The story is told as a series of memories by Jacob Jankowski, a ninety-three year-old man who lives in a nursing home.

As the memories begin, Jacob Jankowski is twenty-three years old and preparing for his final exams as a Cornell University veterinary student when he receives the news that his parents were killed in a car accident. Jacob’s father was a veterinarian and Jacob had planned to join his practice. When Jacob learns that his father was deeply in debt because he had been treating animals for free as well as mortgaging the family home to provide Jacob an Ivy League education, he has a breakdown and leaves school just short of graduation. In the dark of night, he jumps on a train only to learn it is a circus train. When the owner of the circus, Uncle Al, learns of his training as a vet, he is hired to care for the circus animals. This consequently leads Jacob to share with a dwarf named Walter (who is known as Kinko to the circus) and his dog Queenie. A few weeks later Jacob is summoned to take a look at Camel; an old man who after drinking Jamaican ginger extract for many years can’t move his arms or legs. Fearing Camel will be redlighted (thrown off the train while moving) Jacob hides him in his and Walter’s room.

The head trainer, August, is a brutal man who abuses the animals in his care (such as the new elephant Rosie) as well as the people around him. Alternately, he can be utterly charming. Jacob develops a guarded relationship with August and his wife, Marlena, with whom Jacob falls in love. August is suspicious of their relationship and beats Marlena and Jacob. Marlena subsequently leaves August and stays at a hotel while she’s not performing. Uncle Al then informs Jacob that August is a paranoid schizophrenic and then gives him a threat: reunite August and Marlena as a happily married couple or Walter and Camel get redlighted.
A few days later after discovering that August has tried to see Marlena, Jacob visits her in her hotel room. Soon after comforting her however, Jacob and Marlena sleep together and then eventually declare their love for each other. Marlena soon returns to the circus to perform (and also to have secret meetings with Jacob), but refuses to have August near her, which makes Uncle Al extremely mad. Days later Marlena informs Jacob that she is pregnant.

One night Jacob climbs up and jumps each car while the train’s moving to August’s room, carrying a knife between his teeth. Intending to kill August, Jacob backs out and returns to his car, only to find no one there but Queenie. He then realises that Walter and Camel were redlighted and Jacob himself was supposed to be too.

As the story climaxes, several circus workers who were redlighted off the train come back and release the animals causing a stampede during the performance. (Redlighting refers to throwing circus workers off the moving train as punishment or in order to avoid paying them[2]). In the ensuing panic, August is killed by Rosie the elephant, and the only one who sees the murder is Jacob. As a result of this incident, which occurred during a circus performance, the circus is shut down. Soon after, Uncle Al's body is found with a makeshift garrote around his neck. Marlena and Jacob leave, along with several circus animals (Rosie, Queenie and others), and begin their life together.

Ninety-three year old Jacob is waiting for his family to take him to the circus. It is uncovered Jacob and Marlena married and had 5 children spending the first 7 years at another circus before Jacob gets a job as a vet for the zoo. After finding out no one is coming for him, elderly Jacob goes to the circus on his own. He soon meets the manager Charlie and begs him to accompany the circus by selling tickets. Charlie agrees and Jacob believes he has finally come home.
Sara Gruen’s Water for Elephants has become one of the most beloved and bestselling novels of our time. Readers fell in love with Water for Elephants and its story of Jacob, a young man tossed by fate onto a rickety train that was home to the Benzini Brothers Most Spectacular Show on Earth, and Rosie, the untrainable elephant. This instant #1 New York Times bestseller is now available in 44 languages and has over 3 million copies in print worldwide. The movie version is in the works, starring Reese Witherspoon, Christoph Waltz, and Robert Pattinson (2011 release).

Sara Gruen moved to the United States from Canada in 1999 for a technical writing job. When she got laid off two years later, she decided to try her hand at writing fiction. A devoted animal lover, her first novel, Riding Lessons, explored the intimate and often healing spaces between people and animals and was a USA Today bestseller. She wrote a second novel, Flying Changes, also about horses.

Sara Gruen’s most recent book is Ape House, which features the amazing Bonobo ape. When a number of apes are kidnapped from a language laboratory, their mysterious appearance on a reality TV show calls into question our assumptions about these animals who share 99.4% of our DNA. Gruen has had a life-long fascination with human-ape discourse, with a particular interest in Bonobo apes. She has studied linguistics and a system of lexigrams in order to communicate with apes, and is one of the few visitors who has been allowed access to the Great Ape Trust in Des Moines, Iowa, where the apes have come to love her. In bringing her experience and research to bear on this novel, she opens the animal world to us as few novelists have done. Ape House is a riveting, funny, compassionate, and, finally, deeply moving new novel that secures Sara Gruen’s place as a master storyteller who allows us to see ourselves as we never have before.
Discussion Questions

1. Water for Elephants moves between a story about a circus and a story about an old man in a nursing home. How do the chapters about the older Jacob enrich the story about Jacob’s adventure with the circus? How would the novel be different if Gruen had only written about the younger Jacob, keeping the story linear and never describing Jacob’s life as an old man?

2. Did the chapters about the nursing home change how you think about older people? In what ways are the doctors and nurses condescending? How is Rosemary different? How do you treat older people?

3. In chapter two, the twenty-three year old Jacob starts his story by telling us he is a virgin. From the cooch tent to the erections the older Jacob gets when being bathed, sexuality is woven into the whole story. Why do you think Gruen added these details? What role does sexuality play in Water for Elephants?

4. When you first read the Prologue, who did you think murdered the man? Were you surprised by who the actual murderer was?

5. 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).

6. Why does Jacob get so mad about Mr. McGuinity lying about carrying water for elephants? Do you see and similarities of temperament between the young Jacob and the old Jacob?

7. In what ways is Water for Elephants a survival story? A love story? An adventure?

8. Water for Elephants has a happy ending for Jacob, but not for many other characters. Discuss Walter and Camel’s fates. How does tragedy fit into the story?

9. There is an “us and them” mentality in the circus between performers and workers. How does Jacob bridge these two classes of people? Why does each group hate another group? Does the circus merely mirror society in an exaggerated way?

10. Are you satisfied with the end?

11. 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 who repeatedly pulled out her stake and stole lemonade. Gruen did extensive research before writing Water for Elephants. Was her story believable?