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Water for Elephants by Sara Gruen, Algonquin Books, 2007

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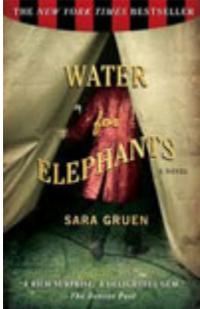
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Recommended Readings



Water for Elephants

by Sara Gruen, Algonquin Books, 2007

Reviewed by Richard McGowan

If you ever entertained ideas of what it's like to work for and travel with a circus, consider reading Sara Gruen's eminently enjoyable *Water for Elephants* first. You might reconsider unless circus life has changed significantly from the depression-era circus depicted in this book.

Life in that circus was, in a word, harsh. And yet, the main character, Jacob Jankowski, looks wistfully upon his experience with the Benzini Brothers' Most Spectacular Show on Earth. I suppose that is only natural for a 93 year-old as he looks from his nursing home at the circus being set up in town. He remembers his days on 'the Spec'-the performers and roustabouts; the animals, especially the elephant, Rosie; and the 'rubes.' He remembers the demands made on his young body and compares that life to the face he now sees in the mirror.

The book, therefore, is not just a story about the greatest show on earth but also about being young and growing old, about falling in love and the presence of memory.

Gruen wove several stories about life in the Big Top so *Water for Elephants* was properly researched. In fact, when my friend recommended the book to me, my friend said, "My uncle left home to join the circus. He said it was the closest account of circus life that he has read."

Ms. Gruen brought the greatest show on earth to her readers. In her hands, that show is life and its fullness.

- Richard McGowan is Instructor of Business Ethics at Butler University.