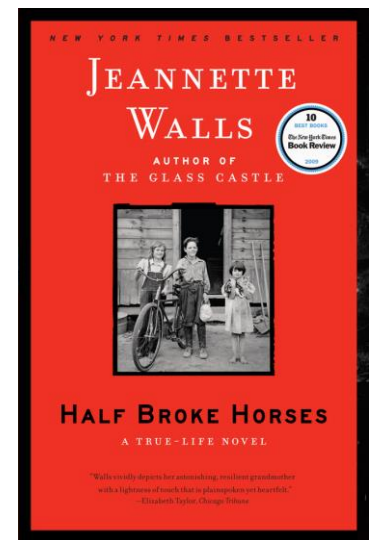


# Half Broke Horses

## Jeanette Walls

### Discussion Questions

1. Jeanette 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 façadecrack. 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?

*If you've also read The Glass Castle...*

1. In *Half Broke Horses*, Lily’s father decides to bring her home from school so that he can use her tuition money to breed dogs. This instance of selfishness bears a close resemblance to Rex Walls’s behavior in *The Glass Castle* when he takes the money Jeannette’s sister has been saving to escape Welch, WV, and goes on a drinking binge. Over and over these men disappoint their children, and yet they are forgiven. Talk about the lack of bitterness in both of these books. How do the children rationalize their parents’ behavior?

2. “There was a big difference between needing things and wanting things—though a lot of people had trouble telling the two apart—and at the ranch, I could see, we’d have pretty much everything we’d need but precious little else” (pg. 134–5). How might this description refer to Lily’s life as a whole? What effect did growing up without much have on Rosemary Walls, whom we learn more about in *The Glass Castle*?

3. Both *The Glass Castle* and *Half Broke Horses* open with a climactic event from the main character’s childhood that has left a memorable impression on her. Compare each event and the narrators’ descriptions of the events. How do these retellings set the stage for what’s to come? Why do you think Walls chose to use them as the openings of both books?

*(Questions issued by publisher.)*