

The Glass Castle

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Author

Jeannette Walls

Characters

Jeannette Walls

The protagonist/author, who we see from her earliest memory at age 3 to adulthood. Jeannette is very intelligent and driven to overcome the poverty she endures as a child. She is smart.

Rex Walls

Jeannette's father. A highly intelligent and skilled man whose positive attributes are thwarted by extreme alcoholism, which compels him to do things such as steal from his children and use Jeannette as a sexual decoy in a bar-room con.

Rose Mary Walls

Jeannette's mother, whose dream is to be a successful artist. She occasionally takes jobs as a school teacher when things are particularly bad. She is an extremely loyal person. She is tolerant of Rex despite his destructive, drunken behavior, and clings unquestionably to numerous other ideas that many would find questionable, to say the least. She has a habit of sugar coating reality to the extent that it is unhealthy.

Brian Walls

Jeannette's younger brother. Throughout their childhood, Brian is Jeannette's closest ally, often attempting to rescue and protect his older sister. In his adulthood he becomes a police officer and eventually a detective.

Lori Walls

Jeannette's older sister, a very skilled artist who is just as driven as Jeannette to overcome her dismal childhood situation. With Jeannette, Lori devises a plan that will emancipate them from West Virginia and land them New York city.

Maureen Walls

The youngest of the Walls children. Little attention is given to Maureen until near the book's end when she is a very attractive but disturbed young woman.

Week Two: pp. 3-25.

I. Woman on the Street

I was sitting in a taxi... pp.3-5

"You want to help me change my life?" Mom asked. "I'm fine. You're the one who needs help. Your values are all confused." (p. 5)

Jeannette Walls, the author of *The Glass Castle*, begins her memoir as an affluent woman living on Park Avenue in New York City. One evening she spots her mother through the window of a taxi. Her mother is rooting through garbage cans. Jeannette later contacts her through a mutual friend and arranges to have lunch with her. Jeannette finds both of her parents embarrassing and worries about them. She feels guilty that they are both street people who must scrounge for food.

At lunch, her mother is cheerful until Jeannette explains the shame and worry she feels for both of her parents and offers to help them. Jeannette's mother responds by saying that Jeannette's values are confused and that she is the one who needs help.

Questions

Compare and contrast Jeannette's apartment with where her mother lives.

What is the significance of the above quotation? Is the mother correct?

Why does the writer open with this incident?

II. The Desert

I was on fire... pp. 9-14

"You don't have to worry anymore, baby," Dad said. "You're safe now." (p. 14)

Jeannette at age 3 is cooking hot dogs while wearing a pink tutu. She is in the kitchen of her family's trailer in Arizona. Her dress catches fire and her mother, who was in another room painting, wraps her in an army blanket and goes to a neighbor for a ride to the hospital.

Jeannette is hospitalized for the next six weeks. She finds the cleanliness and quiet a pleasant change from life in the trailer, where she shares a room with her brother and her sister.

When her family visits she is informed by her mother that she (Jeannette) won a helicopter ride. She is excited until her mother further informs her that the family has already taken the ride. Her mother is offended by the fact that a nurse gave Jeannette gum. Her father (Rex Walls) is offended by the fact that she is wearing bandages. He threatens to hit the doctor and is thrown out of the hospital by a guard.

A few days later her father appears in her room, picks her up and runs out of the hospital to where the car is waiting with the entire family in it.

Questions:

Why does Jeannette Walls open the book with this incident?

How does this incident set the tone for the book? What is the tone?

What is the attitude of other adults toward what has occurred? Cite specific examples.

Why does Jeannette like being in the hospital? (p. 11)

On page 12, Mary Walls is upset when nurses give Jeannette chewing gum. Why is this ironic when compared with Mary's other behaviors?

On page 13: What does the parents' decision to go on the helicopter ride suggest about them?

On page 13: What do you think of father's argument with the doctor regarding Jeannette's bandages and infection?

On page 13: What is "checking out Rex Walls-style"?

Vocabulary:

Tutu, Juju, goomba, Navajo

A few days later... pp. 15-16

"You've got to get right back in the saddle. You can't live in fear of something as basic as fire." (p. 15)

Soon after having been taken from the hospital, Jeannette is back to cooking hot dogs on her own.

Having been burned does not cause her to have a fear of fire; instead, she is fascinated by it. Her father shows her how to pass her finger through the flame of a candle, which she does over and over. She steals and plays with matches and makes small fires that she stomps out while yelling obscenities that she hears her father use. She enjoys watching her neighbors burn their trash, standing as close as she can to the fire. One day, she takes her favorite toy, a Tinkerbelle action figure, outside and lights a match. She holds it close to the doll's face so that the doll can feel the heat. To her surprise and dismay, the doll's face melts. Jeannette tries in vain to repair the doll. Although it is disfigured, Tinkerbelle remains Jeannette's favorite toy.

Questions:

What is the significance of Jeannette's fascination with what almost destroyed her?

Dad came home in the middle of the night... pp. 17-18

"Where are we going, Dad?" I asked.

"Wherever we end up," he said.

One night Jeannette's father (Rex Walls) comes home and tells everyone to grab only what they need to survive and get in the car. Everyone does so, and after Jeannette's mother finds her buried jar of cash, the family departs (or in the words of Rex, does "the skedaddle"). Jeannette realizes that she has left Tinkerbelle behind. Her father tells her that Tinkerbelle will take care of herself, just like he would like Jeannette to do. Jeannette tries to hold the cat for comfort but it scratches at her and begins making noise. Her father throws the cat from the window; it lands and runs away. Jeannette's mother says that it is better to be a wild cat than a tame one, and tells Jeannette that they can get a new cat. The family

spends the night on Army surplus blankets in the desert.

Questions:

What does treatment of cat suggest about the parents? Why would this make a child fearful?
What do you think of what the mother tells Jeannette in order to justify why they are leaving the cat?
What does Brian's reaction suggest about his nature?
What do the pets' names mean? What do these names suggest about the Walls family?

Vocabulary:

Quixote, juju

We were always doing the skedaddle... pp. 19-25

"Once he finished the Prospector and we struck it rich, he'd start work on our Glass Castle." (p.25)

The Walls family (with three children) lived a transient life. They would stay in small western towns where Rex (Jeannette's father) would work as an engineer or electrician in a mine. He would tell the children that the FBI was after him, when in reality it was bill collectors. At times they would stay with Jeannette's grandmother until she and Rex would get into a shouting match.

They spent a lot of time in the desert, where Jeannette and her two siblings would play outside during thunderstorms. Jeannette's mother had grown up in the desert. She knew which plants were edible and had a knack for finding water. Jeannette's father Rex was somewhat of a genius. He was able to repair nearly anything, and was an inventor and a master storyteller. He vowed that after he found gold, he would build the family a glass castle. In order to find gold he invented a machine called the Prospector that would be able to separate gold from other rocks and dirt by its weight.

Although a fascinating and skilled man, Rex had a penchant for violence. He taught his children to use a gun at an early age, and assured them that he could outfight any man they come into contact with. He was also a drunk. When only drinking beer, he was tolerable, but liquor would cause him to threaten his wife and throw furniture.

The stories he told all cast him as a hero, saving thousands of people by repairing a dam, or killing a pack of wild dogs that were threatening an injured horse.

The stories of his past were matched by ambitious claims for the future, such as the glass castle.

Questions:

Who does Rex Walls think is after the family? What does this suggest about his state of mind?
How does Rex Walls convince people to hire him? What does this suggest about his character?
What is the Prospector? What do you think of this invention?
Describe the Rex's relationship with Grandma Smith (p.20). What does this reveal about the two of them?
What types of people live in the desert towns the Walls inhabit?

How did the children get educated?

What do you think of young Jeannette's acquaintance with knives and guns?

On p. 21, characterize the mother's knowledge of and attitude toward the natural world.

On p. 22, children are allowed to play in the water during lightning storms. What does this suggest about the Walls' parenting?

pp. 22-23: Describe Rex's various interests.

p. 22 Describe the family's eating habits. How does this affect the children's emotional stability?

P. 22: Does "a little bit of a drinking situation" truly characterize Rex's behavior? Why does Mary choose to describe his alcoholism in this manner?

P. 24: Are the stories told to the children really suitable for young ones? Why or why not?

p.25: What is the class castle and what does it symbolize?

Vocabulary:

Gestapo, Henchmen, gypsum, flapper, banshee

Week Three: pp. 26-41.

As much as Dad liked telling stories about himself, it was almost impossible to get him to talk about his parents or where he was born... pp. 26-28

"Suffering when you're young is good for you."

Rex Walls' favorite story is the one in which he met his wife. He and some Air Force buddies were trying to get the nerve to jump off a high cliff into the water below. Jeannette's future mother and a friend showed up in bathing suits and made their way through the off-duty airmen and went straight off the cliff. Rex fell in love with her the second he saw her, and followed her off the cliff. In the water, he told her that he would marry her some day, and six months later he did.

It wasn't long before she was pregnant with Lori, who didn't speak or grow hair until she was three. Next came Mary Charlene, who died of crib death at nine months. Jeannette was born two years later, and a year after that came Brian. Brian was born while having a seizure. The seizures continued until he was one year old.

Jeannette's mother believes that people worry too much about children, and that having to endure some hardships while young hardens them. She doesn't dote on them when they cry, and was remarkably unaffected by the death of Mary Charlene.

Rex, however, was deeply wounded by the event. He found her in the crib and let out a cry that Jeannette's mother likens to that of a wounded animal. She also claims that it changed her husband. It marked the beginning of his drinking problem and also of his not being able to hold down a job.

At some point he sells her wedding ring, which her mother had bought. Often during arguments she would bring up the ring. He would tell her to quit complaining and claim that he would buy her a bigger ring someday, and also that he'd build a glass castle.

Questions:

Why do you think the father dislikes talking about his own family?

What is the story of the Walls' courtship? What does this story reveal about their relationship? Describe the birth of each child and what each story may signify for each child. On p. 28, we get the mother's philosophy of child rearing. What values are reflected in her philosophy? What do you think of her attitudes? p. 28: How do the mother and father react to the death of Charlene? What does it suggest about each? How might Charlene's death have affected Jeannette's relationship with her father?

Do you always like moving around? Lori asked me. (pp. 29-30)

"What do you think would happen if we weren't always moving around?" I asked.

"We'd get caught," Lori said.

The Walls now have a green station wagon called the Green Caboose. They are on their way to Las Vegas and stop at a bar. While their parents are inside, Lori and Jeannette try to tabulate how many places they have lived, and lose count after 11.

The parents return with snacks, and Rex drives away while simultaneously smoking and drinking. During a sharp turn over some railroad tracks, Jeannette is thrown from the car. Pebbles are embedded in her skin, and her forehead and nose are bleeding. The car keeps going. She wonders if she has been abandoned like Quixote, the cat her father flung from the car on an earlier trip.

After some time, the Green Caboose shows up again. While cleaning her up, Rex refers to her nose as a snot locker. The whole family finds this hilarious.

Questions

p. 30: Why does Jeannette think of Quixote, the cat, and his fate?

Why does Jeannette just sit and wait for the family to return? Why doesn't she seek help?

Do the parents take any responsibility for Jeannette's fall?

We lived in Las Vegas for about a month... pp.32-34

"...I lived in a world that at any moment could erupt into fire. It was the sort of knowledge that kept you on your toes." (p. 34)

The family lives in a hotel in Las Vegas. Rex develops a method for blackjack and buys everyone vests, cowboy hats and numerous dinners out, the most notable being one in an Old West themed restaurant which tops off the evening with a flaming ice cream cake. Rex's gambling method is discovered the next day and the family has to perform "the skedaddle".

They go all the way to San Francisco and stay in a hotel that is also a brothel. Jeannette experiments with fire in the bathroom of the hotel, putting piles of toilet paper in the toilet, setting them ablaze and then flushing. Ironically, a few nights later the hotel catches fire (not due in any part to Jeannette's experiments). Everyone escapes and waits in a bar across the street while Rex helps fight the fire. While there, Jeannette thinks about fire. She wonders if the fire that burned her when she was cooking hot dogs

is related to the fire she was flushing down the toilet and the fire that just burned the hotel.

After the fire, the family lives in their car on the beach until asked to leave by the police. The parents decide they are fed up with civilization and want to move back to the desert.

Questions:

What does father's gambling suggest about his character?
Why do the Walls parents distrust civilization?

After we pulled up stakes in San Francisco, we headed for the Mojave Desert... pp.35-38

"It's the Joshua Tree's struggle that gives it its beauty."

The family drives until Jeannette's mother is taken by the vision of a Joshua tree. The car stops so that she can make a painting of the tree, and Rex decides that this is as good a place as any to settle.

The town is called Midland and is in the heart of the desert. Water comes in by train twice a day.

Spooked by the sounds of coyotes howling and gila monsters slithering, Jeannette thinks she hears something under her bed. When she tells her Dad, he becomes very serious about ridding the house of the demon. So, with a knife and a pipe wrench, the two go on a search for the demon, which has allegedly been trying to get Rex for years. After having no luck finding the demon, Rex tells Jeannette that all you have to do is show demons that you are not afraid of them and they will not hurt you.

The family's dog gets bitten by a rattle snake and dies. But, they have plenty of cats—so many that they have to take kittens to a pond and drown them. Jeannette's mother explains that they were able to give the kittens a little extra time on earth, and that the kittens should be thankful.

Rex gets a job in a gypsum mine, and Mary (Jeannette's mother) devotes herself to art and writing. She is also pregnant. The family decides to move to Blythe, a larger city in the desert, when it is time for her to deliver.

Questions:

P. 35: How do the Walls choose their next home?

p. 36-7: How does father deal with Jeannette's fears? Does this help or hurt her? What do you think of his method?

p. 37: What does the parents' treatment of animals say about them? What effect does it have on the children?

Describe the mother's artistic endeavors.

p. 38 What does the Joshua Tree symbolize?

Vocabulary:

Pigeonholed

I never believed in Santa Claus... pp. 39-41

"Years from now, when all the junk they got is broken and long forgotten," Dad said, you'll still have your stars."

By Christmas, Rex has lost his job at the gypsum mine. The children have never believed in Santa Claus, the parents being against the whole idea. Christmas with the Walls family occurs several days after the actual holiday so that the family can find discarded trees and usable wrapping paper.

On Christmas Eve on this particular year, Rex takes the children one at a time outside and tells them to pick a star. He says that all you have to do to own a star is to claim it the way Columbus claimed America. Each child chooses a star, except Jeannette, who chooses Venus. Rex knows the names of the stars (Beetlegeuse and Rigel) and gives each child information about their star/planet. The children are happy with their gifts and laugh at all the children who believe in Santa Claus.

Questions:

Why didn't the parents believe in telling their children the Christmas/Santa Claus fantasy?

What was a typical Walls family Christmas like?

Why did father lose his latest job? What does it suggest about his character?

What does father give his kids for Christmas? What do you think of his gifts?

Vocabulary: dago.

Week Four: pp. 42-61.

At twilight, once the sun had slid behind the Palen Mountains... pp. 42-47

"Just a little dust-up."

On the way to Blythe, the parents argue about how long the mother has been pregnant. Rex has been drinking, and the argument gets quite heated. Jeannette's mother reaches her foot over to the driver side and steps on the brakes, then runs away from the car. Rex follows her in the car, and begins chasing her. It appears as though he is trying to kill her with the car. The children beg him to stop, which he doesn't do until he corners her and drags her back into the car.

In Blythe, the family lives in an apartment, and Jeannette goes to school. She is a top reader in the class and always raises her hand enthusiastically when the teacher asks a question.

Other students call her a teacher's pet and also pick on her because she is tall and skinny. On the way home from school, six Mexican girls jump her and beat her up. The next day, the girls are again waiting for her, but this time Brian, her younger brother, helps her with a branch from a yucca tree. The girls are not scared of him or the branch and begin to beat him as well. Jeannette picks up a rock and hits one of the girls in the head. This causes them to leave.

Jeannette and Brian then go to an ice berg lettuce farm where they eat, play and get dusted by a crop duster that flies over.

The baby is born two months later and is called Lilly Ruth Maureen. Lilly coming from her mother, Ruth from Rex's mother, and Maureen begin a derivative of her own name, which is Mary (this is the first time we learn Jeannette's mother's name).

Questions

Why does Rex Walls believe Blythe is the big city?

What does Mary's belief that she can carry a baby for months longer than nine months suggest about her?

Why does Mary bolt from car and what is the effect on the children?

Why does Jeannette act tough for her father?

Why does Brian, in solidarity, try to fight for Jeannette? How and why does his reaction differ from their father's?

What does the crop-dusting plane suggest about the children's lives?

What does it mean if mother checks out "Rex Walls style" from the hospital?

Vocabulary:

sonar (p. 42)

postmature (p.42)

blasphemy (p.42)

A few months after Maureen was born, a squad car tried to pull us over... pp. 48-50

"We got to ride in the back. It would be real fun, she said, a real adventure."

Rex outruns a police car that is trying to ticket him for bad brake lights. Thinking the police will recognize the car, he parks it in a garage and the family walks home. The next day, the children find out that they are moving to Battle Mountain, Nevada, where they are sure to find gold.

Mary and Rex rent a U-Haul and the children, including Maureen, who is only a few months old, ride in the back. The children are cold and have to use the bathroom but have no way of telling their parents.

The truck hits a bump and the doors fly open. Brian is almost pulled out of the truck while trying to shut the door. Luckily, a car comes along and alerts Rex, who is angry and scared when he finally stops the truck and comes to the back.

After using the restroom, he double checks the lock on the doors to the trailer and continues with the drive.

Questions:

What does it suggest that even though they know it's illegal, parents put children into back of U-Haul?

What do you think of the fact that the furniture is secured, but the children almost fall out?

Battle Mountain had started out as a mining post... pp.51-53

"Most pianists never get a chance to play in the great out-of-doors."

In Battle Mountain, the Walls move into a former depot station that has no furniture. The children sleep in refrigerator boxes and the family uses spools that hold industrial cables as tables and chairs.

In the midst of this, Mary decides that the family needs a piano. So, Rex buys a used one from a saloon owner and borrows a truck to move it. He devises a pulley system to get it into the house, using ropes that go in the front door, through the house, and are attached to the truck which is in the backyard. The plan is for Mary to ease the truck forward while everyone else guides the piano inside. Unfortunately is not an experienced driver and takes off, splintering the front door frame, pulling the piano through the house, splintering the back door frame and landing the piano outside. This is where the piano stays, with Mary going outside occasionally to play it.

Questions:

What does it suggest that they have no beds or tables, but the mother must have a piano?

Describe attempt to get the piano into the house.

What does Mary's attitude toward the piano outside suggest about her character?

What do you think of the Walls family's reading habits?

Dad got a job as an electrician in a barite mine... pp.54-57

"Why spend the afternoon making a meal that will be gone in an hour," she'd ask us, "when in the same amount of time. I can do a painting that will last forever?"

Rex gets a job at a barite mine, and stops drinking as heavily. Mary (or Rose Mary as Rex calls her) prefers painting to cooking, reasoning that a painting lasts forever. Therefore, she usually cooks large amounts of food once a week and the family eats whatever is made for breakfast, dinner and lunch. The most common food at the Walls' residence is beans.

The family spends a lot of time reading, individually and to each other. They keep a dictionary handy and sometimes disagree with the definitions, which prompts a letter to the publisher. Any letter from the publisher defending the definition is met by another letter from Rex, who will write as many times as needed to get the last word.

Questions:

What do the games played suggest about the family?

Rex's attitude towards slots: how does this compare with his plan to raise money in Las Vegas (p.31)?

Why is Rex proud of his children? How is this indicated?

What do you think of the mother's attitude toward cooking? How does it affect her children?

Vocabulary:

barite (p. 54)

bluffer (p.54)

ergo (p. 54)

mediocre (p.54)

Mom and Dad enrolled us in the Mary S. Black Elementary School... pp. 58-61

“Dad told us that zone was known in physics as the boundary between turbulence and order. It’s a place where no rules apply, or at least they haven’t figured them out yet.”

Jeannette enrolls in second grade and this time is less enthusiastic about answering questions in order to make friends. Rex, sensing that Jeannette needs more of a challenge, has her do math homework in binary numbers. This confuses the teacher and causes Jeannette to have to stay after school.

The Walls' neighborhood is full of rough-and-tumble kids from low-income families. Rex enjoys playing with the children.

The Walls children are spanked with a belt for talking back and disobeying direct orders; otherwise, the rules are very loose; Come home when the streetlights come on, and use common sense. Injuries that would alarm other parents, i.e. a gash in the thigh from a rusty nail, do not concern Mary or Rex.

In addition to playing various games with the neighborhood children, Jeannette enjoys exploring the desert. She collects rocks and attempts to sell them for several hundred dollars each (only one ever sold, to Rex on credit). She also enjoys exploring with Brian in a junkyard. She and Brian mix a number of chemicals they find there and light the mixture, setting an old shack they deemed as their laboratory on fire. Jeannette escapes but Brian tries to put out the fire. Luckily, Rex is walking by and pulls Brian from the fire. The three watch the blaze and Rex explains that the hazy area around the flame is called the “boundary between turbulence and order”.

Questions:

Why does Jeannette get in trouble for her math homework? What does this show about Jeannette and about her teacher?

What do you think about Mary’s lack of concern when Jeannette is pierced by a rusty nail?

Under what conditions did Rex Walls use corporal punishment on his children?

Why does Walls mention the zone between turbulence and order that fascinates her father?

Vocabulary: garnets (p. 59); granite (p. 59); obsidian (p.59); iron pyrite (p. 59)

Week Five: pp. 62-80.

None of us kids got allowances... pp. 62-66

The Walls children redeem bottles and collect scrap metal whenever they want spending money. Jeannette and Brian meticulously choose the candy they buy with their hard-earned cash. Routinely on the way home from the drug store where they buy their candy, they stop and spy on a house known as the Green Lantern. According to Mary, it is a Cat House. The children don't know what this means and are only told that bad things happen there. One day Jeannette dares Brian to talk to one of the women lounging on the porch. He reports back to her after asking what happens inside, saying merely that men go inside and women are nice to them. He also reports that the woman was nice and starts making a habit of waving to the women at the Green Lantern. Jeannette, however, is scared of them.

Questions

Why are the children fascinated by the cathouse? Why is Jeannette afraid of the women in the cathouse?

Our house in Battle Mountain... pp.64-66

Dad kept telling me that he loved me, that he never would have let me drown, but you can't cling to the side your whole life..."

Numerous animals live at the Walls', everything from cats and dogs to coyotes and wounded vultures. Mary refuses to kill the flies that inhabit the home, reasoning that they are a valid link in the food chain and that killing them would starve the lizards, which would in turn starve the cats.

The family goes to a hot springs in a souped-up Ford that Rex buys. Rex teaches Jeannette to swim by taking her to the middle and throwing her in. He does this repeatedly until, trying to escape him, she begins to swim.

Questions:

What do you think of Mary's attitude toward killing flies? How does it compare with her attitude toward household pets?

Why does Mary believe she's doing animals a favor by not allowing them to become dependent on humans? How does this connect with her attitude towards raising children?

Describe the manner in which Rex teaches Jeannette to swim. What does this reflect about his character? What is your opinion of his teaching method?

How does Jeannette react to her swimming lesson?

Vocabulary: encrustations (p.65)

“Bad news,” Lori said. pp. 67-72

“I’d broken one of the unspoken rules: We were supposed to pretend our life was one long and incredibly fun adventure.”

Rex loses his job at the mine, and the family starts to go hungry. Jeannette steals from the other kids’ school lunches and from a friends’ refrigerator. Brian is caught breaking into a house and is forced to eat the entire gallon of pickles he was attempting to steal.

Rex spends most of his time at the Owl Club gambling in order to make money to create a cyanide solution that will leach gold from rock.

Rex and Mary have a fight. Mary claims that Rex is doing nothing to help the family while Rex thinks Mary should ask her mother for money to fund his cyanide leaching project.

The fight continues the next morning and neighbors begin to wonder if they should intervene. They decide it is not their place to interfere and instead become spectators. Soon, a painting and then an easel come flying out of a second story window. Next come Mary’s feet. Rex is holding her arms. She claims he is trying to kill her but it is obvious that he is preventing her from falling. The children rush inside to help pull her back in.

Questions:

What is Rex’s new excuse for getting fired? Why can’t he keep a job? Does he want to?

How does the lack of food affect family unity?

The next morning, instead of sleeping late... pp. 73-75

“I’m a grown woman now,” Mom said almost every morning. “Why can’t I do what I want to do?”

Mary gets a job as a teacher, an easy job to obtain in Battle Mountain, where teachers are fired for walking the halls with loaded rifles. Mary’s students run wild. They love her, but the principal does not.

Mary doesn’t like teaching. To her, it is equated with being a failure as an artist. The children all encourage and help her with everything from getting out of bed in the morning to grading papers. Lori is especially helpful and is the most academically inclined of the Walls children. She is also in Mary’s class and endures a paddling so that Mary can demonstrate to the administration that she has discipline, without hurting any of the other kids.

Questions:

Why does Mary decide to get a teaching job?

Why does teaching make Mary hate her own mother?

Why does Mary not want to go to work in the morning? What do you think this says about her character?

How does the mother's treatment of the Apache, Navajo, and Mexican children compare with the way she treats her own?

How do the children help their mother with her job?

Why does the author point out that her mother is more upset about having to work than she is about leaving Maureen with the wife of a convicted drug dealer?

Why does Mary discipline her own child instead of others?

Once Mom started teaching... pp.76-80

"Have I ever let you down?" he asked...

Mary tries to keep the money she makes away from Rex. He usually manages to get it, and when the family comes up short, he will claim that Mary is spending it on art supplies.

Although he occasionally comes through with food, the Walls children are starting to become leery of their father, stating that he spends more on drinking than on the family. Jeannette is not as quick as Brian and Lori to lose faith. Rex has proclaimed her his favorite and shares more details of his schemes and ventures with her.

When passing by the Green Lantern one day, a woman named Ginger makes an attempt to greet Brian, who ignores her. He tells Jeannette that on his birthday Rex bought him a comic book, which he read while Rex and Ginger were in a hotel room together. Jeannette asks if he found out any more about what happens in the Green Lantern. He replies merely that they make a lot of money.

Questions:

Why does Rex insist on controlling the money even when he isn't earning it?

How does the father deny their lack of money?

What is Brian's attitude toward their father during this time period?

Why does Rex show up with groceries in the cafeteria?

Why does Rex ask Jeannette if she still has faith in him?

What do you think of a father who would bring his young son with him when visiting a prostitute?

Does Brian know what goes on at the Green Lantern? On what evidence do you base your answer?

Vocabulary: shanghai (p. 79)

Week Six: 81-101.

Some people liked to make fun of Battle Mountain... pp.81-90

"When my daddy passes out, he never pisses himself!"

A boy named Billy Deel moves to Battle Mountain. He is three years older than Jeannette and claims her as his girlfriend, a title that she does not want. He is also a juvenile delinquent, and is accused by a local woman of having set fire to some of her dogs and of skinning cats.

He lures Jeannette to his house so that the two can laugh at his father, who has passed out and urinated on himself. Jeannette isn't amused. He tells her that he will always protect her if she will be his girlfriend, and that if she will not be, she will regret it. She doesn't fear him, but a week later he gives her a ring. It is turquoise and Jeannette loves it. She tells him she'll keep it but will not wear it, and that this does not mean she is his girlfriend.

While playing hide-and-go-seek, Jeannette finds a shack to hide in. While she is hiding, Billy shows up and attempts to rape her. Luckily the other children find them. She goes to his house the next day and returns the ring.

The next day, while the Walls parents are out, Billy comes over, knocks out a window, and begins firing at the children with a BB gun. Lori retrieves her father's real gun and fires at him, missing. Jeannette also fires at Billy as he runs away.

A police car shows up, with Rex and Mary in it. The officer informs the parents that they must appear before the magistrate in the morning. This prompts the Walls to leave town during the night. Their destination is Phoenix, where Mary grew up.

Questions:

In what way is Billy's upbringing worse than that of the Walls children? What types of things does Billy do that the Walls children never would?

How does Jeannette react to Billy's assault? Why doesn't she tell her father about it?

How do the other children react to Billy's assertion that he has raped Jeannette? What does this show about the family?

Grandma Smith's big white house had shutters and was surrounded by eucalyptus trees. pp. 91-

"There's no reason to grieve," Mom said.

On the way to Phoenix, Jeannette is told that her grandmother has died. Jeannette loved her grandmother and the structure she provided whenever the Walls stayed with her. It is a shock to find out she had died.

Mary has inherited a house in Phoenix and some money and looks forward to giving up teaching and buying new art supplies. She tells Jeannette that the episode with Billy Deel was a "blessing in disguise." Mary is happy about the move to Phoenix and proclaims herself an "excitement addict."

Questions:

What impact did Grandma Smith's rules have on her daughter, Mary?

How does Jeannette react to the news that her grandmother has died? How does Mary react?

What do you think of Mary Walls' reaction to her mother's death?

Compare the values Grandma Smith had to those of Mary Walls.

What do you think of the fact that Mary Walls decides to give up teaching and spend her inheritance on art supplies?

When we pulled up in front of the house on North Third Street, I could not believe we were actually going to live there. pp. 93-101

"I like the world just fine the way I see it," she said. (p. 97)

The house in Phoenix has fourteen rooms and trees in the yard. The children are thrilled with the house. They go to school and are all put into gifted reading groups. Lori is told that she needs glasses and experiences wonder at being to see clearly for the first time in her life. Rex gets a job as an electrician and buys the children bicycles.

Life seems ideal to the Walls except for the insect problem. The house is infested with roaches, which the family battles with shoes and rolled up magazines. Termites also reside, and the children are constantly putting their feet through soft spots in the floor. When this happens, Rex will flatten a beer can and nail it over the hole.

Questions:

Describe the Walls' new neighborhood in Phoenix. How does it compare with Battle Mountain?

What is Mary Walls' reaction to her daughter, Lori's, need for glasses? What do you think of this reaction

and what does it suggest about Mary?

On what does Mary spend her inheritance?

What is Mary's attitude toward cleaning?

Could the termites and the rotting floorboards be a metaphor for the family? If so, what does that metaphor mean?

Week Seven: pp. 102-121.

A lot of our neighbors on North Third Street were kind of weird. pp.102-105

Mom and Dad liked to make a big point about never surrendering to fear or to prejudices or to the narrow-minded conformist sticks-in-the-mud who tried to tell everyone what was proper. (pp.102-105).

The Walls' neighborhood in Phoenix is inhabited by a family of Gypsies and a host of perverts.

The Gypsies are thieves. They steal Brian's pogo stick and refuse to give it back when asked. In addition to not yielding the stolen toy, they also leave a chicken with a slit throat on the Walls' doorstep. This prompts Mary to "fight magic with magic," which constitutes standing in front of their house with a crucifix made from ham bones and cursing their home to essentially fall on top of them. The pogo stick is found on the Walls' lawn the next morning.

The perverts, as Jeannette refers to them, are old men who follow the children around offering to give them boosts over fences, or soliciting their friendship with candy and money. Jeannette feels compassion for the men until one sneaks into her room (the Walls never lock or even close their doors due to the heat) and begins touching her private parts and asks if she will play a game with him. Jeannette screams and Brian (who had previously been given a dirty magazine by this same man) comes into the room bearing a hatchet. Jeannette and Brian chase the man away and begin the act of "pervert hunting," which entails the two of them walking the streets with a machete and baseball bat in search of old men who prey on children.

Mary and Rex stress to the children not to give in to fear, or to pre-judge. They view status-quo conformity with as much or more contempt than they have for the unsavory characters in the neighborhood. In one instance, Mary encourages the children to swim in a fountain outside the public library and tells anyone who comments to mind their own business.

An area in which Mary and Rex don't see eye-to-eye is religion. Despite her fierce non-conformist attitude, Mary considers herself a devout Catholic. Rex is an atheist. Church is particularly trying, as Rex usually heckles the priest until the family is asked to leave.

Questions:

What reason do the parents give for leaving the house open at night?

What happens to Jeannette during the night?

How does the incident affect Maureen?

On the basis of what happens to the children, what does the parents' unwillingness to close the house at night suggest about their values and priorities?

Vocabulary: hex, fuddy-duddies, devout, adobe, mantilla, voodoo, holy days of obligation, communicants, hedonism

City life was getting to Dad. pp. 106-109

"I'm going to show you," he said, "that no animal, no matter how big or wild, is dangerous as long as you know what you're doing." (p.106)

Rex is angered when he hears that the police kill a mountain lion that has wandered into a woman's back yard. He sets out to prove to the children that animals are not dangerous if you are not scared of them. He takes them to the zoo where he promptly stares down an alligator. He then climbs a fence surrounding a cheetah's cage and lures the cat to the side of the cage where he can reach through the bars and touch it. He pets the cheetah then has the children climb the fence and they too pet it. Jeannette is thrilled when it licks her hands. After attracting a significant amount of attention, they climb back over the fence. Rex nearly gets in a fight with a security guard on the way out. The family leaves amidst whispers that their father is drunk and that they, the children, are urchins. Jeannette feels no shame from their jeers as the thrill of having her hand licked by a cheetah is more than any of them have ever experienced.

Questions:

Rex Walls get so angry about a mountain lion being shot that he puts his fist through a wall. Is this the real reason for his anger? If not, what is?

Do you believe, as Rex asserts, that wild animals will act tame if you don't show fear?

What does Brian think of his father's assertion?

What do you think of Rex's willingness to risk the lives of his children in order to prove his point?

What does young Jeannette think of her experience with the cheetah? Does she regret it?

Vocabulary: biddy, Hoovering (p.107)

It was around this time that Dad lost his job. pp. 110-115

When Dad went crazy, we all had our own ways of shutting down and closing off, and that was what we did that night. (p.115)

Rex loses job after job and starts going to bars. Luckily, the children have hot lunches at school for a quarter every day.

Maureen, the baby, has no one her age to play with, so she develops imaginary friends and spends most of her time riding her tricycle. Since Maureen has no one to play with, Mary decides that she should get special treatment and uses the other children to cause distractions while she shoplifts clothes for her.

Similarly, she and Rex devise a method of getting money from banks by opening accounts and simultaneously withdrawing all of the money (one at a teller's window inside, one at the drive through) and leaving before the transaction has cleared.

Rex's drinking is getting worse and worse, yet Mary decides that the family will have an extra special Christmas. The children all have a dollar to spend for presents at the thrift store, which they manage to use with extreme creativity. The sight of the children in their threadbare clothes compels a tree salesman to let the family have a tree for a dollar.

Unfortunately, Mary decides that Christmas will wait until the family goes to Mass. Rex, who is incredibly intoxicated, loudly refers to the Virgin Mary as a "Jewish broad" and to Jesus as a bastard.

When the family returns home, in hopes of calming Rex down, Mary lets him open a present. It is a lighter, which he promptly uses to set the tree on fire. Everyone works to put out the fire while Rex laughs. When the fire is out, all of the presents have been ruined.

Questions:

How does Mary Walls rationalize shoplifting? Is this attitude consistent with her belief in self-reliance and in not accepting welfare and handouts?

How does Rex justify stealing from banks? Is this attitude consistent with his other beliefs?

What is Rex Walls' "undercover research"?

Who does Rex blame for the loss of his job? What does this reveal about his character? How do Rex's behavior, beliefs, and morals shape his attitude toward the church?

Vocabulary: pilfering, ingenious, felonious, shylocked, usurious (p. 111) qualms, onyx (p. 113)

I turned ten that spring, but birthdays were no big deal around out house. (pp. 116-121)

I told Mom that maybe I had made a terrible mistake, but Mom said sometimes you have to get sicker

before you can get better. (p.118)

Rex asks Jeannette what she wants for her tenth birthday, and Jeannette asks him if he will stop drinking. Rex stops cold turkey and spends several days strapped to his bed with belts and screaming. Once the basic withdrawals are over, he has no appetite, shakes all the time, and spends most of his time sitting under the orange trees in the yard.

He then gets the idea of taking the family on a vacation to the Grand Canyon. Everyone is excited, but on the way he decides to see how fast the car can go. He floors it and reaches a speed of over 100 mph, but then the car breaks down.

The Walls leave the car and everything in it (which includes an archery set of Mary's that was a gift from her father) and begin the 80 mile walk home. Luckily they are picked up by a woman whose daughter saw the family walking and reported it to her. She refers to the Walls as "poor people", which upsets Jeannette slightly.

When the family gets home, Rex disappears and doesn't return that night.

Questions:

What gift does Jeannette want for her tenth birthday?

What happens to Rex when he locks himself into the bedroom?

How does each family member react to Rex's attempt to get sober?

Why doesn't the Walls family ever get to the Grand Canyon?

Why does Jeannette react so strongly to the lady's description of the Walls as poor?

Vocabulary: delirium (p.117); tentative, strata (p. 118)

Week Eight: pp. 122-139.

Three days later, while Lori and I were sitting at Grandma's old upright piano... (pp. 122-125)

Maybe his parents could keep him in line. (p.123)

Rex comes home drunk and overturns a china closet filled with fine bone china. He drunkenly punches at his children and asks where Mary is. He refers to her as a bitch and a whore as he searches the house, finally finding her in bathtub. They begin to fight and pick up knives that were left on the floor from Rex's earlier rampage. Luckily Rex knocks the knife out of Mary's hand and drops his. Mary calls him a "stinking rotten drunk." Rex says, "Yeah, but you love this old drunk, don't you." This seems to diffuse the situation, and the two begin laughing and kissing.

Mary decides that the family should move to West Virginia, where Rex's parents are. She has some

money from some land that she inherited in Texas which is being leased for drilling. With it she buys a car.

Rex refuses to go with the family until they are pulling out of the driveway. Jeannette asks one more time if he will come and says that the family needs him. Everyone else echoes the plea and Rex ambles over to the car and gets in.

Questions:

Why does Mary decide the family needs to move to West Virginia?

How does Mary Walls get a car that they can drive to West Virginia?

What do you think of the story on p.124 about driving without brakes?

In what state does the family leave the house in Phoenix?

Why does Rex force his children to beg him to come with them to West Virginia?

III. Welch

Back in Battle Mountain, we had stopped naming the Walls family cars, because they were all such heaps that Dad said they didn't deserve names. (pp. 129-132)

"Life is a drama full of tragedy and comedy," Mom told me. "You should learn to enjoy the comic episodes a little more." (p. 129).

The Walls make their way across country in the car Mary bought. It breaks down frequently and has a top speed of twenty miles per hour.

They arrive in Welch, West Virginia in November and go immediately to the home of Rex's family. The Walls children meet their grandparents and Uncle Stanley. Their grandmother, a stern, obese woman, insists on being called Erma. She greets Mary by saying, "Nice of you to let me see my grandchildren before I die." Jeannette looks for some trace of their father in the three of them but sees none. Erma brings the family to the kitchen and feeds them green beans overcooked on an old coal stove.

Although there are unused rooms in the house's upstairs, the family stays in the basement. The upstairs has not been used in ten years because the wood in the floor is rotting.

The children all stay in the same bed, and when they laugh are met with the sounds of a broom on the ceiling. It is Erma, who lets it be known that she does not want the children laughing when they are in her house.

Questions:

What is her father's family like? How does Jeannette react to them?

How is Rex Walls like or not like his family members?

Vocabulary: Conestoga (p.130); moonshine (p. 132)

The next day was Sunday... (pp. 133-135)

"My career could really take off here." (p. 135)

The family awakes the next day to the sound of voices on the radio speaking in tongues. They drive around Welch that day, and Rex tells the family that the only reason the town exists is to mine coal. No crops will grow, and cattle can't be raised. They pass the Tug River, which Rex explains is so full of fecal matter that one cannot swim in it or fish from it. The entire town seems to be covered in coal dust.

Most strangers who come to Welch are either coal mining executives who lay off workers or shut down mines, or bankers foreclosing on houses. For this reason, strangers are not welcome in the town.

Mary proclaims that she will probably be the only artist in Welch, and that her career could really take off.

Questions:

Describe the local history of Welch.

How do the locals greet the outsiders?

Does the setting of Welch foreshadow positive or negative events?

Vocabulary: channeling (p.133); monochromatic (p.134)

The next day Mom took Brian and me to Welch Elementary, near the outskirts of town. (pp. 136-139)

"This girl ain't got no buttons on her coat!" (p. 139)

Mary enrolls her children at Welch Elementary. She doesn't have any of their school records. The principal has such a thick southern accent that Brian and Jeannette can't understand what he is saying. This is too bad, because he is quizzing them to see which class they should go in. He decides they are both a bit slow and places them accordingly. In an English class for children with learning disabilities, the teacher berates Jeannette for not having presented her school records. She tells the class that some people think they are special and above the rules others must follow, and essentially turns the entire class against Jeannette. Amongst the jeers, a tall black girl pokes Jeannette in the back with a sharpened

pencil. At recess, the tall girl and several friends beat Jeannette up.

Questions:

Why doesn't the principal believe Mary's assertion that her children are gifted?

Why does Mary tell her children not to be ashamed of being smarter than the local kids?

Describe Jeannette's history class. What does it imply about the quality of public education in West Virginia?

How does the English teacher treat Jeannette? What does it suggest about the teacher?

Why do the girls beat up Jeannette?

Vocabulary: malicious (p.137).

Week Nine: pp. 140-158.

When we all got home that afternoon, Mom and Dad were eager to hear about our first day. (pp. 140-144)

"Everyone has something good about them," she said. "You have to find the redeeming quality and love the person for that." (p.144)

Jeannette decides not to tell her parents about the bullying, which continues every day at recess. The ringleader of the bullies is Dinita Hewitt. Jeannette is convinced that there is some good in Dinita because of her smile.

One day Jeannette is walking and comes upon a small black boy who is cornered by a dog. The dog bites the boy, but Jeannette then chases it off with a stick. She gives the boy a piggyback ride home, which is right across the street from Dinita, who sees them from her front porch.

The bullying stops and Dinita asks Jeannette for help with some school work. The two become friends. Erma, who is an all-out racist, is not pleased. She scolds Jeannette until Jeannette tells her that she shouldn't use the word "nigger". This results in her being sent to the basement without dinner.

When Jeannette complains about Erma to her mother, she is told to have compassion for her as she has had a hard life. Mary goes on to say that one must look for the good in everyone. When Jeannette asks what good there was in Hitler, her mother replies that he loved dogs.

Questions:

Describe the family's hygiene habits.

Why doesn't Jeannette tell her parents about the bullying? What do you think they'd do if they did know?

What do Mary Walls' "high-minded arguments" suggest about her ability to understand Jeannette's predicament?

Why does Dinita finally stop bullying Jeannette?

What is Grandmother Walls' (Erma) attitude toward black people? What reasons are given for why she feels this way?

Why does Mary tell Jeannette to be nice to Erma?

What do you think of Mary Walls' assertion that everyone possesses redeeming qualities?

Does the fact that Hitler loved dogs redeem him in our eyes? Why or why not?

In late winter, Mom and Dad decided to drive the Oldsmobile back to Phoenix. (pp. 145-148)

"You'd be weird too, if Erma was your mom," Lori said. (p.148)

Rex and Mary go back to Arizona to collect a few things, leaving the children with their grandparents. Erma one day insists on mending Brian's trousers while he is wearing them. She takes him into a bedroom and attempts to molest him. Jeannette walks in on them and tells her to stop. She tells Lori what happened and calls Erma a pervert. Lori stops Erma from slapping Jeannette, and it results in a full-on fight between Lori and Erma which is broken up by Uncle Stanley.

Erma relegates the children to the basement and doesn't allow them upstairs. They are also not allowed to operate the stove for heat and have no bathroom.

When the parents return, Erma tells Rex about the children and their bad behavior, which includes accusing her unjustly. Rex is angered. He takes Erma's side and tells the children that he doesn't want to hear anything else about what happened to Brian.

The children, amongst themselves, wonder if Rex suffered the same sort of abuse as a child and wonder if it might explain his drinking.

Questions:

What reason does Rex give for refusing to work in the mines, the only place where locals can find work?

What does Erma tell her grandchildren about her own childhood? Why do you think she shares this information with them?

Why do Erma and Lori get into a fight?

What does Jeannette accuse Erma of doing to Brian?

Why don't Rex and Mary take the kids' side against Erma?

What do the children learn about the roots of their father's behavior?

How is Rex different from the other members of his family? How does he resemble them?

Vocabulary: cantankerous; skivvies (p. 146)

Mom and Dad told us they'd made it to Phoenix... (pp. 149-154)

"It's good we raised our young'uns to be tough," Dad said. "Because this is not a house for the faint of heart." (p. 150)

According to Rex and Mary, the house in Phoenix had been burglarized. All that remained was put in a trailer, and that too was lost when the car broke down in Tennessee. The couple then took a bus to West Virginia.

Still claiming her innocence, Erma banishes the family from her house due to the situation with Brian. The Walls somehow manage to buy another house. It is a run-down three-bedroom house with no indoor plumbing and a leaky roof. One room is the master bedroom and art studio for Mary, the second room is the children's bedroom, furnished with bunk beds made by the Walls and featuring mattresses of rope and cardboard. The third is the kitchen which, due to faulty wiring, often shocks anyone who touches the oven.

The former tenant of the house left a sewing machine operated by a foot treadle. The Walls try their hand at making dresses, but the results yield nothing that can be worn in public.

Mary tries to make the place a bit cheerier by hanging up her paintings and placing colored bottles on the windows, but the children still long for Phoenix.

Questions:

How does Rex Walls plan to turn the house on Little Hobart Street into a glass castle? How realistic is he being?

How does Mary try to "perk the place up"?

Why don't the Walls go back to Phoenix?

Vocabulary: rustic, palatial (p. 149); armoire (p.150); treadle (p. 153)

Seeing as how Welch was our new home, Brian and I figured we'd make the best of it. (pp. 155-158)

“Life’s too short to worry about what other people think,” Mom said. “Anyway, they should accept us for who we are.” (p. 157).

Rex tells the children that this will be the site of the glass castle, and that the dreary house is only temporary. Unfortunately, he spends most of his time out drinking. Brian and Jeannette take matters into their own hands and begin digging a foundation. They manage to dig a fairly large hole, which soon becomes the family’s garbage dump. The trash attracts a large river rat that shows up in a punch bowl that the Walls use to hold their sugar. Maureen is terrified, and at night insists that the rat is right next to her bed. Jeannette attempts to dispel the fear by turning on the light, at which time they find that the rat is in fact on Maureen’s bed. Luckily, an adopted dog takes care of the rat.

Rex buys a gallon of yellow paint, and Jeannette attempts to paint the house. She gets most of the front porch done but has no ladder. Soon, cold weather sets in and stops her efforts entirely. When warm weather comes, the paint is unusable.

Questions:

Where is Rex most of the time?

What happens to the foundation that Rex digs for the glass castle? What does it symbolize?

How does Maureen’s fear of the rats connect with her fear of strangers in Phoenix? Are these fears substantiated by her reality, or are they unreasonable?

Why does Jeannette try to paint the house? What happens to her efforts? Why don’t the other family members help her?

Week Ten: pp. 159-179.

Little Hobart Street led up into one of those hollows so deep and narrow that people joked you’d had to pipe in the sunlight. (pp. 159-163)

“We can take care of our own,” Mom and Dad liked to say. “We don’t accept handouts from anyone.” (p. 159)

The children of Little Hobart Street hang out at the National Guard Armory where the boys play football and girls sit on a wall preening and hoping a reservist will whistle at them. Maureen has real friends for the first time.

Their neighborhood has numerous sketchy characters. Brian and Jeannette at one point find themselves being fired at by an older boy with a shotgun as they run through the woods. There is a family that had six retarded kids, all of whom still live at home as middle-aged adults. One of them, named Kenny Hall, develops a crush on Jeannette because she is friendly to him. Other neighborhood children often fool him

into thinking they can arrange for him to have dates with Jeannette if he will pay them or show them his privates. This results in his standing outside of the Walls' house, yelling for Jeannette, who would have to explain to him that he had again been fooled, and that she does not date older men.

The town whore, Ginnie Sue Pastor, lives on Little Hobart Street, and one of her daughters (she has 9 children) befriends Jeannette. Jeannette is very curious about the Ginnie Sue, who doesn't at all resemble the women of the Green Lantern. One day Jeannette goes over to the house one day and helps them pick meat off a chicken. She tells them about life in California. Nothing incredible happens and Jeannette doesn't get to ask the woman any questions about being the town whore. She acknowledges, however, that it does manage to put a chicken on the table.

Questions:

Is the parents' refusal to accept handouts consistent with some of their previous behaviors? Why or why not?

What are Jeannette's fantasies about prostitution? How do they differ from Ginnie Pastor's reality?

Why do you think Ginnie asks Jeannette if she knows how to pick a chicken clean? What does this reveal about both of them?

Vocabulary: scuttle (p. 160)

We fought a lot in Welch. (pp. 164-167)

We'd lived in some pretty scrappy places back in the desert, but Mom said Welch was the fightingest town she'd ever seen.

Adults and children alike fight in Welch. Jeannette is targeted by a child named Ernie Goad who teases her about the garbage pit next to the house. It starts with a shoving match at the National Guard Armory, but then one day Ernie and some other boys on bicycles throw rocks at the Wall's house. One rock breaks a window, and another hits Brian in the head. Brian and Jeannette chase the boys, who ride away only to taunt them. Knowing that the boys will return, Brian and Jeannette decide to make a catapult from an old mattress. They rig the mattress with "ropes looped over tree branches" and put rocks on the mattress. The device works, and when they unleash it on Ernie and his gang, their victory is quick and decisive.

Questions:

What reasons are given for the hardness of life in Welch?

What is illustrated by the feud between the Walls and the Goads? Why do you think the author includes

this story?

Vocabulary: catapult (p. 166)

As the weather warmed, a sort of rough beauty overtook the hillsides around Little Hobart Street. (pp. 168-170).

...I never had the feeling of togetherness I'd had in Battle Mountain when we lay around in the depot with our books. (p.168).

The Walls read a lot, but it was not the same as in Battle Hill when they read to each other. Lori reads the most and enjoys fantasy books. Jeannette likes more realistic stories, her favorite being *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, and she compares her relationship with Rex to that of Francie Nolan and her father.

One night Rex comes home bleeding, claiming that he "got in a fight with a mountain." Jeannette ends up having to put stitches in her father's arm using a homemade tourniquet and Mary's sewing kit.

Questions:

Why does the family no longer have the sense of solidarity it had in Battle Mountain? What has changed?

Why does Jeannette love the novel, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*?

Why is it getting harder for Jeannette to believe in her father?

When Jeannette sews up her father's wound, what could this suggest symbolically? What cannot be so easily mended in her own life?

Dad had taken to disappearing for days at a time. (pp. 171-174).

She told us we should forgive her the way we always forgave Dad for his drinking. (p. 174)

Rex develops a habit of being gone for several days at a time. He tells the family he is trying to devise a way to burn more coal efficiently. Jeannette tries to be encouraging but is doubtful that any such plans exist. The only money that comes in are the checks Mary gets from the oil company for drilling rights on her property in Texas.

Again, the children are going hungry. When there is money, they eat beans or entire meals of popcorn. Jeannette hides in the bathroom during lunch at school because she is embarrassed that she has no food. She will position herself in a stall with her feet up so that no one will know it is her. When girls leave the bathroom, she forages through the trashcan and gets uneaten food that they throw away from their

lunches.

Jeannette and Brian go to the forest for berries and other plants that they hear are edible. At one point they find an abandoned house and attempt to open some canned tomatoes they find, only to have them explode and stain their clothes.

Maureen eats well because she goes to friends' houses at dinner time.

One night, the family, minus Rex, is at home and hungry. The children discover that their mother has a large candy bar hidden beneath the blanket she is covering herself with. She proclaims that she is a sugar addict, in the same manner that Rex is an alcoholic. She asks their forgiveness. They do not grant or deny her request; they merely split up the remaining chocolate amongst themselves.

Questions:

With neither parent working, how does the family survive financially?

What were some of the Walls children's strategies for finding food?

What do you think of the Mary's action of secretly eating chocolate while her children are hungry? What does it reveal about her character?

Why does Mary compare her act of eating chocolate to Rex's drinking?

How does Brian react to Mary's request for forgiveness? Do you think that this is the first time she's done this? Why or why not?

Vocabulary: foragers, goiters (p. 172)

Winter came hard that year. (pp. 175-179)

"Just remember," Mom said after examining the blisters, "what doesn't kill you makes you stronger."

"If that was true, I'd be Hercules by now," Lori said." (p. 179).

After Thanksgiving, it starts snowing. The Walls can't afford coal for heat, so Brian and Jeannette try collecting coal dropped from the delivery trucks. The chore does not yield much, so instead they burn wood collected in the forest. The heat produced by the wood is insufficient, and on top of that the house has no insulation. The children fight over who will get to sleep with the dogs the family has adopted. Brian has an iguana he bought at a pet store and he sleeps with it to keep it warm, but it freezes to death during the night. Pipes freeze and the family melts snow to get water. A highlight of the winter season is a trip to the laundromat, where the children revel in the warmth given off from the washers and dryers.

Lori sustains burns when some kerosene she is using to make a fire explodes. She is treated only by having snow put on her wounds, and endures blisters that run the length of her thighs.

Jeannette visits a more affluent classmate's home and is in awe of the modern heating system. For the first time in her life, she sees a thermostat. She dreams of having the same on Little Hobart Street where she lives.

Questions:

Why don't the children get angry when Lori isn't taken to the hospital for her burns?

What does Jeannette discover at Carrie Mae Blankenship's home?

Week Eleven: 180-198.

Erma died during the last hard snowfall... (pp. 180-185).

She said that sexual assault was a crime of perception. "If you don't think you're hurt, then you aren't." (p. 184).

Towards the end of the winter, Rex's mother Erma passes away. She had made elaborate preparations for her funeral, having already purchased the casket and the clothes for her burial.

At the funeral, Rex wears a tie (the first time Jeannette has ever seen him in one) and Mary kisses the corpse. On the walk home, Lori begins singing "Ding Dong, The Witch is Dead." Rex is angered and shouts that the kids make him feel ashamed before turning and walking in the direction of a bar. Lori shouts, "You're ashamed of us?"

Four days later he still has not returned, and Mary deems it Jeannette's job to find him. The task consists of going to a begrudging neighbor's house to use the phone, then going from bar to bar until she finds him. He drinks several more shots and then a fellow bar fly helps put him in the back of a truck where he sings "Swing Low Sweet Chariot" while Jeannette rides up front. The driver makes the mistake of calling Rex the town drunk, which angers Jeannette, who is humiliated that she has no other choice but to accept his hospitality.

The Walls' grandfather and Uncle Stanley move after Uncle Stanley burns down the house after having fallen asleep while smoking. They move into an apartment with no windows and walls covered in graffiti. The children go there once a week for a bath. One week while waiting her turn, Uncle Stanley begins touching Jeannette (and himself) inappropriately. Mary's reaction is to tell Jeannette that sexual assault only hurts you if you let it.

In the spring, the house on Little Hobart Street is spared from the floods that damage much of the area around Welch. However, the wood on the porch rots. This is especially dangerous as the children fall from the porch at night on the way to the toilet, which is under the house. Mary remedies the situation by getting a bucket that the family uses as a toilet which is kept on the kitchen floor.

Questions:

How does Jeannette react to being described as the daughter of the town drunk?

Why does Mary send Jeannette out to find her father, and not one of the other children?

Why do you think Erma spent so much time preparing for her own funeral?

What is your opinion of Mary's assertion that sexual assault is a matter of perception? What burden does this statement place on Jeannette?

Vocabulary: pious, genuflected (p. 180); polecat (p.181)

One day while Brian and I were scrounging around on the edge of our property... (pp. 186-188).

Welfare, she said, would cause irreparable psychological damage to us kids. (p. 188)

Jeannette and Brian find a diamond ring in their yard. They give it to Mary, with hopes that she will sell it to buy food. Instead she keeps the ring for herself, stating that it will help her self-esteem. This makes some sense as her moods have been compelling her to spend much of her time in bed complaining that she could have been a famous artist if not for the burden of raising a family.

After a half-baked attempt at cleaning the house one day, Jeannette confronts her mother about the family's dour situation. She tells Mary that she should leave Rex so that the family can receive some of the benefits other neighbors on Little Hobart Street receive from the government. Mary is appalled at the idea of leaving her husband and of being a charity case, stating that getting welfare causes psychological damage.

Jeannette then suggests that Mary get a teaching job. Mary says that it sounds like a horrible life, and reiterates that she is an "excitement addict."

Questions:

What does Mary do with the diamond? What does this reveal about her? What should she have done?

What does Jeannette suggest that her mother should do? Why doesn't Mary do it?

What is ironic about Mary's assertion that welfare will psychologically damage her children?

Mom never told Dad that I'd urged her to leave him. (pp. 189-192).

I'd never felt cleaner. (p. 192)

It is summer and the heat is intense. Most children in Welch find refuge in the swimming pool, but when Brian and Jeannette go to the pool, Ernie Goad and his friends make so much noise about the two being a "health epidemic" since they live in garbage, that the two decide to leave.

Jeannette runs into Dinita Hewitt. Dinita invites her to come swimming with the black people, who all swim

in the morning before the pool starts charging admission. Jeannette notes that the black women in the dressing room are much freer than white women: joking, singing along with the radio, doing the bump and commenting on each other's bodies. After a comment about her sprouting pubic hair is made, Jeannette reels off a snappy comeback and then feels more at home. She has a delightful time swimming with Dinita .

What is ironic about Rex's statement about real estate?

How does the behavior in the women's locker room differ from Jeannette's usual experience?

Why is Jeannette more comfortable with Dinita than she is with white children?

Vocabulary: ergo (p. 189)

That afternoon I was alone in the house. (pp. 193-195).

Maybe coming back to Welch had killed the idea Dad used to have of himself as a man going places. (p. 194)

When Jeannette is alone in the house, a man from the department of Child Welfare visits and tells her that there are reports that children in the home are being neglected. Jeannette takes his card and he leaves. Jeannette is greatly angered by the visit and is afraid that she might be separated from her brothers and sisters. When Mary comes home, Jeannette explains the situation to her. Mary does not react in her typical non-worried fashion, but instead thinks the problem over while painting a picture of a drowning woman. When the picture is finished, she announces that she will get a job teaching.

Questions:

Why would the Walls children be raised to be suspicious of government officers?

Why does Jeannette hate the man from child welfare, even though her own parents don't take proper care of her?

Why does Mary Walls decide to get a job?

Vocabulary: bituminous (p. 193)

Qualified teachers were so scarce in McDowell County... (pp. 196-198).

But month after month, the money would disappear before the next paycheck arrived, and once more I'd find myself rooting in the garbage at school for food. (p. 197).

Mary gets a job teaching in a neighboring community and rides to school every day with an unpleasant and obese woman who was more or less ordered into providing transportation. This woman chain smokes, sprays the seat with Lysol whenever Mary exits, and mistakes a comment about Jackson Pollack for an ethnic slur against Polish people.

With the checks coming in, the Walls are able to keep up with their bills. Lori and Jeannette ask Mary to give them the money as they have worked out a budget for the family that should, according to their calculations, allow the family to save money so that they can get indoor plumbing and buy coal. She does not adhere to the advice of her children, which leaves the family only slightly better off than they were before she got the job.

Questions:

How do children react to Mary's weekly refusal to go to work?

What effect does Mary's job have on their standard of living? Why don't things improve more than they do?

Week Twelve: pp. 199-217.

I'd started seventh grade that fall... (pp. 199-202)

I had what Mom called distinctive looks. (p. 200).

In seventh grade Jeannette attends Welch High School. She has study hall with Dinita Hewitt, who is going downhill. Dinita drinks at school, putting mad dog 20/20 in a soda can and carrying it into class. She also complains about her mother's new boyfriend. She passes Jeannette a note saying that she is pregnant, and soon stops attending school. Jeannette goes to her house and is turned away at the door by a strange man. Jeannette learns later that Dinita has been arrested for killing her mother's boyfriend.

Although not as consumed with preadolescent drama as many of her peers, Jeannette is self-conscious about her large teeth. Knowing that the family can't afford braces, she develops orthodontial head gear from a coat hanger, rubber bands, and a feminine napkin which she wears to bed every night. One night Rex comes into the bedroom and is thrilled by the device, proclaiming that Jeannette has inherited his inventive nature; he also believes that the device is working.

Questions:

How does Dinita's behavior change? What do you think is the reason behind the change?

What aspect of her appearance most preoccupies Jeannette? What does she do about it? What do her attempts reveal about her character?

How does Rex react to Jeannette's attempts to create her own braces? What do you think of his reaction?

That year I started working for the school newspaper. (pp. 203-205)

I decided I wanted to be one of the people who knew what was really going on. (p. 205).

Jeannette begins working at the school newspaper, the Maroon Wave. She is under the instruction of a teacher named Jeannette Bivens, who had been Rex's teacher when he was in school. She had

encouraged him to submit a poem that won a contest. Bivens was one of the only adults in Rex's life who had encouraged him. So he named his second daughter after her, with an extra "n" added by Mary to "make it more elegant and French."

Jeannette works as a proofreader and spends lots of time at the local newspaper office performing her duties. She enjoys seeing the reporters at work and also the office is much warmer than her house. There is a female typesetter that complains about Jeannette being dirty, smelly, and possibly having head lice. Shel sprays disinfectant in her general direction and even complains to the management-which prompts Jeannette to begin bathing at her uncle and grandfather's house (she steers clear of her uncle, who in the past proved himself a potential sexual predator).

When finished with her work, Jeannette reads stories from the wire service. She decides that she wants to be one of the people that genuinely knows what is going on in the world.

Questions:

Why does Jeannette start working for the school newspaper?

How does newspaper writing differ from the type of writing (her mother's) that Jeannette was used to?

What does Jeannette learn about her father's past experiences?

What attracts Jeannette to journalism?

What does Jeannette decide?

Did you ever have a moment in your life where you suddenly knew what you wanted to be?

Vocabulary: conferred (p. 203); inconspicuous (p. 204); skewed (p. 205)

At times I felt like I was failing Maureen, like I wasn't keeping my promise that I'd protect her...(pp. 206-213).

...I swore to myself that it [my life] would never be like Mom's, that I would not be crying my eyes out in an unheated shack in some godforsaken holler. (p. 208).

Maureen, the youngest of the Walls children, is also the most attractive and seemingly the most content. She spends the majority of her time with other families, and has a keen interest in California, saying that she will live there when she is older.

Mary has mood swings in which she is happy for days and conversely gets so depressed that she will not leave her bed. In one of her down periods, she fails to complete some student evaluations and the next day refuses to go to work.

Lori feels some compassion for her mother, but Jeannette feels she needs to be stronger and handle Rex

with more discipline.

That summer, Jeannette becomes the woman of the house when Lori goes to a camp for gifted students and Mary goes to Charleston to renew her teaching certificate. Mary leaves Jeannette with 200 dollars. Jeannette finds that she is unable to deny her father his requests for money and gives him five dollars on two occasions but questions him when he asks for twenty. When she tells him that she has responsibilities (i.e. taking care of Brian and Maureen) he says that this is his job and that she shouldn't worry about it.

The following Saturday he tells Jeannette that he needs her help getting the money back and takes her to a roadside bar where she is promptly approached by an older man with whom she dances. Instead of being angered, Rex asks him to play pool. The men play a series of games, but in between the games the man dances with Jeannette. Rex says to his daughter; "Keep your legs crossed honey, and keep 'em crossed tight."

After Rex has won eighty dollars, the man tells Jeannette that he lives above the bar in an apartment and has a record that isn't on the juke box that he wants her to listen to. He invites Jeannette upstairs, and Rex allows her to go. Upstairs, in front of his two roommates, the man, whose name is Robbie, pushes Jeannette on the bed and begins kissing her. She thinks about yelling for help, but is so angry at her father that she doesn't want his help. She struggles with Robbie, who says that she is "too bony to screw." She takes this opportunity to show him the scar she has from being burned as a child, and as Robbie looks to his friends, she bolts out the door.

In the car, Rex gives her 40 dollars and says they make a good team. When Jeannette tells him that she was attacked, Rex shrugs it off as insignificant.

Questions:

Why does Jeannette feel that she is not protecting her little sister, Maureen?

Why is Maureen attracted to Pentecostalism?

Why does Maureen idealize California?

Looking at Mary Walls' mood swings, what do you think a psychologist might label her condition?

How does Jeannette react to her mother's breakdown (p. 208)?

What does Jeannette resolve in her reaction to the breakdown?

Do you agree with Jeannette that all her father needed was a strong woman?

Why can't Jeannette be honest with her father regarding his behavior?

What happens at the bar? Who is being exploited and/or manipulated?

Why isn't Rex more protective of his daughter?

Do you agree with Rex's assertion that Jeannette can take care of herself? How does this point of view reflect earlier incidents in Jeannette's relationship with her father?

Vocabulary: caryatid (p. 208)

The next evening Dad disappeared. (pp. 214-217).

Being a strong woman was harder than I had thought. (p. 214).

Rex gets upset with Jeannette when she doesn't want to repeat their routine at another bar. He then talks her out of more money for pool shooting. They are expecting a check from Mary's land in Texas and, when it comes, Rex and Jeannette hide it together. When Jeannette goes to re-hide it, it is too late, the check is gone. Rex claims not to know what happened to it.

Jeannette gets a job at a jewelry store to help make ends meet. She is only 13 but tells her boss that she is 17. Mr. Becker, the shop's owner, acts inappropriately towards Jeannette by rubbing up against her when she is cleaning display cases. She ignores it, but takes offense at the fact that he takes the key to the most expensive display case with him when he goes to lunch. On one occasion, when he forgets to take the key, he counts all of the rings from the case in front of her, making it obvious that he doesn't trust her. She also takes offense when she learns that other employees are getting commissions on their sales, whereas Jeannette gets only a weekly salary of 40 dollars.

With all resentments in mind, Jeannette steals a watch. She gets away with it, but realizes that in order to keep it, she will need to tell lies, which she is no good at. She imagines that she will get caught, go to reform school, and worse yet, give Mr. Becker the satisfaction of knowing that he was right not to trust her.

She experiences more anxiety about the possibility of being caught putting the watch back than she did when stealing it.

Questions

Why doesn't Rex just take Mary's check outright? Why must he be devious?

What kind of harassment does Jeannette put up with at her job in the jewelry store? Would you have acted differently if you were in her shoes?

Why does Jeannette want a watch?

Why does Jeannette steal the watch and how does she rationalize her actions? Where do you think this attitude comes from? Why does she eventually return the watch?

Week Thirteen: pp. 218-241.

In late August, I was washing clothes in the tin pan in the living room... (pp. 218-221).

I had been counting on Mom and Dad to get us out, but now I knew I had to do it on my own. (p. 221).

Lori returns from camp glowing from having eaten and bathed regularly all summer. She reports that at camp she was considered a normal person and even had a boyfriend. She looks forward to someday getting out of Welch and being on her own.

Mary returns from her summer in Bluefield with a similar feeling of empowerment, but the end result of her soul searching is that she quits her job teaching. This infuriates Jeannette, who speaks to her disrespectfully, telling her that if she expects the respect due to a mother, she should act like one.

When Rex finds out about the altercation, he is furious with Jeannette and demands she apologize. She is similarly disrespectful to him. The two have a stand off. Rex threatens to spank her and expects her to apologize; Jeannette expects him to walk away or “lose [her] forever. He ends up whipping her with his belt. She runs off into the woods and decides that she will never receive another whipping in her life, and that she, like Lori, will someday leave Welch. She buys a piggy bank and puts in it the seventy five dollars she has saved over the summer, proclaiming it her “escape fund”.

Questions:

What conclusion does Mary come to from her summer spent reading self-help books? Has she learned anything about herself?

Why does Mary react with anger when Jeannette tells her she doesn't behave like a mother?

What is Jeannette and Rex's standoff really about?

What does Jeannette resolve to do?

Why do the parents side against Jeannette?

That fall, two guys showed up in Welch who were different from anyone I'd ever met. (pp. 222-225).

But Lori began to see New York as a sort of Emerald City—this glowing, bustling place at the end of a long road where she could become the person she was meant to be. (p. 223).

Inspired by two filmmakers from New York who come to Welch as part of a government enrichment program, Lori and Jeannette decide that New York City is where they want to move. They make a plan in which Lori will move in June, when she graduates. Jeannette will follow as soon as she can.

They begin to earn and save money. Lori makes customized posters for people that might include anything from a lover's name in day-glo letters to a rock band's logo. Jeannette babysits, tutors, and does

homework for those willing to pay. Brian also pitches in although, at this point, he is not included in the plan. His work involves mowing lawns and cutting weeds. They name the piggy bank "Oz".

Meanwhile, Rex wins a Cadillac in a poker game and names it Elvis. The family takes trips to craft fairs where Mary tries to sell her paintings and also does charcoal drawings on commission. The mobility Jeannette experiences on these trips further inspires her to move.

Questions:

Describe Lori at this point in her life.

Why do the New York City visitors appeal to her?

What plan do Lori and Jeannette hatch as a result of these visitors?

Why do they name their piggy bank "Oz"?

Why does Rex choose to buy a car rather than pay for an indoor toilet? What do you think of his decision and what does it suggest about him?

Vocabulary: Appalachia; retort (p. 222); solicit (p.223); noblesse oblige (p.225)

As spring approached and the day of Lori's graduation drew closer... (pp. 226-230).

"The family is falling apart," he said.

"It sure is," I told him. (p. 230)

Lori doesn't know exactly what she will do when she moves to New York, and all plans that unfold are foiled. First, she tries to get a National Merit Scholarship so that she can attend college in New York. She has to hitch-hike to Bluefield to take the test and is an hour late because the truck driver who picks her up tries to proposition her. Her tardiness causes her to perform poorly.

Next, she puts together a portfolio of her art work so that she can apply to an art school, but she spills coffee on the portfolio and ruins it. She then tries to win a scholarship from a literary society by creating a bust of Shakespeare which Rex intentionally ruins. He also steals all of the money from Oz, the piggy bank holding the collected funds of the Walls children, which puts an end to the dream that Lori will move to New York and live off of the saved money until she figures out what to do.

Luckily, Jeannette is offered a unique baby sitting opportunity. A family that she works for is moving to Iowa, and they want her to go with them and spend the summer looking after their children. They offer her 200 dollars and a bus ticket back to Welch. Jeannette suggests that the family take Lori instead, and make the return bus ticket for New York City as opposed to Welch. The family agrees, and Lori leaves at the beginning of the summer.

Questions:

In what ways does poverty interfere with Lori's attempts to get a scholarship?

What do you think is the real reason behind Rex's destruction of Lori's Shakespeare sculpture?

What happens to "Oz"? Why does Rex deny the obvious?

How does Lori get out of Welch after the money is stolen?

Why doesn't Rex's charm work on Jeannette anymore?

How does Jeannette make sure that her money won't be stolen in the future?

In your opinion, who is stronger, Lori or Jeannette? What details can you cite to support your opinion?

That fall, when I was going into the tenth grade... (pp. 231-234)

"Great," he said. "But let's juice it up a little." (p. 234).

In tenth grade, Jeannette is made editor of the school newspaper, The Maroon Wave. She loves working for the paper as it gives her the opportunity to go to extracurricular events without feeling awkward. She manages to double the circulation of the paper by publishing the birthdays of students, most of whom have never seen their names in print.

When aviator Chuck Yeager visits their school, Rex educates Jeannette in aviation history and the life of Mr. Yeager. Rex helps her create a list of questions and even rehearses the interview with her.

During the interview, Chuck Yeager is impressed by Jeannette's knowledge. Her classmates are in awe of the fact that she gets to speak with him, and she enjoys a rare moment of popularity.

Questions:

Based on the book's description of Chuck Yeager, why do you think he would be one of Rex's heroes?

Why does Rex provide Jeannette with her interview questions?

Vocabulary: deference (p.234)

Lori had been writing to us regularly from New York. (pp. 235-238).

"Go ahead and build the Glass Castle, but don't do it for me." (p. 238).

Lori writes regularly and has found a job as a waitress. She loves New York City and knows Jeannette will too.

Jeannette is now a junior in high school and visits the guidance counselor, who cannot fathom leaving West Virginia for any reason and discourages Jeannette from doing so. Instead, it inspires Jeannette to go to New York for her senior year of high school so that she can get in-state tuition when it is time for college. She makes a plan to do so, and Lori agrees to the idea.

Rex and Mary are not pleased. Mary is jealous that the kids get to go to New York City and that she doesn't. Rex shows Jeannette updated plans for the glass castle and hopes it will entice her not to leave. She tells him in no uncertain terms that she will be leaving for New York City as soon as the school year is over.

Questions:

What is Jeannette's professional goal?

What advice does Jeannette get from the college guidance counselor regarding college? What is her reaction to this advice?

Why is Mary sad when Jeannette says that she is planning on moving to New York City?

How does her father react to her decision? Why does he resurrect his dream at that point in time?

It had been a mild winter, and summer came early to the mountains. (pp. 239-241).

I wanted to look ahead to where I was going, not back at what I was leaving, but then I turned around anyway. (p. 241)

The school year comes to an end and Jeannette experiences feelings ranging from excited to "just plain scared" in regards to her move.

Brian is happy for her, and encourages her with a countdown of the hours before she leaves. Mary, obviously still feeling envious lets Jeannette know that she will not be seeing her off.

Brian wakes Jeannette in the morning, and she finds Rex outside waiting for her. He carries her suitcase to the bus station and gives her a knife for protection. She waves goodbye despite her determination not to look back. She touches the knife in her pocket as she watches her father disappear in the distance.

Questions:

What reasons does Mary give for not seeing Jeannette off at the bus station? Do you believe these excuses are the real reasons? Why or why not?

Why does Rex give Jeannette his jackknife? Why is this ironic?

Week Fourteen: pp. 243-261.

IV. New York City

It was dusk when I got my first glimpse of it off in the distance... (pp. 245-251).

"You West Virginia girls are one tough breed," he said.

"You got that right," I told him." (p. 246)

Things happen quickly for Jeannette in New York. She begins by working in a hamburger joint and then finds a school that allows her to do an internship instead of attending classes. She interns at a weekly paper called "The Phoenix" and soon the internship turns into a job. After some time with this occupation, the editor/owner of the paper encourages Jeannette to go to college. Through numerous grants and loans (plus a year of answering phones on Wall Street), Jeannette is able to attend Barnard college where she becomes the news editor of the Barnard Bulletin but is hired away by an un-named magazine. She lives free in the apartment of a psychologist in exchange for looking after her children.

Reports from Welch go from bad to worse. Rex drinks more and more, the roof in the bedroom collapses, mudslides wash away the outside steps. Like Jeannette, Brian comes to New York City after his junior year of High School. Soon, twelve-year-old Maureen joins them, enrolling in school using Brian's address.

It seems that growing up in adverse conditions was good preparation for NYC. Jeannette never yields to muggers and fights her way through them, sometimes victorious, sometimes not.

Questions:

Why does Jeannette find her job at *The Phoenix* rewarding? How is the newspaper's title symbolic (ie. what is a phoenix?)

Why is Jeannette fearful about Brian moving to NYC?

Why does Jeannette finally decide to go to college? Who helps her make that decision?

What obstacles does Jeannette overcome in going to college? How does she do it?

Vocabulary: parquet (p. 247); bodega; muckraking; gadfly (p. 248)

One morning three years after I'd moved to New York... (p. 252-254).

I had a room now, and I had a life, too, and there was no room in either one for Mom and Dad. (p. 252).

Jeannette is listening to the radio one day and hears about a van breaking down on the New Jersey turnpike, causing a traffic jam. Furniture and clothing spill from the van, and a dog which escapes from it is running up and down the turnpike pursued by the police. Thousands of people are late for work.

That same night, Jeannette gets a phone call from her parents and is informed that they have moved to New York. She confirms that the incident on the radio in fact involved them.

After a little time in a boarding house, then a flophouse, Rex and Mary move in with Lori and Maureen. When Rex's drinking and arguing become more than Lori can bear, Brian allows Rex to stay with him. After Rex breaks into a liquor cabinet (intentionally locked to keep him out) and drinks every drop of alcohol, Brian gives him the ultimatum to give up drinking or leave. Rex begins sleeping in the van they drove from West Virginia.

Meanwhile, Mary has cluttered Lori's apartment with her paintings and does not adhere to deadlines given by Lori to straighten the place up. After talking it over with Jeannette, Lori asks her mother to leave. She stays in the van with Rex until it is towed away for being in a no parking zone. At this point Rex and Mary are officially homeless.

Questions:

Why doesn't Mary Walls even think about the effect holding up traffic might have on others?

What can you infer from Mary Walls' statements that the murals at Rockefeller Center aren't as good as her own paintings?

How do you think the children feel about their parents coming to NYC to bring the family together again?

Brian and Lori take their parents in, but Jeannette does not. Why do they react differently?

What does Mary say when her daughter, Lori, finally kicks her out? What does this reveal about Mary?

Vocabulary:

rubes (p. 252); art deco; dilapidated (p. 253)

Mom and Dad called regularly from pay phones to check up on us... (pp. 255-257).

"Being homeless is an adventure." (p. 255).

Rex and Mary are adjusting well to homelessness in New York City. They find a plethora of free things to do (movie screenings, museums, recitals) and sleep on park benches or in the bushes of parks. Most of their time is spent in libraries where they read the works of Balzac as well as scientific journals.

Jeannette is feeling conflicted about her parents. When friends tell her not to give change to homeless people because it encourages them, she is offended, but when she disagrees with professors who present the homeless as victims, she is strongly criticized.

Questions:

How do Rex and Mary spend their days in NYC? Do you believe they are typical homeless people?

Why does Jeannette feel guilty about her parents' homelessness?

When Jeannette and Professor Fuchs talk about homelessness, why do they disagree? Do you think

Jeannette lacks sympathy for homeless people?

Does Jeannette's treatment of her parents reveal a lack of compassion? Why does she feel that she must separate from them?

That January it got so cold... (pp. 258-259)

"I've spent my life taking care of other people" Mom said. "Now it's time to take care of me." (p. 258).

The winter is not easy for Rex and Mary. Rex considers the shelters "human cesspools" and so, when possible, they stay in churches that open their doors to the homeless. At times, the churches fill up and Rex resorts to staying in a shelter while Mary (along with their dog) goes to Lori's house. At these times, she confesses to Lori that life on the street is difficult.

Jeannette feels guilty about going to a private school while her parents are homeless and considers dropping out to help. Fortunately Lori and Brian convince her that this is a bad idea by pointing out that; Mary has a large collection of jewelry she could sell, she has land in Texas and Arizona, they could both go back to West Virginia, and that Rex is very proud of Jeannette and her academic accomplishments.

Questions:

Why does Jeannette consider dropping out of college?

What might have happened to her if she'd left college?

What is Mary's reaction when Jeannette suggests ways she could make or raise money? How is her answer ironic?

Vocabulary: vermin (p. 258); Ivy League (p. 258)

Mom and Dad survived the winter... (pp. 260-261).

"Have you ever known your old man to get himself in a situation he couldn't handle?" (p. 260).

Although Rex and Mary manage to make it through the winter, when spring comes, Rex is hospitalized with tuberculosis. Jeannette visits him in the hospital and finds him sober and enthusiastic about the books he's reading on Chaos Theory. He states that his bout with TB has started him thinking about mortality, and that his studies are indicating the existence of a "divine creator.. His hands shake either from TB or detoxification as he shows Jeannette his calculations. Jeannette asks him to promise her he will not try to leave the hospital before he is fully recovered. He laughs, which turns into a "fit of coughing."

Questions:

Why is Rex proud of Jeannette? How has she lived up to his expectations?

Why is Rex now questioning his lifelong atheism? Is it really only because of the physics he's reading?
What does Jeannette make her father promise?

Vocabulary: gaunt (p. 260); cosmos (p. 261)

Week Fifteen: pp. 261-288.

Dad stayed in the hospital for six weeks. (pp. 262-265).

"This crazy-ass mother of yours, can't live with her, can't live without her. Damned if she doesn't feel the same about me." (p. 262)

Rex sobers up completely in the hospital, and fears that he will start drinking again if released back onto the streets. An administrator from the hospital takes an interest in Rex and arranges for him to go to an upstate resort where he is given a job as a maintenance man. He works and seems happy through the summer and fall, but in November, Mary convinces him to come back to New York. He begins drinking again right away.

The Walls all get together for Christmas. Mary and Rex have an assortment of odd gifts that they've found here and there (porcelain dolls with no hair for Maureen, stained sweater for Jeannette, etc.) Jeannette buys her father some new winter clothes, but when he opens the first package he gets offended and leaves. Mary says that it is because, as a father, he feels that he should be taking care of his daughter, not the other way around. It puts a damper on the evening, but Mary is still excited about getting her gifts.

Questions:

Why does Rex manage to stay sober when he is living upstate? Why doesn't he stay there and remain sober?

How does Mary get Rex to come back to NYC? Why doesn't she want him to continue a life where he has been able to be sober?

Why do the two stay together?

How does Rex react to Jeannette's Christmas gifts? Why?

What do the different reactions of the parents to the gifts reveal about each of them?

Vocabulary: auxiliary (p. 262)

By the following summer, Mom and Dad were heading into their third year on the streets. (pp. 264-265).

"If it was really unbearable, we'd do something different." (p. 264).

Rex enthusiastically follows Jeannette's academic career. He reads all of her text books so that he will be

able to clarify things for her if the need arises. Mary says that he is trying to get a college education along with her.

Unfortunately, when fall term nears, Jeannette is short one thousand dollars for tuition and is thinking she will have to drop out. Rex reacts by saying, "Why didn't you tell me sooner?" A week later, he presents Jeannette with nine hundred and fifty dollars in worn and crumpled bills that he has won playing poker. He also gives her a mink coat that he says will easily bring the remaining fifty dollars. Jeannette is hesitant to take the money, but in the end she pays her remaining tuition with the weathered bills.

Questions:

How does Mary manage to blame NYC for her homelessness?

Is the Walls' homelessness really a matter of choice?

How does Rex manage to share in Jeannette's college education?

Why does Rex give Jeannette the money he raised? How does it make him feel?

A month later, I got a call from Mom. (pp. 266-268).

...I'd always been terrified I'd fall for a hard-drinking, hell-raising, charismatic scoundrel like you, Dad,...
(p. 268).

Rex and Mary move into an abandoned building (a squat). They seem to have found a niche for themselves. The other squatters lead similarly chaotic lives and share their disdain for authority. Rex is a hero among the squatters for managing to hi-jack electricity to the building. The apartment they inhabit reminds Jeannette of the house in Welch with Mary's art supplies, various clutter, and smells ranging from stale beer to food going bad.

In the meantime, Jeannette is graduating from college and needs to find new living arrangements. She has been seeing a man named Eric, who comes from a wealthy family. He invites her to live with him on Park Avenue. So, with a pro-rated rent agreement, Jeannette moves into an apartment building that boasts a uniformed door-man. Her new apartment has a fireplace and cross-beamed ceilings.

Questions:

Why does Mary compare squatters to pioneers? What do you think of the comparison? How are they alike and how are they different? What does Mary fail to see in her analogy?

What values do the Walls share with other squatters?

Why is the squatters' building truly a home for Rex and Mary?

Why doesn't Jeannette invite her father to her college graduation?

What kind of man is Eric? Why is Jeannette attracted to him? How is Eric the opposite of her father?

Vocabulary: sheepskin (p. 267); charismatic (p.268)

I Invited Mom and Dad up to the apartment. (pp. 269-271).

I wanted the world to know that no one had a perfect life, that even the people who seemed to have it all had their secrets. (p. 270).

When Mary visits Jeannette's posh new apartment, Jeannette offers to help her parents in some way now that she is doing well financially. Mary declines the help and states that she is concerned for Jeannette, accusing her of selling out, and worrying that she might become a Republican.

Jeannette at this point has been given a weekly column writing about what can be best described as the jet set. She goes to all sorts of high profile events and meets lots of powerful people. Mary thinks that she should be writing about social injustice, but Rex thinks her new job is great, and does research on the people that she interviews, calling her with "tips" about them.

Jeannette feels her new position would be in jeopardy if some of the people she worked for and with knew about her background. When asked about these things, she bends the truth or out and out lies. In one instance she repeats her childhood mantra about her father developing a means of burning coal more efficiently and stating that her family still lives in West Virginia in a restored old house which affords a lovely view of a river.

Questions:

How do Jeannette's parents react to her new home? Why do the parents react so differently to Jeannette and Eric's Park Avenue apartment?

What is Mary worried her daughter will become?

What does Mary think Jeannette should be writing about?

What is the focus of Jeannette's journalism?

How does she justify to herself a career spent writing about the wealthiest people?

What does Jeannette fear?

Why does Jeannette lie about her past?

Vocabulary: exposes (p. 269); entrepreneur (p. 271)

My life with Eric was calm and predictable. (pp. 272-273).

Had all those years...been a caprice inflicted on us by Mom? (p. 273)

Jeannette marries Eric after living with him for four years. Not long after the marriage, Mary's brother

passes away, leaving a parcel of land for sale that borders the land that Mary owns in Texas. Mary wants to buy her brothers land and decides to try to borrow the money from Eric, Jeannette's new husband. After some cajoling, Jeannette finds out that the land her mother owned and did nothing with during all of their years of poverty is worth approximately one million dollars. On top of this, Mary wishes to borrow this same amount from Eric to purchase the other half of the land, and has no plan or use for it. Somehow, keeping land in the family has become a sacred unbreakable rule for Mary. When Jeannette does not comply with her mother's request and refuses to ask Eric for a million dollars, Mary is "deeply disappointed" in her daughter.

Questions:

What does Mary ask Jeannette to do for her?

What does Jeannette discover about her mother's family property and what questions about her life are raised?

Why does Mary refuse to sell her property? Is this a logical decision? How does it connect with the diamond ring incident from Jeannette's childhood?

Why does Jeannette refuse to buy the family land for her mother?

How does her mother react to this decision?

Vocabulary: caprice (p. 273)

Lori was working as a freelance artist... (p. 274-276).

The longer she stayed with Mom and Dad, the more lost she became... (p. 274).

NYC makes every member of the Walls family happy except for Maureen, the youngest of the children. Once out of high school, Maureen starts attending a city college, but ends up dropping out and living in the squat with her parents. She is a very attractive young woman whose life consists of short-term jobs and boyfriends that offer no security. She eventually becomes very introverted, spending all of her time, sleeping, reading, painting nude self portraits and chain smoking. Jeannette tries to intervene by inviting her up to her apartment to discuss the future. Maureen arrives with her hair and eyebrows dyed platinum blonde. As for a future, she is only interested in stopping Mormon Cults in Utah that she alleges have kidnapped thousands of people. When Jeannette questions the validity of the cults, Maureen accuses her of being part of the conspiracy.

Jeannette and Brian talk and suggest to their parents that Maureen seek professional help. Mary insists that all she needs is fresh air and sunshine. Six months later, however, when Mary asks Maureen to move out of the squat, Maureen stabs her. Maureen is arrested, jailed and eventually sent to an upstate hospital where she remains for a year.

At the trial, the Walls shout at each other in the hallway of the court house, blaming one another for the Maureen's predicament.

Upon release from the hospital, Maureen immediately buys a ticket and goes to California. Brian convinces Jeannette that this is the best thing.

Maureen does not want the family to see her off, but Jeannette wakes herself up so that she can at least think of her sister as she departs.

Questions:

What does Rex think of Brian's career as a police officer? What childhood behaviors exhibited by Brian indicated that he might go into law enforcement?

What kind of life is Maureen living? Where do you think she learned this behavior?

Why do you think Maureen looks for men who will take care of her? How does this connect with the way Maureen lived in West Virginia?

Why does Rex say such harsh things to Maureen?

Why does Jeannette think that Maureen is mentally ill?

Why does Mary deny that Maureen tried to kill her?

Explain how each family member reacts to Maureen's arraignment. What do these reactions reveal about each?

Why does Jeannette believe that Maureen is the most fragile family member?

Why does Jeannette feel responsible for Maureen's breakdown?

Where does Maureen go? Why is this probably a good decision?

Vocabulary: Kabuki (. 274); nonchalant; adversity (p. 275)

After that, I hardly ever saw Mom or Dad. (pp. 277-281).

"Your father is who he is," Mom said. "It's a little late in the game to try and reform him. Humor the man." (p. 277).

Communication between the Walls children and their parents becomes scant. At this point Brian is a police officer, married and fixing up an old home on Long Island. Lori has more contact with her parents than either Brian or Jeannette.

Roughly a year after Maureen's departure,, Jeannette gets a call from her father requesting a bottle of vodka and a meeting. Despite some reservations, she complies. On her visit, Rex tells her that he is dying from a rare disease he contracted from fighting with Nigerian drug dealers. Although the story is

questionable, the fact that Rex is dying is not. Jeannette indulges herself with some of the vodka and spends the rest of the evening reminiscing with her parents.

Questions:

Why does the family get together after Maureen's arraignment?

Why does Rex make up a story about his illness?

What is the one way Jeannette can answer Rex's question?

How do Rex and Jeannette feel about each other?

Why does Mary stay out of the conversation?

Vocabulary: rotgut (p 277); magnum (p. 278); chaos (p. 279)

Two weeks later, Dad had a heart attack. (pp. 280-281).

I had this crazy urge to scoop him up in my arms and charge through the doors—to checkout Rex Walls-style one more time. (p. 280).

Rex has a heart attack and spends his final hours hooked to a life support machine. Jeannette holds his hand and recalls how he once expressed the wish to have his body placed upon a mountain for the elements to devour when he died. She has the urge to take his body and "check out Rex Walls-style (without paying) similar to when she was in the hospital as a girl. The life support machine is turned off an hour later.

Grief strikes Jeannette in the form of always wanting to be on the move. She takes up ice skating, rising early in the morning and going to the skating rink before work. She begins to think about her life and "reconsider everything."

Within a year, she has left Eric. She respects him but doesn't feel he is the right man for her, and she is tired of Park Avenue.

After moving to her own apartment, her need to be on the move all the time fades, and she eventually stops skating altogether. But she does take long walks, sometimes gazing at Venus and thinking of her father.

Questions:

How would Rex Walls have preferred to die?

Why does Jeannette react by wanting "to checkout Rex-Walls-style"?

How does Jeannette react to her father's death?

Why does Jeannette divorce Eric? Do you think that this is connected to her father's death? Why?

V. Thanksgiving

I was standing on the platform with my second husband, John. (pp. 285-288).

"Life with your father was never boring." (p. 288).

Roughly five years after Rex's death, Jeannette has remarried to a man named John, and the two live in a nice country home. John decides to have the Walls over for Thanksgiving. Brian has divorced but has an eight year old daughter that he brings with him. He is a detective on the police force and is in charge of a special unit that investigates organized crime. Mary and Lori also come. Maureen is still in California, but has been in contact with Mary and is possibly planning a visit.

Mary has her usual assortment of junk gifts for everyone, and is pleased to report that the city is going to sell the tenements she has been squatting in to the residents for one dollar a piece.

At dinner they begin talking about Rex and some of the adventures they'd had (petting the cheetah, demon hunting, giving stars as Christmas presents). They propose a toast to him, which comes from Mary as follows; "Life with your father was never boring."

Questions:

Why does Jeannette close her memoir with a Thanksgiving reunion? What does the holiday suggest about life and family?

What do you think of John's reaction to Jeannette's scar (that it proved she was stronger than what tried to hurt her)? What does this suggest about his ability to understand her?

Why do you think that Jeannette and Eric, as well as Brian, enjoy restoring old homes?

Why does Brian react with anger to the abundance of the dinner table?

What do you think of their toast to their father?

What does the fluttering of the candle flames suggest? Why does she end with this thought?

Vocabulary: sporadically; fedora (p. 285); ribbing (p. 286); recriminations (p. 288).

Discussion Questions:

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. 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: "You're safe now (p.14)." Why do you think she opens with that story, and how does it set the stage for the rest of the memoir?
3. What is the "glass castle" and what does it signify to Jeannette and her father?
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. What kind of man was Rex Walls? What were his strengths and weaknesses, his flaws and contradictions?
6. What kind of woman was Rose Mary Walls? What did you think about her description of herself as an "excitement addict? (p. 93)"
7. 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? Is homelessness a choice?
8. 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?
9. What was Jeannette's relationship to her siblings? Were you surprised to learn that, as adults, Jeannette and her siblings remained close to their parents? Why do you think this

is?

10. What do parents owe children and what do children owe parents?

11. Though it portrays an incredibly hard scrabble life, *The Glass Castle* is never sad or depressing. How do you think that the author achieved that effect?

12. 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?

Discussion Questions courtesy of Simon & Schuster, Inc.

Useful Websites

<http://conversationsfamouswriters.blogspot.com/2005/10/jeannette-walls-glass-castle.html>

http://www.litlovers.com/guide_glasscastle.html

<http://abcnews.go.com/Primetime/Entertainment/Story?id=552776&page=1>