

Jeannette Walls and “Doing the Skedaddle”

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100A
10/16/08

Jeannette Walls' memoir, *The Glass Castle*, examines her struggle as a child and as a young adult living in poverty. She faces unending hardships and challenges that help her to be self-sufficient and successful in life. In the memoir, the Walls family live in a variety of cities and towns around the country, including: a small town in Arizona; Battle Mountain, Nevada; Phoenix, Arizona; Welch, West Virginia; and New York City. The father, Rex Walls, is generally the one who decides where the family will live, with the exception of Welch. Each new location has a different effect on Jeannette, her brother, Brian, and sisters, Lori, and Maureen, and their parents. Some places provide a better quality of life while others worsen it.

The first place that Jeannette remembers living in is a small trailer park in Arizona. While living here she was taken to the hospital for severe burns, after a cooking accident. While in the hospital, Jeannette realizes that she likes living in quietness and order (11), implying that she is used to messy and loud living conditions. Furthermore, Walls comments on the hospital, saying, "You never had to worry about running out of food or ice or even chewing gum. I would have been happy staying in that hospital forever" (12). One can now begin to gain an understanding of her and her family's poverty. Almost as soon as the Walls family move into a new home, they are moving out again, or "doing the skedaddle" (19), as Rex Walls calls it. "Time to pull up stakes and leave this shit-hole behind" (17), he says, mostly because the bill collectors are after them (19).

Battle Mountain, a town in the Northern Nevada desert (48) is later chosen by Rex as the next Walls residence for its gold mining industry and the potential to make the family rich. When first living in the desert, Rex has "a job as an electrician in a barite mine" (54) and is even bringing home enough money so that the family can go to dinner at a restaurant, called the Owl Club, every Sunday night (55). Also, the children go to school at Mary S. Black Elementary

School (58) where Jeannette is able to excel in her education and be at the top of her class. Later, however, when Rex is out of work because he is trying to perfect “a technique by which the gold could be leached out of the rock by processing it with a cyanide solution” (69), life for Jeannette and her siblings has changed for the worse. Since Rex is using the location of Battle Mountain as an excuse to leave his job, the family no longer has money coming in. The lack of food for the children is so severe that Rose Mary Walls, the mother of the family, gets into an argument with her kids over who had eaten the last edible object in the house—a half stick of margarine (69). After living conditions worsen and Jeannette gets caught up in an almost fatal conflict with Billy Deel, the town troublemaker, and the local law enforcement, Rex and Rose Mary decide that it is time to leave town and move to Rose Mary’s mother’s home in Phoenix, Arizona.

Life at Jeannette’s grandmother’s home in Phoenix opens up a number of new opportunities for positive living conditions. The house that Rose Mary inherits is enormous, with “fourteen rooms, including the kitchens and bathrooms” (94). It is definitely an improvement over living in the “railroad depot” (51) back in Battle Mountain. Furthermore, the children are enrolled in a public school called Emerson (95), which is such a well off school that it has its own nurse who prescribes free eye glasses for Lori (96). Emerson also puts Jeannette, Lori, and Brian into advanced reading groups where they can further their education (95). In addition to a large home and a great school, the father is making enough money that he is able to buy his kids bicycles to ride on, a first for all of the children (98). Unfortunately, Rex eventually loses his job, however, and takes up drinking all over again, causing distress and a lack of food for the family. Rose Mary makes up her mind to move the family to West Virginia because of her husband’s increasing drinking problem and his inability to hold a job. She thinks that his

parents will be able to steer him in the right direction and help the family out with their financial problems (123).

The living conditions for the Walls family deteriorate drastically in Welch, compared to those at the mansion in Phoenix. The first home where they stay is Erma's, Jeannette's grandmother. Jeannette describes the interior of the shabby home, saying, "It was cold in the house, and the air smelled of mold and cigarettes and unwashed laundry" (131). Furthermore, the children are only allowed to bathe once a week in four inches of water that all of the kids must share. In addition to unfit conditions at home, Jeannette is constantly bullied at school and does not fit in (140), which makes it difficult for her to concentrate on her studies. The second house that the Walls live in and buy is a rundown shack on 93 Little Hobart Street which is no better than Erma's. In fact, it is probably worse since the kitchen ceiling leaks when it rains (154) and the entire area surrounding the foundation becomes a garbage dump because the family cannot afford to pay for trash pick-up (155). With Rex drinking constantly and leaving the children to fend for themselves, Lori and Jeannette decide that, for their own good, they should move to New York.

Life in New York City for Jeannette is a spectacular change and improvement over that of West Virginia. She immediately notices that the people there are very kind and "that the opportunities would come so easily" (247). When Jeannette moves in with her older sister, Lori, she is fascinated by the fact that their apartment is "bigger than the entire house on Little Hobart Street, and way fancier" (247). She is happy to learn that their home has warm running water that is hooked up to a toilet and a bathtub (247). Jeannette acquires many job opportunities while living in New York. On one occasion, she is offered work as a reporter for a newspaper called *The Phoenix*, which pays her \$125 a week (249), a higher salary than she previously ever had.

Life in New York is so rich and full of opportunities that she and Lori resolve to have their brother and sister move there as well (249).

The Walls family live in a number of locations throughout their lives, constantly moving to different cities like Battle Mountain, Phoenix, Welch, and New York. Each new home brings unique challenges that each member of the family must overcome, particularly the children. However, they are almost always able to find ways to adapt to their poor living situations and overcome them. From reading Jeannette Walls' memoir, *The Glass Castle*, we, as readers, are able to learn and understand that there are some people in the world who are not as fortunate as others financially, but tend to gain more self-reliance and self-discipline than those who are better off economically.

Works Cited

Walls, Jeannette. The Glass Castle: A Memoir. New York: Scribner, 2005.