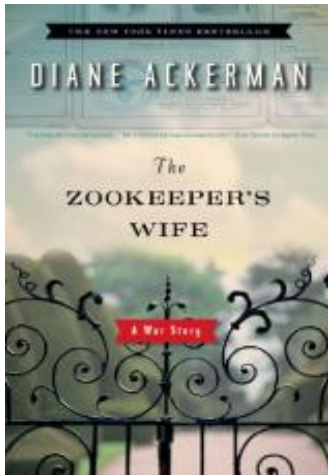


The Zookeeper's Wife: A War Story

by Diane Ackerman



About the Book

A lovely story about the Holocaust might seem like a grotesque oxymoron. But in **The Zookeeper's Wife**, Diane Ackerman proves otherwise. Here is a true story --- of human empathy and its opposite --- that is simultaneously grave and exuberant, wise and playful. Ackerman has a wonderful tale to tell, and she tells it wonderfully.? --- *Washington Post Book World*

A poignant and absorbing book.? --- *New York Times Book Review*

I can't imagine a better story or storyteller. **The Zookeeper's Wife** will touch every nerve you have.? --- Jonathan Safran Foer, author of **Everything is Illuminated**

After their zoo was bombed, Polish zookeepers Jan and Antonina Zabinski managed to save over three hundred people from Nazi racism by hiding refugees in the empty animal cages. With animal names for these "guests," and human names for the animals, it's no wonder that the zoo's code name became "The House Under a Crazy Star."

Best-selling naturalist and acclaimed storyteller Diane Ackerman combines extensive research and an exuberant writing style to recreate the fascinating, forgotten, true-life story --- sharing Antonina's life as "the zookeeper's wife," while unraveling the disturbing obsessions at the core of Nazism.

Discussion Guide

1. 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?

2. Reviews have compared this book to **Schindler's List** and **Hotel Rwanda**. How would you compare them?
3. Did this book give you a different impression of Poland during World War II than you had before?
4. Can you imagine yourself in the same circumstances as Jan and Antonina? What would you have done?
5. 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?
6. Do people have a "sixth sense" and how does it relate to "animal instinct"?
7. Some might judge Jan and Antonina guilty of anthropomorphizing animals and nature. Would you? Why or why not?
8. 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?
9. 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?
10. 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?
11. 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?

Author Bio

Poet, essayist, and naturalist, Diane Ackerman is the author of two dozen highly acclaimed works of nonfiction and poetry, including *THE ZOOKEEPER'S WIFE* and *A NATURAL HISTORY OF THE SENSES* --- books beloved by millions of readers all over the world. In prose so rich and evocative that one can feel the earth turning beneath one's feet as one reads, Ackerman's thrilling observations urge us to live in the moment, to wake up to nature's everyday miracles.

Critical Praise

"A fresh and compelling addition to Holocaust literature."

? *San Francisco Chronicle*

"A lovely story about the Holocaust might seem like a grotesque oxymoron. But in **The Zookeeper's Wife**, Diane Ackerman proves otherwise. Here is a true story --- of human empathy and its opposite --- that is simultaneously grave and exuberant, wise and playful. Ackerman has a wonderful tale to tell, and she tells it wonderfully."

? *Washington Post Book World*

"Ackerman has written many stellar works... but this is the book she was born to write. An exemplary work of scholarship and an ?ecstasy of imagining,? Ackerman's affecting telling of the heroic Zabinskis' dramatic story illuminates the profound connection between humankind and nature, and celebrates life's beauty, mystery and tenacity."

? *Booklist*, starred review

"Poet and naturalist Diane Ackerman turns her keen gifts to an absorbing true tale of war and compassion in **The Zookeeper's Wife**, a non-fiction narrative that breathes literary life into a most unusual hero.... A startling and moving portrait of life during wartime."

? *Kirkus Reviews*

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