

# **BOOK CLUB IN A BOX**

## **Bookclub-in-a-Box presents the discussion companion for Sara Gruen's novel Water For Elephants**

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Quotations used in this guide have been taken from the text of the paperback edition of *Water For Elephants*. All information taken from other sources is acknowledged.

This discussion companion was written by Marilyn Herbert, B.Ed. She is the founder of Bookclub-in-a-Box, and an international speaker with more than 30 years experience as a teacher and school librarian. Bookclub-in-a-Box is a unique guide to current fiction and classic literature intended for book club discussions, educational study seminars, and personal pleasure.

### **Bookclub-in-a-Box discussion companion for Water For Elephants**

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# BOOKCLUB-IN-A-BOX

## Sara Gruen's *Water For Elephants*

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# BOOKCLUB-IN-A-BOX

## Readers and Leaders Guide

Each Bookclub-in-a-Box guide is clearly and effectively organized to give you information and ideas for a lively discussion, as well as to present the major highlights of the novel. The format, with a Table of Contents, allows you to pick and choose the specific points you wish to talk about. It does not have to be used in any prescribed order. In fact, it is meant to support, not determine, your discussion.

### You Choose What to Use.

You may find that some information is repeated in more than one section and may be cross-referenced so as to provide insight on the same idea from different angles.

The guide is formatted to give you extra space to make your own notes.

## How to Begin

**Relax and look forward to enjoying your book club.**

With Bookclub-in-a-Box as your behind the scenes support, there is little for you to do in the way of preparation.

Some readers like to review the guide after reading the novel; some before. Either way, the guide is all you will need as a companion for your discussion. You may find that the guide's interpretation, information, and background have sparked other ideas not included.

Having read the novel and armed with Bookclub-in-a-Box, you will be well prepared to lead or guide or listen to the discussion at hand.

Lastly, if you need some more "hands on" support, feel free to contact us.

## What to Look For

Each Bookclub-in-a-Box guide is divided into easy-to-use sections, which include points on characters, themes, writing style and structure, literary or historical background, author information, and other pertinent features unique to the novel being discussed. These may vary slightly from guide to guide.

**INTERPRETATION OF EACH NOVEL REFLECTS THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE BOOKCLUB-IN-A-BOX TEAM.**

## **Do We Need to Agree?**

**THE ANSWER TO THIS QUESTION IS NO.**

If we have sparked a discussion or a debate on certain points, then we are happy. We invite you to share your group's alternative findings and experiences. You can contact us via our website ([www.bookclubinabox.com](http://www.bookclubinabox.com)), by email ([info@bookclubinabox.com](mailto:info@bookclubinabox.com)), or by phone (1-866-578-5571). We would love to hear from you.

## **Discussion Starters**

There are as many ways to begin a book club discussion as there are members in your group. If you are an experienced group, you will already have your favorite ways to begin. If you are a newly formed group or a group looking for new ideas, here are some suggestions.

- Ask for people's impressions of the novel. (This will give you some idea about which parts of the unit to focus on.)
- Identify a favorite or major character.
- Identify a favorite or major idea.
- Begin with a powerful or pertinent quote. (Not necessarily from the novel.)
- Discuss the historical information of the novel. (Not applicable to all novels.)
- If this author is familiar to the group, discuss the range of his/her work and where this novel stands in that range.
- Use the discussion topics and questions in the Bookclub-in-a-Box guide.

If you have further suggestions for discussion starters, be sure to share them with us and we will share them with others.

**Above All, Enjoy Yourself**

# **INTRODUCTION**

**Novel Quickline**

**Key to the Novel**

**Author Information**

**Background Information**

# INTRODUCTION

## Novel Quickline

*LADIES-S-S-S-S AND GENTLEMEN-N-N-N-N-N!  
Twen-n-n-n-ty five minutes till the big show! Twen-n-  
n-n-ty five minutes! More than enough time to avail  
yourselves of the amazing, the unbelievable, the m-a-a-  
a-a-a-rvelous wonders we have gathered from all four  
corners of the earth, and still find a good seat in the big  
top! Plenty of time to see the oddities, the freaks of  
nature, the spectacles! Ours is the most dazzling collec-  
tion in the world, ladies and gentlemen! In the world, I  
tell you! (p.40)*

Running away with the circus is probably one of the most enduring and romantic images in the world. However, the reality of circus life for the hundreds and thousands of people who joined the early circuses was very hard and painful. This is one of the things that Jacob Jankowski finds out first-hand when he becomes part of the Benzini Brothers Most Spectacular Show on Earth.

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notes

Before Jacob fell into circus life, he was quite well-off — he was in school getting his veterinary degree; he was poised to take over his father's practice; he was falling in love with Catherine. Then tragedy strikes. His parents are killed in a car accident, and due to a series of Depression-related circumstances, Jacob's world collapses.

Jacob learns that not only had his father mortgaged the family property to pay for his ivy league education, but his father also had no other income. He had been accepting payment from destitute farmers, in goods, rather than refusing to look after their sick animals. Jacob is left with nothing — no family, no home, no degree, no work. He is penniless. The only thing he can think to do is to run. By a twist of fate, he runs to the circus.

Because of his veterinary training, Jacob looks after the circus animals, but he does many other jobs as well. He maintains security, shovels out the animal stalls, feeds the tigers, and in addition, he looks after the health and welfare of all the animals. Despite the many hats he wears, Jacob has no specific status with the circus — he is not a performer, he is not a roustabout, nor is he an accredited veterinarian. He leaves school six days before his final exam. In fact, the details of his position in the circus are blurry, just like the fantastic facts of circus life itself. This is one of Gruen's major thematic ideas.

As we enter the novel, we become aware that Jacob's story parallels the story of the circus. Both are aging and changing. Just as the old-time circus has declined during the last century, so too has Jacob's position in his very large family. He is not in the center ring any more. Both Jacob and the circus are about to be relegated to memory, but as Gruen emphasizes, neither should be disregarded.

She has created an enduring picture of both the man and the circus — one that we will not soon forget.



**Thanks for previewing this  
Bookclub-in-a-Box discussion guide.**

**If you'd like to purchase the full guide in  
print or PDF format, just visit:**

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