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Soul mates for 'Elephants:' Asheville resident, author Sara Gruen talks about loving animals

Rob Neufeld

'We had a choice — ocean or mountains, in North Carolina — and we chose mountains," best-selling author Sara Gruen says of her and her family's move to the Asheville area. Gruen, who has dual Canadian-U.S. citizenship, was born in Vancouver, where both environments are prominent.

Her coming here followed the publication of her third novel, "Water for Elephants," an immensely popular tale of romance and tragedy in a Depression-era circus. Now the writer, who has become attached to a number of humane causes, embraces a local one, the Literacy Council of Buncombe County.

On Friday, she'll talk about "The Writer's Experience" as the keynote for the Literacy Council's annual fundraiser, the Authors for Literacy Dinner and Silent Auction. The following interview captures her interest in reading and her passions as a writer.

Question: What is your own experience with learning to read?

Answer: I was given my first book as a prize for reading it all the way through when I was 3. My brother and I watched only one hour of television a week. We created our own world with stuffed animals and a daily newspaper for this world. ... In school, I read books under my desk. My second-grade report card said, "If books contained calories, Sara would be obese."

Q: What was one of the books that most influenced you as a child?

A: You're going to laugh. "Black Beauty." I was about 10. I went through a fairly long animal book stage.

Q: I know you rode horses, and your family had a dog and a cat. Did you have other interactions with animals?

A: I used to wander the neighborhood and find animals to befriend.

Q: You're involved in some animal research now, aren't you?

A: The boat I got off yesterday is a research vessel with the Wild Dolphin Project. I'm still in Florida, and the land is still moving beneath my feet. ... The research vessel has been going out and studying these families of dolphins for 25 years, so the dolphins know the people. So they come up to us and show off their new calves.

Every time we jump in the water with the dolphins, they (the researchers) are recording the sounds, and they've made discoveries such as every dolphin has a name. It's called the signature whistle, and it's the name that the mother gives the calf, and it's the name that it responds to from all the other dolphins for the rest of its life.

Q: Readers will be glad to know that Rosie (the elephant in "Water for Elephants") has her soul mates. Your new novel, "Ape House" — when will that be out?

A: 2010.

Q: How did that book evolve?

A: I've been fascinated with the idea of human-ape discourse. Since I was 12, I've been following the story of Koko the gorilla. These apes are computer-competent. They use a series of lexagrams. They press buttons on a computer, and this synthesized human voice says the words that they press.

For instance, when I went in there (to the Great Ape Trust in Des Moines, Iowa), I knew that these were language-competent apes, but I didn't know how to break the ice, so I brought pictures along, and I showed one of them — Panbanisha, who'd had two sons (she'd lost one) — I showed her a picture of mine, from several years ago, when they were in a bubble bath, and she went to her computer and punched, "baby washing bubbles."

It was a life-changing moment. Wow, I'm looking into the eyes of a sentient creature who is competent in my language.

Q: You have been generous in your interviews in revealing your writing process. I love the story that you put yourself in a walk-in closet for a few months in order to finish "Water for Elephants." You needed sensory deprivation and to focus on the world of your fiction.

A: It wouldn't work now because I have Wi-Fi.

Q: You've also said that you need half an hour to get into that world.

A: Actually, it's more like an hour and a half. ... And I have to change the walls occasionally. I use up all the goodness in a room, and I have to go to a new location. There are a lot of nooks and corners in my house, so I just switch it up.

Also, if I need inspiration, I smell my horse's neck. I think if you could bottle that scent, the world would be a more peaceful place.

Q: Has being here in the mountains given you inspiration?

A: Right this moment, I have a desk set out on our screen porch, and that's where I work, because I'm out there with trees rustling and birds singing, and I see the occasional snake, and it just doesn't get much better than that in terms of a writing environment.

Q: Congratulations. That sounds much better than the walk-in closet.

A: It's way better than the closet.

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Additional Facts

WANT TO GO?

What: The Authors for Literacy Dinner and Silent Auction, the Literacy Council of Buncombe County's annual fundraiser, featuring Sara Gruen.

When: 6 p.m. Friday.

Where: DoubleTree Biltmore Hotel, 115 Hendersonville Road, Asheville.

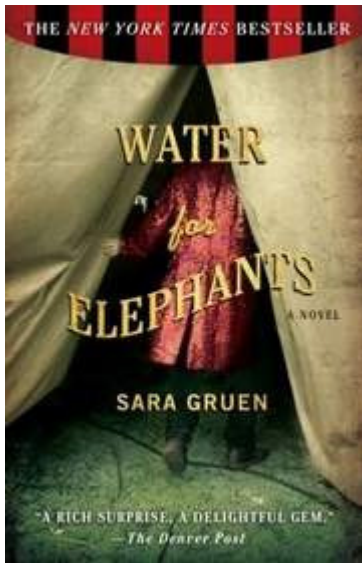
Major sponsors: Blue Ridge Energy Systems, DoubleTree Biltmore Hotel, N.C. Rep. Bruce Goforth.

Tickets: \$75. Call Mignon Durham at the Literacy Council, 254-3442, ext. 205.

Learn more: www.litcouncil.com and www.saragruen.com.



Writer Sara Gruen says, "If I need inspiration, I smell my horse's neck." (Terence W. Bailey/Special to the Citizen-Times)



Asheville author Sara Gruen's third novel, "Water for Elephants," became a phenomenal best-seller. Her fourth book, "Ape House," will be published next year.