Growth Through Acceptance: The Value of Lessons from Childhood

By: Mary Girard

In her childhood memoir, The Glass Castle, Jeannette Walls recounts the story of her youth spent with parents whose behavior pendulates from whimsical to destructive. Within the course of Ms. Walls’ story, the reader glimpses into her parents unwillingness to accept responsibility as well as the determination and resilience that their behavior instills upon their four children. Ms. Walls’ craft at telling her story without seeking the reader’s pity is why this book succeeds. The book is a balance of tales of stargazing enchantment to utter parental neglect. But the reader is not asked to judge the parents. Rather, Ms. Walls’ intent is to make the reader understand, that for her, the outcome served the means. The eventual career success for Ms. Walls and the continued closeness to her siblings is her triumph, and the pain of her childhood is part of the recipe that allowed her to become and accept who she is.

Although narrated in the first person, the book’s central character is the dynamic between the parents and the children. This dynamic is so crucial to the storyline that it almost has a heartbeat of its own. As the family migrates between fringe existences; the family dynamic ebbs and flows along with the narration of the story. Sometimes the charismatic father, Rex, is in control and other times the artistic mother, Rose Mary, is the central energy force for the family. However, the expected parent/child transformation of assumed roles does unfold. With the family settled in the rundown mountain town of Welch, the three eldest, Lori, Jeannette and Brian, become parental to both parents and the youngest child, Maureen. This transformation is painful, illustrated by the struggle to keep at least one parent gainfully employed, the struggle to eat, heat a home, and attend school. The children's
valiant attempts are not always successful due to forces beyond their control, most notably, their father’s raging alcoholism.

“When Dad saw me, he stopped talking and looked at me the way he did every time I had to track him down in a bar. It was always an awkward moment for us both. I didn’t want to be fetching him any more than he wanted his ragamuffin daughter summoning him home like a wayward schoolboy.” (Walls, p. 182)

It is through these painful episodes that the children begin to gain a sense of maturity beyond their parents. As Jeannette escorts her father home from the bar she accepts the assistance of ride from a stranger who refers to her as the daughter of the “town drunk”. She is both stunned and angered by the reference. After arriving home with her father, she doesn’t thank the stranger nor berate him, just lets him drive away. It is experiences such as these that illustrate how the book is not intended as a crucible of her childhood. When the stranger utters the insult, Jeannette absorbs the comment but won’t allow herself to be labeled by it. Even at the young age of thirteen, Ms. Wall’s growing sense of self is directly accountable to her parents repeated failures; because Ms. Walls refuses to claim her parent’s failures as her own.

Throughout The Glass Castle, Ms. Walls’ closest ally is her brother Brian. The relationship between these two children creates a powerful palliative against the family dysfunction around them. Throughout the book Brian and Jeannette share adventures and challenges together. “Brian and I loved to go to the dump. We looked for treasures among the discarded stoves and refrigerators...” (Walls, p. 60). From adventures in the desert to overcoming the neighborhood bullies in Welch, “Then Brian yelled, ‘Charge!’ and we came barreling down the hill...Brian and I did a victory dance in the rock-strewn street, giving our own war whoops,” (Walls, p.167). Jeannette and Brian forge a special bond to support and protect each other within their erratic life. This close relationship between Ms. Walls and her brother Brian speaks to the importance of alliances within any family dynamic. The alliance between
Jeannette and Brian gives the children the strength to survive and even thrive, despite their family circumstances.

As with any process, reliving and rewording a childhood is a dense and delicate task. Ms. Walls meets the challenge admirably. The pace of her tale and selected stories serve to keep the reader involved and empathetic. One particularly charming moment is when Jeannette’s father invites her outside on Christmas Day and asks her to pick a star out of the sky as her present. As she and her father gaze at the sky, they share a moment of peace and connectedness. During this moment, her father, Rex, explains a little of the physics of space, carefully describing the wonders of the cosmos and the sky. Through this gentle story of nurturing, Rex is a parent. He is a parent in a quiet moment, giving part of himself to his child. Within The Glass Castle the author does not miss an opportunity to illustrate and celebrate these aspects of her father’s parenting abilities, however limited, (Walls, pp.40-41).

Too often with tales of warped childhood there is an underlying need to blame. Whether cathartic or self-indulgent, the act of blame within a book can destroy the fragile balance of the characters with the story itself, especially in a memoir. This is a story that allows no blame. Ms. Walls has not written a story to objectify the poor parenting she received as a child. She has instead spun a tale of hope and loss; her childhood born with a sense of adventure that eventually exacts a toll of tremendous pain and acceptance from her. However, as the younger Jeannette becomes aware of her parent’s shortcomings and fragility, she gains insight into her own strengths and capabilities. In middle school, as she begins to be labeled by her classmates for the life of poverty she obviously inhabits, she looks for solutions through school newspaper projects and after-school jobs. With her teenage years comes an independent sense that her family life does not necessarily define her. By the time Ms. Walls moves away from West Virginia and adapts to a successful life in New York City, the reader is left thinking, “we knew she had it in her!”
The crux of this story is how diligence and self-belief can carry a person through very difficult times. That a childhood spent in crisis does not dictate adulthood spent in crisis. Within *The Glass Castle*, Ms. Walls wants the reader to recognize all aspects of her tale, the good and the horrible. It is a story of moments of glorious parenting and close sibling camaraderie that is eventually marred by selfishness and alcoholism. It is a tale of inner-family alliances in the face of adversity and how small triumphs can give hope for the future. And most of all, Ms. Walls wants the reader to recognize the individual’s capacity for growth through acceptance. Through writing *The Glass Castle*, Ms. Walls shows that she can accept her past, and she can love her family for who they are. Ms. Walls’ ability to accept, embrace, and move beyond her childhood is a valuable lesson for all of us to learn.

**Bibliography**