

The New York Times

Book Review: 'Water for Elephants'

By Elizabeth Judd

July 12, 2007

On our first date, my husband took me to see Tod Browning's "Freaks," a 1932 horror film with a distinctly Diane Arbus feel that takes a voyeuristic delight in dwarfs, fat ladies and other sideshow improbabilities. Sara Gruen's arresting new novel, "Water for Elephants," explores similar subject matter — the pathetic grandeur of the Depression-era circus. And like Browning, Gruen infuses her audacious material with a surprisingly uplifting strain of sentimentality.

"Water for Elephants" begins violently and then veers into weirder terrain. Jacob Jankowski, a veterinary student at Cornell, discovers that his parents have been killed in a car accident. Aimless and distraught, he climbs aboard a train that happens to be carrying the Benzini Brothers Most Spectacular Show on Earth, and inveigles a job as an animal doctor. His responsibilities draw him into the unpredictable orbit of August Rosenbluth, the circus's mercurial menagerie director, and his beautiful wife, Marlena, whose equestrian act attracts enthusiastic crowds.

Jacob immerses himself in the bizarre subculture of acrobats, aerialists, sword swallows and lion tamers, mastering a vernacular that reflects a rigid caste system. Ringling Brothers is nicknamed "Big Bertha," performers are "kinkers" and members of the audience are always "rubes." When an aged Jacob observes a contemporary circus, he sees children carrying blinking toys: "Bet their parents paid an arm and a leg for them, too. Some things never change. Rubes are still rubes, and you can still tell the performers from the workers."

The troupe crisscrosses the country cannibalizing acts that have gone bankrupt in the Depression-era economy. After Uncle Al, the autocratic ringmaster, purchases Rosie, an elephant with an unquenchable thirst for lemonade and the inability to follow the simplest command, Benzini Brothers looks doomed. How Jacob coaxes Rosie to perform — thereby saving the circus — lies at the heart of the novel.

Gruen, whose first novel was "Riding Lessons," turns horses and other creatures into sympathetic characters. According to an author's note, she studied elephant body language and behavior with a former handler at the Kansas City Zoo. The research pays off. August's mistreatment of Marlena pales beside the visceral wallop of his nonchalant cruelty toward

Rosie: "I look up just as he flicks the cigarette. It arcs through the air and lands in Rosie's open mouth, sizzling as it hits her tongue. She roars, panicked, throwing her head and fishing inside her mouth with her trunk. August marches off. I turn back to Rosie. She stares at me, a look of unspeakable sadness on her face. Her amber eyes are filled with tears."

Second-rate and seedy, Benzini Brothers suffers a collective inferiority complex (no one is permitted to utter the word "Ringling" in Uncle Al's presence). When Lovely Lucinda, the 400-pound fat lady, dies suddenly, Uncle Al orchestrates a funeral procession led by 24 black Percherons and an army of mourners competing for the three dollars and bottle of Canadian whiskey promised to whoever puts on the best show. "You've never seen such grief — even the dogs are howling."

Gruen's circus, with its frankly mercantile morality, symbolizes the warped vigor of capitalism. No matter how miserable or oppressed, the performers love the manufacturing of illusion, sewing a new sequined headdress for Rosie or feeding the llamas as men die of starvation in a devastated America. August's paranoid schizophrenia feels emblematic — an indictment of a lifetime spent feigning emotions to make a buck.

At its finest, "Water for Elephants" resembles stealth hits like "The Giant's House," by Elizabeth McCracken, or "The Lovely Bones," by Alice Sebold, books that combine outrageously whimsical premises with crowd-pleasing romanticism. But Gruen's prose is merely serviceable, and she hurtles through cataclysmic events, overstuffing her whiplash narrative with drama (there's an animal stampede, two murders and countless fights). She also asserts a grand passion between Jacob and Marlena that's never convincingly demonstrated.

Black-and-white photographs of real American circus scenes from the first half of the century are interspersed throughout the novel, and they brilliantly evoke the dignified power contained in the quieter moments of this unusual brotherhood. The grainy photos capture the unexpected daintiness of an elephant disembarking from a train, the symmetry of a marching band, a gaggle of plumed showgirls stepping gingerly across a patchy lawn and the haunting solitude of an impeccably dressed cook.

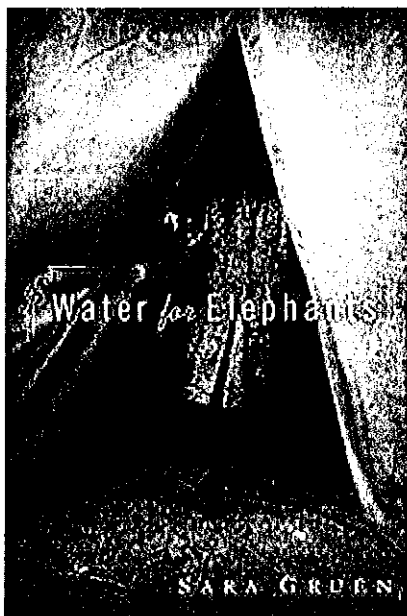
Circuses showcase human beings at their silliest and most sublime, and many unlikely literary figures have been drawn to their glitzy pageantry, soaring pretensions and metaphorical potential (Marianne Moore leaps to mind). Unsurprisingly, writers seem liberated by imagining a spectacle where no comparison ever seems inflated, no development impossible. For better and for worse, Gruen has fallen under the spell. With a showman's expert timing, she saves a terrific revelation for the final pages, transforming a glimpse of Americana into an enchanting escapist fairy tale.



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Water for Elephants

Sara Gruen, Author . Algonquin \$23.95 (335p) ISBN 978-1-56512-499-8

MORE BY AND ABOUT THIS AUTHOR

With its spotlight on elephants, Gruen's romantic page-turner hinges on the human-animal bonds that drove her debut and its sequel (*Riding Lessons* and *Flying Changes*)—but without the mass appeal that horses hold. The novel, told in flashback by nonagenarian Jacob Jankowski, recounts the wild and wonderful period he spent with the Benzini Brothers Most Spectacular Show on Earth, a traveling circus he joined during the Great Depression. When 23-year-old Jankowski learns that his parents have been killed in a car crash, leaving him penniless, he drops out of Cornell veterinary school and parlays his expertise with animals into a job with the circus, where he cares for a menagerie of exotic creatures, including an elephant who only responds to Polish commands. He also falls in love with Marlena, one of the show's star performers—a romance complicated by Marlena's husband, the unbalanced, sadistic circus boss who beats both his wife and the animals Jankowski cares for. Despite her often clichéd prose and the predictability of the story's ending, Gruen skillfully humanizes the midgets, drunks, rubes and freaks who populate her book. (May 26)

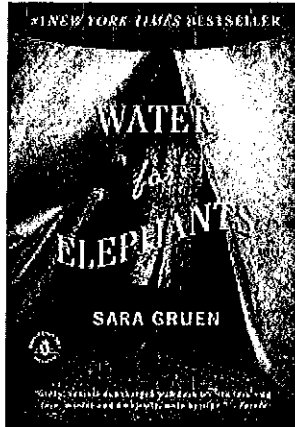
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Water for Elephants

by Sara Gruen



About the Book

Though he may not speak of them, the memories still dwell inside Jacob Jankowski's ninety-something-year-old mind. Memories of himself as a young man, tossed by fate onto a rickety train that was home to the Benzini Brothers Most Spectacular Show on Earth. Memories of a world filled with freaks and clowns, with wonder and pain and anger and passion; a world with its own narrow, irrational rules, its own way of life, and its own way of death. The world of the circus: to Jacob it was both salvation and a living hell.

Jacob was there because his luck had run out --- orphaned and penniless, he had no direction until he landed on this locomotive "ship of fools." It was the early part of the Great Depression, and everyone in this third-rate circus was lucky to have any job at all. Marlina, the star of the equestrian act, was there because she fell in love with the wrong man, a handsome circus boss with a wide mean streak. And Rosie the elephant was there because she was the great gray hope, the new act that was going to be the salvation of the circus; the only problem was, Rosie didn't have an act --- in fact, she couldn't even follow instructions. The bond that grew among this unlikely trio was one of love and trust, and ultimately, it was their only hope for survival.

Surprising, poignant, and funny, **Water for Elephants** is that rare novel with a story so engrossing, one is reluctant to put it down; with characters so engaging, they continue to live long after the last page has been turned; with a world built of wonder, a world so real, one starts to breathe its air.

Discussion Guide

1. To what extent do the chapters concerning the elderly Jacob enhance the chapters recounting the young Jacob's experiences with the Benzini Brothers circus? In what ways do the chapters about the young Jacob contribute to a deeper understanding of the elderly Jacob's life?

2. How does the novel's epigraph, the quote from Dr. Seuss's **Horton Hatches the Egg**, apply to the novel? What are the roles and importance of faithfulness and loyalty in **Water for Elephants**? In what ways does Gruen contrast the antagonisms and cruelties of circus life with the equally impressive loyalties and instances of caring?
3. 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?
4. 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? How would you characterize August? Which situations in the novel reveal his true character?
5. 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?
6. 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?
7. Reflecting on the fact that his platitudes and stories don't hold his children's interest, the elderly Jacob notes, "My real stories are all out of date. So what if I can speak firsthand about the Spanish flu, the advent of the automobile, world wars, cold wars, guerrilla wars, and Sputnik --- that's all ancient history now. But what else do I have to offer?" (page 110). How might we learn to appreciate the stories and life lessons of our elders and encourage people younger than ourselves to appreciate our own?
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 what ways and to what degree do Uncle Al's maneuvers and practices regarding the defunct Fox Brothers circus reflect traditional American business practices? How would you compare his behavior with that of major businessmen and financiers of today? What alternative actions would you prefer?
10. As he lies on his bedroll, after his night with Barbara and Nell, Jacob cannot empty his mind of troubling visions and he reflects that "the more distressing the memory, the more persistent its presence" (page 143). How might the elderly Jacob's memories corroborate or contradict this observation? What have been your experiences and observations in this regard?
11. 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?

12. 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"?

13. How did you react to the redlighting of Walter and Camel, and eight others, off the trestle? How might we see Uncle Al's cutthroat behavior as "an indictment of a lifetime spent feigning emotions to make a buck" (in the words of one reviewer)?

14. After the collapse of the Benzini Brothers circus and Uncle Al's having "done a runner" (page 314), Jacob realizes, "Not only am I unemployed and homeless, but I also have a pregnant woman, bereaved dog, elephant, and eleven horses to take care of" (page 317). What expectations did you entertain for Jacob and Marlena's --- and their menagerie's --- future after they leave the Benzini Brothers circus? How do the elderly Jacob's memories of Marlena and their life together confirm or alter those expectations?

15. At the end of the novel, Jacob exclaims, "So what if I'm ninety-three? . . . why the hell shouldn't I run away with the circus?" (page 331). What would you project to be the elderly Jacob's experiences after he runs away with the circus the second time? How does his decision reflect what we have learned about his early years?

16. Sara Gruen has said that the "backbone" of her novel "parallels the biblical story of Jacob," in the book of Genesis. On the first night after his leaving Cornell, for example, Jacob --- as did his biblical namesake --- lies "back on the bank, resting my head on a flat stone" (page 23). In what other ways does **Water for Elephants** parallel the story of the biblical Jacob? How do the names of many of the characters reflect names of characters in the biblical account?

17. In the words of one reviewer, **Water for Elephants** "explores . . . the pathetic grandeur of the Depression-era circus." In what ways and to what extent do the words "pathetic grandeur" describe the world that Gruen creates in her novel?

These book-group discussion questions were prepared by Hal Hager, of Hal Hager & Associates, Somerville, New Jersey.

Author Bio

Sara Gruen, the author of *AT THE WATER'S EDGE*, *APE HOUSE* and *WATER FOR ELEPHANTS*, moved to the United States from Canada in 1999 for a job as a technical writer. She was laid off in 2001 and decided to pursue a lifelong dream of writing fiction. She has published five novels, each involving animals as full-fledged characters; the first two, *RIDING LESSONS* and *FLYING CHANGES*, about horses, were published as mass market originals. Gruen lives in North Carolina with her husband, three sons and a menagerie of rescued animals. She donates a portion of her earnings from all of her books to various animal charities.

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Water for Elephants

by Sara Gruen

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