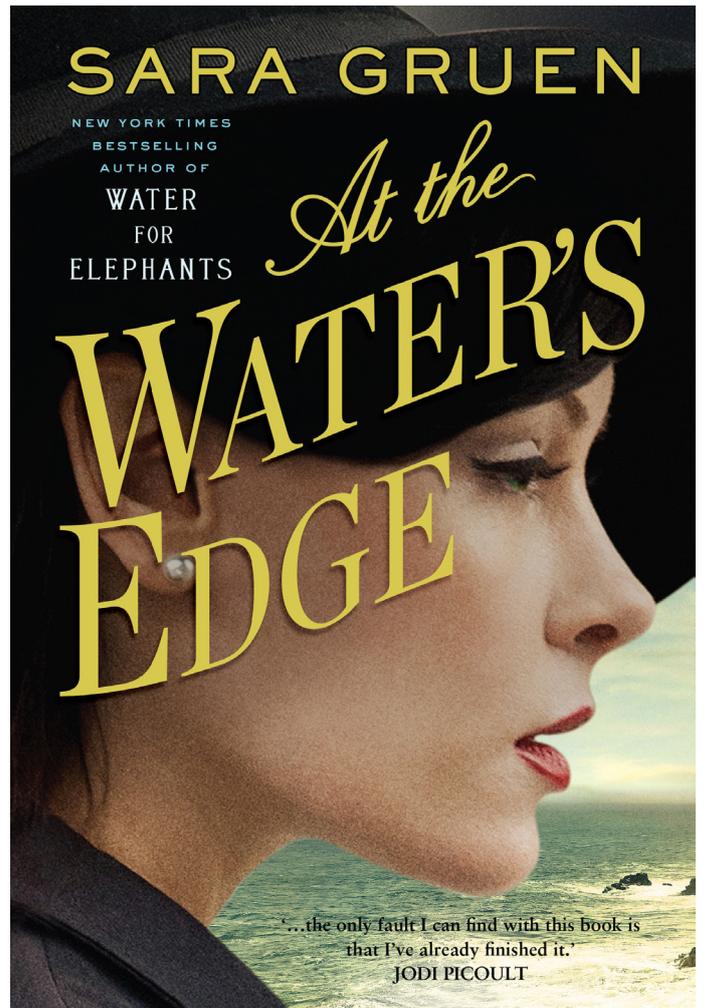


ALLEN&UNWIN



READING GROUP NOTES

Contents: About the book (2) About the author (2)
Reviews (2) Suggested points for discussion (3)
Further reading (3)

About the book

After disgracing themselves at a high society New Year's Eve party in Philadelphia in 1944, Madeline Hyde and her husband, Ellis, are cut off financially by his father, a former army colonel who is already ashamed of his son's inability to serve in the war. When Ellis and his best friend Hank decide that the only way to regain the Colonel's favour is to succeed where the Colonel very publicly failed - by hunting down the famous Loch Ness monster - Maddie reluctantly follows them across the Atlantic, leaving her sheltered world behind.

The trio find themselves amid the devastation of World War II, in a remote village in the Scottish Highlands, where the locals have nothing but contempt for the privileged interlopers. As the men go out looking for the monster, Maddie is left on her own at the isolated inn, where food is rationed, fuel is scarce, and a knock from the postman can bring tragic news.

Gradually the friendships she forms open her up to a larger world than she knew existed. As she embraces a fuller sense of who she might be, Maddie becomes aware not only of the dark forces around her, but to the beauty and surprising possibilities of life.

About the author

Sara Gruen is the international bestselling author of *Water for Elephants*, *Ape House*, *Riding Lessons*, and *Flying Changes*. Her works have been translated into forty-three languages and have sold more than ten million copies worldwide. She lives in western North Carolina with her husband and three sons, along with their dogs, cats, horses, birds, and the world's fussiest goat.

Reviews

'If I needed a reminder why I am such a fan of Sara Gruen's books, her latest novel provides plenty. Unique in its setting and scope, this impeccably researched historical fiction is full of the gorgeous prose I've come to expect from this author. And even after the final page, its message still resonates with me: The monsters we seek may be right in front of us. In fact, the only fault I can find with this book is that I've already finished it.' - Jodi Picoult, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Leaving Time*

'I devoured this book. Once again Sara Gruen has proven herself to be one of America's most compelling storytellers. You might be tempted to rush to get to the answers at the end - but don't, or you'll miss the delectable journey that is Gruen's prose.' - Kathryn Stockett, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Help*

'Sara Gruen is a wizard at capturing the essence of her historical setting, and does so here in spades.' - Paula McLain, author of *The Paris Wife*

For discussion

- ☞ Beginning a story with three unsympathetic characters is a tough thing to do. At what point did you begin to empathise with Maddie, Ellis and Hank? Or perhaps you didn't? Do you believe that a reader must like a character in order to want to engage with the book?
- ☞ The search for the Loch Ness Monster is the initial impetus for Maddie, Ellis and Hank's impulsive journey from the US to Scotland. And the reader watches as the 'Loch Ness monster' becomes a metaphor for all the monsters, both near and far, in Maddie's life. What are they?
- ☞ The Prologue is set three years before the novel begins. And the author employs the use of an Epilogue to provide a glimpse into the future of Angus and Maddie. Did you enjoy these literary devices? Did you think they were well used in this book?
- ☞ Angus Grant says to Maddie, when she asks how much loss people are supposed to bear, 'I'm afraid I don't know. It seems there's nothing so good or pure it can't be taken without a moment's notice. And then in the end, it all gets taken anyway.' The terrible losses and privations of war are woven movingly into the narrative. Discuss.
- ☞ The sighting of the Caonaig is legendary in the small Scottish village and it evokes strong feelings for Maddie. Did you find the involvement of the supernatural within the narrative effective?
- ☞ Maddie and Ellis's relationship comes to a shocking conclusion as Gruen demonstrates how ordinary evil exists. What did you think of Maddie and Ellis's trajectories, both as a couple and individuals?

Suggested further reading

Water for Elephants - Sara Gruen

The Secret Keeper - Kate Morton

Steady Running of the Hour - Justin Go

In Falling Snow - Mary-Rose MacColl

Half the World in Winter - Maggie Joel

The Iron Necklace - Giles Waterfield