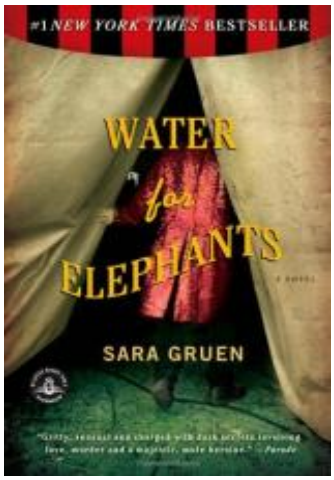
ReadingGroupGuides
The online community for reading groups

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 ownway 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. Marlena, 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.

Photo Credit: © Tasha Thomas

Water for Elephants

by Sara Gruen

Publication Date: April 9, 2007
Genres: Fiction
Paperback: 350 pages
Publisher: Algonquin Books
ISBN-10: 1565125606
ISBN-13: 9781565125605