

Life is the most
spectacular show on
earth!- sara gruen,
water for elephants.

[Entertainment](#), [Movie](#)



" All I can do is put in time waiting for the inevitable. Observing the ghosts from my past, rattling around in my vacuous present. They crash and bang and make themselves at home, mostly because there's no competition. I've stopped fighting them. " says Jacob Jankowski, who is now ninety (or ninety three). Mr. Jankowski reflects upon memories of himself as a young man, tossed by an unnerving past into the lively world of the circus. Without a home, friend to call, or penny to his name- the circus must be ideal for Jacob, but is it? Page by page, this new life proves to be both a sanctuary and a literal hell for Jacob.

Revealing the horrors of the circus, the beauty of all things living, and the reality that life that never stops moving forward, Sara Gruen presents; *Water for Elephants*- a profound, brilliantly written novel that lives, teaches, and captivates far beyond the last page. " I had my whole life planned, I knew exactly where it was taking me.. " said Jacob Jankowski- before fate threw him into a whole new world; a world filled with freaks and secrets, a world with it's own set of rules, and it's own way of life. A youthful Jacob proves to be intelligent and compassionate, as well as honest and independent.

Studying at Cornell, Jacob appears to be on a road to success. One moment he is taking the final exam at Cornell. And the next, Jacob's road to success is taken from beneath his feet. Both of his parents have died in a car accident, now orphaned and without a home or money, Jacob leaves Cornell and before he can blink he has jumped onto a train owned by the Benzini Brothers Most Spectacular Show on Earth. " Age is a terrible thief. Just when you're getting the hang of life, it knocks your legs out from under you and

stoops your back. It makes you ache and muddies your head and silently spreads cancer throughout your spouse."

Says a now older Jacob Jankowski in his ninties, predestined to await his death in anursinghome. With his life now behind him, Mr. Jankowski is a defiant, frustrated old man with the same independence he had as a student at Cornell. His soul now weathered, we learn that he is a man with an old soul, he has lived his life honestly. However, life in this home has suffocated his independence, and frustrated him deeply. He feels he is being treated like an animal in the circus, not as a respectedhuman being. He reminises, asking himself many of the questions that we ask ourselves; am I happy?

Am I successful? am I at peace?. Mr. Jankowski is a man who lived through one of the biggest circus disasters in history, yet no one has found the time to listen to him, Mr. Jankowski is left alone to reflect on his life. Though his memory fails him at times in the present, his life in the past remains vivid and evident, he recalls every last detail of his life in the circus. Mr. Jankowski's memories, written as he remembers, become the unforgettable story- Water for Elephants. Jacob Jankowski is studying at Cornell, an Ivy league college, he is extremely successfull.

At this moment, Jacob seems to have a healthy, successfull life in the palm of his hands, but Jacob soon finds himself in complete despiration, confusion, he has nothing. Both of Jacob's parents have died in a car accident, Jacob is notified that at the time of their death, his parents did not have a dollar to their name. They had stopped paying mortgage, in order to pay for Jacob's tuition. Jacob's home, and all of his parents possesions are now property of

the state. Jacob has no friends to call, no money to support himself, and no family other than his deceased parents.

Jacob is in shock, he is cold, he feels he is watching himself walk aimlessly throughout life. During Jacob's final exam at Cornell, Jacob discovers that his life has suddenly lost all meaning. Jacob leaves in the middle of his exam, and he never looked back. These events have brought Jacob to a river, where he finds, and boards a train. He did not know where this train was going, or why he was on it. All he knew was that his new life now lied within wherever the train was heading. Jacob finds that this train is owned by Benzini Brother's Most Spectacular Show on Earth. This begins the journey that turned Mr.

Jankowski into the man he is today. On the train- Jacob meets Camel, an old, fatherly figure, and a harmless drunk. Camel warns Jacob about life in the circus, and advises him that if he has a home, to go back to it, that life on the train will prove to be more of a nightmare than whatever he's left behind. Jacob assures Camel that he has left nothing behind, all that he has lies ahead of him. With this said, Camel speaks to Uncle Al (the ringmaster), who is very interested in Jacob. Having an Ivy league veterinarian makes Benzini Brother's one step closer in comparison to their rival, Ringling Brother's.

Jacob now has a job, a home, and more or less, a family on the train. Jacob is staying in a car with a performer named Walter, and his dog Queenie. Jacob does his job, and goes far beyond that. He sees that the animals are being mistreated, underfed, and are not supplied with clean water, this is unsettling to Jacob, who does what he can to help these abused animals.

Jacob meets August (head of the animal acts) and his wife, Marlana (one of the show's stars, lead of the equestrian act). Jacob is attracted to Marlana, but August and other workers have made it clear that Marlana is off limits, and August will do anything to make that clear.

Jacob quickly falls in love with life under the big top, and discovers the beauty in circus 'freaks'. They are all people just like him, with nothing in their past but sorrow, and no way of continuing forward, besides the train. Jacob discovers all the show's secrets, some beautiful, some horrifying. As the show travels from city to city, the effects of the Great Depression become more apparent, more people get red-lighted, less animals get fed, the conditions for all life depending on the Show get drastically worse. Benzini Brothers eventually accumulate a circus elephant named Rosie.

She was the 'great gray hope' the new act that was going to put Benzini Brothers on the map, Rosie would be the salvation of the show. Unfortunately, Rosie is deemed useless. August cannot communicate with her, therefore he cannot train her, and she may not perform and save the show. August's anger and mental instability cause him to abuse her on a regular basis. Jacob sees this, and it upsets him. Jacob learns that Rosie is indeed intelligent, she can be trained, and she can perform. The barrier between August and Rosie was that Rosie did not understand English.

With Jacob's help, August trains Rosie in her vernacular- German. Meanwhile, Camel has become incredibly sick. Jacob searches restlessly for answers, from town to town looking for a doctor with answers. Camel has become

useless to the show, now paralyzed, and slowly dying, he could no longer work. In the times of the Great Depression, Benzini Brothers couldn't afford to feed a man who can't do his job. It is apparent to Walter and Jacob that if Uncle Al hears of Camel's illness, he would be redlighted that evening. Jacob discovers that Camel has Jake Poisoning.

Jake Poisoning was common during the 1930s Prohibition Era, it came from drinking Jamacian Ginger extract. Jacob and Walter hid their old, now paralyzed friend in their traincar, planning to meet up with Camel's son in one of the cities of Benzini's performances. Unfortunately, Uncle Al discovers Camel before he could be taken to safety. This is during one of the shows most financially tragic times in the Great Depression, in order to stay in business and be able to feed the animals, they must cut more performers, and more workers. Walter and Camel are redlighted, Jacob escapes death.

Jacob and Marlana become closer, they share an unconditional love for the animals, and a passion for each other. They are both running from their pasts, and reaching out for someone to hold. Their romance must remain secret to ensure their safety. They are cautious, but August suspects that Marlana is unloyal. August becomes progressively more violent, and eventually lashes out- beating both Marlana and Jacob. Marlana explains to Jacob that August charmed her during her earliest days in the circus she felt lust for him and they married, but this perfect image soon turned dark. August was abusive, bipolar, and very angry.

In conclusion, Marlana leaves August and is finally able to acknowledge her love her Jacob. A surviving group of men that were redlighted during the

Depression catch up with the show, and start an animal riot during one of its performances. With animals running wild in the bigtop, there is chaos amongst the performers. During this, Jacob struggles to find Marlena to ensure her safety. As Jacobs eyes lock onto Marlenas, he sees Rosie behind her, lift the stake the once constricted her from the ground. She 'lifted the stake high in the air and brought it down splitting his (August's) head

like a watermelon'. Jacob and Marlena live happily together, they marry, and have children. Jacob gets his degree at Cornell, Rosie, Bobo (Jacob's baboon), and four of Marlena's beloved horses accompany them in Ringling Brothers Circus. Jacob's children grow up, Marlena dies of cancer, and Jacob retires to a nursing home. prohibition era important to plot- caused camels death. came from jamacian ginger extract, jamacian ginger itself was not dangerous, but during prohibition the government recognized it as a source of alochol, and changed its contents.

Setting- Setting greatly impacts the course of this novel. In fact, many of the struggles Jacob faced as a young man in the circus were a direct outcome of the time period this novel was set in. One major setting of this novel is the Benzini Brothers circus. Where a young Jacob runs to in a time of complete despiration, where he is hired as a veterinarian, meets and falls in love with Marlena, a star in the show. After leaving Benzini Brothers, Marlena and Jacob work at Ringling. This later impacts his life one final time; Mr. Jankowski leaves the nursing home to return to the circus, his real home.

In the final pages of this novel, Jacob resorts back to the circus, the only place he feels accepted. Jacob becomes the tickmaster for Ringling. Another

main setting of this novel is the retirement home. This retirement home is where he relives his youth, and tells it in story form, which is what we read. It is here that Jacob reflects on his life, and we watch and understand his thoughts and frustrations. This retirement home was set next to a park, Jacob looks out his window and sees the circus is in town, which sets this story into action.

In the retirement home, Jacob feels alienated, alone, and forgotten. The time period also greatly effected this novel- both the Great Depression and the 1930s Prohibition took place during this novel. Due to the Great Depression, the Benzini Brothers Most Spectacular Show on Earth was sturggling financially, resulting in it's workers being ' red lighted'. The Prohibition evidentially caused Camel's death. The prohibition was a national ban of the transport, consumption, and sale in the United States from 1920 to 1930.

As a result, the government Jamacian Ginger as a potential alcohol source, and because of this, required manufactures to change its contents before sale. It was later dicovered that these modifications to Jamacian Ginger cause paralayzation, which Camel suffered from. Symbolism- Symbolism is an important, and commonly used element in this novel. One symbol used in this novel is the stake that holds Rosie to the ground. August chained her up, in order to control and confine her. This stake represents captivity, and pain.

Later in the novel, this stake also symbolizes freedom. The stake that was once used to confine Rose, fulling exposing her to August's abuse, was used to kill August, freeing Rosie, Marlana, and Jacob. Included in the title, water is another evident symbol in this novel. Throughout the entire novel, water

represents purity, and a fresh start. When Jacob left his final exams and walked to the trains, there was a river nearby which he rinsed his feet on. Being by this river led him to the train tracks, which led Jacob to a whole new world.

Throughout the book, each of its characters carry heavy burdens, mistakes, and haunting memories from the past, water represents an escape from these horrors. The train tracks represent life's way of continually moving forward, never pausing to wait for its passengers. Rosie's desperation represents the American's struggle during the Great Depression. Conflict- Man vs. Nature (Barrier between domesticated animals and the humans that try to train and confine, rather than understand them.), Man vs. Self (Mr. Jankowski vs. Jacob Jankowski), and Man vs. Man (Jacob vs.

August over both Marlena and the animals) are all represented throughout this novel. Flashback- Flashback is another literary element used throughout this novel. Flashback greatly impacts the mood of this book, allowing us to see the conflict between young Jacob and old Jacob. This flashback also allows us to see Mr. Jankowski's yearning for young love, young passion, and feeling accepted. Foreshadowing- Foreshadowing is introduced within the first few pages, revealing to us that Jacob has witnessed a murder, this keeps the reader's attention, the details of the murder are not revealed until the final chapter.

I thoroughly enjoyed this book, page after page it captivated me. I would find myself reading for hours on end, Gruen's imagery made you, yourself feel like you were living a hectic life in the circus. Each page pulled you farther

into a world of freaks, ringmasters, anger, love, and above all, passion. Water for Elephants taught the lifechanging lesson, that in the end, everyone returns home. I strongly suggest this novel to a mature audience who wants to be enchanted by rich memories of the circus, and an old man's fight to maintain dignity and sanity in a changing world.