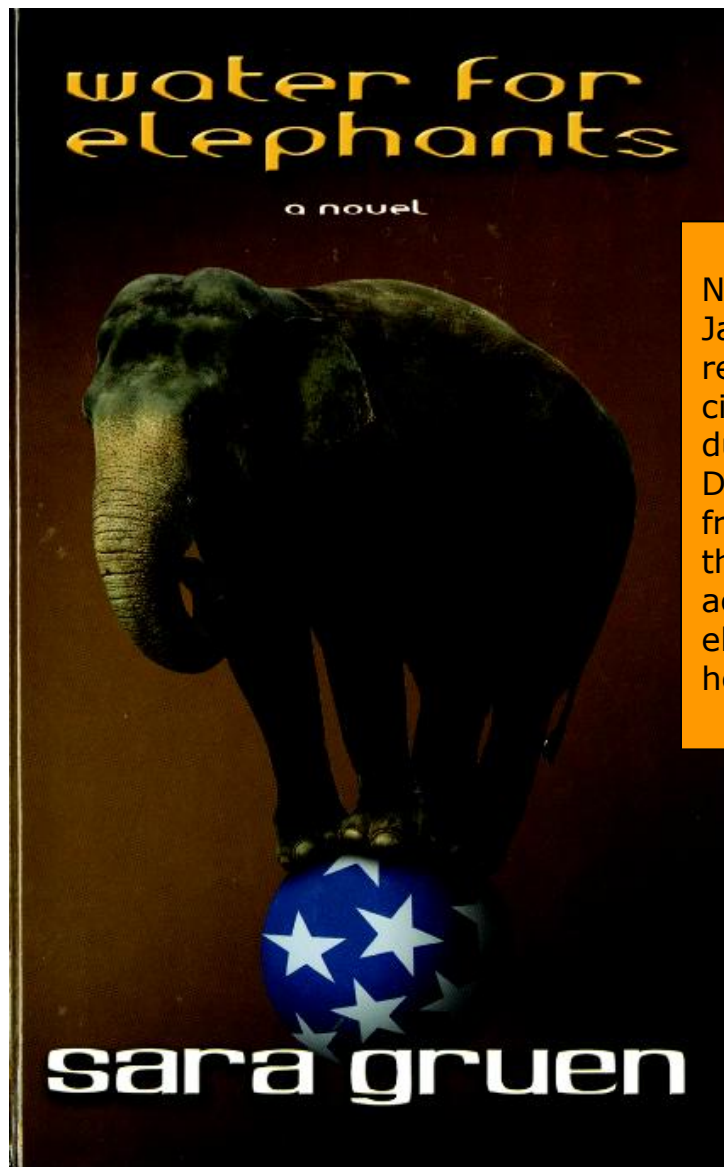


About the book...



Ninety-something-year-old Jacob Jankowski remembers his time in the circus as a young man during the Great Depression, and his friendship with Marlena, the star of the equestrian act, and Rosie, the elephant, who gave them hope.

About the author... (*NoveList*)

Sara Gruen is Canadian by birth, 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 small 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.

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.

Reviews

Booklist:

Life is good for Jacob Jankowski. He's about to graduate from veterinary school and about to bed the girl of his dreams. Then his parents are killed in a car crash, leaving him in the middle of the Great Depression with no home, no family, and no career. Almost by accident, Jacob joins the circus. There he falls in love with the beautiful performer Marlena, who is married to the circus psychotic animal trainer. He also meets the other love of his life, Rosie the elephant. 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.

Publishers Weekly:

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.

Library Journal:

When his parents are killed in a traffic accident, Jacob Jankowski hops a train after walking out on his final exams at Cornell, where he had hoped to earn a veterinary degree. The train turns out to be a circus train, and since it's the Depression, when someone with a vet's skills can attach himself to a circus if he's lucky, Jacob soon finds himself involved with the animal acts - specifically with the beautiful young Marlena, the horse rider, and her husband, August. Jacob falls for Marlena immediately, and the ensuing triangle is at the center of this novel, which follows the circus across the states. Jacob learns the ins and outs of circus life, in this case under the rule of the treacherous Uncle Al, who cheats the workers and deals roughly with patrons who complain about blatant false advertising and rip-off exhibits. Jacob and Marlena are attracted to each other, but their

relationship is fairly innocent until it becomes clear that August is not merely jealous but dangerously mentally deranged. Old-fashioned and endearing, this is an enjoyable, fast-paced story told by the older Jacob, now in his nineties in a nursing home. From the author of *Riding Lessons*; recommended for all Libraries.

Kirkus:

Gruen (*Riding Lesson*, not reviewed) brings to life the world of a Depression-era traveling circus. Jacob Jankowski, a retired veterinarian living out his days in an assisted-living facility, drifts in and out of his memories: Only days before graduating from vet school in 1931, young Jake learns his parents have died and left him penniless. Leaving school, he hops a train that happens to belong to the Benzini Brothers Most Spectacular Show on Earth. When the circus's owner, Uncle Al, learns Jake's educational background, he quickly hires him as the circus vet. This position allows Jake access to the various strata of circus society, from lowly crewmembers who seldom see actual money in their pay envelopes to the performers and managers who drink champagne and dress in evening wear for dinner. Jake is soon in love, both with Marlena, an equestrienne married to the head

animal trainer, August, and with Rosie, an elephant who understands only Polish (which Polish-American Jake conveniently speaks). At first, August and Marlena seem happily married, but Jake soon realizes that August's charm can quickly turn to cruelty. He is charismatic but bipolar (subtle echoes of *Sophie's Choice*). Worse, he beats Rosie, and comes across as having no love for animals. When August assumes Marlena and Jake are fooling around—having acknowledged their feelings, they have allowed themselves only a kiss—he beats Marlena, and she leaves him. Uncle Al tries blackmailing Jake to force him to reunite Marlena with August for the sake of the circus. Jake does not comply, and one fatality leads to another until the final blowup. 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.

Despite genuine talent, Gruen misses the mark.

Literary Criticism

Title: *Trunk Show*

Author(s): Elizabeth Judd

Source: ***The New York Times Book Review***.
(June 4, 2006): Arts and Entertainment: p35(L).
From *Literature Resource Center*.
Document Type: Book review
Full Text:

WATER FOR ELEPHANTS

By Sara Gruen.

Illustrated. 335 pp.

Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill. \$23.95.

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 swallowers 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.

CAPTION(S):

Photo (Photograph by Terence W. Bailey)

By ELIZABETH JUDD

Source Citation

Judd, Elizabeth. "Trunk Show." *The New York Times Book Review* 4 June 2006: 35(L). *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 31 July 2011.

Discussion questions (Bestsellers Book Club)

1. *Water for Elephants* moves between a story about a circus and a story about an old man in a nursing home. How do the chapters about the older Jacob enrich the story about Jacob's adventure with the circus? How would the novel be different if Gruen had only written about the younger Jacob, keeping the story linear and never describing Jacob's life as an old man?

2. Did the chapters about the nursing home change how you think about older people? In what ways are the doctors and nurses condescending? How is Rosemary different?

3. When you first read the Prologue, who did you think murdered the man? Were you surprised by who the actual murderer was?

4. The book begins with a quote from *Horton Hatches the Egg* by Dr. Seuss: "I meant what I said, and I said what I meant...An elephant's faithful—one hundred percent!" What is the role of faithfulness and loyalty in *Water for Elephants*? How do different characters define loyalty? (Jacob, Walter, Uncle Al).

5. Why does Jacob get so mad about Mr. McGuinny lying about carrying water for elephants? Do you see any similarities of temperament between the young Jacob and the old Jacob?

6. In what ways is *Water for Elephants* a survival story? A love story? An adventure?

7. *Water for Elephants* has a happy ending for Jacob, but not for many other characters. Discuss Walter and Camel's fates. How does tragedy fit into the story?

8. There is an "us and them" mentality in the circus between performers and workers. How does Jacob bridge these two classes of people? Why does each group hate another group? Does the circus merely mirror society in an exaggerated way?

9. Are you satisfied with the end?

10. In the Author's Note, Gruen writes that many of the details in the story are factual or come from circus workers' anecdotes. These true stories include the hippo pickled in formaldehyde, the deceased fat lady being paraded through town and an elephant who repeatedly pulled out her stake and stole lemonade. Gruen did extensive research before writing *Water for Elephants*. Was her story believable?

Multimedia

"A Circus Tale: 'Water For Elephants'" Available through National Public Radio:
<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5535347>

"Water for Elephants" Soon to be released on DVD

Read alike

Michael Raleigh, *The Blue Moon Circus* (2002)
Cathy Day, *The Circus in Winter* (2004)
Richard Schmitt, *The Aerialist* (2000)
Jim Fergus, *The Wild Girl: The Notebooks of Ned*

Giles, 1932 (2005)

Robert Chalmers, *Fortune's Bastard* (2004)

Dee Brown, *The Way to Bright Star* (1998)

Robertson Davies, *World of Wonders* (1975)

Sarah Waters, *Tipping the Velvet* (2000)



Ann Arbor District Library