

Jeannette Walls, *The Glass Castle*

A book review by Zoe Bell

Reading *The Glass Castle* by Jeannette Walls is like taking a long road trip with the nomadic Walls family – through the California desert, the West Virginia mining towns, to the cities of Phoenix, Las Vegas, and New York– in the back of a beat-up Oldsmobile. This is the story of Jeannette Walls’s life: her tumultuous childhood living with an alcoholic father, a free-spirited, artist mother, and her three siblings. Her stories are outrageous and often upsetting – but this is her life. And as readers, we are along for the ride.

The Glass Castle is compelling because it is true. The reader sees Jeannette’s childhood through her own eyes, and are witness to her slow loss of faith in her parents, and the realization that their life on the move is not all just a fun adventure.

The book opens in the middle of a scene in the life of Jeannette Walls as an adult in New York City. She is on her way out for the evening when she spots her mother digging through the trash on the side of the street. The snapshot the scene provides is clear: Walls is successful, living on Park Avenue with her husband, while her mother is homeless.

After we are given this glance into the future, part two of the book, “The Desert,” begins with Jeannette at three years old, and continues chronologically. The first line of this part, “I was on fire,” (Walls 9) grabs the reader and takes us to the author’s earliest memory – a moment of extreme panic as she burns herself cooking hot dogs. It is clear that Walls is self-sufficient and independent – to a point that is

dangerous for a three year old. She spends six weeks in the hospital before her father checks her out “Rex Walls-style.” Soon readers find out that “Rex Walls-style” is rarely safe or legal.

As the story goes on, there are other memorable scenes that convey the complexity of characters in the Walls family. The most striking, to me, is the scene where Jeannette’s father, Rex, decides to give each of his children stars for Christmas. The reality is the family does not have money for presents, but Jeannette’s parents use their imagination and express their love in a way that makes the kids feel even more special. Rex says about more well-off family’s presents, “Years from now, when all the junk they got is broken, you’ll still have your stars.”

(41) The relationship between Jeannette and her father – how much admiration she had for him early in life and her almost-unwavering affection for him – is understandable in these scenes. As readers we watch Jeannette’s faith in her father become strained as she realizes the extent of his alcoholism and his inability to come through on his promises.

The symbol of “The Glass Castle” reoccurs throughout the book. Rex promises Jeannette and the family that one day he would create a huge house, made entirely out of glass, using solar energy and a water-purification system. This unrealistic dream is a metaphor for Rex’s life: extremely ambitious, but without the practicality or work ethic to achieve anything. He still talked about building his Glass Castle despite the extreme hunger and poverty from which his children are suffering. Finally, as she is about to leave for New York, Jeannette tells her father

that he never will build this castle. As he protests, she finally stops him by saying, "Go ahead and build the Glass Castle, but don't do it for me." (238)

As the story carries on, the key to understanding the family's life is in these scenes. The details about the surroundings – the desert, Phoenix, Battle Mountain, Welch, and everywhere else – ensure the reader can truly see the family's awful living conditions. An excellent example is the description of 93 Little Hobart Street, which Walls takes at least two pages to convey the "rustic" nature of the house, including the "drooping porch" and kitchen ceiling that "leaked like a sieve." (153)

Walls excels at showing her readers the complicated nature of family. Growing up, she cannot grasp the truly strange and unfortunate nature of her situation. She manages to tell the story as she would have understood it at the time. As readers we knew all along her parents were not the heroes they claimed to be, but it takes years within her own narrative for Walls to become disenchanted with the family fairy tale. Only as a teenager does she begin to understand the Glass Castle will never be built.

Walls uses dialogue as a major tool in establishing character, especially in order to show the reader the level of frustration experienced by the Walls children. The best examples are various conversations with Jeannette's mother, Rose Mary. Although an intelligent and capable person, she has an inability to listen to reason. For example, after she becomes homeless and Jeannette asks what will happen in the winter, her mother smiles and says, "Winter is one of my favourite seasons." (256) Rose Mary refuses to give up the façade that her life is not one big adventure.

Walls's writing flows beautifully, and makes perfect use of detail and dialogue to weave her sad, yet hopeful, story. She manages to write each hardship she faces in the tone of a happy and resilient child – never with a tone of complaint or regret.

Since she presents this story as a memoir, we are promised that this is all true; Jeannette and her family's memories would be the main source of research for the book. Although it would be difficult for one person to remember so much about their life, especially all the direct dialogue, it seems believable that through asking that these situations really did happen – or at least, happened almost exactly as she said. If a few words were off here and there, I don't think it would detract from the story.

The most compelling part of the book is watching the Walls children survive – and eventually make it to New York City – despite everything standing in their way. The universally understood theme is how a family can be full of love and entirely dysfunctional at the same time. The unbelievably harsh life of the Walls children almost seems like it must be fiction, but their story is still relatable, as everyone understands the complex, unwavering bonds that tie a family together.