

# Skokie Public Library's Book Discussion Guide

## Water For Elephants by Sara Gruen

---

- How do Jacob's reminiscences of his young life contribute to a deeper understanding of the life he's leading in the retirement home?
- How does Gruen depict old age?
- How is family portrayed in the novel?
- How would the novel be different if the author, Sara Gruen, had only written about the younger Jacob? Would it be as compelling?
- What is the significance of the title?
- What is the significance of the prologue?
- Did Jacob kill August?
- Did the "circus" parts of the novel really happen, or do you think they are part of Jacob's imagination?
- What are some of the similarities between the 1930s parts and the "present" parts?
- Does Jacob die at the end?
- Are you satisfied with the end?
- Do you see *Water for Elephants* as a survival story? A love story? An adventure?
- Is Jacob responsible for the deaths of Camel and Walter?
- What role does sexuality play in *Water for Elephants*?
- The book begins with a quote from Horton Hatches the Egg by Dr. Seuss: "I meant what I said, and I said what I meant ... An elephant's faithful—one hundred percent!" What is the role of faithfulness and loyalty in *Water for Elephants*? How do different characters define loyalty? (Jacob, Walter, Uncle Al).
- Why does Jacob get so mad about Mr. McGuinty lying about carrying water for elephants? Do you see and similarities of temperament between the young Jacob and the old Jacob?
- In the Author's Note, Gruen writes that many of the details in the story are factual or come from circus workers' anecdotes. These true stories include the hippo pickled in formaldehyde, the deceased fat lady being paraded through town and an elephant that repeatedly pulled out her stake and stole lemonade. Gruen did extensive research before writing *Water for Elephants*. Was her story believable?
- 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?
- After the collapse of the Benzini Brothers circus, Jacob realizes, "Not only am I unemployed and homeless, but I also have a pregnant woman, bereaved dog, elephant, and eleven horses to take care of" (page 317). What expectations did you entertain for the future of Jacob and Marlana—and their menagerie—after they leave the circus? How do the elderly Jacob's memories of Marlana and their life together confirm or alter those expectations?



**Skokie Public Library**

5215 Oakton Street  
Skokie, Illinois 60077  
847.673.7774 / 847.673.7797 fax  
www.skokielibrary.info

Skokie Public Library Trustees: Diana Hunter, President/President Emerita;  
John Graham, Vice President; Dayle Zelenka, Secretary;  
Richard Basofin; Susan Greer; Zelda Rich; John M. Wozniak  
Director: Carolyn A. Anthony