

# Half Broke Horses: a True Life Novel



This Sunday in our Booksplus program (Library Room 2B at 2p.m.) we will be

discussing Jeannette Walls' rousing true fiction story Half Broke Horses about her grandmother, Lily Casey Smith, a feisty woman who grew up in the still wild west of Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona in the early years of the last century. You may be familiar with the author's first book The Glass Castle; it made many best books of the year lists when it came out in 2005 and still has a wide readership.

What a gripping opening. A flash flood rips through the family ranch one evening and Lily her brother and sister hear a loud rumbling as the earth shakes beneath them. Lily grabs the youngest and runs for the only tree in the field. They spend a harrowing night hanging on to branches as massive flood waters drown the field. Although Lily is only ten at the time, she keeps both children awake by making them say their math tables, the names of the states, and any other long list she can remember.

Their family ranch makes hard-scrabble sound nice. They don't even have a real house--just a dugout on the banks of the Salt Draw. One year another storm destroys the whole place, but luckily for the Caseys, that flood was the last straw for their neighbors. They abandon their ranch house nearby. Lily's dad and hired man rip it apart and bring it back to the Salt Draw and reconstitute it so Lily finally has a real home.

Lily's dad is an ex-con accused of murdering a man--the threat of more imprisonment drove him away from good land he owned in New Mexico. Although he has a limp and a major speech impediment, he's super at training horses. As Lily herself becomes. She suffers some terrible falls, but just gets back on and keeps riding.

Her parents are terrible at providing a living. Her mother prays a lot but can't handle the homestead's problems. She's more concerned with keeping her skin fair and marrying off her daughters. Since their arid land is too small and dry to raise cattle, Lily's dad decides to raise peacocks for the "carriage trade." Except there is no carriage trade. Eventually, they are forced to head to New Mexico.

Lily's mom sends her to boarding school, but too late. Lily is too untamed, too wild, too similar to her own wild horses. But even with only a couple year's schooling she manages to secure a teaching job in a remote town in Arizona. So, at age fifteen, she saddles up her horse and rides alone five hundred miles over mountains and desert. This is her first of many teaching jobs. (She eventually gets her college degree.)

At one new Arizona town, two men try to have some fun with her by making her ride a wild horse before they will give Lily her first paycheck. But she rides the bronco in fine style--"nine little pony" she says afterward. The men are nonplussed but befriend her. On weekends they bring Lily to horse races and this is where Lily meets her future husband, "Big Jim," another man amazed by her horse skills and sense of adventure.

Lily gets in trouble in a Mormon town for teaching the girls about Amelia Earhart and other women explorers. She takes flying lessons herself.

This novel is adventure-packed, told in a first person, authentic-sounding voice, about a woman who would not let poverty or society's prejudices keep her down. For those who love the American West, it's like a journey across beautiful landscapes and back in time.

Another fine memoir--a beautiful evocative coming-of-age story that is set in Africa is Alexandra Fuller's [Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight](#) ..

Posted by Dory L. on September 29, 2011

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