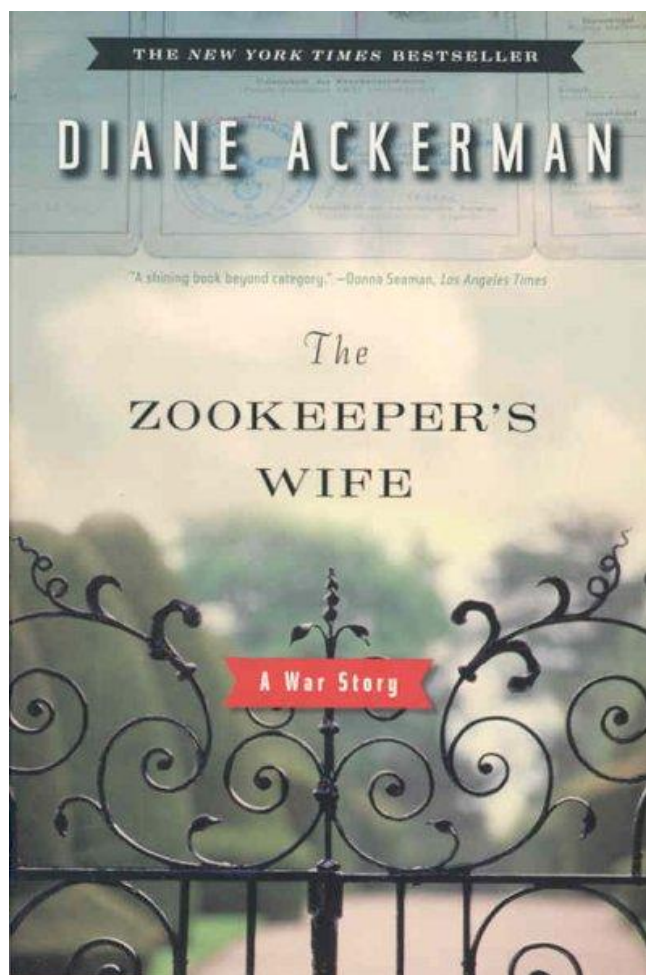


About the book...

American Library Association Notable Books,
2008

Booklist Editors' Choice: Adult Books, 2007



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.

About the author...(www.dianeackerman.com)

Diane Ackerman was born in Waukegan, Illinois. She received an M.A., M.F.A. and Ph.D. from Cornell University. Her works of nonfiction include, most recently, *The Zookeeper's Wife*, narrative nonfiction about one of the most successful hideouts of World War II, a tale of people, animals, and subversive acts of compassion; *An Alchemy of Mind*, a poetics of the brain based on the latest neuroscience; *Cultivating Delight: A Natural History of My Garden*; *Deep Play*, which considers play, creativity, and our need for transcendence; *A Slender Thread*, about her work as a crisisline counselor; *The Rarest of the Rare* and *The Moon by Whale Light*, in which she explores the plight and fascination of endangered



Her poetry has been published in leading literary journals, and in the books *Origami Bridges: Poems of Psychoanalysis and Fire*; *I Praise My Destroyer*; *Jaguar of Sweet Laughter: New and Selected Poems*; *Lady Faustus*; *Reverse Thunder: A Dramatic Poem*; *Wife of Light*; *The Planets: A Cosmic Pastoral*. She also writes nature books for children: *Animal Sense*; *Monk Seal Hideaway*; and *Bats: Shadows in the Night*.

Ms. Ackerman has received many prizes and awards, including a D. Litt. from Kenyon College, a Guggenheim Fellowship, Orion Book Award, John Burroughs Nature Award, and the Lavan Poetry Prize, as well as being honored as a Literary Lion by the New York Public Library. She also has the rare distinction of having a molecule named after her -- dianeackerone. She has taught at a variety of universities, including Columbia, the University of Richmond, and Cornell. Her essays about nature and human nature have appeared in *The New York Times*, *Smithsonian*, *Parade*, *The New Yorker*, *National Geographic*, and many other journals, where they

have been the subject of much praise. She hosted a five-hour PBS television series inspired by *A Natural History of the Senses*.

Reviews

Library Journal

About 25 years ago, Diane Ackerman proposed to her editor at *National Geographic* magazine that she write an essay about Bialowieza, a primeval forest in Poland where descendants of paleolithic bison and horses still roamed freely. Instead, the writer was dispatched to Hawaii to write about monk seals, but her fascination with this pristine forest and its “living fossils” remained strong. “What I didn't know then was that I was sharing some of Adolf Hitler's and Hermann Goering's obsessions,” says Ackerman.

Through further reading, Ackerman learned about the Nazi attempt to resurrect extinct species, a process that involved looting the zoos of conquered countries. And she uncovered the little-known but remarkable story of Jan and Antonina Zabinski, Polish Catholic zookeepers who rescued over 300 Jews during World War II by hiding them in the ruined Warsaw zoo. “As I began learning their story piece by piece,” explains

the author, "it was like pulling off dusty layers and being able to see the story more clearly."

What she discovered and recounts so movingly in her book (see review on p. 147) was an act of compassionate heroism. At a time when harboring a Jew was punishable by death, the Zabinskis smuggled friends and strangers out of the Warsaw Ghetto into their villa and the zoo's empty cages. While Jan, an active member of the Polish resistance, buried ammunition in the elephant enclosure, Antonina cared for her young son, her "guests," and a tiny menagerie that included a pet pig and a kissing, carnivorous rabbit named Wicek. In Antonina, whose extraordinary empathy for animals and human beings is evident throughout the text, Ackerman found a kindred spirit determined "to keep play, the arts, innocence, and even humor alive in a household where everyone feared the horrors and uncertainties around them. I think that takes a special kind of courage."

With nail-biting accounts of daring deeds and narrow escapes, *The Zookeeper's Wife* reads like a thriller, but Ackerman was careful to stay close to the facts, drawing on Antonina's memoirs and children's books, as well as interviews she and Jan gave to Polish, Hebrew, and Yiddish newspapers after the war. "Trying to understand Antonina was a new challenge

for me,” says the author. “I couldn't depend on my own impressions when [these events] took place long ago.” Ackerman repeatedly visited the Warsaw zoo and the villa where she could look out of Antonina's bedroom and—as Warsaw's Old Town had been carefully restored after the war—see the same vistas the zookeeper's wife once enjoyed. Ackerman also interviewed the Zabinskis' son and several women, now in their eighties, who had served with Jan in the Polish Underground. And she immersed herself in Poland's natural environment by visiting Bialowieza. “What I did is insinuate myself back into Antonina's world,” Ackerman explains.

Strangely, the story of the Zabinskis is not well known in their homeland, which Ackerman attributes to the Soviet-dominated Communist regime that suppressed any signs of Polish patriotism. When the book is published in Poland in a year, she believes that the events it relates will be a great surprise to many people there—and a source of pride. She hopes both Polish and American readers will learn that ordinary people perform radical acts of compassion over the world every day. “For some reason, we like to highlight the worst in human nature,” observes Ackerman, “but it's worth reminding people of the best.”—

Publisher's Weekly

Ackerman (*A Natural History of the Senses*) tells the remarkable WWII story of Jan Zabinski, the director of the Warsaw Zoo, and his wife, Antonina, who, with courage and coolheaded ingenuity, sheltered 300 Jews as well as Polish resisters in their villa and in animal cages and sheds. Using Antonina's diaries, other contemporary sources and her own research in Poland, Ackerman takes us into the Warsaw ghetto and the 1943 Jewish uprising and also describes the Poles' revolt against the Nazi occupiers in 1944. She introduces us to such varied figures as Lutz Heck, the duplicitous head of the Berlin zoo; Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, spiritual head of the ghetto; and the leaders of Żegota, the Polish organization that rescued Jews. Ackerman reveals other rescuers, like Dr. Mada Walter, who helped many Jews "pass," giving "lessons on how to appear Aryan and not attract notice." Ackerman's writing is viscerally evocative, as in her description of the effects of the German bombing of the zoo area: "...the sky broke open and whistling fire hurtled down, cages exploded, moats rained upward, iron bars squealed as they wrenched apart." This suspenseful beautifully crafted story deserves a wide readership.

Booklist /*starred review*/

Jan Zabinski, the innovative director of the Warsaw Zoo, and Antonina, his empathic wife, lived joyfully on the zoo grounds during the 1930s with their young son, Ryszard (Polish for *lynx*), and a menagerie of animals needing special attention. The zoo was badly damaged by the Nazi blitzkrieg, and their bit of paradise would have been utterly destroyed but for the director of the Berlin Zoo, Lutz Heck, who wanted Jan's help in resurrecting extinct "pure-blooded species" in pursuit of Aryan perfection in the animal kingdom. Resourceful and courageous, the Zabinskis turned the decimated zoo into a refuge and saved the lives of several hundred imperiled Jews. Ackerman has written many stellar works, including *A Natural History of the Senses* (1990) and *An Alchemy of Mind* (2004), but this is the book she was born to write. Sharing the Zabinskis' knowledge of and reverence for the natural world and drawing on her poet's gift for dazzling metaphor, she captures with breathtaking precision and discernment our kinship with animals, the barbarity of war, Antonina's unbounded kindness and keen delight in "life's sensory bazaar," Jan's daring work with the Polish Underground, and the audacity of the Zabinskis' mission of mercy. 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.

Literary Criticism

Title: Antonina's List

Author(s): D.T. Max

Source: ***The New York Times Book Review***. (Sept. 9, 2007): Arts and Entertainment: p9(L). From *Literature Resource Center*.

Document Type: Book review

Full Text:

THE ZOOKEEPER'S WIFE

By Diane Ackerman.

Illustrated. 368 pp. W. W. Norton & Company.
\$24.95.

There were 380,000 Jews in Warsaw on the eve of World War II. Most did not survive the Holocaust. The director of the Warsaw Zoo and his wife were responsible for saving about 300. Why then write about them? Can 300 mean anything when hundreds of thousands died? Certainly any such act of wartime courage is worth recording, but Jan and Antonina Zabinski's work was distinctive. The Nazis dehumanized the Jews; the Zabinskis hid them in animal cages. The Nazis behaved like beasts; the zookeepers, who were experienced with dangerous animals, threw them off the scent with subterfuge and

lies. The Zabinskis' effort was not just merciful, it was human in the deepest sense of the word.

In her poignant new book, Diane Ackerman, the noted nature writer, focuses on Antonina, the "zookeeper's wife" of the title. But her husband, Jan, lived the more dramatic life. He was a lieutenant in the clandestine Polish Army and a professor in Warsaw's secret university. He smuggled Jews out of the Warsaw Ghetto to the zoo. But once there it was up to Antonina to safeguard them: to find them room and food, to keep their spirits up, and most of all to hide them from the Nazis.

"The Zookeeper's Wife" proceeds chronologically, starting before the war, when the Warsaw Zoo was as esteemed as any in Europe. Soon the Nazis destroyed the zoo with bombs and guns. Led by the criminal zoologist Lutz Heck, they carted off the best animals for their own collections. Then Heck and the SS held a shooting festival on New Year's Eve, 1939, to finish the job. Their brutality at the zoo foretold their brutality in the war, as Antonina intuited in her diary, which Ackerman draws on heavily for her book. "How many humans will die like this in the coming months?" Antonina asks herself, watching the Nazi shooting spree.

Soon after they captured Warsaw, the Nazis turned their attention to its Jews, first rounding them up into

the ghetto, then shipping them to extermination camps. While the Nazis depopulated the ghetto, the Zabinskis repopulated the zoo -- this time with humans. The Nazis had allowed Jan to turn the zoo into a pig farm. So Jan and his staff had reason to enter the ghetto to pick up unused scraps to feed the animals. They brought in tref -- nonkosher food -- and smuggled out people. More contacts ensued; more pretexts to go into the ghetto; more Jews safeguarded. The Zabinskis hid Jews in sheds, enclosures and even the lion house. Those who had papers or Gentile looks were passed via the underground to other parts of Poland. The rest stayed.

Antonina's own looks helped allay suspicion. Fair and tall, she looked "like a Valkyrie at rest," Ackerman writes. She also had a unique gift, "a nearly shamanistic empathy when it came to animals." Antonina "loved to slip out of her human skin for a while and spy on the world through each animal's eyes." Ackerman's chronicling of this "slippage of the self" forms the freshest part of this book. For Antonina, animal and human formed a continuum. Each of her "guests" was given an animal code name. The distinguished sculptor Magdalena Gross, for instance, was called "starling" because Antonina "pictured her 'flying from nest to nest' to avoid capture." To cheer up her residents, Antonina stocked her "animal republic" with a rabbit named Wicek and

a chicken named Jacob and a pet badger who uses Antonina's son's potty. "This house is totally crazy," one mystified resident complains. "You use animal names for people and people's names for animals!"

To fend off cuteness -- Herriot's Heroes -- Ackerman returns often to the carnage outside the zoo's gates: the routine murder of children, Himmler's determination to destroy every stone in the ghetto as a birthday present for the Fuhrer, the firebombing of entire cities. In 1943, the Allies turned the tide and began driving the Nazis back. The Polish Army rose up in rebellion as the Russian Army, fox-like, waited for the Germans and the Poles to fight to the death. Then they moved in. The zoo reopened in 1949 -- with some of its old animals but without its old vigor, and with Stalinism casting a new pall over the grounds. Two years later, Jan resigned as director.

At her lowest moment during the war, Antonina wonders whether the horrible period she was enduring wasn't "a sort of hibernation of the spirit, when ideas, knowledge, science, enthusiasm for work, understanding and love -- all accumulate inside" where "nobody can take them from us." Her dream of a Warsaw spring -- and a reborn zoo -- would come true after the fall of Communism, though she wouldn't live to see it; she died in 1971. Nature is patient, people and animals fundamentally decent, and the writer, as she always does, outlives the killer -- that is

the message of "The Zookeeper's Wife." This is an absorbing book, diminished sometimes by the choppy way Ackerman balances Antonina's account with the larger story of the Warsaw Holocaust. For me, the more interesting story is Antonina's. She was not, as her husband once called her, "a housewife," but the alpha female in a unique menagerie. I would gladly read another book, perhaps a novel, based again on Antonina's writings. She was special, and as the remaining members of her generation die off, a voice like hers should not be allowed to fade into the silence.

CAPTION(S):

Photo: Jews in Warsaw, 1930s. (Photograph by Hulton-Deutsch Collection/Corbis)

By D. T. MAX

Source Citation

Max, D.T. "Antonina's List." *The New York Times Book Review* 9 Sept. 2007: 9(L). *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 31 July 2011.

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 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?

Multimedia

“Book Chronicles Warsaw Zoo as Refuge in WWII”
Available through National Public Radio:

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=18222827>

Readalike

Non-Fiction

Babylon's Ark: The Incredible Wartime Rescue of the Baghdad Zoo by Lawrence Anthony (2007)

Diary of Mary Berg: Growing Up in the Warsaw Ghetto by Mary Berg (2007)

Oskar Schindler: The Untold Account of His Life, Wartime Activities, and the True Story Behind the List by David M. Crowe (2004)

Michelangelo in Ravensbrück: One Woman's War against the Nazis by Karolina Lanckoronska (2007)

Fiction

Those Who Save Us by Jenna Blum (2004)

A Thread of Grace by Mary Doria Russell (2005)

A Blessing on the Moon by Joseph Skibell (1997)

Louisa by Simone Zelitch (2000)



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