



Books in a Box

Reading Guide

Blaine
Bookmobile
Deming
Everson
Ferndale
Island
Lynden
Maple Falls
Point Roberts
Sumas
wcls.org

the best place to begin



whatcom county
library system

Books in a Box Information

We hope you will enjoy the convenience of having multiple copies of the same title to share—either with your official book group or with an unofficial friends-and-family group!

Some general information about the kits:

- ◆ Kits check out for six weeks.
- ◆ Kits are available to reserve, but we cannot guarantee their availability for specific dates.
- ◆ One person in the group is responsible for the kits full return.
- ◆ Return kits in person at any Whatcom County library

How do I find a list of all your kits?

- ◆ Go to www.wcls.org
- ◆ Click on “catalog”
- ◆ In the Subject Keyword Search type “book club kit”

This list includes kits owned by both Whatcom County and Bellingham Library Systems. Please note that the Bellingham kits must be picked up and returned to the Bellingham Library. Whatcom County kits can be reserved and sent to any location for pickup.

Suggested Discussion Questions

Caution! It is likely that the following reading guide will reveal, or at least allude to, key plot details. Therefore, if you haven't yet read this book, but are planning on doing so, you may wish to proceed with caution to avoid spoiling your later enjoyment.

1. Though *The Glass Castle* is brimming with unforgettable stories, which scenes were the most memorable for you? Which were the most shocking, the most inspiring, the funniest?
2. Discuss the metaphor of a glass castle and what it signifies to Jeannette and her father. Why is it important that, just before leaving for New York, Jeannette tells her father that she doesn't believe he'll ever build it? (p. 238).
3. The first story Walls tells of her childhood is that of her burning herself severely at age three, and her father dramatically takes her from the hospital: "You're safe now" (p. 14). Why do you think she opens with that story, and how does it set the stage for the rest of the memoir?
4. Rex Walls often asked his children, "Have I ever let you down?" Why was this question (and the required "No, Dad" response) so important for him -- and for his kids? On what occasions did he actually come through for them?
5. Jeannette's mother insists that, no matter what, "life with your father was never boring" (p. 288). What kind of man was Rex Walls? What were his strengths and weaknesses, his flaws and contradictions?
6. Discuss Rose Mary Walls. What did you think about her description of herself as an "excitement addict"? (p. 93).
7. Though it portrays an incredibly hardscrabble life, *The Glass Castle* is never sad or depressing. Discuss the tone of the book, and how do you think that Walls achieved that effect?

8. Describe Jeannette's relationship to her siblings and discuss the role they played in one another's lives.
9. In college, Jeannette is singled out by a professor for not understanding the plight of homeless people; instead of defending herself, she keeps quiet. Why do you think she does this?
10. The two major pieces of the memoir -- one half set in the desert and one half in West Virginia -- feel distinct. What effect did such a big move have on the family -- and on your reading of the story? How would you describe the shift in the book's tone?
11. Were you surprised to learn that, as adults, Jeannette and her siblings remained close to their parents? Why do you think this is?
12. What character traits -- both good and bad -- do you think that Jeannette inherited from her parents? And how do you think those traits shaped Jeannette's life?
13. For many reviewers and readers, the most extraordinary thing about *The Glass Castle* is that, despite everything, Jeannette Walls refuses to condemn her parents. Were you able to be equally nonjudgmental?
14. Like Mary Karr's *Liars' Club* and Rick Bragg's *All Over But the Shoutin'*, Jeannette Walls' *The Glass Castle* tells the story of a wildly original (and wildly dysfunctional) family with humor and compassion. Were there other comparable memoirs that came to mind? What distinguishes this book?

Unless otherwise stated, this discussion guide is reprinted with the permission of Scribner. Any page references refer to a USA edition of the book, usually the trade paperback version, and may vary in other editions.

Quirky Bio Info about Jeannette Walls

I write on a 19th-century oak table, in front of a window overlooking a wisteria-covered arbor.... [W]hen I wrote *The Glass Castle*, I wrote it entirely on the weekends, getting to my desk by 7:30 or 8:00 a.m. and continuing until 6:00 or 7:00 p.m. I wrote the first draft in about six weeks -- but then I spent three or four years rewriting it. My husband, John Taylor, who is also a writer, observed all this approvingly and quoted John Fowles, who said that a book should be like a child: conceived in passion and reared with care.

A Tree Grows in Brooklyn by Betty Smith [is the book that influenced me the most]....It had a powerful effect on my view of the world and first made me realize how much of an emotional wallop -- and comfort -- a book could deliver. I read it when I was 11 or 12 and was stunned that a character created 50 years earlier seemed so similar to me. She loved her father even though he was a hopeless drunk, she lived in a rough neighborhood but found beauty in it, and she was determined to make something of her life.

When I sat down to write *The Glass Castle*, there was no doubt in my mind that once the truth about me was out I would lose all my friends and my job. So far, the reaction has been the opposite. I'm just stunned. I think I've shortchanged people and their capacity for compassion. The whole experience has changed my outlook on the world. My brother and I are closer. My sister Lori and I have discussed things we'd never before talked about. I'm back in touch with people I knew in West Virginia whom I hadn't spoken to since I left. My mother wants to correct something in the book: She wants everyone to know that she's an excellent driver.

(from a Barnes & Noble interview with Walls)

Author Bio: Jeannette Walls

Source: *Contemporary Authors Online*, Gale, 2006.

New York-based writer Jeannette Walls is a popular gossip columnist for magazines such as *New York* and *Esquire*, and online for MSNBC. Her first book, *Dish: The Inside Story on the World of Gossip*, analyzes the role of gossip in media and public perception, and traces its history from the 1950s up through its explosion in the 1990s.

In *The Glass Castle*, Walls applies her fascination with people's lives to herself, revealing her own painful, deprived childhood and a life she once viewed as a shameful secret. Told from Walls' point of view as a child, the book describes her alcoholic father and artist mother, parents who seemed more intent on their next adventure than on providing basic necessities for their children. The family often skipped town in the dead of night to avoid bill collectors or paying back rent on apartments that lacked heat or running water. When they ended up in Welch, Virginia, the small mining town where Walls' father grew up, the children could add their grandmother's abuse to their list of hardships. At age seventeen, Walls finally escaped to New York City with her older sister, and the two struggled to support themselves with jobs in the service industry while living in an apartment in the South Bronx. Eventually, Walls graduated from Barnard College, a degree paid for with scholarships, loans, and her own hard-earned money, then went on to a career in journalism.

Spectator reviewer Olivia Glazebrook remarked that Walls' memoir "is full of astonishing episodes, but the book is a success beyond its ability to shock. Jeannette Walls ... has managed to balance her account with great precision: as she and her siblings did, we must both love and hate her parents."

In an interview with *Entertainment Weekly* contributor Karen Valby, Walls explained her reluctance to tell people about her past: "I never set out to deceive anybody," the journalist maintained. "I'm a bad liar. I just didn't want to be 'Oh, the girl with the homeless mom.'"



Reviews

[Publishers Weekly](#)

★ Walls, Jeannette. [The Glass Castle: A Memoir](#). New York: Scribner, 2005.

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."

"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." (**Kirkus Reviews**)

"*The Glass Castle* is the saga of the restless, indomitable Walls family, led by a grand eccentric and his tempestuous artist wife. Jeannette Walls has survived poverty, fires, and near starvation to triumph. She has written this amazing tale with honesty and love." (**Patricia Bosworth**, author of *Anything Your Little Heart Desires* and *Diane Arbus: A Biography*)

Suggested Readalikes

Bastard Out of Carolina, by Dorothy Allison

The Three of Us: a family story, by Julia Blackburn.

The Color of Love: a mother's choice in the Jim Crow South, by Gene Cheek.

The Summer of Ordinary Ways: a memoir, by Nicole Lea Helget.

The Next Better Place: a father and son on the road, by Michael C. Keith.

Lifeguarding: a memoir of secrets, swimming, and the South, by Catherine McCall.

Change Me Into Zeus's Daughter: a memoir, by Barbara Robinette Moss.

A Child called "It"; and, The Lost Boy: one child's courage to survive, by Dave Pelzer.

A Brother's Journey: surviving a childhood of abuse, by Richard B. Pelzer.

Even Dogs go Home to Die: a memoir, by Linda St. John.

Web Resources

NYT Book Review: <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/03/13/books/review/013COVERPROSE.html>

LitLovers Guide: http://litlovers.com/guide_glasscastle.html

TheBestNotes.com study guide: http://thebestnotes.com/booknotes/Glass_Castle_Study_Guide/Glass_Castle_Walls_Summary01.html

Notable Biographies: <http://www.notablebiographies.com/newsmakers2/2006-Ra-Z/Walls-Jeannette.html>

Video featuring Jeannette and her mother: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IW0XVno-0gM>
Video—Walls on Colbert Nation: <http://www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/85068/april-10-2007/jeannette-walls>