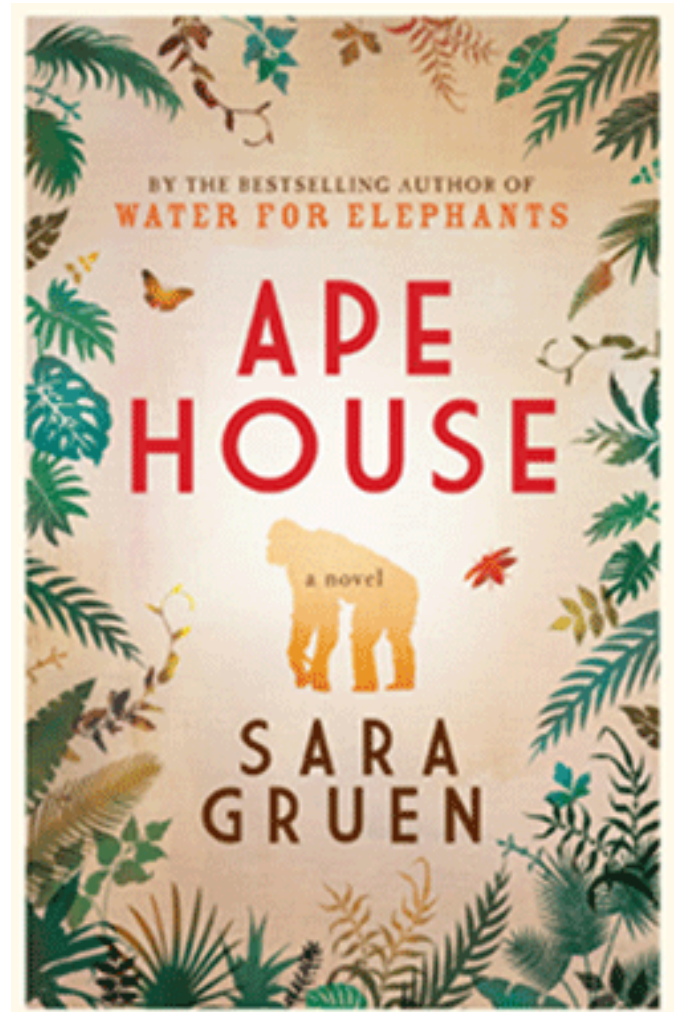


ALLEN & UNWIN



READING GROUP NOTES

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About the Book

Sam, Bonzi, Lola, Mbongo, Jelani, and Makena are no ordinary apes. These bonobos, like others of their species, are capable of reason and carrying on deep relationships - but, unlike most bonobos, they also know American Sign Language.

Isabel Duncan, a scientist at the Great Ape Language Lab, doesn't understand people, but animals she gets, especially the bonobos. Isabel feels more comfortable in their world than she's ever felt among humans ... until she meets John Thigpen, a very married reporter who braves the ever-present animal rights protesters outside the lab to see what's really going on inside.

When an explosion tears apart the lab, severely injuring Isabel and 'liberating' the apes to an unknown destination, John's human interest piece turns into the story of a lifetime, one he'll risk his career and his marriage to follow. Then a reality TV show featuring the missing apes debuts under mysterious circumstances, and it immediately becomes the biggest-and most unlikely-phenomenon in the history of modern media. Millions of fans are glued to their screens watching the apes order greasy take-away food, play with their toys, have generous amounts of sex, and sign for Isabel to come get them. Now, to save her family of apes from this parody of human life, Isabel must connect with her own kind, including John, a green-haired vegan, and a retired porn star with her own agenda.

Ape House is a riveting, funny, compassionate, and, finally, deeply moving new novel in which a family of apes teaches us what it means to be human.

About the Author

Sara is a Canadian-born dual citizen (Canadian and American) who moved to the States in 1999 for a technical writing job. When she was laid off two years later, instead of looking for another job, she decided to take a gamble on writing fiction full-time. Sara lives with her husband, three children, two dogs, four cats, two horses and a goat in North Carolina. Sara already has her eye on another horse and a donkey.

A Letter from Sara

Right before I went on tour for *Water for Elephants*, my mother sent me an email about a place in Des Moines, Iowa, that was studying language acquisition and cognition in great apes. I had been fascinated by human-ape discourse ever since I first heard about Koko the gorilla (which was longer ago than I care to admit) so I spent close to a day

poking around the Great Ape Trust's Web site. I was doubly fascinated—not only with the work they're doing, but also by the fact that there was an entire species of great ape I had never heard of. Although I had no idea what I was getting into, I was hooked. During the course of my research, I was fortunate enough to be invited to the Great Ape Trust—not that that didn't take some doing. I was assigned masses of homework, including a trip to York University in Toronto for a crash course on linguistics. Even after I received the coveted invitation to the Trust, that didn't necessarily mean I was going to get to meet the apes: that part was up to them. Like John, I tried to stack my odds by getting backpacks and filling them with everything I thought an ape might find fun or tasty—bouncy balls, fleece blankets, M&M's, xylophones, Mr. Potato Heads, etc.—and then emailed the scientists, asking them to please let the apes know I was bringing "surprises." At the end of my orientation with the humans, I asked, with some trepidation, whether the apes were going to let me come in. The response was that not only were they letting me come in, they were insisting.

The experience was astonishing—to this day I cannot think about it without getting goose bumps. You cannot have a two-way conversation with a great ape, or even just look one straight in the eye, close up, without coming away changed. I stayed until the end of the day, when I practically had to be dragged out, because I was having so much fun. I was told that the next day Panbanisha said to one of the scientists, "Where's Sara? Build her nest. When's she coming back?"

Most of the conversations between the bonobos and humans in this book are based on actual conversations with great apes, including Koko, Washoe, Booeey, Kanzi, and Panbanisha. Many of the ape-based scenes in this book are also based on fact, although I have taken the fiction writer's liberty of fudging names, dates, and places.

One of the places I did not disguise or rename is the Lola ya Bonobo sanctuary in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. They take in orphaned infants, nurse them back to health, and when they're ready, release them back into the jungle. This, combined with ongoing education of the local people, is one of the wild bonobos' best hopes for survival.

One day, I'm going to be brave enough to visit Lola ya Bonobo. In the meantime, in response to Panbanisha's question, I'm coming back soon. Very soon. I hope you have my nest ready!

Sara. X

Reviews

'Sara Gruen knows things-she knows them in her mind and in her heart. And, out of what she knows, she has created a true thriller that is addictive from its opening sentence. Devour it to find out what happens next, but also to learn remarkable and moving things about life on this planet. Very, very few novels can change the way you look at the world around you. This one does.'

- Robert Goolrick, author of *A Reliable Wife*

'I read *Ape House* in one joyous breath. Ever an advocate for animals, Gruen brings them to life with the passion of a novelist and the accuracy of a scientist. She has already done more for bonobos than I could do in a lifetime. The novel is immaculately researched and lovingly crafted. If people fall in love with our forgotten, fascinating, endangered relative, it will be because of *Ape House*.'

- Vanessa Woods, author of *Bonobo Handshake*

'It is a fascinating insight into the animal world. But it's not all research and facts; Gruen has also woven a riveting human story around an already riveting premise.'

- Good Reading, October 2010 (4 stars)

For discussion

- 📖 'In this novel, Gruen masterfully explores many different types of relationship: those between humans romantic, parental, work-based and friendship and those between a family of bonobo apes.' (- Germaine Leece, Good Reading, October 2010.) Discuss these relationships – compare and contrast.
- 📖 How does the show *Ape House* compare with today's reality TV programmes? What does the success of the show reveal about human society?
- 📖 'Satire is second nature in this novel, and Gruen cleverly parodies today's cult of celebrity.' (Julia Ross, Courier Mail) Do you agree? Is this an effective device ?
- 📖 George Bernard Shaw once said, 'You do not settle whether an experiment is justified or not by merely showing that it is of some use. The distinction is not between useful and useless experiments, but between barbarous and civilized behavior.' Do you agree? How do you feel about animal experimentation? Discuss *Ape House* explores different sides of this issue.
- 📖 After reading *Ape House*, do you view human behaviours differently?

Suggested further reading

Italic title by Author

Water for Elephants by Sara Gruen

Bonobo Handshake by Vanessa Woods

Cleo by Helen Brown

The Infinite Magic of Horses by Candida Baker

Life of Pi by Yann Martel