

Water for Elephants

By Sara Gruen

I chose *Water for Elephants* for the April book club selection because I had heard good reviews of it from many friends. The book did not disappoint; I read all 350 pages in less than 2 days.

The story begins with Jacob, an elderly man in his 90s living in a nursing home. He seems to be the stereotypical grumpy old man. However, as a circus starts setting up down the street, he begins to reminisce about a surprising period of his youth. As a young man, Jacob, distraught over the sudden death of both his parents, runs away and joins the circus as a veterinarian. Despite the glamour we see at the circus, it has a dark side hidden from the public eye, especially a 1930s traveling circus. The circus Jacob joins is run by a cruel owner who is more concerned about profit than honesty and doesn't bat an eye at 'removing' anyone who is not pulling his weight. The performers despise the workers who set-up and run the circus, and vice versa.

Jacob makes friends with August, the animal trainer, and his beautiful wife, Marlena, who performs with the horses. All is not as it seems with August and Marlena. August, all smiles and grand gestures, is hot-tempered and mentally-ill, often causing problems when he feels slighted. Marlena struggles to smooth over these situations. Jacob slowly finds himself falling in love with Marlena. Anyone can guess this is a recipe for disaster. In the midst of this chaos, the circus acquires an elephant, Rosie. Rosie too has a secret!

The story in *Water for Elephants* is well-researched; the circus characters are eccentric and entertaining; the love triangle between Jacob, Marlena and August is full of emotion and stress; and without saying a word, Rosie is funny and lovable. An excellent combination of characters, story and adventure with a surprise twist at the end that will make you glad you never ran away and joined the circus yourself!! (K.T)

The title "*Water for Elephants*" is key for reading the novel's symbolic meaning under the surface story. Although the story does not clearly explain what the title means, it is possible that it is a metaphor for something.

One day the main character, Jacob, hears McGuinty boasting about how he used to carry water for elephants. Jacob gets upset. Jacob knows how much water one elephant drinks a day, and it is not the amount that one man can possibly carry. "Sometimes when one gets older," Jacob's nurse explained, "things you think on and wish on start to seem real. And then you believe them, and before you know it they're a part of your history". McGuinty just chose what he wanted to remember.

Just as McGuinty was not aware of that fact, perhaps Jacob also chose what to remember without noticing. At the beginning of the story we witness a murder. During a stampede, Jacob looks for his love, Marlena, who is with an elephant, Rose. When Jacob finds them, he also sees August, Marlena's husband, standing by them. According to

Jacob's memory, "She reached for something...She lifted the stake high in the air and brought it down", and killed August.

At this point it is not clear who "She" is. It seems "She" can be Marlena, but it is not certain. Later in the story, Jacob describes the same scene again. This time the "She" who hits August's head is clearly the elephant Rose. Therefore, both Jacob and McGuinty had unreliable memories, and so it might be suitable to say "*Water for Elephants*" is a metaphor for their unclear and changeable memories.

Our memories are also very fragile and easily rewritten. We all might be unreliable narrators just like Jacob. Our memories can make us feel pleasant or unpleasant, but unfortunately (or luckily) we are not able to remember every little detail of our past. If it all just depends on how we see our past, why not try to carry water for elephants? (Y.R.)

Jacob is being taken care of in a nursing home. He is over ninety years old. His affluent experiences unexpectedly bring about friction with other people at the nursing home. When he was young, he lost his parents in a traffic accident. Then he met some circus men and was taken to a circus, where he began to work and experienced various unforgettable things. Since he had studied to be a veterinarian, he was respected by the workers. There he encountered an elephant handler August and his beautiful wife Marlena. He fell in love with her.

Before he met Marlena he had ill-treated other women since he was suffering from a mental illness. Then Marlena too came to be abused by him because he doubted the relationship between Jacob and her. Jacob tried to help her and his efforts are depicted throughout the whole story.

At the end of the book, Jacob had a strong desire to see the circus at the time when his family was supposed to visit. But they didn't show up. So he left on his own for the circus without his walker. He walked along to the entrance of the circus, staggering. Fortunately he was able to enter and see the show with the help of the circus manager's kind arrangement. After the show, the manager implored him to talk about his circus life experiences. He was impressed by Jacob's story. In the nursing home, Jacob had found out his favorite nurse was quitting her job. So he no longer desired to go back there. After thinking carefully, he told the manager that he wanted to be employed as a ticket seller at the circus.

When the police came to find Jacob, the manager lied that the circus tent was Jacob's home. He was kind enough to agree to Jacob's idea. Jacob preferred to live a life worth living than to live in a nurse home, being taken care of. I think this might be the feeling of most old people living in nursing homes. (M.M)

