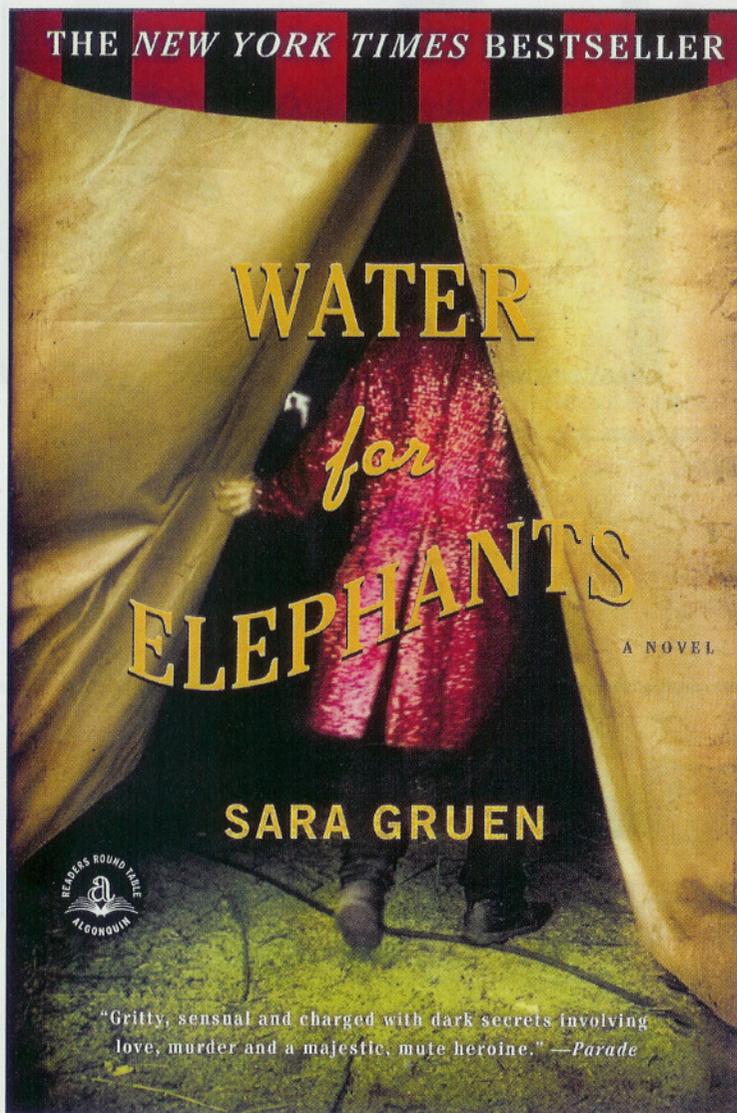


Book Review



“Water for Elephants”

By Sara Gruen

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“I am ninety. Or ninety-three. One or the other,” says Jacob Jankowski at the beginning of “Water for Elephants.” Though Jacob is starting to forget little things, his mind is, for the most part, sharp as a tack, making the frailty of his failing body all the more distressing to him. He’s spending his remaining days in a nursing home, where he freely admits that “sometimes the monotony of bingo and sing-alongs and ancient dusty people parked in the hallway in wheelchairs makes me long for death.” Yet Jacob has led a life of adventure, told in the flashbacks that make up the majority of the novel.

In 1931, Jacob was 23 years old and just days away from taking his final exams at Cornell University’s veterinary school and joining his father’s vet practice. Then his parents are tragically killed and young Jacob learns he is penniless and homeless — the family’s house had been mortgaged to make ends meet during the hardscrabble years of the Depression and his father had been accepting beans and eggs in lieu of payment. Too numb to function, Jacob walks out of his exams without writing a word and, more by chance than choice, ends up hopping a passing train. As it turns out, the train belongs to the Benzini Brothers Most Spectacular Show on Earth, an ill-managed, third-rate traveling circus, and Jacob finds himself plunged into a life he could never have imagined.

Throughout the book, Jacob narrates his story from his own point-of-view, but in two separate time-frames: his Depression-era circus days, and his current bleak existence in an antiseptic nursing home. Though the transitions between the two perspectives are less than seamless and sometimes jarring, Gruen is adept at capturing the gritty details of each of these settings. The nonagenarian Jacob helplessly rages about the ravages of time, institutionalized food, the waning attention of his children and the humiliations of assisted



living. Despite their thoughtful insights into old age, these chapters lean toward tedium and the novel is much more compelling during the circus-era chapters.

It is during these chapters that “Water for Elephants” becomes utterly riveting for the voyeuristic look it gives us at a sordid and bizarre world that may otherwise have remained a squalid footnote in history. Gruen has meticulously researched all aspects of circus lore, often basing her fictional events on anecdotes she gleaned from actual diaries and first-hand accounts of the era. With rich, graphic imagery she portrays the Benzini Brothers circus as a hierarchal subculture with its own vocabulary, traditions and pecking order. It’s truly a rare peek into a secret society.

Gruen’s cast of characters includes a wide range of miscreants and misfits; they are engrossing if not entirely enchanting. Uncle Al, the circus owner, is ruthlessly unscrupulous, often resorting to “redlighting” (throwing an employee off the moving train at night) if the payroll budget gets tight. August, the head animal trainer, is a dashing man who alternates between bouts of tremendous charm and jealous rage. When these two discover Jacob has veterinary skills, he’s put to work caring for the often underfed and overworked menagerie, becoming the animals’ prime advocate and developing a special affection for Rosie, the majestic elephant that consistently fails to perform on cue until Jacob learns her secret. And there is August’s beautiful wife Marlena, a star equestrian performer who has great affection for Rosie and the horses she performs with. Before long, Jacob is deeply in love with Marlena, becoming her protector against August’s obsessive abuse. In fact, Jacob quickly becomes a sort of champion for all the downtrodden, including a lame camel, a dwarf clown, and a roustabout who must be hidden away from Uncle Al when he becomes too sick to work.

“Water for Elephants” has two separate endings. There’s the chaotic and satisfying denouement of the love triangle between Jacob, Marlena and August (“In 70 years, I never told a blessed soul,” the 90-year-old Jacob muses about the memory that still haunts him). And there’s the unexpected turn of events the elderly man experiences when his family fails to turn up for a promised visit at the nursing home. Both endings are just a touch too melodramatic and charming to be probable, but this book pulls you in with all the magic of a three-ring circus, so that you want to sit back and be entertained by illusions.

— Hilda J. Brucker