



Ramapo Catskill Library System Book Discussion Leader's Guide

Water for Elephants

by Sara Gruen (Knopf, 2003)

Target Audience: Adult and mature young adult readers who enjoy historical fiction and novels about human relationships.

Synopsis; Set during the Great Depression, *Water for Elephants* tells the story of Jacob Janowski's experiences with the second rate traveling circus The Benzini Brothers Most Spectacular Show on Earth. The novel is told in a series of flashbacks by the now elderly Jacob. He recounts how he became orphaned and penniless and impulsively joins the circus as its vet. Jacob falls in love with the wife of the head animal trainer of the circus and meets Rosie a supposedly untrainable elephant. The novel recounts the formation of the bond that grew among this trio.

Author Biography: Sara Gruen was born in Canada and moved to the US for a technical writing job. When she was laid off, she decided to take a gamble on writing full time. She is the author of two previous novels, *Riding Lessons* and *Flying Changes* and lives north of Chicago with her husband, three children, two dogs, two dogs and three goats

Reviews:

Library Journal

"Old-fashioned and endearing, this is an enjoyable, fast-paced story"

Denver Post

Lively with historical detail and unexpected turns.... *Water for Elephants* is a rich surprise, a delightful gem springing from a fascinating footnote to history that absolutely deserves to be mined.

Parade Magazine

Gritty, sensual and charged with dark secrets involving love, murder and a majestic, mute heroine (Rosie, the elephant)

Bookreporter.com

Gruen has finely tuned radar for the magic and mysteries of the human heart. 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.

Questions for Discussion:

- 1.** How does the novel's epigraph "I meant what I said, and I said what I meant...An elephant's faithful-one hundred percent" Theodore Seuss Geisel, Horton Hatches the Egg, 1940 apply to the novel. What are the roles of importance of faithfulness and loyalty in *Water for Elephants*?
- 2.** Who did you think, upon reading the prologue, murdered August? What effect did that opening scene of chaos and murder have on your reception of the story that follows?
- 3.** 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? Why do we crave the illusions that the circus represents?
- 4.** In what ways and to what degree do Uncle Al's maneuvers and practices regarding the defunct Fox Brothers circus reflect traditional American business practice? How would you compare his actions with that of major businessmen and financiers of today?
- 5.** Gruen has said that the "backbone of her novel parallels the biblical story of Jacob in the book of Genesis. In what ways does *Water for Elephants* parallel the story of the biblical Jacob? How do the names of many of the characters reflect the biblical account?
- 6.** 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?
- 7.** 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. When did I stop being me?" (page 111). How would you answer that question for Jacob or any individual, or for yourself?
- 8.** 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 of the words "pathetic grandeur" describe the world of the circus in *Water for Elephants*?
- 9.** Are there indications in the story that might tell us? What do you think?

**Compiled by Laurie Angle, Albert Wisner Public Library - December 2008
Ramapo Catskill Library System Adult Services Advisory Council**