

HISTORY LAB #4: HOW TO READ A NOVEL**DUE THURS 10/23**

Yes, I know you know how to read and analyze a novel. You've done it in English classes for years. But this is an interdisciplinary history class, and what is a novel doing in a history class? Novels are a special category of primary sources. They can be subjected to the same kind of "cross-examination" we did for primary sources, but they also have some special considerations because they are self-consciously fictional, addressed to an audience of readers, and written from a particular perspective (or set of perspectives). Fiction can make history "come alive" in ways that textbooks cannot, but since a work of fiction creates a stand-alone universe, it may also distort the past in ways that are sometimes useful, sometimes dangerous. Fiction and History are often presumed to be opposing fields, with fiction concerned with the imaginative world of language, characterization and representation, while history is dedicated to exploring the "real" world of the past.¹ But using fiction AS history can help illuminate the ways that history blurs the line with fiction by crafting story and using a well-informed imagination to narrate a meaningful representation of the past. When using a novel as historical evidence, you need to think about the following (in addition to the kinds of questions we asked in How to Read a Photograph/Primary Source):

- Who is the author? Who is the novel's narrator(s)? Are the author and narrator(s) linked/related?
- When was the novel written? What's the historical context of this novel?
- Notice the "non-textual" material, such as front matter, epigraphs, supporting documentation or essays, even illustrations and cover art, if they are original to the first edition.
- Is there a significant gap between the period the novel was written, and the period it is written *about*? In general, a novel is most useful to historians of the period IN which (not ABOUT which) it was written. For example, Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind* tells us much more about what people in the 1930s thought about the Old South than it does about the actual Civil War period.
- What aspects of a historical period are the focus of this novel?
- How are those aspects portrayed? Are they presented as "accurate," or are they magnified, exaggerated, or deliberately contorted? If the latter, why? How might you verify or corroborate those aspects?
- What specific literary techniques or devices does the author employ?
- How do content and form interact in this novel?

¹ Jane Pederson, "History in Fiction; Fiction in History," University of Wisconsin Eau-Claire

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GRADING: WORTH 10% OF YOUR GRADE

Using the historical fiction novel *Water for Elephants* by Sara Gruen, write a 4-5 page paper that does the following:

DESCRIBES the novel and sets it in historical context (*for this novel, the historical context is now);

ANALYZES some aspect of the novel from a historical point of view (see below for ideas);

CONSIDERS the benefits and limitations of using fiction as historical evidence

And **PROPOSES** some unanswered questions that this assignment has left you with.

Use MLA for any citations within the paper.

IDEAS FOR ANALYSIS OF *WATER FOR ELEPHANTS* – OR CHOOSE YOUR OWN

1) Consider why Gruen alternates between the narrator's present and past throughout the novel, with little discussion of the intervening years. This results in, essentially, two narrators, or splits the character of Jacob Jankowski into two distinct voices/people – one that voices the present and the other the past. Discuss what this decision does for the structure or plot of the novel.

2) The book was turned down by a big trade press and first printed in a small run by a small publisher (Algonquin Books, Chapel Hill NC). However, it went big both in hardback and paperback and was called “the darling of the independent bookseller circuit” because of its rapid rise on the bestseller list during the summer of 2007 – and its success got Ms. Gruen a \$5 million advance from her new publisher for her next two books. The novel proudly trumpets across the front cover that it was a #1 New York Times Bestseller. What is the significance of that claim? This June, production was scheduled to begin on a film adaptation of this novel, reportedly starring Reese Witherspoon, Robert Pattinson, and Sean Penn and the rights to the novel were optioned at \$1 by the producer of the Jason Bourne movies. You'll also notice that the paperback edition includes several pages of short excerpts from book reviews. Why all this self-reflexive hype; why should a book need to make grand claims about its own appeal and success? Although this is common practice in publishing today, is there something about the topic of this book that resonates with self-promotion and hype?

3) Write a 500-word review of the novel, and then compare your review with one of its reviews when it was first published in 2006. You could use the New York Times review at <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/04/books/review/04judd.html> or any of the other newspaper reviews that are quoted in the front matter. Attach both reviews to your paper.

4) Sara Gruen said the “backbone” of her novel “parallels with the Biblical story of Jacob,” which is why her main character shares that name. Explore this idea in your paper. Why might that story have particular resonance in the Depression era, or in our own? Why might it work well for a tale about itinerant performers or dysfunctional families? Are there other literary parallels you notice in the narrative?

5) Reviewers of *Water for Elephants* note its “meticulously researched world” and call it a convincing “glimpse of Americana.” How does Gruen conjure the lost world of the early 20th century circus; what aspects come across as “authentic” or well-researched to you? Consult Gruen’s Authors Note at the end – how did she research this novel, what parts of it does she claim to be “true,” and what can you learn about the challenges of writing historical fiction from reading it closely?