

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLER

WATER *for* ELEPHANTS

A NOVEL

SARA GRUEN



“Gritty, sensual and charged with dark secrets involving love, murder and a majestic, mute heroine.” —*Parade*

Praise for WATER FOR ELEPHANTS

“Lively with historical detail and unexpected turns. . . . *Water for Elephants* is a rich surprise, a delightful gem springing from a fascinating footnote to history that absolutely deserved to be mined.”

—*The Denver Post*

“So compelling, so detailed and vivid, that I couldn’t bear to be torn away from it for a single minute.”

—*Chicago Tribune*

“Gruen unearths a lost world with her rich and surprising portrayal of life in a traveling circus in the ’30s. An emotional tale that will please history buffs—and others.”

—*People*

“[An] arresting new novel. . . . With a showman’s expert timing, [Gruen] saves a terrific revelation for the final pages, transforming a glimpse of Americana into an enchanting escapist fairy tale. . . . *Water for Elephants* resembles stealth hits like *The Giant’s House*, by Elizabeth McCracken, or *The Lovely Bones*, by Alice Sebold, books that combine outrageously whimsical premises with crowd-pleasing romanticism.”

—*The New York Times Book Review*

“Sara Gruen has written a rare book that is a great story, well written and bearing one of the happiest endings you will ever read.”

—Rona Brinlee, NPR’s *Morning Edition*

“[This] sprightly tale has a ringmaster’s crowd-pleasing pace.”

—*Entertainment Weekly*

“Gritty, sensual and charged with dark secrets involving love, murder and a majestic, mute heroine (Rosie the Elephant).”

—*Parade*

“You’ll get lost in the tatty glamour of Gruen’s meticulously researched world, from spangled equestrian pageantry and the sleazy side show to an ill-fated night at a Chicago speak-easy.”

—*The Washington Post*

“[A] riveting story. . . . Gruen is an old-fashioned storyteller, who, in keeping with John Updike’s blueprint for fiction, ‘can keep an organized mass of images and characters.’”

—*The Toronto Globe and Mail*

“Sara Gruen offers love, drama and thrills under the big top. Only the most hardened of audience members will be able to resist.”

—*The Tampa Tribune*

“A fascinating setting and a richly anecdotal story that is enjoyable right up to the final, inevitable revelation.”

—*The Onion*

“Gruen sets her story among the freaks and geeks and captive animals of a traveling circus during the Great Depression. It’s a good move. . . . She ratchets up the tension bit by tiny bit, luring us into the weird world of the roustabout and the candy butcher, the fat lady and the cooch coach.”

—Veronique De Turenne, NPR’s *Day to Day*

“Gruen performs a double trick in her novel: She gives an engrossing picture of circus life as well as a taste of what it’s like to grow old.”

—*Minneapolis Star Tribune*

“A beautiful book.”

—John Searles, CBS’s *The Early Show*

“A piercing look at Depression-era circus life, where violence, laughter managed to coexist. . . . Sara Gruen’s *Water for Elephants* captures the sounds, smells and sights of the circus. . . . Delicious.”

—*The Charlotte Observer*

“Novelist Sara Gruen sweeps her readers off their feet in the opening pages of *Water For Elephants*—and doesn’t let go until she deposits them at the end of her fantastic tale of passion, madness and fancy. . .

. The last notes of *Water for Elephants* linger long after the book ends. The alternating glamour and squalor of the circus world Gruen expertly conjures may truly be one of the greatest shows.”

—*The Grand Rapids Press*

“You need this elephant in your life. . . . *Water for Elephants* is a keeper.”

—*Baton Rouge Journal*

“Jacob’s search for lost time is vivid and atmospheric, his story told with passion and an eye for the curious and entertaining detail.”

—*Bookmarks* magazine

“A love letter to a colorful but terrifying past and an exciting story from cover to cover. . . . This is sheer fun.”

—*Richmond Times-Dispatch*

“Endlessly surprising and superior in its attention to detail, the novel is the unknown adventure saga we can’t believe we’ve never heard.”

—*The Kansas City Star*

“Vivid, riveting, and surprisingly poignant.”

—*Pages*

“A rich, rolling epic of a story. It’s like those circus posters of days gone by: ‘You’ll laugh, you’ll cry, you won’t believe your eyes. Step forward ladies and gentlemen.’ And indeed you should.”

—*Independent Weekly*

“*Water for Elephants* vividly and concisely brings this lost world to life.”

—*Columbus Dispatch*

“Old-fashioned and endearing, this is an enjoyable, fast-paced story.”

—*Library Journal*

“Lovely and mesmerizing.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“[A] page-turner. . . . Gruen skillfully humanizes midgets, drunks, rubes and freaks who populate her book.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“Gorgeous, brilliant, and superbly plotted, *Water for Elephants* swept me into the world of the circus during the Depression, and it did not let me go until the very end. I don’t think it has let me go, even now. Sara Gruen has a voice to rival John Irving’s, and I am hopelessly, unabashedly in love with this book. Read it.”

—Joshilyn Jackson, author of *Gods in Alabama*

“So much more than a tale about a circus, *Water for Elephants* is a compelling journey not only under the big top, but into the protagonist’s heart. Sara Gruen uses her talent as a writer to bring that world alive for the reader: I could smell it, taste it, feel every word of it. This is a fiction reader’s dream come true.”

—Jeanne Ray, author of *Julie and Romeo Get Lucky*

“The circus, the Great Depression, a complex elephant, equally complex love, the mists and twists of memory articulated in the utterly winning voice of a very old man who’s seen it all: these are the irresistible elements of *Water for Elephants*. Sara Gruen has written an utterly transporting novel richly full of the stuff of life.”

—Robert Olen Butler, author of *From Where You Dream*

“An entirely original, captivating story of finding love in a down-at-the-heels traveling circus in the Great Depression. Sara Gruen writes with great tenderness and breathtaking drama, which makes the novel impossible to put down.”

—Stephanie Cowell, author of *Marrying Mozart*

“In this thrilling, romantic story set in a traveling circus in the 1930s, Sara Gruen has a big top’s worth of vivid characters and an exhilarating narrative that kept me up all night. From the perseverance of a terrier named Queenie to the charm of Rosie the elephant, this masterpiece of storytelling is a book about what animals can teach people about love.”

—Susan Cheever, author of *My Name Is Bill*

WATER FOR ELEPHANTS



A NOVEL

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This is a work of fiction. While, as in all fiction, the literary perceptions and insights are based on experience, all names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. No reference to any real person is intended or should be inferred.

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FOR BOB,
STILL MY SECRET WEAPON

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I meant what I said, and I said what I meant . . .
An elephant's faithful—one hundred per cent!

—THEODOR SEUSS GEISEL, *Horton Hatches the Egg*,
1940

WATER FOR ELEPHANTS



COLLECTION OF THE RINGLING CIRCUS MUSEUM, SARASOTA, FLORIDA

Prologue

Only three people were left under the red and white awning of the grease joint: Grady, me, and the fry cook. Grady and I sat at a battered wooden table, each facing a burger on a dented tin plate. The cook was behind the counter, scraping his griddle with the edge of a spatula. He had turned off the fryer some time ago, but the odor of grease lingered.

The rest of the midway—so recently writhing with people—was empty but for a handful of employees and a small group of men waiting to be led to the cooch tent. They glanced nervously from side to side, with hats pulled low and hands thrust deep in their pockets. They wouldn't be disappointed: somewhere in the back Barbara and her ample charms awaited.

The other townsfolk—rubes, as Uncle Al called them—had already made their way through the menagerie tent and into the big top, which pulsed with frenetic music. The band was whipping through its repertoire at the usual earsplitting volume. I knew the routine by heart—at this very moment, the tail end of the Grand Spectacle was exiting and Lottie, the aerialist, was ascending her rigging in the center ring.

I stared at Grady, trying to process what he was saying. He glanced around and leaned in closer.

“Besides,” he said, locking eyes with me, “it seems to me you’ve got a lot to lose right now.” He raised his eyebrows for emphasis. My heart skipped a beat.

Thunderous applause exploded from the big top, and the band slid seamlessly into the Gounod waltz. I turned instinctively toward the menagerie because this was the cue for the elephant act. Marlena was either preparing to mount or was already sitting on Rosie’s head.

“I’ve got to go,” I said.

“Sit,” said Grady. “Eat. If you’re thinking of clearing out, it may be a while before you see food again.”

That moment, the music screeched to a halt. There was an ungodly collision of brass, reed, and percussion—trombones and piccolos skidded into cacophony, a tuba farted, and the hollow clang of a cymbal wavered out of the big top, over our heads and into oblivion.

Grady froze, crouched over his burger with his pinkies extended and lips spread wide.

I looked from side to side. No one moved a muscle—all eyes were directed at the big top. A few wisps of hay swirled lazily across the hard dirt.

“What is it? What’s going on?” I said.

“*Shh*,” Grady hissed.

The band started up again, playing “Stars and Stripes Forever.”

“Oh Christ. Oh shit!” Grady tossed his food onto the table and leapt up, knocking over the bench.

“What? What is it?” I yelled, because he was already running away from me.

“The Disaster March!” he screamed over his shoulder.

I jerked around to the fry cook, who was ripping off his apron. “What the hell’s he talking about?”

“The Disaster March,” he said, wrestling the apron over his head. “Means something’s gone bad—real bad.”

“Like what?”

“Could be anything—fire in the big top, stampede, whatever. Aw sweet Jesus. The poor rubes probably don’t even know it yet.” He ducked under the hinged door and took off.

Chaos—candy butchers vaulting over counters, workmen staggering out from under tent flaps, roustabouts racing headlong across the lot. Anyone and everyone associated with the Benzini

Brothers Most Spectacular Show on Earth barreled toward the big top.

Diamond Joe passed me at the human equivalent of a full gallop.

“Jacob—it’s the menagerie,” he screamed. “The animals are loose. Go, go!”

He didn’t need to tell me twice. Marlina was in that tent.

A rumble coursed through me as I approached, and it scared the hell out of me because it was on a register lower than noise. The ground was vibrating.

I staggered inside and met a wall of yak—a great expanse of curly-haired chest and churning hooves, of flared red nostrils and spinning eyes. It galloped past so close I leapt backward on tiptoe, flush with the canvas to avoid being impaled on one of its crooked horns. A terrified hyena clung to its shoulders.

The concession stand in the center of the tent had been flattened, and in its place was a roiling mass of spots and stripes—of haunches, heels, tails, and claws, all of it roaring, screeching, bellowing, or whinnying. A polar bear towered above it all, slashing blindly with skillet-sized paws. It made contact with a llama and knocked it flat—BOOM. The llama hit the ground, its neck and legs splayed like the five points of a star. Chimps screamed and chattered, swinging on ropes to stay above the cats. A wild-eyed zebra zigzagged too close to a crouching lion, who swiped, missed, and darted away, his belly close to the ground.

My eyes swept the tent, desperate to find Marlina. Instead I saw a cat slide through the connection leading to the big top—it was a panther, and as its lithe black body disappeared into the canvas tunnel I braced myself. If the rubes didn’t know, they were about to find out. It took several seconds to come, but come it did—one prolonged shriek followed by another, and then another, and then the whole place exploded with the thunderous sound of bodies trying to shove past other bodies and off the stands. The band screeched to a halt for a second time, and this time stayed silent. I shut my eyes: *Please God*

let them leave by the back end. Please God don't let them try to come through here.

I opened my eyes again and scanned the menagerie, frantic to find her. How hard can it be to find a girl and an elephant, for Christ's sake?

When I caught sight of her pink sequins, I nearly cried out in relief—maybe I did. I don't remember.

She was on the opposite side, standing against the sidewall, calm as a summer day. Her sequins flashed like liquid diamonds, a shimmering beacon between the multicolored hides. She saw me, too, and held my gaze for what seemed like forever. She was cool, languid. Smiling even. I started pushing my way toward her, but something about her expression stopped me cold.

That son of a bitch was standing with his back to her, red-faced and bellowing, flapping his arms and swinging his silver-tipped cane. His high-topped silk hat lay on the straw beside him.

She reached for something. A giraffe passed between us—its long neck bobbing gracefully even in panic—and when it was gone I saw that she'd picked up an iron stake. She held it loosely, resting its end on the hard dirt. She looked at me again, bemused. Then her gaze shifted to the back of his bare head.

"Oh Jesus," I said, suddenly understanding. I stumbled forward, screaming even though there was no hope of my voice reaching her. "Don't do it! *Don't do it!*"

She lifted the stake high in the air and brought it down, splitting his head like a watermelon. His pate opened, his eyes grew wide, and his mouth froze into an *O*. He fell to his knees and then toppled forward into the straw.

I was too stunned to move, even as a young orangutan flung its elastic arms around my legs.

So long ago. So long. But still it haunts me.

I DON'T TALK MUCH about those days. Never did. I don't know why—I worked on circuses for nearly seven years, and if that isn't fodder for conversation, I don't know what is.

Actually I do know why: I never trusted myself. I was afraid I'd let it slip. I knew how important it was to keep her secret, and keep it I did—for the rest of her life, and then beyond.

In seventy years, I've never told a blessed soul.

One

I am ninety. Or ninety-three. One or the other.

When you're five, you know your age down to the month. Even in your twenties you know how old you are. I'm twenty-three, you say, or maybe twenty-seven. But then in your thirties something strange starts to happen. It's a mere hiccup at first, an instant of hesitation. How old are you? Oh, I'm—you start confidently, but then you stop. You were going to say thirty-three, but you're not. You're thirty-five. And then you're bothered, because you wonder if this is the beginning of the end. It is, of course, but it's decades before you admit it.

You start to forget words: they're on the tip of your tongue, but instead of eventually dislodging, they stay there. You go upstairs to fetch something, and by the time you get there you can't remember what it was you were after. You call your child by the names of all your other children and finally the dog before you get to his. Sometimes you forget what day it is. And finally you forget the year.

Actually, it's not so much that I've forgotten. It's more like I've stopped keeping track. We're past the millennium, that much I know—such a fuss and bother over nothing, all those young folks clucking with worry and buying canned food because somebody was too lazy to leave space for four digits instead of two—but that could have been last month or three years ago. And besides, what does it really matter? What's the difference between three weeks or three years or even three decades of mushy peas, tapioca, and Depends undergarments?

I am ninety. Or ninety-three. One or the other.

EITHER THERE'S BEEN an accident or there's roadwork, because a gaggle of old ladies is glued to the window at the end of the

hall like children or jailbirds. They're spidery and frail, their hair as fine as mist. Most of them are a good decade younger than me, and this astounds me. Even as your body betrays you, your mind denies it.

I'm parked in the hallway with my walker. I've come a long way since my hip fracture, and thank the Lord for that. For a while it looked like I wouldn't walk again—that's how I got talked into coming here in the first place—but every couple of hours I get up and walk a few steps, and with every day I get a little bit farther before feeling the need to turn around. There may be life in the old dog yet.

There are five of them now, white-headed old things huddled together and pointing crooked fingers at the glass. I wait a while to see if they wander off. They don't.

I glance down, check that my brakes are on, and rise carefully, steadying myself on the wheelchair's arm while making the perilous transfer to the walker. Once I'm squared away, I clutch the gray rubber pads on the arms and shove it forward until my elbows are extended, which turns out to be exactly one floor tile. I drag my left foot forward, make sure it's steady, and then pull the other up beside it. Shove, drag, wait, drag. Shove, drag, wait, drag.

The hallway is long and my feet don't respond the way they used to. It's not Camel's kind of lameness, thank God, but it slows me down nonetheless. Poor old Camel—it's been years since I thought of him. His feet flopped loosely at the end of his legs so he had to lift his knees high and throw them forward. My feet drag, as though they're weighted, and because my back is stooped I end up looking down at my slippers framed by the walker.

It takes a while to get to the end of the hall, but I do—and on my own pins, too. I'm pleased as punch, although once there I realize I still have to find my way back.

They part for me, these old ladies. These are the vital ones, the ones who can either move on their own steam or have friends to wheel them around. These old girls still have their marbles, and they're good to me. I'm a rarity here—an old man among a sea of widows whose hearts still ache for their lost men.

“Oh, here,” clucks Hazel. “Let’s give Jacob a look.”

She pulls Dolly’s wheelchair a few feet back and shuffles up beside me, clasping her hands, her milky eyes flashing. “Oh, it’s so exciting! They’ve been at it all morning!”

I edge up to the glass and raise my face, squinting against the sunlight. It’s so bright it takes a moment for me to make out what’s happening. Then the forms take shape.

In the park at the end of the block is an enormous canvas tent, thickly striped in white and magenta with an unmistakable peaked top

My ticker lurches so hard I clutch a fist to my chest.

“Jacob! Oh, Jacob!” cries Hazel. “Oh dear! Oh dear!” Her hands flutter in confusion, and she turns toward the hall. “Nurse! Nurse! Hurry! It’s Mr. Jankowski!”

“I’m fine,” I say, coughing and pounding my chest. That’s the problem with these old ladies. They’re always afraid you’re about to keel over. “Hazel! I’m fine!”

But it’s too late. I hear the squeak-squeak-squeak of rubber soles, and moments later I’m engulfed by nurses. I guess I won’t have to worry about getting back to my chair after all.

“SO WHAT’S ON the menu tonight?” I grumble as I’m steered into the dining room. “Porridge? Mushy peas? Pablum? Oh, let me guess, it’s tapioca isn’t it? Is it tapioca? Or are we calling it rice pudding tonight?”

“Oh, Mr. Jankowski, you are a card,” the nurse says flatly. She doesn’t need to answer, and she knows it. This being Friday, we’re having the usual nutritious but uninteresting combination of meat loaf, creamed corn, reconstituted mashed potatoes, and gravy that may have been waved over a piece of beef at some point in its life. And they wonder why I lose weight.

I know some of us don’t have teeth, but I do, and I want pot roast. My wife’s, complete with leathery bay leaves. I want carrots. I want

potatoes boiled in their skins. And I want a deep, rich cabernet sauvignon to wash it all down, not apple juice from a tin. But above all, I want corn on the cob.

Sometimes I think that if I had to choose between an ear of corn or making love to a woman, I'd choose the corn. Not that I wouldn't love to have a final roll in the hay—I am a man yet, and some things never die—but the thought of those sweet kernels bursting between my teeth sure sets my mouth to watering. It's fantasy, I know that. Neither will happen. I just like to weigh the options, as though I were standing in front of Solomon: a final roll in the hay or an ear of corn. What a wonderful dilemma. Sometimes I substitute an apple for the corn.

Everyone at every table is talking about the circus—those who can talk, that is. The silent ones, the ones with frozen faces and withered limbs or whose heads and hands shake too violently to hold utensils, sit around the edges of the room accompanied by aides who spoon little bits of food into their mouths and then coax them into masticating. They remind me of baby birds, except they're lacking all enthusiasm. With the exception of a slight grinding of the jaw, their faces remain still and horrifyingly vacant. Horrifying because I'm well aware of the road I'm on. I'm not there yet, but it's coming. There's only one way to avoid it, and I can't say I much care for that option either.

The nurse parks me in front of my meal. The gravy on the meat loaf has already formed a skin. I poke experimentally with my fork. Its meniscus jiggles, mocking me. Disgusted, I look up and lock eyes with Joseph McGuinty.

He's sitting opposite, a newcomer, an interloper—a retired barrister with a square jaw, pitted nose, and great floppy ears. The ears remind me of Rosie, although nothing else does. She was a fine soul, and he's—well, he's a retired lawyer. I can't imagine what the nurses thought a lawyer and a veterinarian would have in common, but they wheeled him on over to sit opposite me that first night, and here he's been ever since.