

BOOK CLUB To Go!

Water for Elephants

By Sara Gruen

Introduction

"As a young man, Jacob Jankowski was tossed by fate onto a rickety train that was home to the Benzini Brothers Most Spectacular Show on Earth. It was the early part of the great Depression, and for Jacob, now 90, the circus world he remembers was both his salvation and a living hell. A veterinary student just shy of a degree, he was put in charge of caring for the circus menagerie.

It was there that he met Marlena, the beautiful equestrian star married to August, the charismatic but twisted animal trainer. And he met Rosie, an untrainable elephant who was the great gray hope for this third-rate traveling show. The bond that grew among this unlikely trio was one of love and trust, and, ultimately, it was their only hope for survival."

(*Sara Gruen.com*)

About the Author

Sara Gruen was born in Canada, but moved to the U.S. in 1999 for a technical writing job at a statistical software company. When she was laid off after two years, she and her husband decided it was as good a time as any for Gruen to try her hand at fiction, something she had dreamt of doing since she was a child. The gamble paid off: Sara Gruen is now the author of four novels, although the first is what she calls her "drawer book," which she plans to leave in that drawer and never publish.

Riding Lessons (2004) was Gruen's first published novel, but despite its popular and critical success, Gruen's editor rejected her second novel because it was so different from her first. Undeterred, Gruen wrote and published *Flying Changes* (2005), and then went back to that rejected second novel and tried again to get it published. This time she was successful, and *Water for Elephants* appeared in 2006. In many ways, the subject matter of *Water for Elephants* was a very unlikely one for Gruen to explore, because she readily confesses that before beginning work on the novel, she had never even been to the circus. She admits, too, that she had to finish the novel by locking herself in a closet to shut out all distractions

(<http://www.powells.com/interviews/gruen.html>).

Still, Gruen's efforts in researching the novel and completing it in seclusion seem well worth it, given the novel's success. The novel has garnered praise from critics and was selected by independent booksellers as the #1 Book Sense pick for June, 2006.

Sara Gruen is now at work on her fourth novel at her home in northern Illinois, where she lives in an environmentalist community with her husband, three children, and an assortment of non-circus animals.

(NoveList)

Reviews

“This lushly romantic novel travels back in forth in time between Jacobs present day in a nursing home and his adventures in the surprisingly harsh world of 1930s circuses. The ending of both stories is a little too cheerful to be believed, but just like a circus, the magic of the story and the writing convince you to suspend your disbelief. The book is partially based on real circus stories and illustrated with historical circus photographs.” -- *Marta Segal Booklist Review*

“The leisurely recreation of the circus's daily routine is lovely and mesmerizing, even if readers have visited this world already in fiction and film, but the plot gradually bogs down in melodrama and disintegrates by its almost saccharine ending.” -- *Kirkus Reviews*

Further Reading

The Blue Moon Circus by Michael Raleigh

The Circus in Winter by Cathy Day

The Aerialist by Richard Schmitt

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Possible Discussion Questions

1. How does the novel's epigraph, the quote from Dr. Seuss's *Horton Hatches the Egg*, apply to the novel?
2. Who did you, upon reading the prologue, think murdered August? What effect did that opening scene of chaos and murder have on your reception of the story that follows?
3. In what ways do the chapters about young Jacob contribute to a deeper understanding of the elderly Jacob's life?
4. In what ways does Gruen contrast the antagonisms and cruelties of circus life with the equally impressive loyalties and instances of caring?
5. In connection with Jacob's formal dinner with August and Marlena in their stateroom, Jacob remarks, "August is gracious, charming, and mischievous" (page 93). To what extent is this an adequate characterization of August? How would you expand upon Jacob's observation?
6. August says of Marlena, "Not everyone can work with liberty horses. It's a God-given talent, a sixth sense, if you will" (page 94). Both August and Jacob recognize Marlena's skills, her "sixth sense," in working with the horses. In what ways does that sixth sense attract each man? How do August and Jacob differ in terms of the importance each places on Marlena's abilities?
7. After Jacob puts Silver Star down, August talks with him about the reality of the circus. "The whole thing's illusion, Jacob," he says, "and there's nothing wrong with that. It's what people want from us. It's what they expect" (page 104). How does Gruen contrast the worlds of reality and illusion in the novel? Is there anything wrong with pandering to people's need for illusion? Why do we crave the illusions that the circus represents?
8. Looking at himself in the mirror, the old Jacob tries "to see beyond the sagging flesh." But he claims, "It's no good. . . . I can't find myself anymore. When did I stop being me?" (page 111). How would you answer that question for Jacob or any individual, or for yourself?

9. In his *Carnival of the Animals*, Ogden Nash wrote, "Elephants are useful friends. In what ways is Rosie a "useful" friend? What is Rosie's role in the events that follow her acquisition by Uncle Al?

10. After Jacob successfully coaches August in Polish commands for Rosie, he observes, "It's only when I catch Rosie actually purring under August's loving ministrations that my conviction starts to crumble. And what I'm left looking at in its place is a terrible thing" (page 229). What is Jacob left "looking at," how does it pertain to August's personality and Jacob's relationship with August, and what makes it a "terrible thing"?

(BookBrowse)