



The Zookeeper's Wife: a war story

By Diane Ackerman

First published 2007

Genre & subject

Zoo keepers

Warsaw (Poland)

True stories

Synopsis

The true story of how the keepers of the Warsaw Zoo saved hundreds of people from Nazi hands. When Germany invaded Poland, Stuka bombers devastated Warsaw - and the city's zoo along with it. With most of their animals dead, zookeepers Jan and Antonina Zabinski began smuggling Jews into empty cages. Another dozen "guests" hid inside the Zabinskis' villa, emerging after dark for dinner, socialising, and, during rare moments of calm, piano concerts. Jan, active in the Polish resistance, kept ammunition buried in the elephant enclosure and stashed explosives in the animal hospital. Meanwhile, Antonina kept her unusual household afloat, caring for both its human and its animal inhabitants - otters, a badger, hyena pups, lynxes - and keeping alive an atmosphere of play and innocence even as Europe crumbled around her.

Author biography

Diane Ackerman received a Bachelor of Arts in English from Pennsylvania State University and a Master of Arts, Master of Fine Arts and Ph.D. from Cornell University. Among the members of her dissertation committee was Carl Sagan. She has taught at a number of universities, including Columbia and Cornell.

Ackerman's research has taken her to such diverse locales as Mata Atlantic in Brazil (working with endangered golden lion tamarins), Patagonia (right whales), Hawaii (humpback whales), California (tagging monarch butterflies at their overwintering sites), French Frigate Shoals (monk seals), Toroshima, Japan (short-tailed albatross), Texas (with Bat Conservation International), the Amazon rainforest, and Antarctica (penguins). In 1986, she was a semi-finalist for NASA's Journalist-in-Space Project—this program was cancelled after the Space Shuttle Challenger (carrying Christa McAuliffe as a payload specialist with the Teacher in Space Project) disaster. A molecule has been named after her—dianeackerone—a crocodilian sex pheromone.

Discussion starters

- How does Diane Ackerman's background as a naturalist and a poet inform her telling of this slice of history? Would a historian of World War II have told it differently, and, if so, what might have been left out?

- Reviews have compared this book to Schindler's List and Hotel Rwanda. How would you compare them?
- Did this book give you a different impression of Poland during World War II than you had before?
- Can you imagine yourself in the same circumstances as Jan and Antonina? What would you have done?
- How would you describe Antonina's relation to animals? To her husband? How does she navigate the various relationships in the book, given the extreme circumstances? Is her default position one of trust or distrust?
- Do people have a "sixth sense" and how does it relate to "animal instinct"?
- Some might judge Jan and Antonina guilty of anthro-morphising animals and nature. Would you? Why or why not?
- Can nature be savage or kind—or can only humans embody those qualities? As science and the study of animal behavior and communication teach us more and more about the commonalities between animals and humans, is there still any dividing line between the human and the animal world? If so, how would you describe it?
- The Nazis had a passion for animals and the natural world. How could Nazi ideology embrace both a love of nature and the mass murder of human beings?
- The drive to "rewrite the genetic code of the entire planet" is not distinct to Nazism. What similar efforts are alive today? Are there lessons in Jan and Antonina's story for evaluating the benefits and dangers of trying to modify or improve upon nature? Do you see any connection between this story of more than sixty years ago and contemporary environmental issues?
- Genetic engineering of foodstuffs is highly contentious. So are various reproductive technologies that are now common, such as selecting for—or against—various characteristics when choosing from sperm or egg banks. How would various characters in this book have approached these loaded issues?

If you liked this book, you may also like...

In the garden of beasts: love and terror in Hitler's Berlin by Erik Larson

Suite française by Irène Némirovsky

Resistance: the Warsaw Ghetto uprising by Israel Gutman



If you are looking for something new to read try **NoveList!** It is a free database to help you find that perfect book. Visit www.ryde.nsw.gov.au/library

Author biography from Wikipedia (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diane_Ackerman),

Discussion questions from LitLovers citing author's website (www.litlovers.com/reading-guides/non-fiction/1197-zookeepers-wife-ackerman?start=3)

Synopsis from TROVE citing publisher

(trove.nla.gov.au/work/28429830?q&sort=holdings+desc&_id=1503992906430&versionId=40556803)