

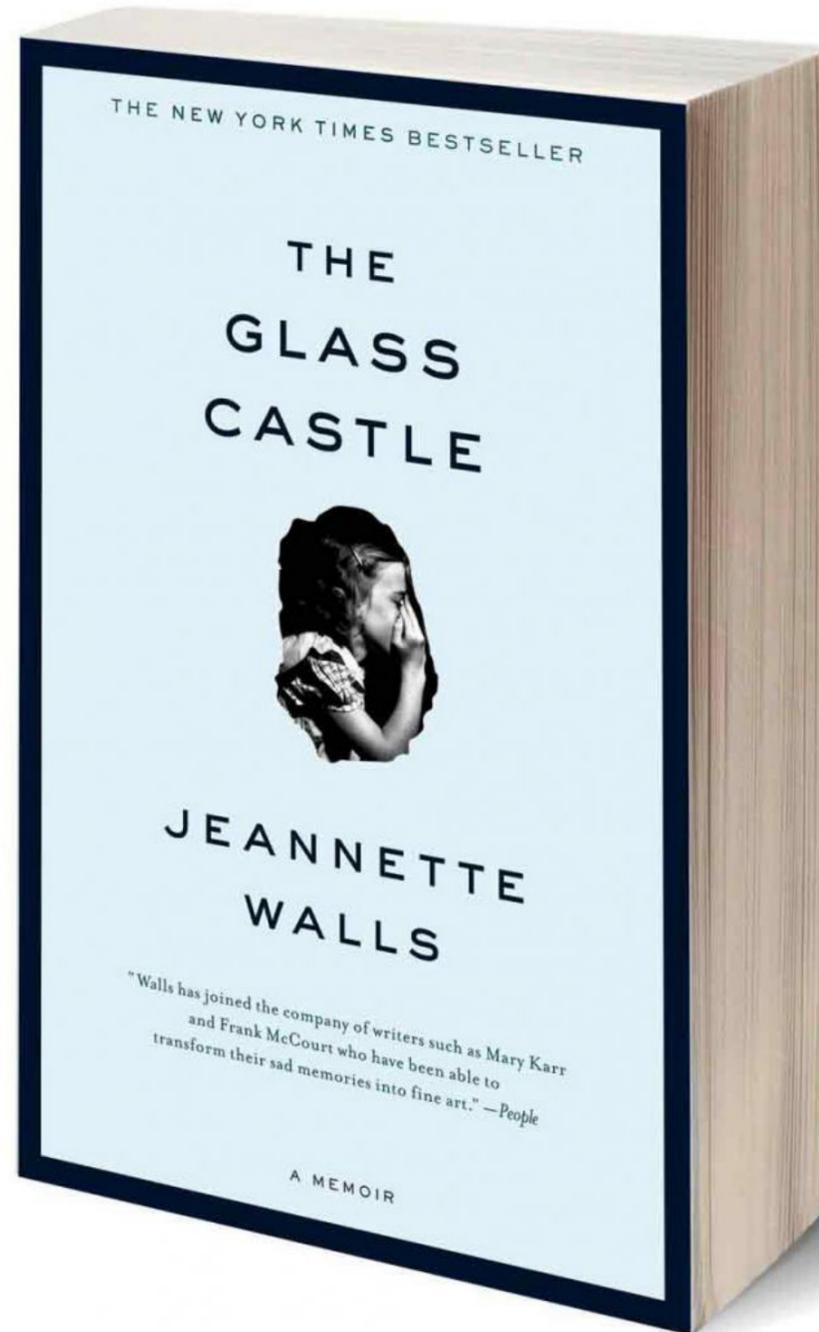
The Glass Castle by Jeannette Walls

Reviewed By Maria Kootsikis

Initially, when reading *The Glass Castle*, I didn't find it believable. How can someone in their forties remember anything in great detail from when they were three years old? I certainly don't. I mentioned this to a neighbor, who then relayed a story in great detail from when she was three years old. Encouraged by my neighbor's excellent memory, I continued reading the book, which begins with the author, Jeannette Walls, was three years old and boiling hot dogs unsupervised when her pink tutu caught fire, putting her in the hospital for six weeks.

Though physically scarred for life, her parents allowed her to resume boiling water by herself when she returned home from the hospital so she wouldn't fear fire. Walls' memoir recalls her years growing up in an extremely dysfunctional family, moving cross-country as they skipped rent, and eventually moving in with her very disturbing grandmother in Welch, West Virginia. Her mother, Rose Mary Walls, was an artist and a free spirit; her father, Rex Walls, was a dreamer and a drunk. Both were extremely irresponsible parents.

Walls' parents did not make every possible effort to work and to provide the basic necessities of life for their children such as food and shelter. Her mother would say, "Why spend the afternoon making a meal that will be gone in an hour when in the same amount of time I can do a painting that will last forever?" Her parents refused government subsidies while Jeannette and her siblings dug through the trash at school looking for food thrown out by other kids.



They lived in their car, a box car, and a leaky, cold cabin without plumbing and heating, but never in the "glass castle" her father promised to build. He never kept his promises, but he had a poetic, dreamy side to him. One Christmas, with no money to buy presents, he gave each of his children the gift of a star high up in the sky. Her mother hated teaching elementary school so much that not even the fact that her children were starving could get her out of bed in the morning to go to work. She would never sell the property she inherited that was worth a million dollars because she believed it must remain in the family.

Despite everything, the Walls kids excelled academically, affording Jeannette the opportunity to work on her school newspaper starting in the seventh grade. She eventually became editor-in-chief of her high school paper. Working on the paper gave her a positive identity, negating the dirty, scrawny kid her peers saw. Her older sister, Lori, was encouraged to move to New York by visiting filmmakers working on a project in their Appalachian community. Jeannette then hatched a plan for herself and her siblings to move to New York City. By working and receiving financial aid and scholarships, she earned a bachelor's degree in Liberal Arts at Barnard College. Two of her three siblings were equally successful. Eventually, their parents followed, living on the street and eventually squatting in an abandoned tenement.

Interestingly, the children of irresponsible parents chose a different path to become successful. Only when Jeannette's mother told her that it was time to stop feeling guilty and accept her parents as they were could Jeannette write her memoir.

Maria Kootsikis and her husband, both retired pharmacists, are living the dream in beautiful Bluff Heights. They enjoy reading, international travel, and outdoor activities such as swimming, biking, and hiking.