



Half Broke Horses by Jeannette Walls

About the author:

Jeannette Walls was born in Phoenix, Arizona, and grew up in the southwest and Welch, West Virginia. She graduated from Barnard College and was a journalist in New York City for twenty years. Her memoir, *The Glass Castle*, has been a New York Times bestseller for more than five years. Walls lives in rural Virginia with her husband, the writer John Taylor.

Source: Simon and Schuster Canada (<http://www.simonandschuster.ca/>)

About this book:

“Those old cows knew trouble was coming before we did.” So begins the story of Lily Casey Smith, Jeannette Walls’s no-nonsense, resourceful, and spectacularly compelling grandmother. By age six, Lily was helping her father break horses. At fifteen, she left home to teach in a frontier town—riding five hundred miles on her pony, alone, to get to her job. She learned to drive a car and fly a plane. And, with her husband, Jim, she ran a vast ranch in Arizona. She raised two children, one who is Jeannette’s memorable mother, Rosemary Smith Walls, unforgettably portrayed in *The Glass Castle*.

Lily survived tornadoes, droughts, floods, the Great Depression, and the most heartbreaking personal tragedy. She bristled at prejudice of all kinds—against women, Native Americans, and anyone else who didn’t fit the mold. Rosemary Smith Walls always told Jeannette that she was like her grandmother, and in this true-life novel, Jeannette Walls channels that kindred spirit. *Half Broke Horses* is Laura Ingalls Wilder for adults, as riveting and dramatic as Isak Dinesen’s *Out of Africa* or Beryl Markham’s *West with the Night*. Destined to become a classic, it will transfix readers everywhere.

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Discussion Questions:

1. Jeannette Walls has said that she tried writing this book in the third person but that it didn't work for her. Do you think you are closer to Lily because you get her story in her own voice? Did you "see" Lily Casey Smith as real? What is your response to the first person voice of the book?

2. When Lily's father dies, she and Rosemary drive his body from Tucson back to the ranch in West Texas. Rosemary is embarrassed to be seen driving with a corpse and ducks down in the car when they stop at a red light (pg. 198). "Life's too short, honey," Lily tells Rosemary, "to worry what other people think of you." What does Lily's reaction to this behavior show about her character? Does she give much credence to what other people think of her? What effect do you think her mother's attitude had on Rosemary?

3. Following Helen's suicide, Lily says, "When people kill themselves, they think they're ending the pain, but all they're doing is passing it on to those they leave behind" (pg. 113). Do you agree with this statement?

4. Lily seems willing to sacrifice everything to defend her principles and the rights of others. On more than one occasion, she is fired from a teaching position for refusing to back down from what she believes in. Do you applaud Lily's moral conviction in these instances? Or did you hope that Lily would learn to compromise?

5. Lily has high expectations for her children, from sending them off to boarding school despite their protests to enforcing strict rules for keeping animals as pets. When Rosemary falls in love with a wild horse and asks her mother if she can keep it, Lily replies, "The last thing we need around here is another half-broke horse" (pg. 190). How might this statement apply to Lily's children as well? Are Lily's expectations of her children particularly high or rather a reflection of the times? Why do you think this phrase was chosen as the title of the book?

6. When a group of Brooklyn ladies visits the ranch, Rosemary and Lily take them for a car ride they'll never forget. Lily concludes their encounter by saying, "You ride, you got to know how to fall, and you drive, you got to know how to crash" (pg. 175).



How does this statement apply to Lily's life as a whole? What does she mean by knowing "how to fall"?

7. Discuss Lily's husband Jim. How does his personality complement her strong nature?

8. While attempting to prevent the ranch from flooding, Lily tells Rosemary, "Do the best you can...That's all anyone can do." Her instructions are echoed by Jim's declaration: "We did a good job—good as we could" (pg. 152). Why do you think Lily and Jim have both adopted this philosophy? To which other instances in their lives are they likely to have applied this rationale?

9. Lily comes off as tough and resilient, but there are moments in this book of vast heartbreak, where you see her façade crack. How does the author handle the death of Lily's friend in Chicago? Her first husband's duplicity? Her sister's suicide? Her suspicions of her husband Jim?

10. Walls calls *Half Broke Horses* a "true life novel." In her author's note, she explains why. Do you agree with this label? What do you think of the "true life" genre?

11. "Helen's beauty, as far as I was concerned, had been a curse, and I resolved that I would never tell Rosemary she was beautiful" (pg. 119). Examine Lily's relationship with her daughter, Rosemary, and, in *The Glass Castle*, Rosemary's relationship with Jeannette. How does each generation try to compensate for the one before? How does each mother try to avoid the mistakes or pain imposed upon her by her own mother?

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