

# Common Reading Program

Appalachian State University

## The Glass Castle Supplemental Materials

**Selection:** [The Glass Castle](#)

### Discussion Questions

#### Literature

- What is the effect of the opening section, "A Woman on the Street," in setting up the narrative that follows? In essence, we see the end of the story before we are shown its beginning. How does this affect our reading?
- The story is divided by the major geographic locations of its setting: The Desert, Welch (West Virginia), New York City, and Thanksgiving (Walls's Virginia home). For each major setting, the type of events and the tone of the narrative changes. Think about how this effects the relationships among members of the Walls family and of the directions in which their lives, both collectively and individually, seem to be moving.
- The narrative arc of this story is episodic. We get short vignettes centering on a specific incident or set of subordinate characters. What is the effect of this and does it contribute to the development of an autobiographic view of Jeannette Walls?
- Walls writes, "[Dad] led us through the crowd [at the zoo] and toward the exit, chuckling and shaking his head to let us kids know that these fools were not worth the time it would take to kick their butts. I could hear people around us whispering about the crazy drunk man and his dirty little urchin children, but who cared what they thought? None of them had ever had their hand licked by a cheetah" (109). Would you rather have your hand licked by a cheetah, or have a parent who protected you from such an experience?
- Recently, a number of memoirs have come under scrutiny and amid scandal, revealed to be false. How do we remember the events of our lives? Could you tell a true story of your life without embellishment, selective fact selection, etc.? What constitutes a true story?



#### Psychology

- Near the beginning of the narrative, Walls talks about the child-rearing attitudes of her mother and father. How are her observations borne out in the book?
- What effect did the mother's attitude about raising children have on the children as they grew up? Do the children's attitudes change over time? If so, how are the changes displayed? If not, what is the effect of the lack of change?
- At what point in the narrative do we become aware of the father's alcoholism? What effect does his alcoholism have on the family, both as a group and individually?
- Despite his alcoholism, does the father have positive attributes for the children? What are these and how do they effect the children?
- As she becomes a teen, Walls develops her own psychological methods of coping with her situation. What are these coping strategies and how effective or ineffective are they?

#### Sociology

- How would you define homelessness? What are some reasons that people become homeless?
- What are the attitudes of the various family members to their situation?
- What evidence is presented about how Walls's mother is or is not in touch with reality? What effect does her tenuous connection with the external world have for her children?
- In several of the places that the Walls family lives, they are clearly near the bottom level of the social strata of the community. What evidence do we get of this social stratification? How do the members of the family react to their social disadvantaging?

#### Social Work

- If you knew of or had observed the level of neglect described in Jeanette Walls's story, what would you have done? What would have been your responsibility?
- People come with different parenting styles. There are parents who provide every conceivable material item for their child, but little expressed love or concern. Then there are those who can provide next to nothing materially, yet raise children who know they are special and loved. Can either (or both) situation(s) be abusive? Which do you think would be the more difficult situation in which to grow up?
- While most agree that there is a high percentage of mental illness among the homeless, studies have disagreed on why. Do you think mental illness contributes to homelessness, or does the stress of poverty/homelessness create the necessary conditions for mental illness?
- Walls writes, "Lori, Brian, and I, and even Maureen, could go pretty much anywhere and do just about anything we wanted. Mom believed that children shouldn't be burdened with a lot of rules and restrictions.... She felt it was good for kids to do what they wanted because they learned a lot from their mistakes" (59). Are there times in the story when the line is crossed between learning from your mistakes and neglectful parenting?
- What were some of the positive attributes exhibited by Walls' parents that made her the creative, intelligent, and articulate woman she is today?

#### Political Science

- Some estimates state there are approximately 750,000 homeless in the U.S. What do you believe our elected officials should do to reduce this number, or is this a problem that belongs in the realm of private foundations (churches, charities, etc.)?
- How do you think the current housing crisis and resulting foreclosures might affect the number of homeless people in the US?
- Does the lack of affordable health care impact homelessness in America?

#### Philosophy & Religion

- Walls seems to conclude that the homelessness of her parents is a "choice," yet we, as readers, also see the underlying mental health issues of her parents. What then constitutes a free choice? When is a "choice" not really a choice because of a mental illness?

- Do we have a moral responsibility to do something about homelessness in America? If so, what?
- David Steindl-Rast has said, "[h]ome is where we start from, but home is also where we are bound for, the place we always seek." Do you find this to be true? In what ways might this observation apply to humanity's spiritual quest over time?

## Communications

- How does the media cover homelessness in America? When is the last time you saw or heard a story about the homeless?
- What role did the media play in bringing the plight of the victims of Hurricane Katrina to our national attention?

## Women's Studies

- Why do you believe Walls's mother chose to stay with her father? What would her options have been otherwise? What might her life have been like as a single mother in her circumstances?
- Walls's family structure was patriarchal despite the fact that her father was a poor provider. Does anyone in the family try to change this dynamic to take control of the situation?
- Who are the strong female characters in the book? What makes them strong women? How are males portrayed?

## Questions from Last Year's Freshmen

- What did you think of Rex Walls? What kind of man was he? What kind of father?
- Was the glass castle simply a false hope?
- What were some of the most memorable parts of the book?
- What does it say about Walls that at age three she tells the nurses it's okay if she doesn't live?
- Why, after all that happened, do you think Jeannette stood up for Rex?
- Why do you think Walls is still close to her mother as an adult?
- Did the opening scene (Walls's mother in the dumpster) make you think something was wrong with Jeannette Walls herself?
- What is the effect of the scene shifting from Walls's mother in the dumpster to the scene with Jeannette Walls cooking hot dogs as a three year old?

## On any given night in America...

- If we filled school buses with golf balls equal to this number, how many buses would we need?
- The population is nearly 304 million people. About 607 buses, which would nearly fill the Rivers Street Parking Deck
- Around 58 million Americans, or 19% of the population, live in married households with both spouses present. Around 116 buses full of golf balls
- Less than 1% of the population, about 2 million people, live in married households with just 1 spouse present. Only about 4 buses
- Just how many people is that?
- Nearly 750,000 men, women, and children, are homeless. (This number has been estimated in other studies to be as high as 35 million, or 11.5% of the population.)
- That's more than the combined populations of Asheville, Boone, Blowing Rock, Charlotte, Mountain City, TN, and Myrtle Beach, SC. (Or a little over 1½ schoolbuses full of golf balls)
- That's nearly 3 times the combined population of New York City and Los Angeles.
- In a group of homeless persons the size of a Summer Reading discussion group, 20 people, ...
- On average, families with children make up 30% of the homeless population, single men 5%, single women 17%, and unaccompanied youth 2%; the remainder includes couples without children. 6 people would belong to families with children, 1 person would be a single man, 3 would be single women, and 1 person would be an unaccompanied youth.
- The homeless population is approximately 39% white, 42% African-American, with the remainder belonging to other races. 8 people would be white, 8 people African-American, and the remaining 4 would belong to other races.
- An average of 16% of homeless people is considered mentally ill.
- 3 people would have some sort of mental illness.
- Thirteen percent of the homeless population is employed. 2–3 people would be homeless but employed.

## Sources

- [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov) (2008)
- [www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hh-fam/cps2006.html](http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hh-fam/cps2006.html)
- [www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hh-fam/cps2006.html](http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hh-fam/cps2006.html)
- [www.census.gov/population/](http://www.census.gov/population/)
- [www.socdemo/hh-fam/cps2006.html](http://www.socdemo/hh-fam/cps2006.html)
- National Alliance to End Homelessness (2007)
- Urban Institute (2000)
- Institutional Research and Planning

## Want to Learn More?

### Take a Course

- SOC 1000, Introduction to Sociology

- SOC 1100, Social Problems in American Society
- SOC 1110, Marriage & Family Relations
- S W 2010, Professional Social Work in Contemporary Society
- PSY 1100, Psychology of Parenting
- PSY 1200, General Psychology

Talk to your academic advisor about additional courses that focus on family issues, homelessness, or mental health.

## Find out about careers in the field

Visit ASU's [Career Development Center](#) to learn about careers or internships.

## Get Active

- Participate in events during Hunger and Homelessness Awareness Week, November 10–14.
- Join the Student Association of Social Workers which creates and participates in service opportunities.
- Get involved in your own neighborhood...
  - Start a canned food drive
  - Volunteer at a local shelter or food bank
  - Donate your clothing and belongings that you do not use anymore to organizations serving this population
  - Collect toys for local children
  - Buy an extra meal when you go out to eat and share it with someone
  - Educate yourself about the issue
  - Talk to a local agency and ask them specifically what they need help with

## Volunteer through the ACT Office

- The ACT Community Outreach Center is located in 218 Plemmons Student Union (just down the hall from McAlister's Deli). Walk-in hours are M-F: 10am-3pm AND T/W evenings from 5-7pm. Call at 262-2193 to learn more, or visit [www.act.appstate.edu](http://www.act.appstate.edu).
- Participate in an Alternative Spring Break.
- Volunteer at one of these agencies, right here in Watauga County, through ACT:
  - [Appalachian Regional Development Institute \(ARDI\)](#)
    - The Appalachian Regional Development Institute (ARDI) is an applied research and public service program of Appalachian State University. Through ARDI, the University makes its resources, faculty and professional staff available to address economic, business, government, and social issues and problems related to regional development. ARDI focuses University resources on issues of regional development with an emphasis on the development opportunities and problems of western North Carolina.
  - Carolina Friendship House
    - Carolina Friendship House is a psycho-social rehabilitation program serving community members who have been diagnosed with mental illness and who are at least 18 years of age.
  - Community Care Clinic (in conjunction with the Hunger Coalition)
    - Serving "low-income uninsured people who have nowhere else to go," the clinic offers medical consultations and a variety of in-house services.
  - [Habitat for Humanity](#)
    - Habitat for Humanity is an ecumenical Christian non-profit agency dedicated to provide decent, affordable housing to low-income Watauga County residents. They do this by building modest homes with volunteer labor, land and materials that are donated or purchased at reduced cost.
  - Hospitality House
    - Hospitality House is a crisis intervention agency which provides shelter and services to the homeless, operates the Bread of Life program (community soup kitchen) and administers WeCAN, the local crisis assistance program.
  - [Hunger and Health Coalition](#)
    - The Hunger and Health Coalition works to relieve poverty and hunger in a compassionate manner for families and individuals, who are experiencing immediate, but temporary economic hardship and food shortages.
  - [Northwestern Regional Housing Authority](#)
    - NRHA is the twenty-six year old regional housing authority serving Alleghany, Ashe, Avery, Mitchell, Watauga, Wilkes, and Yancey Counties. It is the only HUD certified Housing Counseling Agency within the seven-county area.
  - [OASIS Domestic Violence Shelter](#)
    - Provides comprehensive emergency services, transitional support, and a safe environment for survivors as they explore options for a violence-free life.
  - [Shelter Rock Appalachian Relief](#)
    - Shelter Rock Appalachian Relief is a unique organization that was created to search remote mountainous areas and vast wilderness acreage for victims of crushing poverty. It is an inter-denominational Christian organization, dedicated to locating poor Appalachian families and providing them with immediate needs of food, clothing, and medical supplies. Relief teams literally drive into remote areas to search for and find these forgotten people.
  - [SPARC](#)

- SPARC, the Study to Prevent Alcohol Related Consequences, is a program on campus that aims to implement and evaluate a comprehensive intervention that will affect culture changes on the campus and in the community to reduce the incidence of alcohol-related problems among college students.
- [Western Youth Network](#)
  - Provides services and support to local youth and their families.
- Build your own glass castle!