



Water for elephants

By Sara Gruen

First published in 2006

Genre & subject

Historical fiction

Circus life fiction

Synopsis

An atmospheric, gritty, and compelling novel of star-crossed lovers, set in the circus world circa 1932, by the bestselling author of *Riding Lessons*. When Jacob Jankowski, recently orphaned and suddenly adrift, jumps onto a passing train, he enters a world of freaks, drifters, and misfits, a second-rate circus struggling to survive during the Great Depression, making one-night stands in town after endless town. A veterinary student who almost earned his degree, Jacob is put in charge of caring for the circus menagerie. It is there that he meets Marlena, the beautiful young star of the equestrian act, who is married to August, the charismatic but twisted animal trainer. He also meets Rosie, an elephant who seems untrainable until he discovers a way to reach her.

Beautifully written, *Water for elephants* is illuminated by a wonderful sense of time and place. It tells a story of a love between two people that overcomes incredible odds in a world in which even love is a luxury that few can afford.

Author biography

Sara Gruen is an award-winning technical writer and Canadian who moved to the US in 1999 for a technical writing job. Two years later she got laid off, and instead of looking for another job, she decided to take a gamble on writing fiction full-time. Fortunately, the gamble paid off. She made her fiction debut in 2004 with *Riding lessons*, followed by *Flying changes*. *Water for Elephants* is her third novel.

Sara lives with her husband, three children, two dogs, four cats, two goats, and horse in an environmentalist community in North Illinois. Her dream is to spend her life facedown in the ocean, coming up just long enough to eat a piece of fish, write a chapter, and go back in the water.

Discussion starters

- 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).
- 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?

- 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?
- 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? 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?
- Can you see the qualities of the younger Jacob in the old man in the nursing home?
- '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?
- 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?
- 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?

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