

Water for Elephants by Sara Gruen

READING GUIDE FROM THE SJSU CAMPUS READING PROGRAM

Read for the pleasure and excitement of the story and the reading experience. Since you'll have many opportunities to talk to others at SJSU about the book, as you read, you may want to jot down some notes about characters, events and passages that are interesting to you. Bring your notes to the discussion group you attend. If you have questions, visit the website (www.sjsu.edu/reading/) or send an email to anellen@sjsu.edu.

CHARACTERS

The key characters and the page they are first introduced.

Jacob – main character, circus vet (1)
Uncle Al (Alan Bunkel) – circus owner/ringmaster (1)
Marlena – horse trainer and performer, August's wife (2)
Blackie – bouncer (26)
Camel – worker, alcoholic (26)
Joe – animal handler (31)
August – animal trainer/performer (39, by name 57)
Kinko (Walter) – clown, has dog Queenie (59)
Rosie – elephant (125)

A FEW FACTS ABOUT THE AUTHOR

- ✓ Born in Canada.
- ✓ Moved to the US in 1999.
- ✓ Other books: *Riding Lessons* (2004), *Flying Changes* (2007), and *Ape House* (2009).
- ✓ She got the idea for *Water for Elephants* from seeing an old circus photo in the newspaper.
- ✓ Says she'd like readers "to think about how we treat those who are dependent on us."
[\[http://www.curledup.com/intgruen.htm\]](http://www.curledup.com/intgruen.htm)

HISTORICAL INFORMATION

The Great Depression – started with the stock market crash of 10/29/29 and ended with US entry into WWII in 1941. Unemployment rates were high, even up to 50% in some cities.

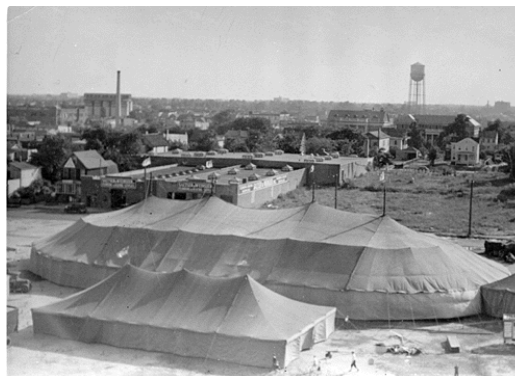
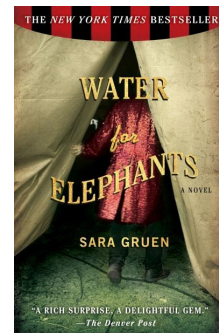
Prohibition – Period from 1920 to 1933 when alcohol consumption was banned by the 18th Amendment to the US Constitution. The ban was repealed by the 21st Amendment.

The Ringling Brothers Circus – started their tented circus in Wisconsin in 1884. Seven Ringling brothers were involved. A few years later they started moving the circus by train. In 1907 they purchased the Barnum & Bailey Circus. The circuses were not merged into one show until 1919.

AS YOU READ, THINK ABOUT ...

- What did you like most about the story? What did you like least?

- Who are your favorite characters? Why?
- Who are your least favorite characters? Why?
- Which scene was most memorable for you? Why?
- Why might the author have given the main character such a tragic start?
- Why might the author have decided to shift the storytelling between the young Jacob to the old one?
- There are many themes in the story – friendship, survival, love, classism, dishonesty, animal welfare, compassion, aging, abuse, and others. Which resonates most for you? Why?
- Where is there tension in the story between doing what your employer wants and doing what you think is right? Do you agree with all actions taken by Jacob with respect to caring for the animals?
- How would you describe Jacob's treatment at the assisted living facility? Do you think the author was trying to make any connection between circus animals and the aged being cared for in a facility?
- What did you think of the ending? Would you have chosen a different ending? What?



WPA Fed Theatre Project Circus in NY 1935-1936
http://newdeal.feri.org/library/r_3k_ho.htm

For more information on the book and fall events visit www.sjsu.edu/reading/.
Online discussions at www.litminds.org (check the Classroom Board) and
Facebook (Campus Reading Program at SJSU).

