

# WATER FOR ELEPHANTS



A Conversation with the Author 339

Book-Group Discussion Questions 347



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## A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

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**Dave Weich** is director of marketing and development at Powell's Books. This conversation first appeared, in different form, online at [Powells.com](http://Powells.com). © 2006 [Powells.com](http://Powells.com). Reprinted by permission.

**Dave Weich:** Is it true that you'd never been to a circus before starting your research for *Water for Elephants*?

**Sara Gruen:** It's true. I had no history whatsoever. No interest, no connection to anyone associated with the circus. I grew up in northern Ontario. I don't know if they didn't come up that far or if I just never went, but if I did go it made such a little impression on me that I didn't remember it.

**DW:** What wound up being your favorite act?

**SG:** In the end, the liberty horses.

**DW:** Describe exactly what they do.

**SG:** A person, usually a beautiful woman, comes out with a group of twelve horses typically, sometimes all white, sometimes black and white. She stands and makes signals with whips in the air, and she talks to them, and they obey her.

I have a horse, and I think it's very cool that they can get horses doing that with no restraint and no halter.

**DW:** Marlena is that woman in *Water for Elephants*.

**SG:** Yes, and in fact I modeled her act after ones I had watched.

**DW:** You explain in a note after the final chapter that many of the details in the novel were drawn from real life, or what passes for it in existing records. For instance, one of the strangest: the scared lion hiding under a sink.

**SG:** It's true.

**DW:** And Rosie was based on a real elephant?

**SG:** Several elephants, yes. There was actually an elephant that would pull her stake out of the ground to go and steal lemonade, and then she'd go back and put her stake back in the ground and look innocent while they blamed the roustabouts.

**DW:** You couldn't have started your research expecting to find enough real-life stories to fill out the novel. Or did you?

**SG:** No. I had thought that I would make it all up entirely, and of course the main thrust of the story is my own, but there were too many of these wacky anecdotes not to try and fit them in. Then to be able to say afterward, "Yes, this really happened."

**DW:** In your research, did you talk to circus fans?

**SG:** I did, and they led to the portal of the circus folk, who were harder to reach. They have a rather reclusive society because various people are coming after them. It took me months and months to make contact with them, but when I did the real stories began to come out.

**DW:** What exactly do you mean by people "coming after them"?

**SG:** PETA, for the use of animals in the circus. Also, I don't know if there's an organized group coming after them for the use of freaks in side-shows, but they've had enough contact with that type of group that they don't give out contact information easily.

**DW:** How did you first make contact?

**SG:** I was looking for the rights to photos in the book, so I was finding people who had circus archives. And of course they had connections. But it was a lot of give and take before they realized I wasn't planted by somebody else to come after them.

I actually got the phone number of a guy who owns a sideshow. He keeps human heads in his house. It took me four months to get up the nerve to call this guy, but when I did he was really sweet and helpful. They're shrunken heads; he doesn't just go off and behead people. But yes, he has a collection of shrunken heads.

**DW:** One of my favorite details in the book, having nothing to do with the circus, describes the boys in the hobo jungle: when they sleep, they take off their shoes but tie them to their feet. How did you educate yourself in Depression-era America?

**SG:** I wasn't quite sure at first that this was the era I'd set the story in. A circus photo set me off on the path of the novel, but then I got on a side-track about hobos and I realized that something like 80 percent of them were under twenty-one. You think about hobos and you imagine middle-aged, dirty men by the side of the track, but no, they were kids.

**DW:** So much happens on the train or just off the train. It's the book's main setting.

**SG:** The whole of a circus worker's social life happened on a moving train. When they were off, they were setting up or they were performing or they were tearing down, so everything happened while they were moving.

Once they collected your quarter, they did their act and then they got out. You were leaving by the front end of the tent, and they were hauling the benches out by the back end—they're done, they're finished, they want to get on the train.

**DW:** You mentioned the photo that gave you the idea for a novel about the circus, but how did you decide to incorporate Jacob's story from the Bible?

**SG:** I can't remember the exact moment of genesis, but this is one of the things I've always liked about literature: the layers. Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel*, for instance, has that whole layer in it. It's a long tradition in English literature. It won't detract from the story if you don't know it's there, but I thought it would be a fun thing to play up for people who recognized it.

**DW:** The writing wasn't without its challenges. To finish the book, you shut yourself in a closet.

**SG:** I had a couple of very long interruptions with this book. The first one lasted eighteen weeks. After that, I crashed out the first half of the book. Then someone from my tech-writing days called me and said, "We have a short, three- or four-week contract. Do you want to do it?" Sure. Easy money, right?

That turned into four months of ten- and eleven-hour days, writing about SQL server databases and XML data files, really serious stuff. I was burned out, and I was having a lot of trouble getting my head back into the characters. I'd left the book at a point where I had something like sixteen plot threads up in the air. I was shopping on eBay and checking my e-mail obsessively, finding a million reasons not to write. That was why the closet. It takes me about an hour and a half to get from the real world into the fictional world.

**DW:** Back in those tech-writing days, before you wrote *Riding Lessons*, did you aspire to write fiction?

**SG:** Totally. I studied English literature because I wanted to write. I had been writing since I was about seven. My first novel filled three exercise books; an imaginary horse shows up in the backyard, and a girl finds him and rides off and jumps fences. It's always been what I wanted to do.

I graduated, and I had an English degree. What are you going to do with an English degree? I went into tech writing. I liked it—it was fine—but my husband and I had always talked about me retiring early to try writing fiction, to see if it worked.

I was writing for a statistical software company, and I got laid off. I was putting my résumé together, and my husband said, “Do you want to try it now?” I said, “Can we?” So he said, “Let’s give it two years or two books, and if it doesn’t work, go back to tech writing.”

**DW:** So did it take two years or two books?

**SG:** Two books, it took. Before *Riding Lessons*, I wrote what I call “my drawer book.”

**DW:** Which no one is ever going to see.

**SG:** My husband threatens that if I die he’s going to try to sell it. If I don’t, no one’s ever going to see it.

**DW:** That’s reason to live, right there.

**SG:** Yes. Also, it’s been cannibalized to the point where I don’t think it’s publishable.

**DW:** I’ve been asking people lately: If you were going to set up your own personal hall of fame for writers from each decade of life, who’d get in there? Who’s been important?

**SG:** I’m probably the outlier here because I was a fan of Victorian novels as a teenager.

**DW:** That’s fine. It’s the Sara Gruen hall of fame.

**SG:** Okay, so it was the Victorians. Then D. H. Lawrence in my twenties and a bunch of Canadian authors. Doris Lessing's *The Black Madonna*. That one I really liked. Margaret Atwood is certainly in my hall of fame. And Yann Martel.

I recently reread *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and I'm rediscovering Hemingway. It's all cyclical, probably the same people every decade, but new ones get added all along.

**DW:** The frame of Jacob as a ninety-something-year-old man grounds some of the crazier stuff going on in his past. Reviews of all your books praise the way you handle older characters.

**SG:** I like to write flawed characters. I take a warts-and-all approach to everyone. People, for some reason, are more forgiving of my older warty characters, but my thirty- and forty-year-old characters are just as warty if you look at them closely. Annemarie, in the *Riding Lessons* series, certainly—it's my intention that people will feel like throttling her on occasion.

**DW:** How do you approach plot? Do you outline and work out the shape of the story in detail before you write, or do you leave that until revision afterward?

**SG:** For *Water for Elephants*, which was the first historical thing I've written, I did all the research ahead of time. I needed to feel that I knew the subject matter in and out.

I hate outlining. I hate outlines, hate them, hate them.

I usually know what the crisis of the book is going to be, though I don't know how I'm going to get there. I try to make it bad enough that I don't know how I'm going to get out of it. And when I get there, I have to get out of it. I just get myself geared up, and I write every day and see what happens.

**DW:** Has your technical-writing background helped, or has it been a hindrance?

**SG:** It was great training. For one thing, it taught me to sit down and write for eight hours a day. For another, it taught me not to take personally editorial comments. The first instructional project I gave to an editor ten years ago came back covered in red. I was practically in tears. It has to be a thousand times worse if it's a piece of fiction, but I don't take it personally anymore.

It also proved to me that I was able to produce a work of this size. And because I have been doing this sort of thing for so long, although I don't outline, I think I have an inherent understanding of structure, where things should rise and fall. It's good training.

One thing: it's really freeing to be able to use adjectives again. In tech writing, they always want you to cut every word that doesn't belong. Every day, they're reminding you that every word costs forty cents to translate into each language. That took me all of two weeks to get over.

**DW:** Did you get up close and personal to elephants in your research?

**SG:** At the Kansas City Zoo, I observed the elephants with their ex-handler for a couple of days, taking notes on body language and behavior. I got into the habit of walking up to elephant handlers at the circus and saying, "Hi. I'm writing a book. May I meet your elephant?" I got lucky twice.

The first time was right after I'd been out with this elephant handler at the Kansas City Zoo who had been gored by an elephant. He took a tusk through the thigh, one through the rib cage, which just missed everything vital, and another through his upper arm. So I still had that in mind. I was standing beside this huge thing with his amber eye staring down at me. The guy said, "Go ahead. You can touch her." I was shaking, but I touched her. I said, "Okay, I'm done now." Several months later, I met the second one. It was one of these little circuses that throws a tent up and says, "Free

tickets!” And then it’s twenty-dollar popcorn. I snuck out of the big top because it was small and pretty cheesy, but during the show I asked to meet the elephant; the handler gave me a bucket of peanuts and stuck me in an enclosure with this thing. He shut the gate. I was alone with this African elephant. I was looking at her, and she was looking at me like, *This is not part of the usual repertoire*. So I fed her the peanuts. By the end of it, she was such a love bug. I was hugging her and kissing her, posing for photos. She gave me a kiss, a big, sock puppet, mushy elephant kiss with the end of her trunk. It was really memorable.

**DW:** Do you have a lot of contact with animals in your everyday life?

**SG:** I have two dogs, three cats, two goats, and a horse—not to mention the three sons and a husband. As far as animals go, that’s usually it, but I have, for some reason, a bird’s nest on the front porch, and I often tape it off if the mailman or other people are ignoring my warnings to go around the back door. And if there’s an orphaned anything in the neighborhood, or a stray cat, people know I’m the crazy cat lady. They come and get me.

**DW:** How do the men in your house feel about this?

**SG:** My husband came with three ferrets, so he’s a like-minded guy. He loves animals, and the kids all do. They think it’s great. It’s chaos in our house, but it’s a fun kind of chaos.

## BOOK-GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



1. To what extent do the chapters concerning the elderly Jacob enhance the chapters recounting the young Jacob's experiences with the Benzini Brothers circus? In what ways do the chapters about the young Jacob contribute to a deeper understanding of the elderly Jacob's life?
2. How does the novel's epigraph, the quote from Dr. Seuss's *Horton Hatches the Egg*, apply to the novel? What are the roles and importance of faithfulness and loyalty in *Water for Elephants*? In what ways does Gruen contrast the antagonisms and cruelties of circus life with the equally impressive loyalties and instances of caring?
3. Who did you, upon reading the prologue, think murdered August? What effect did that opening scene of chaos and murder have on your reception of the story that follows?
4. In connection with Jacob's formal dinner with August and Marlena in their stateroom, Jacob remarks, "August is gracious, charming, and mischievous" (page 93). To what extent is this an adequate characterization of August? How would you expand upon Jacob's observation? How would *you* characterize August? Which situations in the novel reveal his true character?
5. August says of Marlena, "Not everyone can work with liberty horses. It's a God-given talent, a sixth sense, if you will" (page 94). Both August and Jacob recognize Marlena's skills, her "sixth sense," in working with the horses. In what ways does that sixth sense attract each man? How do August and Jacob differ in terms of the importance each places on Marlena's abilities?

## Book-Group Discussion Questions

6. 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? Is there anything wrong with pandering to people’s need for illusion? Why do we crave the illusions that the circus represents?
7. Reflecting on the fact that his platitudes and stories don’t hold his children’s interest, the elderly Jacob notes, “My real stories are all out of date. So what if I can speak firsthand about the Spanish flu, the advent of the automobile, world wars, cold wars, guerrilla wars, and Sputnik—that’s all ancient history now. But what else do I have to offer?” (page 110). How might we learn to appreciate the stories and life lessons of our elders and encourage people younger than ourselves to appreciate our own?
8. Looking at himself in the mirror, the old Jacob tries “to see beyond the sagging flesh.” But he claims, “It’s no good. . . . I can’t find myself anymore. When did I stop being me?” (page 111). How would you answer that question for Jacob or any individual, or for yourself?
9. In what ways and to what degree do Uncle Al’s maneuvers and practices regarding the defunct Fox Brothers circus reflect traditional American business practices? How would you compare his behavior with that of major businessmen and financiers of today? What alternative actions would you prefer?
10. As he lies on his bedroll, after his night with Barbara and Nell, Jacob cannot empty his mind of troubling visions, and he reflects that “the more distressing the memory, the more persistent its presence” (page 143). How might the elderly Jacob’s memories corroborate or contradict this observation? What have been your experiences and observations in this regard?

## Book-Group Discussion Questions

11. In his *Carnival of the Animals*, Ogden Nash wrote, “Elephants are useful friends.” In what ways is Rosie a “useful” friend? What is Rosie’s role in the events that follow her acquisition by Uncle Al?
12. After Jacob successfully coaches August in Polish commands for Rosie, he observes, “It’s only when I catch Rosie actually *purring* under August’s loving ministrations that my conviction starts to crumble. And what I’m left looking at in its place is a terrible thing” (page 229). What is Jacob left “looking at,” how does it pertain to August’s personality and Jacob’s relationship with August, and what makes it a “terrible thing”?
13. How did you react to the redlighting of Walter and Camel, and eight others, off the trestle? How might we see Uncle Al’s cutthroat behavior as “an indictment of a lifetime spent feigning emotions to make a buck” (in the words of one reviewer)?
14. After the collapse of the Benzini Brothers circus and Uncle Al’s having “done a runner” (page 314), 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 Jacob and Marlena’s—and their menagerie’s—future after they leave the Benzini Brothers circus? How do the elderly Jacob’s memories of Marlena and their life together confirm or alter those expectations?
15. At the end of the novel, Jacob exclaims, “So what if I’m ninety-three? . . . why the hell shouldn’t I run away with the circus?” (page 331). What would you project to be the elderly Jacob’s experiences after he runs away with the circus the second time? How does his decision reflect what we have learned about his early years?

Book-Group Discussion Questions

16. Sara Gruen has said that the “backbone” of her novel “parallels the biblical story of Jacob,” in the book of Genesis. On the first night after his leaving Cornell, for example, Jacob—as did his biblical namesake—lies “back on the bank, resting my head on a flat stone” (page 23). In what other ways does *Water for Elephants* parallel the story of the biblical Jacob? How do the names of many of the characters reflect names of characters in the biblical account?
  
17. In the words of one reviewer, *Water for Elephants* “explores . . . the pathetic grandeur of the Depression-era circus.” In what ways and to what extent do the words “pathetic grandeur” describe the world that Gruen creates in her novel?