



So Big

Edna Ferber

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Winner of the 1924 Pulitzer Prize, *So Big* is widely regarded as Edna Ferber's crowning achievement. A rollicking panorama of Chicago's high and low life, this stunning novel follows the travails of gambler's daughter Selina Peake DeJong as she struggles to maintain her dignity, her family, and her sanity in the face of monumental challenges. This is the stunning and unforgettable "novel to read and to remember" by an author who "critics of the 1920s and 1930s did not hesitate to call the greatest American woman novelist of her day" (*New York Times*).

So Big Details

Date : Published August 22nd 2000 by Harper Perennial Modern Classics (first published 1924)

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Author : Edna Ferber

Format : Paperback 272 pages

Genre : Fiction, Classics, Historical, Historical Fiction

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From Reader Review So Big for online ebook

Katherine says

April 12, 2011

This book is remarkably readable and current for being the Pulitzer Prize winner of 1924. Wonderful writing, full of beauty and insight, with a heroine who faces life with a tremendous amount of strength, integrity, and wisdom. Truly a gem of a book, definitely worth seeking out.

Highly recommended.

Note: I read this book in 2011 (April 12) and again in 2012 (May 16). The first time it was a resounding 5 stars for me. The second time I'd probably give it closer to 4. It was still a great book but I saw more of the flaws in the writing and this reading was less timely for me personally.

Bookslut says

I was really excited to read this Pulitzer, but after the first 50-75 pages I thought I was just going to be working through this book. It seemed much in the mold of prototypical American fiction of that time, with the choppy mid-American prose I don't like and a 'pull yourself up from your bootstraps' story that is a dollar a dozen, especially in that era. The dialogue in particular, used like a blunt instrument, rubbed me the wrong way. I heard a lot of this in Arrowsmith as well (although I liked it very much), and while I'm sure the educated class of Americans must have talked this way in the 1920's, I hate to read it. And with the dialogue element combined with the American Rags to Riches genre we appeared to be heading for, I thought this was going to be a precursor to Journey in the Dark. Not a bad book, but one I could easily miss without regret.

However, Ms. Ferber surprised me and continued to surprise me in the second half of this book. The book does not take all of the typical turns I expect with an ARtR book, and it impressed me with some of its rich allusions and observations. It gilded the lily in the character of Serena, I thought--the author gave in to the temptation to make her too perfect, too beyond reproach, especially in having her take in degenerates towards the end of the book. But I thought Dirk was well-rendered, despite not being a very deeply-explored character, as was Paula. I thought the author also achieved some very vivid setting work using very spare prose, especially the market scene. This is the first book I've read by Edna Ferber, so I can only say this through hearsay, but I have heard that she always has something (political or social commentary) to say in her books, and I found that to be so here. Her criticisms of the new rich, especially in their desire to copy the fashions and customs of Europeans, through the words of Serena were not too subtle. I think you get a pretty clear picture of the thoughts of the author through her books, which I don't necessarily mind.

I would definitely read more of her books. I am particularly excited to try Giant and Showboat.

Candi says

"The more kinds of people you see, and the more things you do, and the more things that happen to you, the richer you are. Even if they're not pleasant things. That's living. Remember, no matter what happens, good or bad, it's just so much — just so much velvet."

Selina Peake's father was a perceptive man indeed to impart these words of wisdom to his only daughter, words that would stay with her through life and ones that she would practice to the fullest extent possible. This extraordinary novel by Edna Ferber, winner of the 1925 Pulitzer Prize, is as relevant now as it would have been back in its day. It is a highly accessible classic and a pure joy to read. I began 2018 with this book, and with any luck it's a sign of a glorious reading year to come!

Selina's father introduced her to a way of life that likely not many young girls would have had the opportunity to experience. In 1885, at the age of sixteen, Selina moved with her father to the bustling city of Chicago, where she learned to appreciate art, literature, theater and a diversity of people. When tragedy strikes, Selina is forced to make an important choice on her own. *"... the choice of earning her own living or of returning to the Vermont village and becoming a withered and sapless dried apple, with black fuzz and mould at her heart, like her aunts, the Misses Sarah and Abbie Peake. She did not hesitate."* Life in High Prairie, a farming community to the south of Chicago, would be completely opposite to what she was accustomed, but she was determined to make the best of it.

A vegetable farm may not seem the setting for the grand adventure after which Selina yearned, but the unwavering spirit of this young woman was a rare quality. Selina ranks right up there in my book of literary heroines! Her capacity to recognize the beauty even in what others would consider the most mundane of objects and people made me stop and consider whether or not I take enough time to appreciate the everyday things in my own life. *"But always, to her, red and green cabbages were to be jade and burgundy, chrysoprase and porphyry. Life has no weapons against a woman like that."* I may never quite look at a cabbage the same again! Like her father before her, Selina also wishes to instill the appreciation for the beauty in all things to her own child. Dirk Dejong, fondly called Sobig by his mother, may be a farmer's son, but he will be exposed to books and art just the same, despite what little use his own father rates these small luxuries. Selina has plans for Dirk, a wish for him to lead life to the fullest and experience all those things she feels she has missed out on herself. She will toil away at the land in order to provide a future away from the farm for Dirk. *"All the worth-while things in life. All mixed up. Rooms in candle-light. Leisure. Colour. Travel. Books. Music. Pictures. People—all kinds of people. Work that you love. And growth—growth and watching people grow. Feeling very strongly about things and then developing that feeling to—to make something fine come of it."*

But can we shape the life of another, even one of our own flesh and blood? What sacrifices should we make, what do we give up, in order to ensure the happiness of our children or another loved one? Can you really stop a person from making mistakes, mistakes that you recognize from your personal trials and errors? Or do these things need to be experienced first-hand for us to truly learn from them ourselves? I am at a point in my own life where I ask myself these exact questions that Edna Ferber so astutely challenges us to consider through her thoughtful writing. As a mother of two teens, one starting to make decisions about college and career, I ask myself everyday if I am doing my best for them. And what exactly is 'my best'? How much autonomy should they be allowed, and how often should I yet take the reins and exert my own influence? It's a balance I am certain, and one that needs to be constantly checked!

There is so much more I could say about this pearl of a novel. Better yet, you could just trust me, grab a copy, and learn for yourself that this truly was deserving of the esteemed literary award bestowed upon it. I haven't delved much into the characters other than Selina, but there are several others that Ferber brilliantly imbues with life through her skillful pen. **So Big** is simply a lovely novel towards which my review cannot do justice. This book will adorn my favorites shelf for sure.

"About mistakes it's funny. You got to make your own; and not only that, if you try to keep people from making theirs they get mad."

Teresa says

Interesting how this book compares with another Pulitzer Prize winner I read recently -- Tarkington's *The Magnificent Ambersons*. Each is a story of the great love a mother has for her son, and each is set in the 'early' years of a fast-growing, developing American city (Chicago in this instance), yet the stories are very different from each other, as are the mothers. The sons do have quite a bit in common, but in general the characters in *So Big* are not only more likable but more realistic. Despite one or two sentimental passages that aren't my thing at all, I did enjoy Ferber's writing.

Jeanette says

This style and depth of characterization, what we "know" about the main protagonists, those aspects are presented in a lovely old fashioned way, but not in a dated sense. This book definitely stands the test of time. I have to say that I enjoyed the first 2/3rds far more than the last 1/3rd. Selena's sentimentality in the later parts, and the Dirk progression lost a star for me. Knowing all the Chicago land marks, and how she fictionalized South Holland and U. of Chicago especially, that was intriguing. Almost 60 years before my own people were selling vegetables bought in those downtown markets, early mornings there had not altered all that much re Ferber's description. Minus the horse and wagons, lines of huge trucks and piggy backs by the rail lines! But quite similar.

Seeing Chicago's economy and opportunity during this period and now; there is such an immense contrast. It is so sad. In between were so many decades of boom that I did see. But not for nearly 20 years now. Dirk would never get in U.of C. today. Wrong gender, wrong race, wrong background, wrong prior schooling, etc. But this book brought to mind so eloquently the periods I have seen where you could go from picking fields to manufacturing lines, to office, to sales or ownership, to changing careers- and often within a decade. All you needed to do was work endlessly and have a goal. It truly was empowering to thousands. And I was lucky enough to live that entire progression. The beautiful things were gathered (as Ferber saw the goal of life beyond money) far, far more easily as well. Chicago and Silena DeJong cored the "can do" in *So Big*.

I enjoyed the last 20 pages in my issue that did an entire review of Edna Ferber's life and her Algonquin Round Table crew. Tons of pictures and asides to her travel and connections. You could see her antsy movement in the photos, and hear the tales that she suffered no fools in the "hear-says". Very, very interesting for a girl from Kalamazoo.

Amber Anderson says

In the three years I've worked in a bookstore, I've had ZERO customers ask for books by Edna Ferber. Dude. That is going to change.

I am going to start by recommending it to everyone I know (Andrew's mom is reading it next, then Andrew) and then I am going to recommend it to customers.

It's about Selina DeJong, a gambler's daughter-turned schoolteacher in a dutch village just outside of Chicago. It is definitely interesting to think that there was so much farmland in Selina's day, where now it's all steel and traffic. Selina is an intriguing character, she's smart, young (well...the novel spans a few decades), idealistic and determined. She falls in love and becomes someone she never thought she'd be. She

has a son who she works very, VERY hard for. Their lives happen and I couldn't pull myself away. A page turner indeed, this book wasn't thought to be very literary when it was published in 1924 (although it won the Pulitzer Prize)but the language is rich and the story is wholly interesting. Do read it.

JanB says

Winner of the Pulitzer prize, this book was a surprise to me. Written in 1924, the themes are timeless and the wisdom and insight as appropriate now as they were then. It is beautifully written and I found myself highlighting many passages.

Highly recommended!

L.A. Starks says

While I've heard of Edna Ferber, I can't believe a teacher or another authority on American literature didn't require me to read this book. So Big, Ferber's 1924 Pulitzer-prize-winning novel is on par with other great American novels by authors such as Mark Twain, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Ernest Hemingway. It is startlingly prescient (the ether of bond sales in the pre-1930s crash, for example), while drawing a picture of American farming, hard work, imagination, and ingenuity.

Let me preempt the reasonable complaints that there are a few characterizations in So Big that will make modern readers wince, as we should. However, like with Mark Twain, this book should be judged in the context of its time. That she represents the early 1900s so well is indeed all the more reason to read Ferber's fascinating observations about rural-to-urban Chicago neighborhoods in the early 1900s.

With So Big, Ferber belongs in the American pantheon. Yet she herself was concerned that the novel would not stand alone and should instead be serialized.

More Ferb.

Sylvester says

I'm going to say right off that I wasn't in the mood for this book. It deserves more than 2* because it's very well-written, and the theme is great - but I expected it to be something different than it was, and couldn't get past my disappointment. My bad. Anyway, the theme is compelling, and I didn't have any difficulty reading through the whole book, so I'd say that is a result of clearly excellent writing. If you're interested in a story about an American woman looking for beauty and worth in life in spite of very bleak conditions, you might well enjoy "So Big". For me, the second part of the book when things began to look up for Selina the plot lost intensity for me. Her son Dirk had little of her character, and I wasn't happy when he replaced her as the main character. I find the fact that people who fight against all odds to reach their goals often have children who have none of their parents' vision or strength of will very disheartening -"So Big" describes that situation well.

Irene says

I loved this story of a late 19th century woman who maintained a joi de vive and love of beauty despite life's toils and hardships. The characterizations in this novel was amazing. Ferber made these characters pulse with life. This is my first book by Ferber and I want to read much more.

Liza Martin says

This was my second Edna Ferber novel (the first being "Giant"), and it feels like I've discovered a well-kept secret of the literary world.

"So Big" is a great story about a young woman who grows up in various American cities, only to be disillusioned with what life "should be" after getting married to a poor Dutch farmer and toiling in the fields. But it's not just that: It's about believing that life is a grand adventure, "so much velvet." And then going out to find that, to be that person you envisioned yourself as, only to discover years later that you are not at all where you thought you'd be, who you thought you'd be. And how do you reconcile that? But Ferber cunningly shows us that the adventure is within us, that the turns and surprises are what we make of them, and that in the end, it is our spirit that dictates our love -- and interest -- in life. It is our character, Ferber seems to be saying, that makes life an adventure.

What I like best about Ferber is how she writes and the women she writes about. Her female heroines are quietly independent, fiercely strong without being bitchy or nagging. These characters suggest feminism without the blunt edges. They are, simply, women you'd want to meet. And that, along with her sweeping way of painting a portrait of a landscape on which lives thrive and turn, is what will keep you turning the pages.

Sara says

My decision to attempt to read all the Pulitzer Prize winners for fiction has netted me one wonderful, delightful, amazing discovery--this novel, *So Big*, by Edna Ferber. I cannot imagine I would have ever come upon it otherwise for two very sketchy reasons: one being the name which just has no compelling power for me, and the other being that I have seen the movie adaptation of *Giant* several times and absolutely hated it. That being my only encounter with Miss Ferber, I drew the absolutely untenable conclusion that I would not like her work.

Well, I did not like her work, I loved it. I find Edna Ferber kept making me think of her contemporary, Edith Wharton. They are nothing alike, in fact, since they have very different styles, come from completely disparate backgrounds, and write about two very different parts of the country; however, they are very alike in that they are a strong voice for women, they understand the classes they write about, and they cut to the quick the hypocrisy that they see all around them in the society they live in. Both of them seem to be saying, happiness can be had, but not if you are looking in the wrong place to ever find it.

Selina Peake DeJong is a character I am not likely to ever forget. She is a free-spirit but a hard worker. She is a person who expects a lot from life, but expects to get back only what she puts in. She is a person who experiences the beauty in everything that is simple and genuine and unique. There is no cookie-cutter that could produce a Selina. She is as individual as a piece of artwork, and a piece of artwork is what she is, in

the end.

Very early in the novel we are introduced to Selina's father, a gambler who lives sometimes at one end and sometimes at the other end of prosperity, giving her some advice about life:

"I want you to see all kinds," he would say to her. "I want you to realize that this whole thing is just a grand adventure. A fine show. The trick is to play in it and look at it at the same time."

"What whole thing?"

"Living. All mixed up. The more kinds of people you see, and the more things you do, and the more things that happen to you, the richer you are. Even if they're not pleasant things. That's living."

The crux of this book is about exactly that. About living. About what it is to get into the muck of life and squeeze the marrow out of the bone. And it is about the things that make a life both worthwhile and valuable...and I believe Edna Ferber would have told you, with complete sincerity, that money would not rank highly on that list.

The novel is built on contrasts. The contrast between the working man and the toff. The contrast between the wealthy and the poor. The contrast between the artist and the financier. The contrast between Selina, who lives close to the earth, and her son, Dirk, who strives not to.

I loved all these fine characters, celebrated and wept with them. I think the Pulitzer Prize committee got this one right. This is a book that is relevant today more than ever, for when has there ever been such a rush to measure life by the dollar value you can attach to it? I am ashamed for having thought of Edna Ferber as irrelevant and I am rushing out to get her other books and see if she weaves this magic more than once. Hey, I might even read *Giant* and find out that, aside from all that simpering and strutting that Liz Taylor and Rock Hudson and James Dean brought to the screen, there was a novel with a story and a lesson I can appreciate.

Laysee says

"There are only two kinds of people in the world that really count. One kind's wheat and the other kind's emeralds." – Edna Ferber

"So Big" is one of the most delightful books I have read this year. It won the Pulitzer Prize for the Novel in 1925. The story was set in High Prairie, New Holland, ten miles outside Chicago, circa 1885, when bananas apparently were considered "a delicacy of delicacies to the farm palate". It traced the life of Selina Peake DeJong and her beloved son, Dirk DeJong. "SoBig" was Dirk's nickname, affectionately given because his 2-year-old response (complete with outstretched arms) to Selina's question, "How big is baby?" was "So-o-o-o big".

The appeal of the novel lies in Edna Ferber's remarkable depth of characterization. Selina, in particular, was portrayed as an intelligent, resourceful, and resilient woman who was extremely likeable and deserving of respect. The daughter of a professional gambler, she led a nomadic childhood, moving from city to city wherever her father's business took him. At age 16, Selina had to fend for herself and earn her keep as a school teacher when her father died suddenly. While boarding with the Pool truck farming family, Selina developed a strong friendship with Roelf Pool (a boy a few years her junior) to whom she read and encouraged his pursuit of art. Selina soon married Pervus DeJong, a struggling truck farmer but he died unexpectedly when Dirk was still a young boy. For Selina, it was a hardscrabble life to farm and peddle vegetables at a time when the marketplace was solely male territory. Thus, it was immensely gratifying to

follow Selina's travails, to witness her triumph over unimaginable odds, and to observe her devotion to her son's education and success.

"So Big" is really quite big on some sound philosophy to live by. Selina's father did not leave her much money. However, he left her wise counsel that stood her in good stead through very hard times. The first is to embrace life in all its complexity: "Living. All mixed up. The more kinds of people you see, and the more things you do, and the more things that happen to you, the richer you are. Even if they're not pleasant things. That's living. Remember, no matter what happens, good or bad, it's just so much... velvet." Selina and Dallas O'Mara (Dirk's one true love interest) lived out this philosophy as reflected in their unpretentious lives and the pleasure they found in embracing diverse individuals and circumstances.

The second centers on beauty and self-expression, and most importantly, being true to one's passion. Selina had a "beauty loving eye" and discovered joy in surveying the jade and burgundy in the cabbage fields. Ferber, the omniscient narrator, had this to say in praise of Selina: "But always, to her, red and green cabbages were to be jade and Burgundy, chrysoprase and porphyry. Life has no weapons against a woman like that." Selina wanted Dirk to have "all the worth-while things in life...Rooms in candle-light. Leisure. Colour. Travel. Books. Music. Pictures. People - all kinds of people. Work that you love. And growth - growth and watching people grow. Feeling very strongly about things and then developing that feeling to - to make something fine come of it." Unfortunately, this did not materialize for Dirk despite his good looks, social panache, and excellent education.

Reading Selina's unrelenting efforts to secure the best for her son, one cannot help but wonder how far parents should go to pave the way for their children's future. Aug Hempel (a close friend's father who provided financial assistance to Selina) may be right in checking Selina's ambitions: "If you think giving your whole life to making the boy happy is going to make you happy, you ain't so smart as I took you for." How indeed do parents balance love and solicitude for their children's happiness with the need to accord them the freedom to live life as they desire? Arguably, no amount of love will allow anyone to live someone else's life for him or her.

At the end of the novel, there was a lovely reunion between Selina and Roelf Pool who had become a famous Parisian sculptor. In contrast, the last scene had Dirk, by then a wealthy banker, returning to his apartment, bone weary. There was meager consolation in knowing that Dirk realized that the life he had hankered after was not the life he thought it would be. I like to believe that Dirk had a chance to find his way home to his love of architecture and to things that truly matter.

Erika says

I opened this novel not sure what to expect. Edna Ferber was an extremely popular writer in her day, and I've found that many of the bestsellers in the 1920s are overly sentimental and not very deep.

But while So Big had degree of these qualities, it was also a really great read. The characters are developed well and after a slightly slow beginning, the action flows at a fast pace.

In addition, the novel does a wonderful job at describing Chicago in the early part of the 20th century along with smart, witty depictions of the society people who lived there. But my favorite aspect of the book was its protagonist. Selina is so full of joyful optimism and her love of beauty is so deep that "life has no weapons against a woman like that." She perseveres in spite of horrible setbacks, and even though the book is a little corny, it's impossible not to be inspired by it anyway.

Sandy says

Winner of a Pulitzer Prize in 1925, this novel is still well worth reading almost 100 years later. Author Edna Ferber's prose is a delight to read. There is a good balance between narrative and dialogue; the story moves along at a comfortable pace, never boring, never frantic. The author paints beautiful pictures and lively characters with well-chosen words. There is no flowery language here - just plain good English! This book was, for me, pure entertainment.

If you are looking for a story that will draw you into the suffering and emotional upheaval of the characters, then you ought to look elsewhere. The characters face their own challenges in life but the reader is most definitely a spectator. This quality may be what made the novel so popular in 1924 America. In the aftermath of the Great War and in the midst of the "Roaring 20's", did the reading public have an appetite for anything but escape through entertainment? Keeping that in mind, the modern reader can enjoy this glimpse of life as it might have been in the American midwest in the early 20th century.

Linden says

I think cabbages are beautiful, too. This book was frank, charming, and candid in a way that I never expect of older books, and so I am regularly surprised. So Big maintains throughout the important message of finding beauty in the mundane, and cultivating vitality even in the least expected places. It's a book about not taking things for granted, and for striving for one's beliefs, yet it's not schmaltzy. It has some of the same feel as A Tree Grows in Brooklyn, but over a span of an entire life, not just a childhood. And also, I love cabbages.

Elyse says

At first I was curious about the title "So Big"....which we soon learn is the nickname for a boy named Dirk DeJong. The nickname becomes symbolic for a theme running throughout this story pointing to what's important in life.

Another way this theme is expressed is that there are two types of people in life:
"Emeralds and Wheat"

The biggest treasure in this story, yet there are others, is Dirk's mother, Selena De Jong, who moves to a Dutch-farming community near Chicago.

She becomes a widow after her husband dies. She demonstrates inspiring work ethics making do with what she has. Setbacks don't set her back. She values education, justice, integrity, beauty, literature, and art. She's not afraid of hard work and rolls up her sleeves. She's strong, independent, optimistic, spunky, and courageous.....a feminist before her time.

Selena encourages her son to follow his heart - be true to his deepest self- but kids are going to make their own choices....which her son does.

As much as we wish our children to take the most inspiring roads in life, it doesn't always look as if they do. As parents we just might have less influence than we think.

Some people seem to need to make mistakes themselves in order to learn a life lesson- others are inspired by observing others and avoid a few more.

What motivates one person - and not another? How much influence do we as parents really have on our children?

Maybe there is still a bigger lesson yet. How much does it really matter if our children take 'the-wrong-road'and make big mistakes? Who hurts more, the parent? Or the child? And is that the question to ask? Or is it possible that the challenge is to embrace the big mistakes in life head on- accept them - learn from them - forgive - and through differences love full heartedly during the hardest times?

"So Big" is a timeless novel giving us BIG THINGS to think about! Parts of the story is heartbreaking....But it's always a powerful look at humanity!

This book won the Pulitzer Prize in 1924.....WELL DESERVED!

The writing is lyrical.....characters come alive in the context of detail descriptive writing.

"He knew cabbage from seed to sauerkraut; he knew and grew varieties from the sturdy Flat Dutch to the early Wakefield. But they were beautiful; that they looked like jewels; that they lay like Persian patches, had never entered his head, and righty. What has the head of a cabbage, or, for that matter, of a robust, soil-stained, toiling Dutch truck farmer to do with nonsense like chrysoprane, with Jade, with Burgundy, with Persian patterns!"

Zsofi says

So Big is a novel about the adventure called life. It has serious messages about family, motherhood, hardship, and most importantly, finding beauty. I am very glad to have met Selina, who lived in several homes in several cities during her childhood, than moved to a Dutch farming community. Although she faces challenges previously unknown to her, she tries to keep her dignity and view of life amidst physical, financial, and mental hardships.

But this story is not only about her. I agree with a previous reviewer who said that this book was about contrast. We meet smart and dumm, rich and poor, beautiful and ugly, visionary and "near-sighted", and everything in between. All the characters - even the ones who we meet for a short time - are so well described, that we almost feel like knowing them. And maybe, we do. I could relate some of them to people I know, and sometimes, to myself. Ms Ferber knows the nature of people, and shows it in a wonderful way.

This was my first book by Edna Ferber, and I love her work! This one is definitely a must read.

Deyanne says

Surprise. What a delightful experience to start a reading year with a "gem" if you will. Another formerly unread choice in our book group year of Pultizer Prize Winners, I truthfully did not hold high expectations. I

have questioned whether or not the books we have already read have been dated and relevant at their times but truthfully antiquated in language and more historical in importance. While I did find numerous words I didn't know in this novel like the clothing: panniers, plastrons, reveres, etc. I found the writing style to be strong and one of the greatest strengths to be the characterizations. These people: Selina, Dirk, Roelf Pool and Dallas all lived and breathed for me.

There were two philosophies that Selina had been taught to measure and evaluate living. First, she needed to embrace life - all of life: " Living. All mixed up. The more kinds of people you see, and the more things you do, and the more things that happen to you, the richer you are. Even if they're not pleasant things. That's living." Secondly, you had to be true to your passion and center life on beauty and self-expression. Both philosophies are explored in the book with Selina being able to live both, but yet she cannot teach these concepts to her only son.

The characters, their experiences and the timeless relevancy of this novel led to some rich and engaging discussion. There was no need for organization. We just jumped into the discussion asking our own driving questions. "What is the significance and meaning of the title?" "How does a parent balance insights and desires for a child while yet allowing that child freedom?" "What is beauty?" "What would have happened to Selina if she hadn't been required to run the farm?" "Would Dirk find happiness and a rich life?" "Let's examine the importance of reading in this novel." "Hands were certainly a strong image. How many times were they referenced?"

What was surprising for me and personally enriching were the humble and honest connections people made to this book. Though we have been together for close to forty years, I learned some things about some of these friend's lives that I didn't know. I love them even more. This book and other's insights provided the basis for a memorable and delightful afternoon.

Steve says

This was a very different, very enjoyable read for me. Thanks for nudging this now forgotten little gem my way, Susan. Your instincts for what I would like were, as always, unerring.

So Big was Edna Ferber's Pulitzer Prize winning book from 1924. Despite the accolades I didn't know what to think going into it. For one, I imagined the language would seem a little dainty and old-fashioned. For another, it was mostly set on a vegetable farm – not exactly promising. The first few pages scared me, too, with talk of bustles and complex, compound feminine emotions like exhilarated wariness. Once I let it unfold, though, I discovered what a talented writer Ferber was. The prose was neither flowery nor spare. In fact, if a single word could describe it, I'd probably just call it beautiful. A great author can also make you care about things you never thought you would, farm life in Illinois in the late 19th century being the relevant case in point.

You really get a sense of one remarkable woman's life with this book. Selina had a spark that the humdrum of her situation couldn't squelch. Here's what she told a friend she wanted for her young son: "Beauty. Yes. All the worth-while things in life. All mixed up. Rooms in candle-light. Leisure. Colour. Travel. Books. Music. Pictures. People – all kinds of people. Work that you love. And growth – growth and watching people grow. Feeling very strongly about things and then developing that feeling to—to make something fine come of it." There are ironies in the way things play out, and in who may appreciate what, but those are thematic pleasures granted only to those who read this exceptional book.

