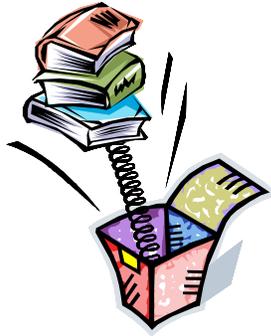




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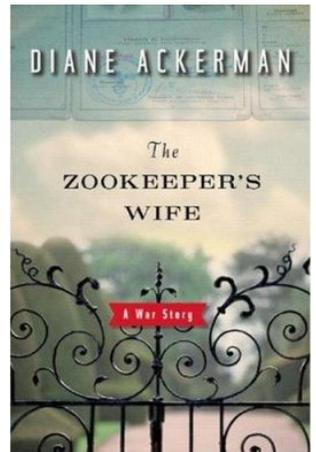


Book Club in a Box

THE ZOOKEEPER'S WIFE

About the Book

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, socializing, 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. With her exuberant prose and exquisite sensitivity to the natural world, Diane Ackerman engages us viscerally in the lives of the zoo animals, their keepers, and their hidden visitors. She shows us how Antonina refused to give in to the penetrating fear of discovery, keeping alive an atmosphere of play and innocence even as Europe crumbled around her.



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About the Author



Diane Ackerman was born Diane Fink in Waukegan, Illinois, on October 7, 1948, the only daughter of Sam Fink, a shoe salesman, and Marsha Tischler Fink. She had one brother, Howard. In Waukegan, then a rural area, she learned to love nature. She also discovered her own poetic sensibility. One day, while walking with friends through a plum orchard, she noted how much the dark plums looked like bats. She later referred to this as her first metaphor.

When Diane was eight, the family moved to Allentown, Pennsylvania, where her father managed one of the first McDonald's restaurants. Although Diane liked being with boys and girls of her own age, her association with the counselors at a summer camp introduced her to books

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such as those that college students were reading. She was already writing poetry; reading now became her other obsession.

After a year at Boston University, Ackerman transferred to Pennsylvania State University. There she met the novelist Paul West, who would become her lifelong companion; they would later make their permanent home in upstate New York. Ackerman received her B.A. in English in 1970. An offer of a teaching assistantship took her to Cornell University, where she earned an M.F.A. in 1973, an M.A. in 1976, and a Ph.D. in 1978. In 1980, Ackerman became assistant professor of English at the University of Pittsburgh; in 1984, she became director of the writers' program and writer-in-residence at Washington University in St. Louis. She was later writer-in-residence at a number of other universities.

Although Ackerman's poems had appeared along with those of two other writers in a 1973 chapbook, her first published volume was *The Planets: A Cosmic Pastoral*. It was made up solely of poems about astronomy. Later collections focused on topics ranging from pure science and nature to the adventurous life. Ackerman also wrote prose articles for publications such as *The New Yorker*, where she was a staff writer from 1988 to 1994, and published book-length memoirs. *Twilight of the Tenderfoot* told the story of her life as a cowhand on a New Mexico ranch; *On Extended Wings*, of her adventures as a pilot; and *A Slender Thread: Rediscovering Hope at the Heart of Crisis*, of her experiences as a volunteer at a suicide-prevention hotline. Ackerman's most unusual prose work, *A Natural History of the Senses*, was a diverse collection of fact, folklore, and personal observations. It became a best-seller, published in sixteen countries, and was made into a television miniseries, hosted by the author, that was aired by the Public Broadcasting System in February, 1995. That same year Ackerman brought out her first children's book.

Ackerman's awards include the Poetry Prize of the Academy of American Poets and the Corson Bishop Prize for Poetry in 1972, the Poetry Prize of the *Black Warrior Review* in 1981, and the Peter I. B. Lavan Younger Poet Award of the Academy of American Poets in 1985. In 1990, she received the Lowell Thomas Award from the Society of American Travel Writers, and in 1998, the John Burroughs Nature Award. The range of her honors points to her unique achievement. Both as a poet and as a prose writer, she has produced a synthesis of science and technology with nature and art.

Reisman, Rosemary M. Canfield, and Reisman Rosemary M. Canfield. "Diane Ackerman." *Guide To Literary Masters & Their Works* (2007): 1. *Biography Reference Center*. Web. 4 Aug. 2014.

Further Reading

If you liked *The Zookeeper's Wife*, you might like:

22 Britannia Road by Amanda Hodgkinson

Away by Amy Bloom

Exodus by Leon Uris

In the Garden of Beasts by Erik Larson

Resistance by Israel Gutman

Suite Francois by Irene Nemirovsky

Discussion Questions

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 anthropo-morphizing 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?