of old chemicals they had found. Jeannette lit the chemicals on fire with some of her father's matches and, before she knew it, the shed was on fire. Rex rescued the children. Instead of punishing them for their recklessness, Rex took the opportunity to teach the children a lesson on the physics of fire.

This part of the book introduces the family in more detail, describing each member in terms a three year old would understand, since the narrator, Jeannette, is only three when she begins this part of the book. The first thing the reader notices about this family is the lack of supervision given to the children. Jeannette is cooking hotdogs at three years old, something that would never happen in a household where the parents have a stronger sense of responsibility toward the safety of their children. Then the father, Rex, steals Jeannette from the hospital before her wounds are fully healed because he does not believe in the treatment the doctors are offering. Again, this is a glaring difference between Jeannette's parents and what society accepts as responsible actions toward small children. After this, Jeannette talks about how her family often moves around, leaving in the middle of the night and taking few possessions. This further suggests a lack of responsibility on the part of the parents. When describing her father in more detail, Jeannette explains that Rex has a drinking problem, perhaps partially accounting for some of his behavior. Rose Mary had a stern mother, perhaps also explaining her behaviors as well.

The family moves around quite a bit in this first part of the book, first traveling through the desert, into San Francisco and then into the desert towns on the border of California and Arizona. Again several episodes of irresponsibility fill the narration, beginning with a fire that puts the unattended children in danger, to time spent living in the car, to a trip in a U-Haul that can only be described as harrowing. The theme of alcoholism is touched on lightly in this part, as Jeannette describes a few episodes in which her father made poor decisions while drinking. This includes stopping at a bar and leaving the children in the car alone. The episode ended with Jeannette falling out of the car and being left behind for a large amount of time before her parents knew she was gone.

Another child joins the family when Rose Mary gives birth to her youngest, Maureen. Immediately Lori and Jeannette take responsibility for this small child, again underscoring the lack of concern on the part of the parents for their children. This lack of responsibility on the part of the parents will become a burden to the children, especially the older children who have to step up where their parents refuse. Jeannette is one of





these older children; and because she is the narrator of the book, the reader must wonder how having parents of this type will affect her. What dangers await her in the following pages of the memoir?



## Part Two, The Desert, Pages 62-125,

### Part Two, The Desert, Pages 62-125, Summary and Analysis

In Battle Mountain there was a business called the Green Lantern that fascinated the children. Jeannette and Brian often walked past the business and could not figure out what it was. There were many women who worked there; but they all seemed to be doing nothing except sunbathing on the front porch most of the day. One day Jeannette dared Brian to talk to one of the girls. He did, learning little except that the ladies were nice.

That winter, Rex took the family swimming at The Hot Pot, a hot spring in the desert north of town. Jeannette could not swim, so Rex decided he was going to teach her. Rex threw Jeannette into the deep center of the spring repeatedly until she began to swim on her own. Jeannette was traumatized by the experience; but believed her father when he assured her that he loved her, and that it was the only reason he had done what he had done.

Rex lost his job after the family had lived in Battle Mountain for six months. Rex had held this job longer than any other. He explained to his family that he had decided it was time to concentrate on looking for gold, so he had quit. This meant there would be less money in the household and that the commissary would no longer be a source of food. Jeannette began stealing food from other children's lunches at school when the refrigerator at home became bare. Once, Rex came home with a bag of groceries that were all eaten within a few hours, except for a stick of margarine. The next day Jeannette caught Lori eating the margarine mixed with a little sugar. A few days later, Rose Mary and Rex had an argument over Rex's attempts to find money that kept him out of the house the majority of the time. The argument escalated until Rose Mary was somehow dangling from the second story window, screaming that Rex was trying to kill her. The children were left alone to soothe Rose Mary's hurt feelings and resolve the argument.

The next day, Rose Mary used her teaching certificate to get a job at a local elementary school. Rose Mary hated teaching because it required structure and discipline, two things she shunned. Not only this, but Rose Mary was expected to keep a teaching plan. Rose Mary was not good at organizing things, so Lori began doing it for her. Rose Mary's new paycheck changed things for the better for the family. However, Rex felt that, as the man, he should have control over the family finances. To keep this from happening, Rose Mary would often hide money or sneak off to the bank when Rex was not around. However, Rex caught on to all Rose Mary's tricks and managed to steal the money every month anyway, often spending it on gambling and alcohol rather than buying food for his family.



Just after Jeannette turned eight, Billy Deel moved into a neighboring house. Billy Deel lived alone with his father. Billy was three years older than Jeannette and took an instant liking to her. Jeannette found Billy both overfriendly and unpleasant; but when her mother lectured her to be more compassionate, Jeannette agreed to be Billy's friend. Billy took this as a promise to be his girlfriend. A few days later Billy gave Jeannette a ring. Jeannette accepted the ring, so as not to hurt Billy's feelings, but refused to wear it. Then, when Jeannette was playing hide and seek with a group of other children, Billy found her alone in an old shed. Billy tried to kiss her and forced her to touch him intimately. Jeannette became upset and, a few days later, gave Billy his ring back, telling him she could not be his friend anymore. Billy promised Jeannette she would regret her decision. Billy showed up at Jeannette's house one afternoon while she was there alone with her siblings and began shooting at her with a BB gun. Lori went upstairs and got her father's gun, taking a shot in Billy's direction. When their parents later came home, they were escorted by the police. The family left Battle Mountain that night.

The family traveled to Arizona. Jeannette was excited because she thought this meant they would be staying with Grandma Smith, whom she loved because she would brush her hair and fix her hot cereal every morning for breakfast. However, Jeannette learned that Grandma Smith had died some months before and her parents had not bothered to tell her. As a result, Rose Mary had inherited a house in Phoenix and some land in Texas. The family moved into the Phoenix house, where Rose Mary hoped to open a gallery for her artwork. The house was in a poor neighborhood and was in bad condition, but to Jeannette and her siblings it was like living in a mansion.

The school in Phoenix placed each of the Walls children in advance classes because of their reading skills. They were also tested for hearing and vision problems. Lori was given glasses when it was discovered that her eyesight was poor, opening a whole new world to her. There were things that Lori had never seen, like street signs and the individual leaves on a tree, which now excited her. Rex joined the local electricians' union and suddenly, between his jobs and the money coming in from the mineral rights of the Texas property, the Walls had money. Rex bought the children their first bicycles. There were also household appliances, like a washing machine and a telephone, another first for the family.

Rex and Rose Mary liked to leave the windows and doors in the house unlocked because there was no air conditioning and it often became stifling inside. As a result, the children would often wake in the middle of the night and find strangers in their bedrooms. Rex, a nature lover, became claustrophobic in the city and decided to take the children to the zoo. Once there, Rex felt that the experience of looking at the animals in a cage was not satisfying, so he took the children past the safety walls and allowed them to pet a cheetah before they were chased out of the zoo by security.

Rex lost his job shortly after the zoo incident. Money became tight again, but because of a kind teacher at school, Jeannette did not go hungry. This teacher would often pay for her meal if she thought Jeannette forgot her lunch money. Rose Mary began taking the children to the local stores and shoplifting clothing for them. Rex came up with a



scheme in which he and Rose Mary would open accounts in local banks. Then they would both remove the balance at the same time, so they got twice the money before the bank realized what had happened.

That Christmas Rose Mary decided they would celebrate on Christmas Day instead of waiting the usual week for all the discounts to appear. Rose Mary bought gifts for everyone at the local thrift shop and then took the kids to get a tree on Christmas Eve. Rex was drunk that night and caused a scene at church; so Rose Mary gave him one of his gifts to calm him down. The gift was a lighter and Rex accidentally lit the tree on fire, burning not only the tree and its ornaments, but also all the gifts underneath. Jeannette's tenth birthday came later that year. Rex could not afford to buy her a gift, so he asked her what she wanted. Jeannette asked him to stop drinking. For the next week, Rex locked himself in his bedroom and tied himself to his bed while he suffered from withdrawal.

Toward the end of summer, Rex decided to celebrate his new sobriety by taking the entire family to the Grand Canyon. However, before they had gone more than a few miles outside of Phoenix, Rex began to push the car beyond its speed threshold, in order to entertain Jeannette, and burned out the engine. The family began to walk back to the city before a kind woman offered them a ride. They never retrieved the car or their belongings. Rex began drinking again a few days later. Rose Mary decided it was time for the family to move on again. She began making plans to move to West Virginia, where Rex's family lived. Rose Mary bought a car through a radio special. Rex did not want to move to West Virginia and ignored Rose Mary's attempts to talk him into it until the morning the family climbed into the car to leave. Rex joined them.

The second half of this part continues to describe the unique philosophies of Jeannette's unusual parents. Neglect, a theme of this book, begins to enter the story, as the reader begins to see a pattern of disinterest on the part of the parents. Rex, who begins their stay in Battle Mountain with a decent job, begins to disappear for hours at a time and loses his job, saying he would be better off searching for the gold that is going to change their lives forever. However, the reader gets the impression that Rex is not looking for gold unless he is looking in the bottom of a beer glass. Rex is a regular at the local bar, as suggested by a family visit to the bar where the other regulars greet Rex like an old friend. Rex is clearly an alcoholic, another theme of the memoir. This alcoholism is taking a toll on his relationship with his family. Jeannette sees this and, after a disastrous Christmas, asks her father to stop drinking. In a surprising show of affection for his daughter, Rex does attempt to stop drinking. Unfortunately, the stresses of life coupled with poor decision making cause Rex to fall into drinking once again. Rex's inability to stop drinking gives the reader some insight as to what the future will hold for Rex and his family.

Rose Mary took a job in Battle Mountain to make money for the family, showing she has the education and the ability to work when necessary. However, Rose Mary is not very good at her job and relies on her child, Lori, to do a large bulk of the work for her. Rose Mary is almost like a child, allowing her own children to act as the adults in their relationship. Rose Mary's lack of maturity is carried over in her spontaneous decisions,



such as moving in the middle of the night to occupy the home her mother left her in the will, rather than face legal consequences in Battle Mountain for Bill Deel's attack on her children. Rose Mary also balked at the idea of getting her daughter glasses, something a parent would normally look at as part of the responsibilities that come with parenting. The theme of neglect comes to call in this situation again, showing how Rose Mary's refusal to take on the role of parent in her relationship with her children causes the children's basic needs to be neglected. Rose Mary's actions also give the reader an idea of the direction of the book, suggesting Rose Mary's neglect of her children will leave them open to danger later in the memoir as well.

Rose Mary's decision to pack the family up and move to West Virginia takes the book into a new direction. Rex does not want to go, even though this is his family that Rose Mary suggests they go live with. Rex's reluctance suggests to the reader that there is a reason why he does not want to go home. The reader does not know if this is simply a relationship problem between he and his family, or something darker. Perhaps the next section of the book will better explain this reluctance.



## Part Three, Welch, Pages 129-183,

### Part Three, Welch, Pages 129-183, Summary and Analysis

It took a month for the Walls family to make it to West Virginia. When they did, Jeannette imagined they would meet a set of grandparents not unlike Grandma Smith. Jeannette imagined hot meals, hair brushing and stories. However, it was clear from the first moment that this was not what Jeannette would get. Grandma Erma was a rough woman who did not accept criticism well. Erma's cooking also left a lot to be desired. Erma also liked to drink. Living in the house along with Erma was Grandpa Walls and Uncle Stanley, Rex's brother. Neither seemed capable of standing up to Erma, even when she was clearly wrong.

The children started school shortly after their arrival in Welch. However, Rose Mary had left town so quickly that she had not bothered to get the children's school records. School officials refused to believe her claim that the children had all been in gifted classes. As a result, they were placed in special education classes. This was based on the principal attempting to ask them simple questions. They did not understand his accent and failed to answer the questions correctly. Jeannette immediately began to suffer beatings from the local bullies, especially one group that was led by a young black girl in Jeannette's class. Jeannette did everything she could to avoid these students, but was unable to avoid them completely. Then one day, Jeannette was walking downtown and saw a young boy having trouble with a stray dog. Jeannette scared away the dog and took the boy home. This boy turned out to be a neighbor of the girl Jeannette was having trouble with. The next day at school the girl, Dinitia, thanked Jeannette for her help. A week later, Dinitia asked for help on a homework assignment. Jeannette went to Dinitia's home and had a good time; but in the process she learned that her grandparents held dark opinions of the black people in town, and that she should not advertise her relationship with Dinitia.

Late that winter, Rose Mary and Rex drove back to Phoenix in order to retrieve the things they had left behind. This meant leaving Jeannette and her siblings alone with Erma. The children had already grown to dislike Erma, especially Jeannette, who got into an argument with her grandmother over her friendship with Dinitia. About a week after Rose Mary and Rex left, Erma called Brian into her bedroom under the pretext of repairing a hole in his jeans. Jeannette walked into the room just in time to see Erma touching Brian in an intimate fashion. Jeannette called Erma out on this and Erma immediately denied the accusation. An argument broke out in which Erma attempted to hit Jeannette. Lori interceded, so Erma hit her. Lori hit Erma back. Erma relegated the children to the basement until their parents returned. When they did, Jeannette and her brother and sister told them what had happened. To their surprise, Rose Mary and Rex took Erma's side and told the kids they should have behaved better. Now the family would have to find a new place to live because Erma was throwing them out. Later,



Jeannette found herself wondering if perhaps Erma had abused her father, and if that might explain some of his difficulties.

Rose Mary and Rex had little money and could not afford most of the rental properties in town, so they decided to buy something. With no money for a down payment, their choices were limited; but they finally found a house. The house was small. It had one large bedroom and no indoor plumbing. There was no heat, the wiring was bad, and the house was infested with bugs and rats. There was also no furniture for the children; so they had to fashion beds out of ropes. However, it was set on a large piece of land and Rex suggested that someday, when things began to improve for them, they could build their Glass Castle there. Soon after moving in, Jeannette and Brian began to dig a foundation for the Glass Castle. However, within a few weeks, trash had begun to build up in the house because there was no garbage service in the area. Rex ordered them to bury it in the hole for the foundation.

Jeannette was embarrassed by the house and held on to the hope that they would move soon. To try to improve things, Jeannette attempted to paint the house by herself one winter afternoon. However, before she could complete the job, the paint froze. Soon after, Jeannette lost interest in trying to improve the house. To keep the children from complaining, Rose Mary would often remind them that there were other families on the same street who were worse off. Many of them had fathers who were dead or dying from black lung. Then there was the lady down the road, Ginnie Sue, who was a prostitute. Jeannette got invited to Ginnie Sue's house one afternoon by one of her daughters. She went with the intention of learning everything she could about what it was like to be a prostitute. However, Jeannette became so distracted by the chicken carcass Ginnie Sue allowed her to help strip for a soup, that she forgot her questions. It had been a long time since Jeannette had had chicken.

Brian, Jeannette, and Lori got into more fights in Welch than they had in any of the other places they lived. The other children looked down on them because of their house and their lack of resources for food and clothing. Once, a group of kids broke a window in their house to make a point about their poor economic status. Brian chased them down the street and bombarded them with stones, making a point that the other kids did not quickly forget.

Rex's drinking grew worse in Welch. Rex could not keep a job and he would often disappear for days at a time, coming home with cuts and bruises. There was little money coming into the household. What little there was, Rex would often take and spend on drink and gambling. Jeannette became an expert at finding food in the trashcans at school, in order to have anything to eat on a daily basis. It was during this same time, however, that the children discovered their mother hoarding chocolate bars, often eating them while the children were starving.

Winter was particularly harsh that first year. Rose Mary refused to spend money on a coal delivery, suggesting the children collect wood to burn. However, finding dry wood was nearly impossible. The wet wood would often smoke, throwing off little heat. The children also discovered the house was not insulated.,No matter how hot the fire was, it



was nearly impossible to heat the house. Therefore the pipes often froze; and the children were also left without water. To help the wood burn better, the children took to using kerosene. However, one afternoon Lori was trying to light a fire and it exploded, burning her badly over her face and the front of her legs. For weeks Lori suffered from raw sores where her blisters burst.

Erma died that winter. The Walls went to the funeral and afterwards said some things about Erma that were unkind. Rex became upset and disappeared for several days. Jeannette was assigned the task of trying to find him and bring him home. When she did find him in a dark bar, Jeannette had to ask for help from a fellow patron to get him home. The man was kind and asked Jeannette about her plans for the future. To complement her on her desire to be a nurse, the man made a comment about how ambitious that was for the daughter of the town drunk. Jeannette was so outraged at her father being addressed in such a way she attempted to leave the car before she had reached home.

The beginning of this part describes the Walls family move to Welch. The grandparents, especially Erma, are introduced in the beginning of this section. Erma is the opposite of Grandma Smith, treating the children as a nuisance, instead of showing some of the affection that Grandma Smith often showered upon them. Erma also turns out to be prejudiced, and appears to have some sexual perversions. Jeannette dislikes Erma from the very beginning and proves to be instrumental in the situation that causes Erma to kick the Walls family out of her house. However, what Jeannette has done is protect her brother, something the adults in her life should have done and have failed to do. Jeannette also discovers a darkness about Erma that makes her wonder if perhaps her father does not have a reason for his behavior, especially his alcoholism.

The Walls buy a house that is nothing more than a shack out in the woods. Jeannette is so embarrassed by this house that she does everything she can to fix it up, including painting it by herself. However, everything Jeannette attempts to do seems to backfire; and she finally gives up. This does not stop Jeannette and her brother from being embarrassed by their home and it does not stop the local bullies from terrorizing them. It is not only the house that causes Jeannette heartache, however. Her father refuses to get a job and Rose Mary is also without work; so there is no food in the house. Jeannette is now forced to find food in the trash in school. At the same time, Jeannette's mother is sneaking candy bars and growing fatter while her children are starving to death. Rose Mary's actions again touch on the theme of neglect, proving that Rose Mary is more concerned with her own comforts than those of her children.

Rex's alcoholism, a theme of the book, has grown worse, now that he returned to his hometown. Rex refuses to work, leaving his family destitute, while at the same time stealing the little bit of money that does come into the house. Rex is so lost in his own selfishness that he does not see what his actions are doing to his children. Not only does Rex refuse to care for his family, but he also comes home beaten up, exposing the children to this unpleasantness. Often, he does not bother to come home at all. When Rex's mother dies, things only seem to grow worse. However, interesting for the reader is Jeannette's reaction to someone calling her father the town drunk. Jeannette is



outraged. Jeannette's reaction is typical of an alcoholic's denial, a phenomenon that often affects the family as well as the victim. The reader is left wondering if Jeannette's denial will change later in the book, and if Rex's disease will affect the rest of the plot development.



## Part Three, Welch, Pages 183-241,

### Part Three, Welch, Pages 183-241, Summary and Analysis

The spring that year was wet, and the house began to grow mold everywhere. The front porch also began to rot and fall apart. The family began using a back window as the front door. There was no bathroom, so when Uncle Stanley and Grandpa moved into an apartment after their house burned down, the family began going there to shower on the weekends. Jeannette refused to go, however, after Uncle Stanley tried to molest her. That same spring, Jeannette and Brian were foraging in the woods behind the house and found a diamond ring worth a great deal of money. Instead of selling it, however, Rose Mary decided to keep it to help raise her spirits. Rose Mary had become depressed over the winter. Jeannette tried to talk her into leaving their father in order to make things better for the whole family. Rose Mary refused.

The summers were unbearably hot in Welch. There was a public pool where the local kids went to swim; but the one time Jeannette tried to go there, other kids made such a big deal about having to swim with someone who lived in a trash heap, she did not wish to return. Dinitia heard about this and invited Jeannette to go swimming with her in the morning during the free swim that had traditionally become a time for all the black people to swim. Jeannette went and felt better accepted by the black community than she ever had by anyone else. However, Dinitia never asked her to return.

The afternoon Jeannette went swimming with Dinitia, she was at the house alone when a social worker showed up asking for her parents. Jeannette convinced him no one was home. Still, she was frightened by the idea that the state could take her from her parents and separate her from her siblings. Jeannette told her mother about it and convinced her she would have to do something to keep the state from tearing the family apart. Rose Mary reluctantly agreed to get a job. Teachers were in great need in the area, and Rose Mary quickly found a job. However, Rose Mary hated the job and once again relied on Lori to do her lesson plans and help with grading papers. Once more there was money and food in the house; but somehow it never lasted the entire month.

Jeannette was in seventh grade by then and beginning to be concerned with her looks. Jeannette felt she needed braces. She knew her parents would never pay for them and that she could never afford them with her babysitting money. Jeannette decided to make her own braces, tying rubber bands around her head until she suffered terrible headaches. When Rex found out what Jeannette was doing, he praised her for finding ways to save money.

Jeannette began working for the school paper that year, a job that allowed her to work in the offices of the local newspaper where she could watch the other reporters at work. Jeannette was amazed by what she saw and decided that she wanted to be a writer. Jeannette was beginning to grow as a person, making decisions about her future, even



as she worried about her brother and sisters. Maureen was never home anymore, spending much of her time at the homes of friends. Brian was fighting more than ever. Rex was always gone. Rose Mary was suffering terrible mood swings and fighting horrible depression. Late in spring, Rose Mary went out of town, training for her job. Jeannette was left in charge of the money, something she thought she could handle so much better than her mother did. However, when her father came asking for money, Jeannette was not able to tell him no. During this same time, Rex took Jeannette to a bar and encouraged her to entertain a man while he tried to beat him at pool. Rex showed no concern that the man had clear sexual designs on Jeannette or that he took her into a room where he could have hurt her if Jeannette had not managed to get out of the situation on her own.

The money Rose Mary had left for Jeannette to feed the entire family for the month was gone after a few weeks, so Jeannette decided to get a job despite being under the legal age. Jeannette got a job in jewelry store. When Jeannette's boss implied that he thought she was a thief, Jeannette decided to steal a watch she admired in order to hurt him. However, after having the watch only a day, Jeannette was so filled with guilt that she returned it to the store. In August, Rose Mary quit her job, claiming she did not need it anymore since Jeannette had a job now. Jeannette confronted Rose Mary and told her she was acting like a child. When Rex returned home, he told Jeannette to apologize. When Jeannette refused, he gave her a spanking. Jeannette swore at that moment that she was going to get out of Welch no matter what she had to do.

Lori wanted to go to New York to attend art school. Jeannette and Lori began to make plans for this to happen. Jeannette felt that if Lori could get out of Welch, they all could. Lori began selling posters to fellow students while Jeannette collected money she had made from her job and babysitting. Even Brian added to their collection with money of his own. The children saved for months, counting the days until Lori graduated high school and could leave. Barely a month short of graduation, Jeannette went to add money to their piggy bank. She discovered Rex had broken into it and stolen their money. Jeannette was very upset, but she began saving money again, still hoping Lori could get out. When a lady she babysat for offered her a large amount of money to go on vacation with the family, Jeannette talked her into giving the job to Lori and to buying Lori a bus ticket to New York at the end of the summer.

At the end of her junior year of high school, Jeannette went to talk to the school counselor about her future. When the counselor told her she was better off staying in state to go to college, Jeannette decided there was nothing keeping her in Welch. Jeannette decided not to wait until she graduated high school, but to go to New York right away. When Jeannette left Welch, Rex took her to the bus station, promising she could always come home if she so chose. Jeannette knew she would never return.

This section of the memoir marks a change in the tone of the work. At the beginning Jeannette looked at her childhood through the eyes of an innocent child, able to excuse the behavior of her parents. However, in this section, Jeannette has become a teenager and is beginning to see her parents through the ideas of a person with enough experience to realize the way they live is not normal. Jeannette does not seem capable



of blaming her parents, but she can see that they do not want to put forth the effort required to raise a family; and this clearly upsets her. Jeannette's realization of her parents' neglect not only touches on the theme of neglect, but it begins to show a maturity in Jeannette that will move her out of her childhood poverty and into the self reliance of adulthood.

Rex's alcoholism has become out of control. Not only is he not caring for his family, but he is stealing money better served to care for the family. Further, he is using his daughter as a sexual pawn in order to win pool games against young men in bars. This places Jeannette in danger, yet Rex seems unconcerned with Jeannette's safety. Rex also steals money his children have worked hard to save, using it to buy alcohol that will only further his disease and make it difficult for Lori to escape the craziness of home life. These behaviors make alcoholism a theme of the book, as Rex's disease makes such a large impact on everyone in the family.

Rose Mary is suffering from depression; and she allows this disorder to keep her from making a living and supporting her family. When Jeannette calls her out on this, Rose Mary does perhaps the only motherly thing she had done in the entire book: she tells Rex and forces him to punish Jeannette. This action is the final straw for Jeannette, who realizes the only way she can survive is by getting out of this house and away from these people. Jeannette begins planning her escape, living vicariously through Lori's escape, before she can save up the money to leave herself. In fact, Jeannette leaves a year sooner than expected, running as fast as she can from her parents and their improvised lifestyles. The reader is left with Jeannette's escape, wondering if she will survive and what will become of her parents and her other siblings.



# Part Four, New York City, and Part Five, Thanksgiving,

## Part Four, New York City, and Part Five, Thanksgiving, Summary and Analysis

Jeannette moves in with her sister at a hostel and gets a job. Within a few months, Jeannette and Lori find an apartment of their own, a place larger than the entire house in Welch. That fall, Lori arranges for Jeannette to attend a public school that allows her to get credit working for a small publication. Jeannette does so well at the paper that they offer her a job after she graduates. However, when the owner of the paper realizes that Jeannette is content enough with her job to skip college, he talks her out of it. He suggests college is the only way she can get the kind of job she really wants. Jeannette applies to Columbia and is accepted. Since she cannot pay her half of the rent anymore, Jeannette moves in with a psychologist in exchange for taking care of her two children.

Brian moves to New York upon graduation. A few months later, Lori arranges for Maureen to move in with her. Rose Mary is thrilled with the arrangement, but Rex thinks Lori is trying to steal his whole family. So it is no big surprise when, three years later, Rex and Rose Mary move to New York as well. At first they move in to a boardinghouse, but quickly fall behind on their rent. Then they live for a few months in a flophouse, but again cannot make the rent. Then they move in with Lori; but after a while Lori cannot coexist with them and sends them on their way. Rose Mary and Rex live in their van for a short time; but one day they park it in a no-parking zone and it is towed. Then they are homeless.

Jeannette and Lori try to help their parents; but Rex and Rose Mary see homelessness as an adventure and refuse all help. That winter was very cold. Rex got sick. After several weeks in the hospital, he was sober. A hospital employee arranged for him to take a job at a resort, upstate. However, when Rose Mary called him and convinced him she could not live without him, Rex returned to the city and resumed drinking. A year later, when Jeannette thought she was going to have to drop out of school because she could not come up with enough tuition money, Rex somehow got a thousand dollars that he gave her for the tuition. He proved he could still provide for his family, despite his living arrangements. However, Jeannette was so concerned with his drunken behaviors she refused to invite her father to her graduation ceremony.

Rose Mary and Rex found an abandoned building where they took up residence as squatters. They invited Jeannette to their new home for a housewarming party of sorts. Jeannette learned her parents were worried about her living arrangements. Jeannette had a good job as an editor and moved into her boyfriend's Park Avenue apartment. It was this luxury that worried her parents. They were afraid the luxury would spoil her. Jeannette would eventually marry her boyfriend. One day, Rose Mary came to



Jeannette in a panic, begging her to ask her new husband to buy her brother's property in Texas that abutted her own. When Jeannette asked how much the property was worth and learned it would cost a million dollars, she was astounded that her mother had owned property worth that much all this time and had never attempted to sell it in order to care for the family.

Maureen was having a hard time adjusting to adulthood. At one point Maureen moved in with Rose Mary and Rex. One day during a fight, Maureen stabbed Rose Mary. Maureen was sentenced to a year in a hospital. When she was released, Maureen moved to California and lost touch with the family. The rest of the family was growing distant as well. Brian had joined the police force; despite the fact that Rex was deeply disappointed his only son would join the government forces he had been trying to outrun his whole life. Brian got married and bought a house on Long Island. Lori was working as an artist and kept mostly to herself, even though she continued to do what she could for her parents.

Rex called Jeannette to his squatter's apartment and told her he was dying from complications to alcoholism. A short time later he died of a heart attack. Jeannette felt out of sorts from the moment of his death and decided to make a few changes in her personal life. Jeannette got a divorce and began to live a simpler life, the one she had always wanted.

Many years later, Jeannette hosted Thanksgiving dinner at the home she shared with her new husband John. Brian was there with his eight-year-old daughter. Brian was still with the police department, but had gotten a divorce. Lori came with Rose Mary. Rose Mary was still living in her squatter's apartment and announced that the city had finally agreed to sell the apartment to her for a dollar. Dinner was a happy affair. Everyone toasted Rex, remembering him as the force that he was in their lives.

These two sections sum up the story in a way that allows the reader to see how Jeannette made the transition to adulthood after such a turbulent childhood and how her parents still had such a strong impact on her life, even outside of the roles of child-parent. Jeannette did everything she had always wanted, attending a well-respected college and getting the job she wanted in journalism. Jeannette even married a rich man and had all the money, food, and luxuries she could ever want. However, when Rex died of a heart attack, Jeannette slowly came to understand that it was not material possessions that she really craved, but love and acceptance. The final part of the book shows the readers that Jeannette found this love and acceptance with her second husband.

Homelessness is a theme of this book because this is the state in which Rex and Rose Mary find themselves at the end of the book. However, rather than proving to be a devastating condition that left them unhappy, Rose Mary and Rex embrace homelessness the way most people would embrace a sudden lottery winning or an inherited windfall. Rex and Rose Mary have never been conventional people, and they continue to prove this with their way of life. It is through their homelessness that Jeannette finally comes to accept her parents. She finally sees that they are who they



are and there is nothing she can do to change this, even if she had all the money in the world. The fact that her mother has been sitting on land that is worth more than a million dollars all these years proves this to Jeannette like nothing else could. Rose Mary would rather hold on to the land and allow her children to starve than to sell it. This is who Rose Mary is and there is no changing the fact.

Jeannette has suffered terrible neglect, a theme of the book, and suffered through the alcoholism that ruled her father's life. Yet she survived. Not only did Jeannette survive, but she did well for herself; and she came out of her experiences able to still feel a great deal of affection for both her parents and to almost understand their behaviors. Not all her siblings were able to come away from their mutual experiences this way; but Jeannette has, proving what a strong person she is. Jeannette is not a victim, which is probably the best result she could have gotten from her childhood experiences.



# **Characters**

**Jeannette Walls**

**Rose Mary Walls**

**Rex Walls**

**Lori Walls**

**Brian Walls**

**Maureen Walls**

**Grandma Smith**

**Grandma and Grandpa Walls**

**Billy Deel**

**Mary Charlene**





# Objects/Places

## The U-haul

When the Walls family left Blythe, they rented a U-haul truck. The children, including Maureen who was only a few months old, rode in the back of the truck.

## Jewelry

Rose Mary kept at her mother's home a collection of jewelry that was worth a large amount of money. Despite living in poverty and later on the streets, Rose Mary refused to sell the jewelry.

## Geode

Often the Walls family would move from one home to another so quickly that the Walls children would only be allowed to take one thing. Jeannette twice chose to take a geode, a rock she found while living in Battle Mountain.

## Stars

For Christmas one year, Rex Walls could not give his children gifts; so he gave them each the star of their choice. Jeannette chose Venus.

## The Glass Castle

The Glass Castle is an energy efficient, solar powered glass home that Jeannette's father designed and intended to build in order for the family to live in.

## The Owl Club

The Owl Club was a bar in Battle Mountain where Rex Walls spent a great deal of his time, while supposedly researching the corruption that kept him from holding down a job in the mines.

## Green Lantern

The Green Lantern was a brothel located in Battle Mountain. Rex Walls was friends with one of the women there.



## **Midland**

Midland was a town on the border between California and Arizona where the Walls family lived briefly.

## **Blythe**

Blythe was a larger city in California where the Walls moved to when Rose Mary thought she would soon give birth to their fourth child, Maureen.

## **Battle Mountain**

Battle Mountain was a mining town where the Walls lived in a converted train depot. The Walls ran from Battle Mountain after a few years when a fight with a neighbor threatened to drag the entire family into court.

## **Land in Texas**

Rose Mary Walls inherited land in Texas from her mother that offered a small income for mineral rights. Many years later, Jeannette would learn that the land was worth a million dollars.

## **Phoenix, Arizona**

The Walls family moved to Phoenix, Arizona after leaving Battle Mountain in order to live in a house that Rose Mary's mother left to her. The family would remain in Phoenix until Rose Mary's inheritance would run out.

## **Welch, West Virginia**

The Walls family moved to Welch, West Virginia, where Rex Walls grew up, in order to seek help from Rex Walls' family. The Walls family would buy a shack in Welch and would remain there until the children reached legal age and moved to New York.



# Themes

## Alcoholism

Alcoholism is a devastating disease that affects an entire family, not just the person afflicted. Alcoholism often causes the victim to make bad decisions and to act in ways that are not always in the best interest of those around him. Jeannette's father is an alcoholic. Due to his affliction, Jeannette's father spent a majority of her childhood making decisions that were detrimental to the family. When Jeannette was a small child, her father's disease was better controlled. Jeannette's father would often hold a job for months at a time and provide for his family the necessities required to survive. However, as Jeannette grew older, her father's disease worsened. Soon Jeannette's father began to lose his jobs with more frequency, until he finally refused to even search for a job. The family suffered from this lack of income. However, more importantly, it was Jeannette's father's decision-making skills that caused the most suffering. Jeannette's father decided once to push the family car beyond the limits of its used engine, causing the family to be stranded on the side of the road for several hours. Another time, the father drove with such recklessness that Jeannette fell out of the car and was lost for several hours before her parents realized she was gone.

Alcoholism is a disease. However, its effects on behavior cause the most devastation to families. Jeannette's father failed to make responsible decisions in regards to his family, leaving them with no income, no source of food, and often placing his children in difficult situations. There was once a time when he forced Jeannette into a compromising position with a fellow drinker, in order to distract the man from a gambling victory Jeannette's father had won. It was more important to her father to win this money than it was for him to protect his daughter. Selfishness is a large part of alcoholism; and this selfishness ran deep in Jeannette's father. He cared more about his own needs than he did for his family's. Once, Jeannette's father even stole money from his daughters' piggy bank in order to have money to drink and to gamble.

These actions are a large part of the reason alcoholism is a theme of the memoir. Everything Jeannette's father did in order to get his next drink deeply affected his family. Not only this, but at one point Jeannette asked her father to stop drinking as a gift to her for her birthday. He did, going through withdrawal in a bedroom of the home he shared with his wife and children. This newfound sobriety only lasted a short time, but it changed the dynamics of the family and proved to Jeannette once more that her father loved her enough to try to give up his crutch. When her father failed and began to drink again, this also affected Jeannette on an emotional level. Alcoholism eventually led to his death many years later, taking from Jeannette forever the father she had learned to love despite his failings.



## Neglect

Although Jeannette never uses the word "neglect" throughout her memoir, its affects are clear in every page of the book. Jeannette's mother was an artist who felt her time was better used on her art, rather than working as a teacher like her own mother or offering structure and discipline to her own children. Jeannette's mother was so against structure in raising her children that she even refused to offer the proper three meals a day to her children, leaving a three year old Jeannette to cook her own hotdogs. Jeanette burned herself while cooking and was in the hospital for several weeks before her father, thinking he was doing what was best for his daughter, stole her from the hospital and ran.

The family continuously moved, running from creditors while telling the children they were running from government agents and members of the mob. Often times Jeanette's parents would pack up in the middle of the night and force the children to pick just one possession to take with them before running off to places unknown. The family finally settled down in the town where Jeannette's father was raised in West Virginia, only to live in a shack that had no heat, no indoor plumbing, and no trash removal. Jeannette and her siblings were forced to steal loose coal to warm the house because their parents refused to buy a supply for themselves. Jeanette and her brother also found themselves reduced to stealing food from the trashcans at school in order to have anything to eat.

Neglect is an important theme to the memoir because it best describes the life Jeannette and her siblings had during their childhood. Jeannette and her siblings learned at an early age to care for themselves and to care for each other. No one was there for Jeannette when a young man attacked her sexually and later came after her with a gun. No one was there to protect Jeannette when her father set her up with an older man in order to distract him from a gambling scheme. Jeannette's parents were more concerned with their own needs and desires than they were their own children's needs. Neglect was the only consistency in Jeannette's life, making it perhaps the most important theme of the memoir.

## Homelessness

When Jeannette and her siblings came of age, they each moved to New York. First was Jeannette's sister who moved with help from Jeannette, who set her up with a babysitting job that paid the bus ticket and some pocket money for the trip. Jeannette was to follow after she finished high school, but decided there was no reason to wait so long. Jeannette followed her sister shortly after she finished her junior year of high school. Shortly after, Jeannette's brother followed. A few years later, Jeannette and her sister sent for their youngest sister. As a result, Jeannette's parents packed up a used van and followed as well. Once they arrived, Jeannette's parents lived with the elder sister; but this soon became a problem for the sister. Jeannette's sister sent their



parents to live in an apartment of their own. However, due to their mutual refusal to work, Jeannette's parents lost their apartment after only a short time.

Jeannette's parents began living on the streets, moving from place to place to keep one step ahead of the police. They disliked the homeless shelters, but enjoyed the freedom of not having to stay in one place for very long. Jeannette and her siblings tried to help their parents find a permanent place to live, but they resisted. Jeannette's father became ill at one point and sobered up, taking a job at a resort that someone at the hospital arranged for him. Jeannette's father did well for himself for a short time. However, Jeannette's mother called him and told him she could not live without him and he went back to the city to be with her. Within a short time, Jeannette's father was drinking again. Jeannette's parents became squatters in an abandoned building, fixing it up for themselves and several other homeless people who took up space in the other apartments in the building. Soon afterward, Jeannette's father learned he was dying.

Homelessness is a theme of this memoir because it describes how Jeanette's parents ended up late in their lives. Homelessness is also symbolic of the childhood Jeannette had. Jeannette's home life was nothing like the lives most children have. Jeannette suffered from a lack of attention from her parents and was forced to essentially raise herself. Jeannette was homeless just as much as her parents were later in life, despite the fact that she had siblings and parents with whom she spent her days. Jeannette did not have structure, she did not have protection and she did not have the support of loving parents. Jeannette was just as homeless as her parents were.

# Style

## Perspective

The memoir, *The Glass Castle*, is written by Jeannette Walls and describes her unique childhood. Jeanette shares with her readers a view of her life as a child in a family that can only be described as dysfunctional. Jeannette's parents had unusual views on life; and these views influenced the way in which they raised their children. The children were essentially neglected, as the parents spent much of their energy caring for their own needs. Jeannette's father had moral issues against holding down a job, which meant he spent the majority of his adult life out of work. Jeannette's mother, who had a college degree and a teaching certificate, had moral issues against disciplining children. This left her unable to keep a teaching job. Jeanette's father was also an alcoholic and her mother suffered from chronic depression. The inability of Jeannette's parents to function left Jeannette and her siblings scrambling for money to pay for simple things like food and housing.

Since the memoir is about Jeannette's family and her own experiences in childhood, Jeanette's perspective in the writing of this book is highly personal. Jeannette lived the life she writes about in this book. Every word she has written is a memory of a moment she experienced, or her siblings experienced, in their childhood. The perspective is highly personal and gives the reader an emotional connection to the story that another author could never have provided. In fact, Jeannette's perspective within this memoir is generous, compared to what another writer might have provided. Jeannette is kind to her parents in this memoir, suggesting that she holds no ill will toward them, despite the blatant neglect they offered her and her siblings when they were growing up. Another writer might have appeared bitter or angry. Jeannette offers the view that her parents could not help the way they were; and therefore it is not their fault that Jeannette and her siblings had the difficulties they did as children. Only once in the course of the memoir does the reader sense anger and hurt on Jeannette's part. This is when Jeannette learns that the land her mother owned in Texas was worth more than a million dollars. This was money that could have provided for the family Jeannette's entire childhood, money that her mother chose not to procure. Due to Jeannette's restraint in the writing of the memoir, the reader gets an almost objective view of Jeannette's parents and yet still gets a sense of the love Jeannette had for them, despite their unorthodox way of living.

## Tone

The tone of this memoir begins with a lighthearted walk down memory lane. The author begins the memoir by recalling some of her earliest memories, many of which were happy to her small child's recollection. The tone continues to be light, even as the author recalls a time when her father forced the family to move in the middle of the night and tossed a much beloved cat out the car door. This tone underscores the author's age



at the beginning of the memoir and the innocence with which a child views her life and her parents. As the memoir progresses and Jeannette's age increases, the tone begins to change. At first the tone continues to be full of innocence; but slowly the author begins to introduce a trace of irony. This irony grows as Jeannette matures, until it turns into confusion tinged with anger. As Jeannette enters early adulthood, this anger again turns to a tone of bewilderment after Jeanette's parents follow their children to New York and become homeless. Finally, the tone becomes something similar to acceptance, even as confusion continues to be interlaced with, not only the tone, but Jeannette's view of her parents' choice of lifestyle.

The tone of the memoir enhances the emotional connection the reader feels with the author because it follows so closely the emotions the author felt at various times in her life. The subject of the book is a highly emotional one, dealing with the author's childhood and the neglect she suffered as a child. The tone makes it clear to the reader that, despite an unappealing childhood barely short of child abuse, the author feels no ill will toward her parents and, in fact, loves her parents. The author does not attempt to explain the actions of her parents. She seems to feel they did the best they could do. She seems reconciled to the idea that they did not mean her or her siblings any ill will. This idea comes across, not only in the author's words, but in her tone. There is little anger in the tone. What anger there is can be easily explained by the circumstances, at the point in which the anger touches the narration. This tone continuously enhances the narration. It enhances the emotional impact of the memoir and gets across the reader the emotion the author wanted to express by writing this memoir.

## Structure

The book is separated into five parts that contain no chapters or other identifying sections. Each part is divided simply by paragraph breaks. Each part describes a specific moment in time. It begins with the author on her way to a party while living on Fifth Avenue and seeing her mother digging in the trash, traveling back in time to the author's childhood. It then continues chronologically through the author's childhood and into early adulthood, finally ending with a Thanksgiving dinner at a point in which the author had become a well adjusted adult. The memoir follows a clear time line, moving in a logical pattern through the author's life that keeps the reader from moving back and forth and possibly becoming lost. The time line is logical, the sequence of events is clear and the structure is easy to follow.

The book is written largely in exposition interspaced with scenes that include dialogue. Since the book is a memoir, much of the writing is in a flashback type of writing that includes snapshots of time written in a sort of synopsis of real events that took place in the author's childhood. The author took these events of her childhood and turned them into scenes that almost appear like sequences out of fiction, in order to make the memoir easier for the reader to understand. The exposition interspaced with scenes makes it easier for the author to include a great deal of information in a small amount of space, including only details that are important to the overall importance of the story line. The structure of this memoir works because it allows the author to present her

story in a simple, entertaining way that gives readers everything they need to understand the impact of the memoir.





## Quotes

"I was sitting in a taxi, wondering if I had overdressed for the evening, when I looked out the window and saw Mom rooting through a Dumpster." Part One, A Woman on the Street, pg. 3

"All this running around and moving around was temporary, Dad explained. He had a plan. He was going to find gold." Part Two, The Desert, pg. 22

"In my mind, Dad was perfect, although he did have what Mom called a little bit of a drinking situation. There was what Mom called Dad's 'beer phase'. We could handle that. Dad drove fast and sang really loud, locks of his hair fell into his face and life was little bit scary but still a lot of fun. But when Dad pulled a bottle of what Mom called 'the hard stuff', she got kind of frantic, because after working on the bottle a while, Dad turned into an angry-eyed stranger who threw around furniture and threatened to beat up Mom or anyone else who got in his way. When he'd his fill of cussing and hollering and smashing things up, he'd collapse. But Dad drank hard liquor only when we had money, which wasn't often, so life was mostly good in those days."

Part Two, The Desert, pg. 23

"I never believed in Santa Claus. None of us kids did. Mom and Dad refused to let us. They couldn't afford expensive presents, and they didn't want us to think we weren't as good as other kids who, on Christmas morning, found all sorts of fancy toys under the tree that were supposedly left by Santa Claus. So they told us all about how other kids were deceived by their parents, how the toys the grown-ups claimed were made by little elves wearing bell caps in their workshop at the North Pole actually had labels on them saying MADE IN JAPAN." Part Two, The Desert, pg. 39

"We didn't have many toys, but you didn't need toys in a place like Battle Mountain. We'd get a piece of cardboard and go tobogganing down the depot's narrow staircase. We'd jump off the roof of the depot, using an army-surplus blanket as our parachute and letting our legs buckle under us when we hit the ground, like Dad had taught us real parachutists do. We'd put a piece of scrap metal—or a penny, if we were feeling extravagant—on the railroad tracks right before the train came. After the train had roared by, the massive wheels churning, we'd run to get our newly flattened, hot and shiny piece of metal." Part Two, The Desert, pg. 54

"'You know you're down and out when Okies laugh at you,' she said. With our garbage-bag-taped window, our roped-down hood, and the art supplies tied to the roof, we'd out-Okied the Okies." Part Three, Welch, pg. 129

"Dad was still looking for a car to replace the Olds—our budget was in the high two figures—so that weekend we all hiked over for our first look at the new place." Part Three, Welch, pg. 150



"It was on the way home that I realized I hadn't gotten answers to any of my answers. While I was sitting there talking to Ginnie Sue, I'd even forgotten she was a whore. One thing about whoring: It put a chicken on the table." Part Three, Welch, pg. 163

"At home we'd empty Mom's purse onto the sofa bed and count the remaining money. There'd be hundreds of dollars, more than enough to cover our expenses until the end of the month, I thought. But month after month the money would disappear before the next paycheck arrived and once more I'd find myself rooting in the garbage at school for food."

Part Three, Welch, pg. 197

"What I needed, I knew, was braces. Every time I looked in the mirror, I longed for what the other kids called a barbed-wire mouth. Mom and Dad had no money for braces, of course—none of us kids had ever even been to the dentist—but since I'd been babysitting and doing other kids' homework for case, I resolved to save up until I could afford braces myself. I had no idea how much they cost, so I approached the only girl in my class who wore braces and, after complimenting her orthodontia, causally asked how much it had set her folks back. When she said twelve hundred dollars, I almost fell over. I was getting a dollar and hour to baby sit. I usually worked five or six hours a week, which meant that if I save every penny I earned, it would take about four years to raise the money.

I decided to make my own braces." Part Three, Welch, pg. 201

"Mom and Tinkle moved into the van with Dad. They lived there for a few months, but one day they left it in a no-parking zone and it was towed. Because the van was unregistered, they couldn't get it back. That night, they slept on a park bench. They were homeless."

Part Four, New York, pg. 254

"Mom stared up at the ceiling, miming perplexed thought. 'I've got it.' She held up her glass. 'Life with your father was never boring.'

We raised our glasses. I could almost hear Dad chuckling at Mom's comment the way he always did when he was truly enjoying something. It had grown dark outside. A wind picked up, rattling the windows, and the candle flames suddenly shifted, dancing along the border between turbulence and order." Part Five, Thanksgiving, pg. 288



## Topics for Discussion

Define neglect. Was Jeannette neglected as a child? If so, how was she neglected? Did the parents neglect their children on purpose? Why did Jeannette's parents treat her and her siblings in this way?

Discuss sexual abuse. Sexual abuse is mentioned several times throughout the novel. How many instances can you remember? Did sexual abuse have anything to do with Rex's alcoholism? If so, how? Was Jeannette ever sexually abused? How? By whom?

Why does Jeannette's mother behave the way she does? Why does Jeannette's mother rebel so much against her own mother? Why does Jeannette's mother not want to work to support the family? Why does Jeannette's mother have such a hard time disciplining her children and the children she teaches?

Why does Jeannette's father drink? Did the death of their second child have anything to do with his behavior? What about his childhood? How did Jeannette's father's childhood affect his personality as an adult? Why did Jeannette's father have such a hard time keeping a job?

Why did Jeanette's mother never sell her land in Texas? How could selling it have changed their lives? Why did Jeannette's mother not remain in the house in Arizona? Why not sell that house? Why did Jeannette's mother not feel the need to do things in order to help her family?

Why did Jeannette divorce her first husband? How did her childhood affect her adulthood? How did it affect the lives of her siblings? Why did her younger sister have so much trouble when she entered adulthood? Did her childhood affect her behavior? How did their childhood influence each of the four children?

The overall tone of the memoir is one of understanding. Why do you think Jeannette has so much understanding for her parents? Do you think her parents deserve this understanding? Does Jeannette ever show anger toward her parents? Do you think this anger is deserved? Why or why not?