

The Zookeepers Wife by Diane Ackerman

Author Bio

Birth—October 7, 1948

- Where—Waukegan, Illinois, USA
- Education—B.A., Penn State; M.A., M.F.A, Ph.D., Cornell University
- Awards—D. Lit. from Kenyon College; Guggenheim Fellowship; Orion Book Award; John Burroughs Nature Award; Lavan Poetry Prize; honored as a Literary Lion by New York Public Library.
- Currently—lives in Ithaca, New York

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 animals; *A Natural History of Love*; *On Extended Wings*, her memoir of flying; and the bestseller *A Natural History of the Senses*.

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. Lit. 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*. (From the [author's website](#).)

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 anthro-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? (*Questions from [author's website](#).*)

Reviews

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.

D.T. Max - *New York Times*

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.

Susie Linfield - *Washington Post*

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. (8 pages of *illus.*)

Publishers Weekly

The 1939 Nazi bombing of Warsaw left its beloved zoo in ruins with many of its animals killed or wounded. Worse was to come when Berlin zoo director Lutz Heck had surviving rare species shipped back to Germany as part of a Nazi breeding program and held a New Year's Eve hunting party for German officers to finish off the remaining animals. Witnessing this horror was the zookeeper's wife, who wondered, as she recalled later in her memoirs, how many humans would die in the same manner in the coming months. As Antonina Zabinski and her husband, Jan, soon learned, the Nazis had targeted Poland's large Jewish population for extermination, and the couple, who were already supplying food to friends in the Warsaw Ghetto, pledged to help more Jews. And help they did. Ackerman's (*A Natural History of the Senses*) moving and eloquent narrative reveals how the zookeepers, with the aid of the Polish underground, boldly smuggled some 300 Jews out of the Ghetto and hid them in their villa and the zoo's empty cages. Based on Antonina's own memoirs and newspaper interviews, as well as Ackerman's own research in Poland, the result is an exciting and unforgettable portrait of courage and grace under fire. While some critics might feel she glosses over Polish anti-Semitism, Ackerman has done an invaluable service in bringing a little-known story of heroism and compassion to light. Highly recommended.

Wilda Williams - Library Journal