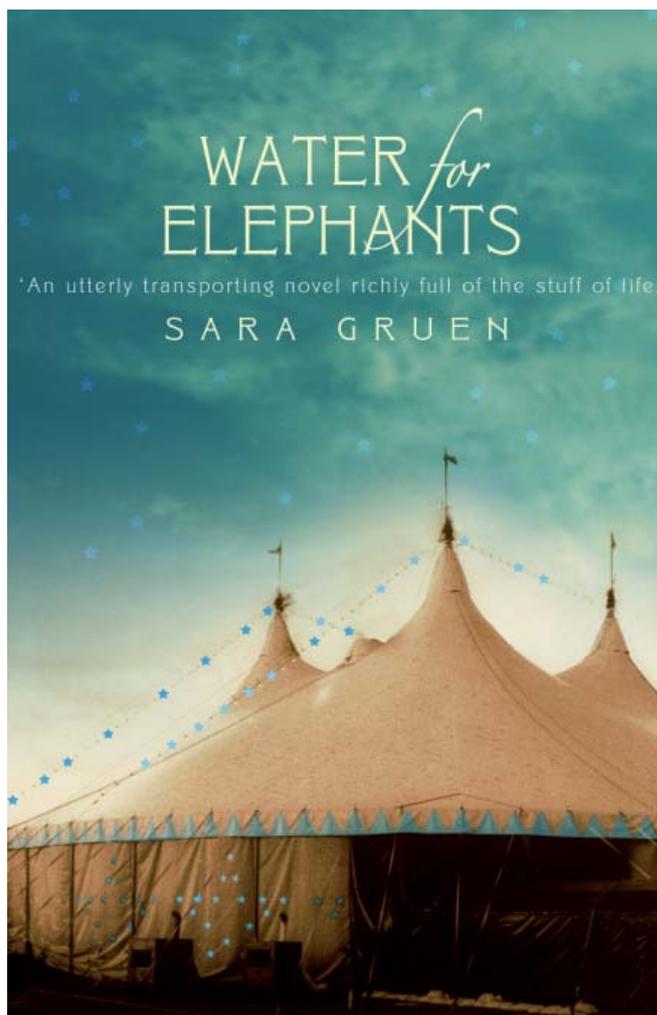
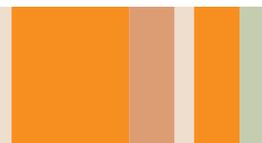


ALLEN & UNWIN



# READING GROUP NOTES

**Contents:** About Sara Gruen (2) On writing *Water for Elephants* - Sara Gruen (2)  
Reviews (3) Some suggested points for discussion (3)  
Further reading (4)



## About Sara Gruen

Sara Gruen is a award-winning technical writer and a transplanted Canadian who moved to the States 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, and she's currently working on her fourth.

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.

## On writing *Water for Elephants*—Sara Gruen

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 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.

## Reviews

Reviews to come.

## Some suggested points for discussion

☞ 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?

## Further reading

*The Pact* by Jodi Picoult

*Once Upon a Day* by Lisa Tucker

*Lost in the Forest* by Sue Miller

*The Broken Book* by Susan Johnson

*The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini