

## Jacob Jankowski: The Circus Man



Water for Elephants by Sara Gruen is a fascinating and captivating novel told from the point of view of Jacob Jankowski, a veterinarian who jumps aboard a traveling circus during the depression in the 1930's. The novel has received high praise from numerous critics, and has reached the position of number one on the New York Times bestseller list. Loved for its vivid and colourful characters, Princeton Book Review says "Water for Elephants is a moving tale about circus life during the depression era with quirky characters and complex emotions underlying the character's actions". This story is character-driven, and often said to have amazing character development and relationships. The characters vary in range from the beautiful Marlena, to the charming yet destructive, manipulative, paranoid-schizophrenic August, and to the protagonist of the novel, the caring Jacob. Jacob is portrayed as a touching character with strong beliefs and morals that when suddenly orphaned, unintentionally finds himself the newest member of the Benzini Brothers travelling circus. The story is told by two versions of Jacob, one as an old man in his nineties and the other as a young man in his twenties that each develop throughout the novel. The novel discusses various aspects of the character of Jacob, such as his physical description, background and personal history, thoughts, emotions, values, surroundings, actions and reactions, speech, and his opinions of others. Through the description and representation of these aspects, the wonderfully written three dimensional character of Jacob is created.

Physical Description: When Jacob is introduced at the beginning of the novel he is, as he says, “ninety. Or ninety-three. One or the other,” (Gruen 5). At this age, Jacob is in a nursing home and often accesses mobility through a wheel chair; however, he does have a determination to be able to walk again. He walks with his walker as often as possible, despite his broken hip. Due to the fact that Jacob had previously broken his hip and required a walker, the reader would imagine he would walk very slowly, possibly with a limp, and, as many elders do, have a hunched back. The elder Jacob has very little hair left, just “about a dozen (...) strands of white hair spring absurdly from its spotted skull,” (Gruen 111). He describes his facial features while staring into a mirror, “I find an Appalachian apple doll, withered and spotty, with dewlaps and bags and long floppy ears,” (Gruen 111). He also mentions “trying to see beyond the sagging flesh” but not being able to find himself anymore. He wonders when he stopped being himself, which therefore indicated that obviously the physical description of the elder Jacob is drastically different than his younger self. The younger Jacob is an average twenty year old man with carrot top red hair, freckles and milky blue eyes. Jacob had an average, or above average, build as he was strong enough to complete the physical labour tasks given when working for the circus. Hygiene wise, he strived to be hygienic, but often was unable to wash for days due to circumstances out of his control. Jacob was an attractive young man that was portrayed by the actor Robert Pattinson in the film adaption of the novel.

Background or Personal History: Jacob Jankowski was born into a fortunate Polish family in Ithica, New York, America. Jacob had a pleasant childhood and was raised by his loving mother and father, which remain unnamed. His father was a veterinarian and a very caring man, displayed by his act of kindness of accepting beans, eggs, chicken, and various other goods as payment for his services during the depression due to the fact that “he was trying to help out.

Couldn't stand by and watch animals suffer," (Gruen 20). Jacob describes his mother as being "so pretty and meticulous in life," (Gruen 18). Jacob was an only child who had a very close relationship with his parents and was absolutely devastated by their deaths. He describes not being able to eat, sleep, or think of anything else other than his parent's tragic accident. Jacobs love for his parents was reciprocated, as to send Jacob to Cornell University; they took out a mortgage on their house. Jacobs's parents provided him with a proper education, as he grew up to be a very intelligent young man, attending Cornell University for Veterinary Sciences, like his father. Jacob adopted many traits of his parents, such as his love and caring for animals and others. Jacob was living a charmed life. He had a loving family, was finishing his last year of university, and had no financial worries or issues; having a family practise to take over once a graduated veterinarian. However, in one single day, Jacobs's life came crashing down around him. His parents died and everything he and his parents owned had been repossessed by the bank. He didn't have a cent to his name and he was left helpless, not being able to do anything about it. With nowhere else to turn, this series of unfortunate events lead Jacob to inadvertently jump aboard the Benzini Brothers Circus train.

Thoughts, Emotions, Values: The loving and caring younger version of Jacob contrasted his older bitter self as a result of living in a miserable old age home which slowly altered his attitude and outlook on life. The young Jacob, although upset and burdened by his parents death and its repercussions, was still an optimistic character. He had very strong moral beliefs and values, and would stand up for what he believed was right. His values included equality, loyalty, family, generosity, kindness, love, and a strong ethical sense. Although Jacob had an understanding of authority and his place in society, he was a very passionate individual that would stand up for what he believed in. In the novel, Jacob being a veterinarian, had a strong love for animals and is

outraged by animal abuse, which he took a stand against in the novel. For example, when Jacob insisted on evaluating the condition of the animals of a bankrupt circus the Benzini Brothers were buying from, August forbade him to until business was finished. Jacob responded that he was sorry, but couldn't do that (Gruen 119). When August told him that "that's just how it works" (Gruen 119), Jacob responded "that's bullshit" (Gruen 119). This excerpt demonstrates Jacob's passion for animals and his selflessness, as he was willing to accept punishment from going against authority to save the animals. He was also selfless in the fact that he would put himself in danger to protect his beloved Marlena in any situation. He was willing to putting everything he had on the line and even risk his life for her, as he was aware of the chance of him being "redlighted", thrown from the moving train, for standing up to August for mistreating Marlena. In fact, when a number of men were "redlighted", including Jacobs's friend Walter, a performer, it is brought to Jacobs's attention by a friend that performers "don't get tossed, even lowly ones. If Walter got it, they were after you," (Gruen 301). Jacobs's sweet and kind, yet strong and driven personality fades and becomes pessimistic and bitter in his old age. The older version of Jacob strongly dislikes the nursing home he lives in, as he is treated by the condescending nurses and doctors as a child. He is often frustrated due to the fact that despite his psychological soundness, he is deprived of his independence and right to his own decision making. Although the younger and older versions of Jacob are drastically different in numerous ways, Jacob maintains certain personality aspects, such as his moral sense of right and wrong, and his strong determination in life.

Surroundings: In the novel, the young Jacob's surroundings mainly consists of the train and the circus grounds, including the menagerie, and the big top; while the elder Jacob consistently stays in the nursing home. When the circus sets up in various cities, the younger Jacobs environment

expands when he occasionally goes into town with August and Marlana, such as when the three of them attended a speak easy, or when they went out for breakfast. The train Jacob resided on was not a pleasant place to live in the least. He lived with the lower class performer Kinko, also known as Walter, in disgusting conditions; the constant rickety feeling as the train travelled down the tracks, the flea ridden, crumpled, damp, mildew smelling, horse hair covered horse blanket he was forced to sleep on, and the stench of living in the same cart with the horses with only a sliding wooden door to separate Jacob and Kinko from them. When Jacob awoke one night, he said “I’ve scratched my arms and neck raw. I don’t know if it’s from sleeping on horsehair or vermin and don’t want to know,” (Gruen 62). Although Kinko, Jacobs roommate, eventually warmed up to him, he was at first incredibly unpleasant and impersonal. Jacob often had no other choice then to wear the same clothes unwashed and not bath himself, until August befriended him, when he was then provided with water for bathing and new clean clothes. When working, Jacob spent most of his time in the menagerie surrounded by the amazingly kind and talented circus animals. Jacob’s surroundings on the circus grounds were often busy and bustling with many circus members working around him and the presence of the smell of sweet cotton candy, popcorn, and fresh food from the cookhouse. The circus environment was exceedingly different than the nursing home, as Jacob spent most of his time in his room by himself, or with the condescending nurses and doctors. Jacob often ate his meals in the dining room with the rest of the nursing home residents, which Jacob often thought to be irritating. The younger Jacobs surroundings were exciting and busy, while the elder Jacobs were dull and lonely.

Actions and Reactions: Jacob was faced with a variety of different situations throughout the novel, some pleasant and others dangerous. Jacob was a rational thinker for the most part, and considered his major decisions when he had time; however when influenced by strong emotion in

immediate highly stressful situations, his reactions were emotionally charged and impulsive. An example of Jacobs's rational thinking was how he took time to seriously consider when and how he and Marlena would leave the circus, and how they would survive. Jacob and Marlena could have fled immediately following August's outburst, but Jacob logically thought about the best time to leave, taking into consideration his sick friend Camel. However, Jacob's rationality quickly turned into impulsive, bad decision making when his emotions were brought into the equation. For example, when August hit Marlena, Jacob flew into a rage and beat August, which led to a number of dangerous consequences. Jacob was a grateful individual, and often repaid favours done for him. For example, Camel saved Jacob from being thrown off the train and secured a job for Jacob working with the circus. In return, Jacob saved Camel when he was sick by stowing him away and taking care of him. Jacob was very thankful for any positive aspects of his life, and tried to avoid conflict with others by using logical problem solving. However, due to his strong morals and values, when they were brought into question, Jacob fought for what he believed in.

Speech: Many critics have said "Water for Elephants" to be beautifully written, which indicated how entertaining Jacobs's speech was, as he was the narrator of the novel and it is told from his point of view. His speech was one aspect of himself that stayed consistent between both versions. Jacobs's speech and the language he used reflected the time period of the novel and his high intelligence. He did not use flowery language to flaunt his intelligence, but through his word choices the reader is able to realize his intelligence. Jacobs's speech can be very powerful and leave an impact on the reader. For example, when August says "because if I thought she was in any danger at all, there's no knowing what I might do," (Gruen 159), referring to his wife Marlena, whom Jacob is in love with. The narrator, Jacob, writes "I look up quickly. August is

staring right at me,” (Gruen 159), and that is the end of that chapter. Hi speech often creates suspense for the reader, and also humour. The young and old Jacob both provide comic relief throughout the novel. An example of the elder Jacobs humour is this excerpt “now I can roll onto my side without hitting the damned table and spilling the porridge. Don’t want to do that again- they may call it a display of temper and summon Dr. Rashid,” (Gruen 111). Jacobs’s speech also mirrors his caring, sensitive personality, as he so beautifully describes his love for Marlana, and many of his animal friends. Jacobs’s speech throughout the novel reflects himself, brings the story to life, and enthrals the reader.

Opinions about Others: Jacob, as a very passionate individual, feels very strongly about the relationships he forms and develops these opinions as the storyline unfolds and when different sides of characters are revealed. The reader is fortunately able to witness young Jacobs’s relationships and opinions of others develop right from Jacob’s first meeting them. During his time with the Benzini Brothers Circus, Jacob develops a diverse range of relationships with many characters, including Rosie, the other circus animals, Marlana, Kinko/Walter, and Uncle Al, August. Jacobs’s relationships with his fellow circus members can quite simply be divided into those that he loves and protects, and those that he despises. Jacob develops a strong love for and bond with the animals of the circus, Jacob says “it is impossible to describe how tenderly I suddenly feel toward them (...) a love for these animals wells up in me suddenly , a flash flood,” (Gruen 146). Jacob developed a special bond specifically with Rosie the elephant, as he felt for this terribly misunderstood majestic creature. Jacob took the time to understand Rosie and discovered her amazingly unique, humorous, loyal personality. Jacob also befriended and fell in love with the beautiful equestrian trainer, Marlana. They bonded over their love for animals, and Jacob became absolutely infatuated with her. After a night spent with Marlana, Jacob described

her as glowing, while they were spinning around the dance floor (Gruen 156). He also described how his mind was captivated by thoughts of her. Jacob also developed a close relationship with his roommate Kinko, which had a rocky start, due to Kinko's distaste for Jacob, but eventually became a strong bond. Although Kinko at first strongly disliked Jacob; Jacob never judged him, nor did he ever feel ill towards him. A common factor in all of these relationships was that Jacob felt the need to protect and care for these individuals; unlike his feelings for August and Uncle Al. These characters were ruthless, mean, destructive and manipulative and Jacob hated them, specifically August. In fact, one night Jacob snuck into August's cabin with the motive to kill him, although he did not follow through. The single most important relationship the elder Jacob developed was with his nurse Rosemary. Rosemary treated Jacob with respect, which he greatly appreciated; growing to care for her so greatly, that he did not know how he would survive in the home without her. Both Jacobs develop relationships with a variety of people, feeling very passionately about each one.

Jacob Jankowski, the protagonist and narrator of the novel, is a caring, passionate, driven individual that grasps the reader's attention and leads them through the amazing, yet horrific world of the traveling circus, and the unfair, depressing life in a nursing home. The author details the journey of Jacobs character development as he strives to overcome the many obstacles presented to him. Gruen portrays Jacob through a variety of aspects, such as his physical description, background and personal history, thoughts, emotions, values, surroundings, actions and reactions, speech, and his opinions of others. Through the description and representation of these aspects, the wonderfully written three dimensional character of Jacob is created, telling the story of an unforgettable world where love is a luxury few can afford.



