

Discussion Questions for *Water for Elephants* by Sara Gruen

1. The novel begins with a quote from Dr. Seuss. What does the novel have to say about loyalty during hard times?
2. The prologue gives a glimpse of a climatic scene later in the book. Did this act as a spoiler or wet your appetite for the story? Why do you suppose that the author chose to include the part of the story so early? Did your understanding of this scene change as you read it later in the story? How so?
3. Choosing to have the narrator question his sanity lends an interesting twist to the interplay of past and present in this book. How do the parts with the “old Jacob” add to the book?
4. Jacob does not feel a strong connection to his surviving family and cannot always remember their names. Do you feel that his relationships with them are typical? Jacob’s family does appear to be trying. What could his family have done differently to really help him deal with aging?
5. What did this novel teach you about the world of the circus? Did the author’s portrayal of it strike you as realistic? What business today may have similarities to the circus of yesterday?
6. The circus staff constantly different themselves from the “rubes” and act accordingly. Does the theme of illusion happen elsewhere in the novel?
7. The title, “Water for Elephants” refers to a comment made by a resident of the nursing home. What do you think the author meant by it?
8. The characters of Al and August are both cruel and opportunistic. Do you find their characters well developed and true to life? Following what you learned about schizophrenia from last month’s “the soloist” do you think that August really had paranoid schizophrenia or possibly something else?