

Teacher's Rationale

School: Arrowhead Union High School

Teacher(s): Fellmeth/Freeburg/Johansen

Title: *Water for Elephants* by Sara Gruen

Grade or Course: Modern Literature X

Approximate date(s) a book will be used:

Semester 1

Semester 2

This book will be (check one or more):

studied by the whole class. (But students have option to choose different text).

studied by small groups.

placed on a reading list.

placed in a classroom library.

recommended to individual students.

part of a larger study of (explain):

other (explain):

Ways in which the book is especially appropriate for student in this class:

With scenes of a dangerous wild-animal stampede and the harrowing plight of the performers during the Depression era, *Water for Elephants* is a book that will capture students' minds and hearts. The protagonist's grief over the tragic loss of his parents will evoke sympathy from them while he travels into a new world—the world of the traveling circus in the 30s. The themes of love, cruelty, authority, and poverty should generate plenty of stimulating classroom discussion. Students will care about the protagonist's fate as he struggles, much like themselves, to decipher right from wrong and the game of power while discovering their own true selves. Students will also enjoy the local connection to the Circus World Museum in Baraboo, WI.

Ways in which the book is especially pertinent to the objectives of this course or unit:

Water for Elephants gives students a strong, intelligent male figure with a sense of humor and adventure. Both girls and guys will relate to Jacob Jankowski's grief over the loss of his parents and his desire to run away from the pain. Girls who traditionally relate to relationships and personal dialogue, will enjoy how Jacob's love for Marlena and Rosie grows into his need to protect the both of them. Guys will enjoy the historical detail and unexpected turns of the plot as well as identifying with the heroics of a young man in love. It's a win-win situation for readers of both genders.

Special problems that might arise in relation to the book and some planned activities that handle this problem:

The life of a circus performer in Depression-era American was often gritty and brutish. Scenes from the sleazy side show and performers contain a few descriptions of sex acts. Yet the scenes are essential to the story as Gruen does a wonderful job of showing the reader the human side of the performers trapped in the “freak show” of circus life. Occasional cursing comes from the crotchety narrator of the story as he is unhappy with his life in a nursing home. Some “standard” violence also occurs (someone murdered by being thrown off the train or dying of bad moonshine), but it is neither too graphic nor very common in the text.

Some other appropriate books an individual student might read in place of this book:

Other books by Sara Gruen would be a good option for a student such as *Riding Lessons* and *Flying Changes*. Both contain the human-animal bond and relationship as the focus of the story. This would make either book an acceptable alternate title.

Summary of the book:

Water for Elephants is an atmospheric, gritty, and compelling novel of star-crossed lovers, set in the circus world circa 1932. When Jacob Jankowski, recently orphaned and suddenly adrift, jumps onto a passing train, he enters a world of freaks, drifters, and misfits, a second-rate circus struggling to survive during the Great Depression, making one-night stands in town after endless town. A veterinary student who almost earned his degree, Jacob is put in charge of caring for the circus menagerie. It is there that he meets Marlena, the beautiful young star of the equestrian act, who is married to August, the charismatic but twisted animal trainer. He also meets Rosie, an elephant who seems untrainable until he discovers a way to reach her. Beautifully written, *Water for Elephants* is illuminated by a wonderful sense of time and place. It tells a story of a love between two people that overcomes incredible odds in a world in which even love is a luxury that few can afford.

Reviews and/or awards of the book or author:

1. A *Los Angeles Times* bestseller
2. A *Wall Street Journal* bestseller
3. A *Newsday* Favorite Book of 2006
4. A *USA Today* bestseller