

Book Discussion Questions
for
The Circus Fire: A True Story by Stewart O’Nan

1. The language and descriptions in this book are often graphic and very descriptive. Do you feel this was appropriate or unnecessary?
2. The author describes the smells, the sounds, the sights that people experienced at the fire. If you had been at the fire, what sensory experience would have had the most impact on you?
3. How do you feel about the way the author listed the “Cast of Characters?” Was his writing style effective in telling the story of the fire?
4. How does the community’s response to the fire compare with the response that would happen today?
5. What similarities can be found between this book and the fiction book, *Water for Elephants* by Sara Gruen?
6. There were many kids with pocket knives who cut holes in the tent to escape. Would kids today be more or less prepared physically and emotionally than the kids at the time of the fire?
7. How do the safety policies of the past compare with those of today? For example: fire codes and toys for children.
8. Because of this fire, what policies or precautions do we have today? Are they too extreme?
9. Do you agree with the outcome of the trials?
10. What about the court settlements struck you as most fair? Most unfair?
11. Do you think the reaction of the community toward finding justice would have been the same or different if there had been fewer deaths? If those who died were circus employees? If the deaths were animals?
12. What comments do you have about how various survivors viewed circuses, fires, tents, etc., for the rest of their lives?