



Ramapo Catskill Library Book Discussion Leader's Guide

The Glass Castle

by Jeannette Walls (Scribner, 2005)

Target Audience: Adult readers who enjoy personal memoirs.

Synopsis: *The Glass Castle* is a memoir of resilience and redemption. It tells the story of the dysfunctional Walls family: alcoholic, but brilliant, father; free-spirited, artistic mother; and children who had to learn to take care of themselves.

Author Biography: Jeannette Walls was born in 1960 in Phoenix, Arizona and her family lived in various southwestern towns before settling in Welch, West Virginia when she was ten. She graduated from Columbia University's Barnard College with honors and went on to become a reporter for New York magazine, Esquire, USA Today and MSNBC.com. She currently lives in northern Virginia and is married to writer John Taylor. Her memoir, *The Glass Castle*, was a New York Times bestseller and is being turned into a movie by Paramount.

The Glass Castle is Walls' second book, following *Dish: The Inside Story on the World of Gossip*, (2000). *The Glass Castle* received an Alex Award in 2006.

Reviews:

People

"Walls has joined the company of writers such as Mary Karr and Frank McCourt who have been able to transform their sad memories into fine art."

Entertainment Weekly

"*The Glass Castle* is nothing short of spectacular."

The New York Times Book Review *Francine Prose*, , front page

"Memoirs are our modern fairy tales.... The autobiographer is faced with the daunting challenge of attempting to understand, forgive, and even love the witch.... Readers will marvel at the intelligence and resilience of the Walls kids."

Questions for Discussion:

- 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?
- 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: 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." 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"?
- 7.** Though it portrays an incredibly hardscrabble life, *The Glass Castle* is never sad or depressing. Discuss the tone of the book.
- 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?

**Compiled by Belinda Cash, Nyack Library - August 2008
Ramapo Catskill Library System Adult Services Advisory Council**