

Book Review:

Water for Elephants

Author: Sara Gruen

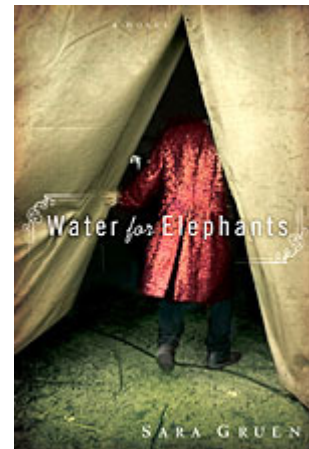
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By Lynne DeMichele

(UMC.org)—The circus! What an engaging and intense microcosm, full of exotic characters and drama—both staged and real. Sara Gruen’s third novel is as generously infused with love as with the hard realities of Depression-era circus life. The Bernini Brothers Most Spectacular Show on Earth travels through Depression-era Midwestern towns bringing sequins and fantasy pouring out of railroad cars and parading down Main Street.

Unemployment and hunger have made such a distraction irresistible for the “rubes” who come to see the show. Beyond the vivid distractions of the big top, Gruen deftly pulls aside the tent flaps to show readers something of the unadorned lives inside. Actual circus photos of the time enhance the story’s feel of authenticity.



A family catastrophe leaves Jacob Jankowski homeless, penniless, and numb just before taking his final veterinarian exams. In desperation, he literally grabs the first opportunity that comes along—a slow-moving circus train. His expertise with animals is quickly apparent to Marlena, the top performer, and also to Uncle Al, the relentless opportunist and owner of the show. Marlena’s sadistic husband, August, resents Jacob’s intrusion into his circus menagerie, and his violence ignites the plot.

The narrative swings easily between the past and present—between the naïve 23-year-old Jacob in the circus, and the crotchety old widower he becomes “either 91 or 93, I don’t remember.” He now lives in a nursing home, alone with his guilt and memories all locked up. When a little circus sets up nearby, Jacob hobbles out to see it and his memory of his time with the circus comes flooding back. In an idealized ending, he finds redemption from his self-imposed loneliness. It comes in the form

of two new relationships and a new means of sharing the joy that had shriveled inside him years earlier.

Gruen's extensive research into the times and culture of these traveling shows is evident in the gritty characters and the rich lingo of the "roustabouts" who raise the tents, the "freaks," and "hay burners"—all glad for a meal and a place to sleep. Hope for the increasingly rickety circus comes when Uncle Al buys Rosie the elephant. Both Jacob and Marlena fall in love with her, even as they try not to fall in love with each other. But Rosie turns out to be "stupid," seemingly unable to live up to the promise of a headlining elephant act. However, when Jacob discovers her secret, everything changes and the story stampedes to a shocking climax.

Some of the story's harsher scenes are taken from historical events, including the barbarous practice of "redlighting" unneeded workers (throwing them off the back of a moving train). The 1930s were despairing, often brutal times, and the writer does not spare us these details. Still, through some unusual, caring relationships, the story shines with the redemptive power of love. We see selflessness and an extraordinary example of pure love demonstrated by Jacob and one of the circus "freaks" for a helpless old drunk who lies dying in the back of a boxcar. We see the stamp of godly good on the souls of these two men, amazingly uncrushed by the evil and despairing circumstances surrounding them, and on the unconditional love of two of the animals. The story makes its point without sentimentalism, but vividly. And it could be said that something of God is reflected in the unlikely forms of a dwarf and even an elephant in this haunting story.

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- Think of some of the instances where Rosie and Bobo communicate with young Jacob in a special way. Is he a good veterinarian? If so, how can you tell?

- How does Jacob know Rosie's sorry about the raiding the garden? (p. 171)
- Why is elderly Jacob so irritable—specifically when he challenges someone at his table who claimed to have hauled water for the elephants?
- There are a number of prejudices evident among the circus folk and the “rubes.” Have attitudes about class and race changed since then?
- What do you think had happened to Camel before he joined the circus?
- Discuss the scene in the church (p. 148) where Jacob sought absolution from his “disgrace.” Do you view what happened to him in the cooch tent as sinful? If so, is there more than one sinner? What exactly is the sin or sins? Which is the greater wrong: a sinful act itself, or lying about it? Try applying this same question to a modern-day situation.
- Where can you see demonstrated the goodness in Jacob, Marlena and Earl?
- There are several instances in which someone cares for someone who is helpless. Compare how the nurses treat Jacob (p. 249) and how Kinko/Walter treats Camel. How is Nurse Rosemary's attitude toward him different from that of his previous nurses? Are any of these observations applicable to today?
- Where can you find God in this story?

Visit someone in a local nursing home and observe how the residents are treated.

- Do you find any nurses like Rosemary?
- Do you think the care provided in such places has improved?
- How does your church minister to shut-ins?

Visit someone in a nursing home enough times to hear their “story.” Everyone has one, and the telling of it can bring both grace and gladness

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