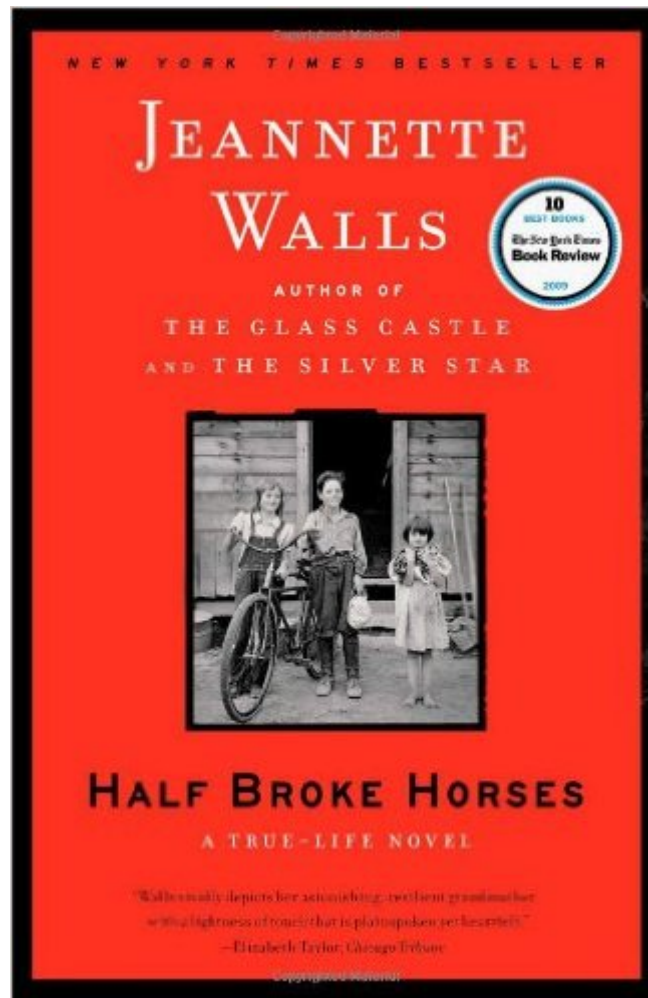


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# Half Broke Horses: A True-Life Novel



## Synopsis

"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 of whom 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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Jeannette Walls struck gold when she published her personal memoir, *The Glass Castle*, a few years back. Her own unusual upbringing touched a spot in people's hearts and minds. I highly recommend the book for schools especially for teens. When you look at Jeannette Walls, you see a sophisticated and intelligent woman who looked like she came out of private boarding schools. The reality is that Jeannette came from poverty where her parents' roaming lifestyle led to them even

being homeless on the streets. In this book, Jeannette wants to write about her mother, Rosemary Smith Walls, but ends up writing about her mother's mother, Lily Casey Smith, who herself was quite a character. Her maternal grandmother was born in 1901 in the Southwest. Like her descendents such as Jeannette and Rosemary, she defied conventional living. She became a school teacher during World War I in Arizona and living in Chicago where she worked as a servant and went to school. Jeannette writes lovingly about her grandmother and brings her character to life. Lily's life was no picnic and her early years on the ranch with her book-smart father, mother, and siblings-Buster and Helen provide an interesting portrait of life in the American Southwest before World War I. It's interesting since Jeannette Walls last surprised us with her memoirs to note that she is no longer a social or gossip columnist in New York City's Upper West Side. She and her husband have traded their city lives for a country life in Northern Virginia complete with their own set of beloved horses.

This is not as good as her previous book, "The Glass Castles," which I could not put down. This book is a "true-life novel" based on Walls' grandmother, her mother's mother. And it is a wonderful book. Lily Casey Smith was no lily-livered woman who fainted at the slightest urge (Lily's mom did do that on occasion). Lily was the oldest child in her family and by the age of 6 she was helping her father break in horses, a no easy feat for a child, let alone a grown man. Lily was a woman in every sense of the word ... practical, no-nonsense, hard-working and honest. Even though Walls is writing a novel based on her grandmother's life, Walls' words bring the woman to life in every word of the page. This is a different writing style from Walls' memoir, where it was a thoughtful prose designed to get the reader to read more into a childhood that was hard and filled with parents who couldn't stay put in one place nor could they raise their children. The children raised themselves. In this book, Lily was written to be a tough woman who had faced desperate times ... such as hiding bootleg liquor underneath her son's crib. She did what she could to make ends meet. Even her marriage to Big Jim was practical though I sense through Walls' writing that there was love and mutual respect between the two. Lily is the example of feminism in its best ... she pulled no punches into doing anything. She didn't shy away from speaking her mind even though it did cost her job twice. Walls has a talent where people and their distant stories just come to life. For awhile there, I was so interested in this novel that I kept forgetting that parts of it is made up since Walls admitted that she never talked with her grandmother so she was filling in the blanks. Lily Casey Smith comes alive in this book and what a wonderful tribute to a woman who is part of Jeannette Walls' heritage. What a rich heritage that is too. 7/25/09

Jeannette Walls new book "Half Broke Horses" is an enthralling, hard to put down book, written by a brilliant writer. But the book suffers from that most modern of flaws, an inability and actually even a positive embargo on emotions and consequent moral judgments or shadings. "Half Broke Horses" with Lily, its heroine, a real life pioneer woman, could be the next "I Remember Mama" or "A Tree Grows in Brooklyn". But I'm sure Walls and all other modern writers would rather die than be compared to either of those, which would surely be regarded by modern critics as overly sentimental. So, what we're left with is a book that is a great yarn, with fascinating details about the American Southwest at the turn of the century, told by an immensely talented and skilled writer, that lacks one thing: the pulse of human feeling. There's plenty of sweat, and that makes the characters very admirable, but no blood, and that makes them a little dry and depressing. Events that would scar any normal human heart happen without even drawing a drop of blood or tears or sighs. And yet the events of her life show that Lily did many things that required courage, strength, love, and dedication, and that heartbreak touched her life more than once. But not only does the author not dwell upon Lily's feelings and the emotions that must have kept her going or threatened to sink her, they are never mentioned. The result is the book's tone becomes like listening to someone suffering from low level depression drone on about their life. Arid, dry, a downer. The author seems to admire Lily's lack of feeling, as if the best human beings can aspire to is to ignore their emotions. And that may be how Lily got through her daunting and difficult life. But since her emotional distance from herself and others may have contributed to her troubles, it also distances us from her story, which starts to seem like a long series of half truths, with many of the good parts, the meaty parts left out. There are hints that Lily's Irish father has a contentious nature and is always ready to fly off the handle and do something stupid, inconsiderate or violent. And the way Lily keeps getting fired may be from a similar disposition. A temper like that certainly is indicative of some passion in her makeup. But, she acknowledges it only in regards to minor incidents in her life. But, even hampered by the modern critical sensibility, which cannot seem to stomach the storm and drang of real life, Walls' writing is so magnificent, she's such a natural storyteller that you forgive her everything. My advice is don't miss this book. You'll enjoy it despite it's drawbacks.

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