

Water for elephants, an analysis

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The title: Water for Elephants. The author: Sara Gruen, a writer from Vancouver, Canada, place where she presently lives. This book, as the rest of her collection, was written in English, same language in which I read it. It is considered as a Historical Romance novel, genre that is proved with the story and the facts of the book.

We can say it is historical because it belongs to a specific and known era in history. Romance, because the story revolves around a young couple fighting for their love. Finally we have the word “novel” which tells us that the story comes from the imagination of the author, and is not a recounting of a real event. In the story, we follow Jacob, a veterinary student in Cornell University who drops out after hearing of his parents' death. He then wanders without direction until he comes across the Benzini Brothers circus, where his real life begins.

It doesn't belong to a specific literary current as it was written only two years ago. You could say it is part of the modern era. The book holds many characters, dozens of personalities that enchant the reader, but none like the main character and his beloved. Jacob and Marlena represent one of the most magical couples among millions of books. Although their story may be very similar to others (a forbidden love, two people fighting for what they desire, able to do anything to get it), their particular personalities bring something to the story that is completely different.

When we imagine them, we feel as if they're real. There comes a point when we are sure that they live with us, that they are a couple of our friends. Jacob Jankowski, our narrator and the person the focuses on, is presented to

us with two physical appearances. There is the young man: brown hair, brown eyes and still in his twenties, and then, we have the man in the present: The Jacob that is ninety-three years old and leads the story. He is, no matter at what age, a very emotional man.

He isn't afraid to love, and is sure of his feelings, following them without question. Because of this his reactions are strong, immediate. He is a planner and does think things through, but he also believes strongly on his feelings, and this won't change. All he wants in his life is to be happy. For most of the book, what he seeks is Marlena's love, and the way to get her off August's clutches, her abusive husband.

This is directly related to his internal, and external conflict. His heart screams "MARLENA", but his head sees her with August. As a reader can realize by now, true love for him is overwhelming, it fills his body and becomes him, it is all he wants, his only purpose is to have a full life with Marlena. (To those who haven't read the book, stop right here, I am about to spoil it for you.) His purpose, his conflict, and his Leif motif (which refers to the person or thing that pulls him, that keeps him going on and leads the story), is the girl he meets in a circus. From being these three things and more, she does become his wife, and the mother of his children.

For those readers who have reached this point, be happy, Jacob and Marlena do end up together. Marlena is beautiful, strong, and completely breathtaking. Unlike Jacob, we only know her with blonde hair, red lips, rosy cheeks and a hundred percent irresistible to the main character. She also has a strong belief in her emotions, and for this she is independent, and sure

of what she believes in. She isn't the type to be manipulated by a man, but her emotions don't let her see August as he really is, and instead what she feels for him is pity. Her emotions are never a secret or a mystery to her.

She knows when it is love, or hate, pity or desire. Also unlike Jacob, her reactions aren't quick. She takes time to decide what she will do, what the best course of actions is, but when she does decide to respond aggressively and she is sure that it is the right decision, she doesn't hold back. Before meeting Jacob, her purpose in life is being good at her job, making sure the animals she works with are cared for, and at the same time that she is the best person she can be. The moment she sees the love of her life though, everything changes.

As him, she falls in love immediately, and although she tries to fight it, her nature comes through and towards the end she gives in. The conflict she experiences comes from her husband. She doesn't love him, but feels committed to him; she does love Jacob, but doesn't know how to be with him in a real way. Her life motif, what leads her through the story, is her love for Jacob, and her love for the animals she works with. Jacob drops out of veterinary school because the death of his parents erases his love for life, his purpose.

When he gets to the circus and meets Marlana, what he had lost is restored. He sees her everyday and feels his love growing. He tries to kiss her and she pulls back, but when he sees she is unhappy, he tries again. After many hardships, his wish is granted, and he gets a long, happy life with his love. The relevance of this book, and the plot, isn't the story itself, but the setting

and the psychological environment. Although *Water for Elephants* is a novel, the description of the circus, the effect it has on each of the characters and even the details the author gives us on how it is built are essential, and cannot be ignored.

It is set in the 1930s, an era when circuses would arrive to every town and entertain millions of people. The shows, the food, even something as simple as the tents, play an important part in society, and culture itself. People were different when entering the circus. It gave them something to look forward to, something to admire. This presence of the “Benzini Brothers Circus” on towns throughout the novel, gives readers a sense of another time.

As it did with the crowds of the thirties, the description entertains us, makes us feel, and overall transports us to another time and place. It even changes who we are and transforms our reality. The way the story is developed is very singular. The novel starts with Jacob as an old man, telling the audience of his life in the present, the way he spends his days in the hospital. Every two or three chapters, maybe less, the perspective switches.

Although the life of Jacob as a young man is narrated to us in the form of a dream, we live it in the present. Three chapters later, we are taken back to the “real” world, and we meet with Jacob as an old man once again.

Although we find ourselves only for a short time in class with Jacob, the setting is mainly divided in two: The 1930s when Jacob lives, breathes and works in the circus; and seventy years later, when our main character finds himself in an elderly home. At the end of the book however, he goes back to the circus, still as an old man, and continues to live his dream. The setting is

so transcendental and has such an effect on the environment, that it reaches the rest of the novel too.

The text is infused with circus talk, slang from the performers and workers. The characters let this psychology get mixed up inside their minds. The circus changes their attitude, their personality. We even see it is as Jacob, who thinks everything that is important can only be learned at school. Then he is introduced to the pure magic of the circus and he realizes that what he loves is what must lead his life, and that happiness is the thing that will keep him alive.

This magic also makes all believe they're capable of anything and everything, and most importantly that there is no day like the present. The last thing that is affected is the plot itself. The story revolves around the circus, treating it almost as one of the characters. Every action, every feeling, every conflict is directly related to the tents, and to the mystery that is contained within them. Sara Gruen is an author that has an amazing ability with words. Out of everything within the book, the language is my absolute favorite part.

She plays with your feelings, telling you exactly what you want to hear. The description, to me, is exquisite. Gruen gives you a million eyes, a thousand noses and a hundred ears. You are able to see each event, each breath of each character, from all possible points of view. The most beautiful part is that the words are like water.

They flow off the page and into you like a river flowing through a forest. If read aloud, each syllable comes out of your mouth and slips around your

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tongue as naturally and as effortless as if they had been there all along. While reading, you agree with everything and the words make you part of the story. You may even end up talking like one of the characters. The language is what makes this book extraordinary.

It is what leads Jacob to kiss Marlena, and her to kiss him back. It is what makes Rosie, the beautiful elephant and another of the main characters, seem like an actual human being. Finally, it is what makes the readers, and frankly what made me, fall hopelessly in love with the novel. This eight letter word is what makes the books as valuable as love, and the audience even richer than the Queen of England. From the l-a-n, to the beauty of the g-u-a, and the perfect ending of g-e, the words used by Gruen are what make this book a masterpiece as wonderful as life itself. One day I will read it again, I am sure of it.

Maybe with new eyes and an old sight, but I know that the feeling will be the same. I will fall in love once more with Jacob, Marlena and Rosie the elephant, and it will be as deep as it was the first time. The words will once again become a part of my skin, a part of my soul and a part of myself.