



Books in a Box

Reading Guide

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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 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

1. Jeannette Walls has said that she tried writing this book in the third person but that it didn't work for her. Do you think you are closer to Lily because you get her story in her own voice? Did you “see” Lily Casey Smith as real? What is your response to the first person voice of the book?
2. When Lily's father dies, she and Rosemary drive his body from Tucson back to the ranch in West Texas. Rosemary is embarrassed to be seen driving with a corpse and ducks down in the car when they stop at a red light (pg. 198). “Life's too short, honey,” Lily tells Rosemary, “to worry what other people think of you.” What does Lily's reaction to this behavior show about her character? Does she give much credence to what other people think of her? What effect do you think her mother's attitude had on Rosemary?
3. Following Helen's suicide, Lily says, “When people kill themselves, they think they're ending the pain, but all they're doing is passing it on to those they leave behind” (pg. 113). Do you agree with this statement?
4. Lily seems willing to sacrifice everything to defend her principles and the rights of others. On more than one occasion, she is fired from a teaching position for refusing to back down from what she believes in. Do you applaud Lily's moral conviction in these instances? Or did you hope that Lily would learn to compromise?
5. Lily has high expectations for her children, from sending them off to boarding school despite their protests to enforcing strict rules for keeping animals as pets. When Rosemary falls in love with a wild horse and asks her mother if she can keep it, Lily replies, “The last thing we need around here is another half-broke horse” (pg. 190). How might this statement apply to Lily's children as well? Are Lily's expectations of her children particularly high or rather a reflection of the times? Why do you think this phrase was chosen as the title of the book?

6. When a group of Brooklyn ladies visits the ranch, Rosemary and Lily take them for a car ride they'll never forget. Lily concludes their encounter by saying, "You ride, you got to know how to fall, and you drive, you got to know how to crash" (pg. 175). How does this statement apply to Lily's life as a whole? What does she mean by knowing "how to fall"?

7. Discuss Lily's husband Jim. How does his personality complement her strong nature?

8. While attempting to prevent the ranch from flooding, Lily tells Rosemary, "Do the best you can...That's all anyone can do." Her instructions are echoed by Jim's declaration: "We did a good job—good as we could" (pg. 152). Why do you think Lily and Jim have both adopted this philosophy? To which other instances in their lives are they likely to have applied this rationale?

9. Lily comes off as tough and resilient, but there are moments in this book of vast heartbreak, where you see her façade crack. How does the author handle the death of Lily's friend in Chicago? Her first husband's duplicity? Her sister's suicide? Her suspicions of her husband Jim?

10. Walls calls *Half Broke Horses* a "true life novel." In her author's note, she explains why. Do you agree with this label? What do you think of the "true life" genre?

11. "Helen's beauty, as far as I was concerned, had been a curse, and I resolved that I would never tell Rosemary she was beautiful" (pg. 119). Examine Lily's relationship with her daughter, Rosemary, and, in *The Glass Castle*, Rosemary's relationship with Jeannette. How does each generation try to compensate for the one before? How does each mother try to avoid the mistakes or pain imposed upon her by her own mother?

If you've also read *The Glass Castle*...

1. In *Half Broke Horses*, Lily's father decides to bring her home from school so that he can use her tuition money to breed dogs. This instance of selfishness bears a close resemblance to Rex Walls's behavior in *The Glass Castle* when he takes the money Jeannette's sister has been saving to escape Welch, WV, and goes on a drinking binge. Over and over these men disappoint their children, and yet they are forgiven. Talk about the lack of bitterness in both of these books. How do the children rationalize their parents' behavior?

2. "There was a big difference between needing things and wanting things—though a lot of people had trouble telling the two apart—and at the ranch, I could see, we'd have pretty much everything we'd need but precious little else" (pg. 134–5). How might this description refer to Lily's life as a whole? What effect did growing up without much have on Rosemary Walls, whom we learn more about in *The Glass Castle*?

3. Both *The Glass Castle* and *Half Broke Horses* open with a climactic event from the main character's childhood that has left a memorable impression on her. Compare each event and the narrators' descriptions of the events. How do these retellings set the stage for what's to come? Why do you think Walls chose to use them as the openings of both books?

(Questions issued by publisher.)

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](#)

★ *Half Broke Horses*, Jeannette Walls. Scribner, \$16.00 (272p) ISBN 978-1416586296

For the first 10 years of her life, Lily Casey Smith, the narrator of this true-life novel by her granddaughter, Walls, lived in a dirt dugout in west Texas. Walls, whose megaselling memoir, *The Glass Castle*, recalled her own upbringing, writes in what she recalls as Lily's plainspoken voice, whose recital provides plenty of drama and suspense as she ricochets from one challenge to another. Having been educated in fits and starts because of her parents' penury, Lily becomes a teacher at age 15 in a remote frontier town she reaches after a solo 28-day ride. Marriage to a bigamist almost saps her spirit, but later she weds a rancher with whom she shares two children and a strain of plucky resilience. (They sell bootleg liquor during Prohibition, hiding the bottles under a baby's crib.) Lily is a spirited heroine, fiercely outspoken against hypocrisy and prejudice, a rodeo rider and fearless breaker of horses, and a ruthless poker player. Assailed by flash floods, tornados and droughts, Lily never gets far from hardscrabble drudgery in several states—New Mexico, Arizona, Illinois—but hers is one of those heartwarming stories about indomitable women that will always find an audience.

“Jeannette Walls . . . once again proves that the combination of gifted storyteller with great stories is both rare and intoxicating.” (*The Cleveland Plain Dealer*)

“[An] eloquent tribute to a pragmatic heroine . . . A powerhouse—fast-moving, fearless and impossible to forget.” (**Michelle Green, *People***)

“[Jeannette Walls is] the third generation of a line of indomitable women whose paths she has inscribed on the permanent record, enriching the common legend of our American past.” (**Liesl Schillinger, *New York Times Book Review***)

Suggested Readalikes

The Worst Hard Time, Timothy Egan.

Peace Like a River, Leif Enger.

The Jump-off Creek, Molly Gloss.

Bold Spirit: Helga Estby's Forgotten Walk Across Victorian America, Linda Hunt.

The Lacuna, Barbara Kingsolver.

All the Pretty Horses, Cormac McCarthy.

Lazy B: Growing Up on a Cattle Ranch in the American Southwest, Sandra Day O'Connor.

These is my Words: The Diary of Sarah Agnes Prine, 1881-1901, Arizona Territories, Nancy E. Turner.

The Glass Castle: A Memoir, Jeannette Walls.

The Story of Edgar Sawtelle, David Wroblewski.

Web Resources

LitLovers Guide: <http://www.litlovers.com/reading-guides/13-fiction/408-half-broke-horses-walls>

Jeannette Walls discusses *Half Broke Horses* (video): <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IOKkcBPYI5Y>

Video featuring Jeannette and her mother: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IW0XVno-0gM>

Article on ranching in Texas from the State Historical Association: <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/azr02>