

### The Story of “Rex Walls-Style”

My first impression of memoir writing, that memoirs are a sort of note to satisfy the need to remember for the author and only the author was a little restricted. Walls’s *The Glass Castle* is a striking counterexample of the objectivity and exclusivity that I had previously thought. The book has reached out to millions of readers who sympathize with her human struggles, the “same issues” that everyone encounters in some form or another, which leads to my new understanding that memoir is, while not meant for purposes of entertainment as fiction often is, a way to capture moments in life for the *collective* keeping of all its readers.

The first aspect of *The Glass Castle* that sets it apart from what we read earlier was that it was in the context of a novel. Most, if not all, of the stories we read were also from larger works, but we read them as a complete entity, including the first chapter of *The Glass Castle*. Even though there was adventure to the scene and its own little plot, “breath[ing] in the familiar smell of Vitalis, whiskey, and cigarette smoke” (Walls 14) or “check[ing] out, Rex Walls-style” (14) means little to the reader. It’s a happy childhood memory, much as David Sedaris’s “Go Carolina” or the tooth fairy story. There’s no real connotation behind the Blue Goose, or fire, or Lori and Brian and Rex and Rosemary, or “Rex Walls-style” — you need much more context than that. The reader has no idea from this opening scene how dysfunctional and disjoint the family could become, which I only began to realize as I read Part I of the novel. Particularly that latter detail, “Rex Walls-style,” gains so much meaning as the book progresses — it’s as if the entire book were dedicated to explaining that it meant escaping the “FBI agents” (19) after Rex, presenting his children with stars for Christmas, forcing respect for his mother, building and trashing the glass castle foundations, and moving to New York City to reunite the family.

It’s as if each story were an individual annotation, a figurative sticky-note, and you’re trying to understand the whole book. But the book is (for practical purposes) infinitely long, and reading the entire story wouldn’t be feasible.

This annotation metaphor also works because of a point brought up in class: that a person cannot change the past, but he or she can change his perception of it. A sticky note can simply mark an event, such as the burning of a Christmas tree, but the fact that “when Dad went crazy, we all had our own ways of shutting down and closing off, and that was what we did that night” (115) is not something that would register in the mind of a nine year-old. It’s what Jeannette *knew* at the time, but only was able to register more completely as an adult, writing the memoir.

This contrasts with my original view of memoir, which sought less interpretation and purer dialogue and actions to tell the story. Again, that was in the context of a single, encapsulated short story, not a thematic, longer storyline. In Jeannette’s case, this interpretation doesn’t skew the truth (it doesn’t change what happened nor what she thought), but it is simply an improved expression. This amount of hindsight is not only non-damaging to a memoir (annotations don’t alter the content of a story), but also very important for Jeannette to try to feel the emotion of a child as an adult. The best way is to put her thoughts into words, even if they are the words of the present.

A single short story may not be very relatable to everyone, but *The Glass Castle* is widely appraised as being extremely relatable, despite the extreme circumstances of the Walls family. For example, Rosemary is a mom with “a houseful of kids and a husband who soaks up booze like a sponge” (197), but also steals money for her sweet indulgence and keeps a million-dollar property while her children starve. The father is a brilliant alcoholic, and Maureen the ungrateful daughter of Rosemary. Sure, it’s an interesting story, but that’s not the point. It’s not

meant to make people laugh or cry, an emotional thriller of a roller coaster. Rather, it's as some of the many sticky notes from Jeannette's story could fit right into the stories of anybody else, perhaps with the details slightly different: the wife could be the alcoholic, the grandmother a miserly hoarder, the dog causing the trouble, the step-son getting into the fights. Each annotation, every episode is a key part not only of the author's life, but a dialogue on all his or her readers' lives. *The Glass Castle* is meant for everyone to remember and understand their Rex and what gives them that "Rex Walls-style."