

# Water for Elephants

## Sara Gruen

### Author Background

- Birth— 1969
- Where—Vancouver, Canada
- Education—B.A. English literature, Carleton University, Ottawa
- Awards— Book Sense Book of the Year Award for Fiction, the Cosmo Fun Fearless Fiction Award, the Bookbrowse Diamond Award, the Great Lakes Book Award for Fiction, the Midwest Booksellers' Choice Award for fiction, the ALA/Alex Award, the Carl Sandburg Award, 21st Century Fiction, and the Friends of American Literature Adult Fiction Award.
- Currently— lives in North Carolina with her family

Sara Gruen was raised in London, Ontario, and then moved to Ottawa as a young adult, where she attended Carleton University and received a BA in English literature. After 10 years in Ottawa Gruen moved to the United States in 1999 to work as a technical writer. When she was laid off 2 years later she decided to try writing fiction. As a dedicated animal lover, Gruen's bestselling novels deal greatly with animals, and she has established herself as a chronicler of both human and human-animal relationships.

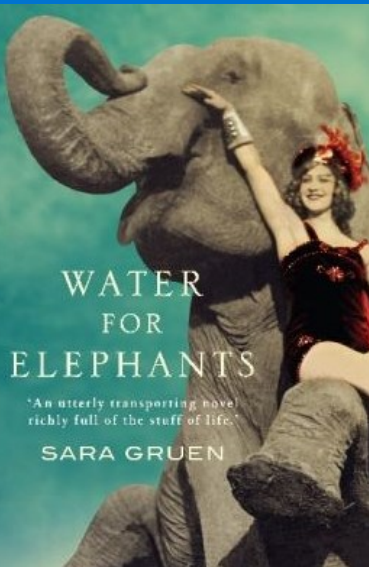
Gruen's focus on humans' complicated yet fulfilling relationships with fellow humans and animals alike runs throughout her works. Her first novel, *Riding Lessons* (2004), and its sequel, *Flying Changes* (2005), tell the story of Annemarie, a former equestrienne and Olympic contender whose career was ended by a tragic accident at the age of 18. Now, 20 years later, Annemarie has returned to her dying father's home with her teenaged daughter, where she struggles to come to terms with her faltering human relationships and her unresolved experiences with horses.

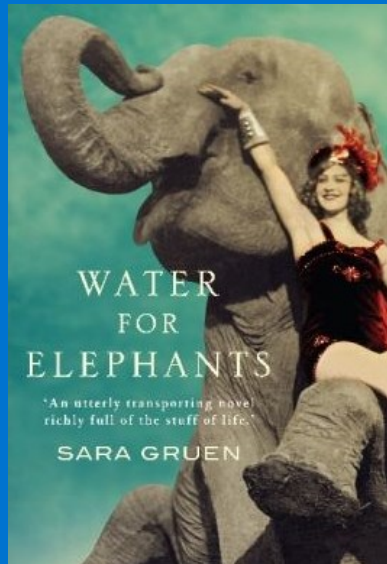
Sara Gruen's best-known work is her third novel, *Water For Elephants* (2006), which chronicles the story of 23-year-old Jacob Jankowski's summer working on a travelling circus as a veterinarian. Told as a series of memories from the perspective of Jacob, now in his nineties, the historical romance focuses a great deal on the circus' many animals, particularly an elephant named Rosie. It presents circus life during the great depression while exploring mental health, illusion and reality, and the interpersonal dynamics of love triangles. The book's paperback edition was a *New York Times* bestseller and the novel has been translated into 44 languages. A film adaptation was released in 2011.

In 2010 Gruen released her fourth novel, *Ape House*, after becoming fascinated with language acquisition and cognition in great apes. While working on the novel Gruen received a rare invite to visit the Great Ape Trust, a scientific research facility in Des Moines, Iowa dedicated to understanding the culture, language and intelligence of great apes. The novel tells the story of a group of Bonobo apes who are kidnapped from a language laboratory, only to mysteriously appear as the stars of a reality television show shortly afterward, suggesting just how alike humans and apes can be. Focusing on issues surrounding animal rights and evolution, *Ape House* teaches readers not only about the Bonobo apes, but about themselves as humans as well.

Gruen lives in North Carolina with her husband, 3 sons and many animals, including horses, dogs, cats and goats. She is a supporter of numerous charitable organizations that help and protect both domestic animals and wildlife, and she donates a portion of the revenue from each of her books to various animal-related charities, including Lola Ya Bonobo sanctuary, the only sanctuary in the world for the endangered Bonobo ape, and the Proud Spirit Horse Sanctuary.

(from The Canadian Encyclopedia)





# Water for Elephants

Sara Gruen

## Book Summary

### *Water for Elephants*

Sara Gruen, 2010

Allen & Unwin (Australian release)

352 pp.

ISBN-13: 9781741149814

**Winner of the 2007 BookBrowse Diamond Award for Most Popular Book.**

This is a great, glorious, big-hearted novel set in a travelling circus touring the backblocks of America during the Great Depression of the early 1930s. It's a story of love and hate, trains and circuses, dwarves and fat ladies, horses and elephants - or to be more specific, one elephant, Rosie, star of Benzini Bros Most Spectacular Show on Earth...

When Jacob Jankowski, recently orphaned and suddenly adrift, jumps onto a passing train, he enters a world of freaks, swindlers and misfits in a second-rate circus struggling to survive during the Great Depression.

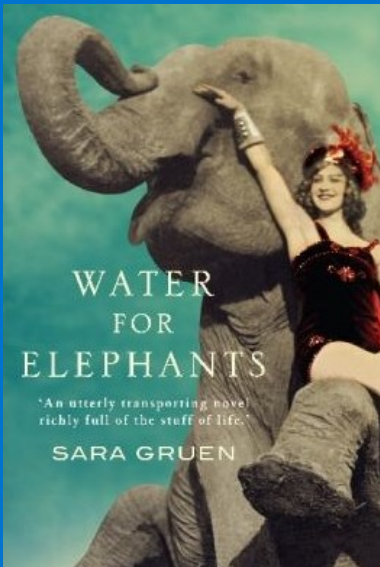
A veterinary student who almost earned his degree, Jacob is put in charge of caring for the circus menagerie. It is there that Jacob meets Marlena, the beautiful equestrienne who is married to August, a charismatic but violently unpredictable animal trainer. Jacob also meets Rosie, an elephant who seems unmanageable until he discovers an unusual way to reach her.

Water for Elephants is a story that has it all - warmth, humour, poignancy and passion. It has an energy and spirit like the feeling under a big top when the show is about to begin. It is a novel that will win your heart.

(from the publisher)

# Water for Elephants

## Sara Gruen



### Reviews

Jacob Jankowski is pushing 90 and wallowing in a nursing home, abandoned by his family and surrounded by aged octogenarians who irk him with their senility. He has few pleasures in life -- an astute and friendly nurse named Rosemary and his vibrant memories. As Jacob lies in his bed, drifting in and out of sleep, lucidness and dreams, the compelling story of his experiences as a young man unfolds in Sara Gruen's mesmerizing new novel, *Water for Elephants*.

The year is 1932. Jacob is 23 and just shy of getting his degree in veterinary medicine from Cornell when he learns that his parents have been killed in a horrific accident. Emotionally and monetarily stranded, unmoored and with nothing to lose, Jacob jumps a train and finds himself traveling with the Benzini Brothers Most Spectacular Show on Earth. Starting at the bottom rung of the strict caste system within the ranks of the Circus employees, Jacob's veterinary knowledge quickly garners him a place near the top of the hierarchy, among the company of the hot-headed ringmaster August and his beautiful wife Marlena --- the all-purpose female star of the show.

He also finds himself among the company of cantankerous midgets, gloriously endowed "men's entertainers" and a menagerie of exotic and soulful creatures. In her previous novels, Gruen has proven herself a master at depicting the uncanny and often astounding bond between humans and animals, and the scenes with Jacob and the creatures under his care are nuanced and lovely. Gruen paints each creature's persona with as much care and detail as she does for the humans, subtly illuminating the similarities and undermining the concept of human superiority. In the Depression-era setting of Jacob's tale, the survival of the humans is inextricably intertwined with that of the animals; they all live in a kind of chaotically symbiotic state where a star horse's sickness could spell bankruptcy and the chance for redemption lies in the acquisition of an elephant named Rosie.

Exceptionally drawn as well is the development of a tentative bond between Jacob and Marlena. Jacob immediately is attracted to the lovely Marlena. She takes longer to reciprocate his affection, and throughout their cautious and hesitant budding romance the presence of Marlena's husband looms large and threatening. Gruen's pacing is excellent and the tension among Marlena, Jacob and August simmers and crackles before coming to a brutal and electrifying climax.

The transitions back and forth in time, and the mundane events that unfold as Jacob moans and gripes through his days at the nursing home, could have been, in the hands of a less skilled writer, jarring and distracting, breaking the flow and drawing the reader out of the story. But while the crazed, dramatic and often spectacularly bizarre world of the Benzini Brothers is fascinating, as the novel progresses the reader becomes equally drawn into Jacob's present world. His disdain for his aged body and regret over the confusing array of relatives who visit him intermittently and whose names are permanently muddled in his mind is deeply poignant.

Gruen spent years researching Depression-era circuses, and the breadth of her knowledge is revealed in all the tiny details that pepper Jacob's memories, but she also has a finely-tuned radar for the magic and mysteries of the human heart. The meat and madness of this novel may appear to lie in Jacob's memories of his younger self, but in her subtle exploration of Jacob as an old man, Gruen finds an equally compelling story.

Readers may find themselves churning through this book at a rapid-fire pace, eager to see what lies ahead, then slowing down as they realize the pages are dwindling. *Water for Elephants* is a book that can be read and reread, recommended and handed off between friends; it begs to be discussed and mulled over. With lines of startling beauty, haunting and evocative scenes and finely-drawn characters who dance off the page, readers can dip in and out of the novel, immersing themselves in Jacob's memories. The story and its characters will haunt readers long after they have resurfaced.

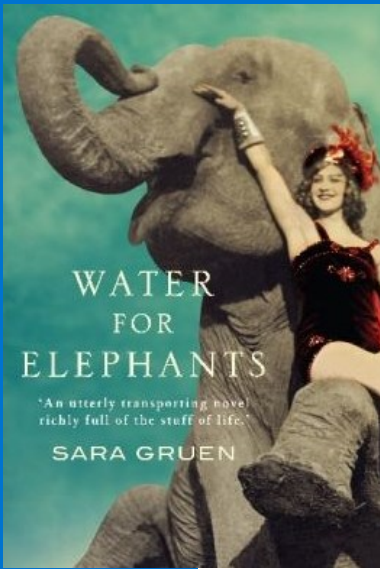
#### **Reading Group Guides**

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

# Water for Elephants

## Sara Gruen



### Reviews (continued)

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.

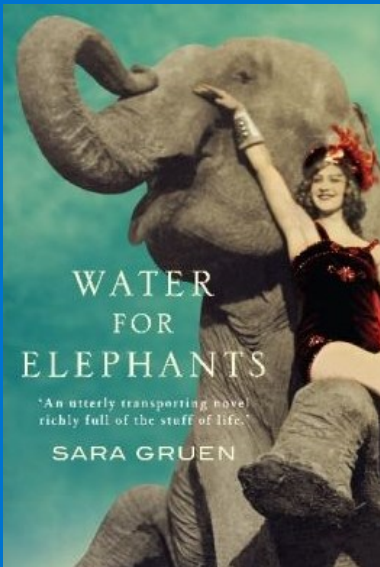
Circuses showcase human beings at their silliest and most sublime, and many unlikely literary figures have been drawn to their glitzy pageantry, soaring pretensions and metaphorical potential (Marianne Moore leaps to mind). Unsurprisingly, writers seem liberated by imagining a spectacle where no comparison 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.

**New York Times**



# Water for Elephants

## Sara Gruen



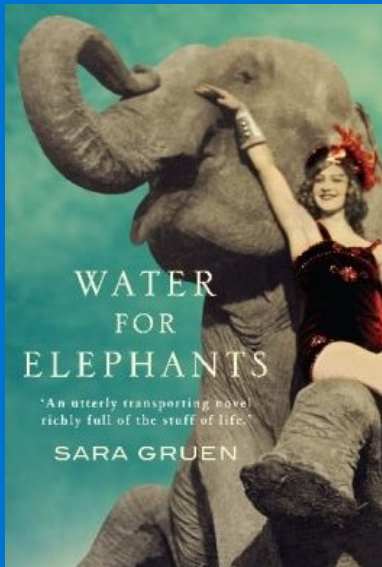
### Discussion Questions

1. There is a quote from *Horton Hatches the Egg* by Dr. Seuss at the start of *Water for Elephants*: 'I meant what I said, and I said what I meant...An elephant's faithful—one hundred percent!' Rosie certainly is one of the more faithful and loyal characters in the book. How important are these qualities in *Water for Elephants*? Discuss some of the other characters in the book (Jacob, Walter, Uncle Al) and how they display loyalty and fidelity (or the lack of these qualities).
2. Do you read *Water for Elephants* as a love story, an adventure story, or simply a circus story? How would you describe it to someone who has not read it?
3. Did the ending of the novel take you by surprise? Particularly after the way in which the Prologue was written? Do you think this was a clever way to begin the book?
4. *Water for Elephants* comprises two separate but connected stories: that of the old Jacob in the nursing home, and the young Jacob in the circus. In what way do you think the story of the older Jacob works in the novel?
5. Do you think it enriches the story and gives it greater meaning? Or did you find that it distracted you from the main story? Would the novel be the same if Sara Gruen had simply written the novel in a more traditional, chronological way, finishing the story after the stampede?
6. Can you see the qualities of the younger Jacob in the old man in the nursing home?
7. 'When did I stop being me?' Jacob asks himself in the nursing home. What did you think about Gruen's portrayal of old age? Did you think it accurate? Did you find it moving?
8. There is such a strong 'us and them' mentality in the circus world – the 'rubes' and the 'roustabouts', the townsfolk and the performers – even a measure of contempt. Why do you think it was like this?
9. In the Author's Note, Gruen writes that many of the details in the story are factual or come from circus workers' anecdotes, including the hippo pickled in formaldehyde, the dead fat lady being paraded through town and an elephant who repeatedly pulled out her stake and stole lemonade. Gruen did extensive research on Depression-era circuses before writing *Water for Elephants* – do you think this is reflected in her story? Would you have believed that much of the story was based on the truth if you didn't know? Did you find her story believable?

(from the publisher)

# Water for Elephants

## Sara Gruen



### Sara Gruen on writing *Water for Elephants*

The idea for this book came unexpectedly. I was a day away from starting a different novel when the Chicago Tribune ran an article on a photographer who followed and documented train circuses during the 1920s and '30s. The photograph that accompanied the article was stunning—a detailed panoramic that so fascinated me I immediately bought two books of old-time circus photographs. By the time I thumbed through them, I was hooked. I abandoned my other novel and dove into the world of the train circus.

I began by getting a bibliography from the archivist at Circus World in Baraboo, Wisconsin. Most of the books were out of print, but I managed to track them down online and through rare book sellers. Within weeks I was off to Sarasota, Florida, to visit the Ringling Circus Museum. I spent three days crawling under circus wagons, peering inside the trunks stored beneath them, and taking flash pictures to reveal the mysteries stashed in unlit corners.

By the end of the first day, I was being shadowed. By the end of the third, an employee approached me and asked what on earth I thought I was doing. When I told her of my desire to write a novel set on a circus train, her eyes lit up and she walked me through the entire museum, regaling me with a rich oral history that was far more vivid than the information on the posted placards, and that answered many of the questions I had scribbled in my notebook.

The museum was selling duplicates of books in its collection, so I came home poorer by several hundred dollars. Yet the more I read, the more aware I became of just how much I still had to learn. Train circuses operated in a distinct culture that had its own language, its own traditions, its own laws. I also realized that there is a huge subculture of circus fans who would know if I got something wrong.

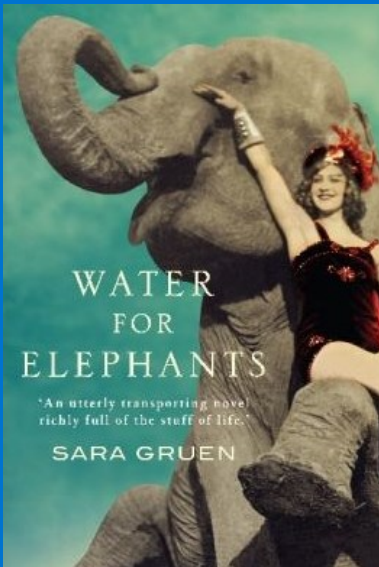
I spent almost a year doing research, including hauling my family to every circus within driving distance. I returned to Sarasota and brought home more books. I went to Circus World, where I was taken into the elephant enclosure and introduced to a beautiful 53-year-old Asian elephant named Barbara. I stood by her ten-foot high shoulder, literally trembling as I reached out to touch her. And finally, because I wanted to learn about elephant body language, I went to the Kansas City Zoo with one of their former elephant handlers.

When it was time to start writing, my head was so full of details I couldn't stand external stimulus. I asked my husband to move my desk into our walk-in closet, covered the window, and wore noise-reduction headphones. I spent much of the winter in that closet, weaving together the things I had learned.

The history of the American circus is so rich that I plucked many of the novel's most outrageous details from fact or anecdote (in circus history, the line between the two is famously blurred). Among them are stories about a hippo pickled in formaldehyde, a deceased four-hundred-pound "strong lady" who was paraded around town in an elephant cage, an elephant who repeatedly pulled up her stake and drank the lemonade intended for sale on the midway, another elephant who ran off and was retrieved from a backyard vegetable patch, and an ancient lion who got wedged beneath a sink along with a restaurant employee, rendering both of them too terrified to move. I also incorporated the horrific and very real tragedy of Jamaica ginger paralysis, a neurological disease caused by the consumption of adulterated Jamaica Ginger extract that devastated the lives of approximately 100,000 Americans between 1930 and 1931, and which is virtually forgotten because most of

# Water for Elephants

## Sara Gruen



its victims lived on the fringes of society.

None of the characters in the novel is based on any one real person; rather, they are a distillation of the many memorable performers and circus workers I encountered during the course of my research. And then there is Rosie, the elephant at the centre of the novel: she became as real to me as any living pachyderm could ever be.

I knew from the beginning that I had embarked on an adventure with this book, but I didn't know the extent until the day I found myself cold-calling a man who owns a sideshow and keeps human heads in his house. And really, how often can you greet your spouse with the words, "So I was talking with a retired clown today..."? I went through a period of mourning when the book was finished, and it took me a while to figure out why. Eventually I realized it was because I no longer had an elephant in my life.

I miss her.