

The Glass Castle: Exhausting or Enlightening?

Jeannette Walls' memoir *The Glass Castle* (2005) has come under fire in recent years in many circles of concerned parents and readers. The memoir focuses on Walls' life growing up in poverty with a difficult family dynamic, and involves some sexual scenes as well as depictions of alcoholism and neglect. For many concerned parents, these themes are considered far too heavy and difficult for their children to have to read in school. For others, the book seems to simply be “exhausting” to be worth a read. In my search to understand the qualms so many parents and readers have had with this memoir, I first turned to Amazon book reviews, because I find them to be strongly opinionated, and I can absorb a bunch of them in a short period of time. I was interested (but not surprised) to see the sheer amount of reviews which mentioned *The Glass Castle* as entirely too sad to read. Here is just one of them:



Amazon Customer



The only thing that made me happy reading this book was when it was over

Reviewed in the United States 🇺🇸 on October 1, 2017

Verified Purchase

I MADE myself finish this book. It was exhausting going from childhood trauma to trauma. The only thing that made me happy reading this book was when it was over. I wish I could get my money back. Save your money!

10 people found this helpful

Helpful

Report abuse

These reviews got me thinking- why are these people so unwilling to read about real life difficulties? While I understand actively seeking out uplifting books to read in your free time, I do believe there is an entirely different yet equally beneficial reasoning behind the assignment of books such as *The Glass Castle* in schools. (I will get to this point shortly.) I also saw plenty of reviews mentioning the vulgar language and depictions of poverty and abuse in the memoir, so I decided to check out some higher level cases involving the restriction of this memoir's availability. Upon digging through Marshall University's pages for the histories of

banned/challenged books, I found many of the same complaints. It seems to me that most parents struggle with the curse words because they view them as inappropriate for their childrens' ears. While this is understandable, my argument in favor of swearing in literature is always the same: when it is appropriate for character and style, it can show unique depth and create intensity. On top of that, the fact of the matter is that any student in a high school classroom hears the same words (often in much more vulgar tones/situations) on a daily basis. While this doesn't necessarily excuse the behavior, I would invite critics to consider the potential literary value of certain manners of speaking. Could you imagine the character of Rex Walls being as effective with a clean vocabulary?

In terms of the challenges based on abuse and alcoholism, the main issue seems to be with Walls' choice to depict her parents as complicated people, instead of as wholly good or bad. I saw many Amazon reviews which argued that Walls "glorifies" and "excuses" her parents' abuse and neglect. The argument that excusing abusers is bad is certainly valid, but in the case of *The Glass Castle* I would argue that Walls comes far from excusing her parents behavior. Let's think back to one of the earliest scenes in the book, in which Jeannette is seen boiling hotdogs at the ripe old age of three. As a reader, I noticed straight away that these childhood scenes are not reflected upon by Walls' adult self, rather they are recalled through the eyes of a child. The wording is simple and matter-of-fact, but descriptive enough to keep the reader engaged. If Walls was offering reflections in real time while recalling these childhood experiences and made points which excused her parents' neglectful nature, I would stand on the side of the critics of this memoir. However, Walls' choice to exclude her adult voice from the telling of her childhood is very deliberate and powerful. When we hear about these scenes in a child's voice and experience reflections through her youthful lens, we are forced to consider the realities of abusive situations.

When anyone (especially a child) is in an abusive situation, it is often impossible for them to understand that they are in one. The very nature of abuse is that it is cyclical and involves phases of reconciliation and calm. Walls' parents, especially Rex, are masters of reconciliation. Rex attempts to redeem himself through fun outings, small gifts, and (most notably) his grand attempt to quit drinking. These "redemption" phases make it nearly impossible for a child to comprehend that someone who loves them so much could hurt them so badly. While a shallow reading may lead someone to the conclusion that *The Glass Castle* is excusing abuse, I think that if one is capable of reading between the lines they will quickly come to see that it is instead creating a poignant view of childhood abuse/neglect for what it really is: *complicated*.

In the same vein, the argument that the book is too "exhausting" to read comes across as incredibly shallow as well. Yes, it contains frequent recollections of childhood trauma- this makes for a difficult read. For parents who would rather not allow their children to be affected by the sadness which may come from reading this book, I would like to raise this question: What kind of world do you think we live in? This is a very blunt question, but I really mean it. A highschool aged child is exposed to the internet and the news every single day. While parents can shield their children from many things, that shield only spans so far and can only stay up for so long. I feel that because Walls' book is often written through the eyes of the child experiencing it, an in-depth reading of it creates a space where students can discuss what these REAL LIFE situations might mean to them. With a teacher's guiding hand, students can be led to helpful conclusions about meaningful ways to process these types of traumatic experiences. I think there is a lot of value in viewing and processing this trauma second-hand before the student will ever have to experience it themselves. As tragic as it may be, it is also true that many students are likely actively experiencing things like abuse, alcoholism in the family, and sexual assault. For

those silenced children, imagine how impactful it may be to be able to process their trauma with the book as a surrogate of sorts.

While *The Glass Castle* can be a challenging read at times, I hope parents and teachers will consider allowing it to remain in their curriculum. Walls' reflects upon the complicated nature of neglect and frequently shows readers the undeniable truth that human beings are more than just one thing. We are more than our feelings, more than our actions or inactions. Walls attempts to teach us that it's okay to feel confused and trapped by our own difficult experiences, as long as we understand that there will always be a light at the end of the tunnel. *The Glass Castle* is a message of strength. To quote Walls herself,

“My book has ugly elements to it, but it's about hope and resilience, and I don't know why that wouldn't be an important message. Sometimes you have to walk through the muck to get to the message.”

I encourage you to take that walk “through the muck”. This memoir is reflective of the unseen experiences of so many children, and if more empathy and awareness can be generated through its reading, then I hope it will become a staple in English classrooms. When we create a space where students can feel that their traumas are respected (as opposed to being called “too exhausting”), we create a space that is safe and fosters growth for all learners.

Sources

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