

VENTURA BOOK REVIEWS

WHERE WILL THE NEXT BOOK TAKE YOU?

THE ZOOKEEPER'S WIFE

BY DIANE ACKERMAN



The Zookeeper's Wife is one of Diane Ackerman's many nonfiction books. This incredible true story is about a husband and wife, Jan and Antonina Zabinski, who hid Jews in their Warsaw zoo during WWII. The Zabinski's story is one of a kind and I am surprised I hadn't heard of it until now.

Only two pages in and I could tell that the author had done her research. She gives a very detailed description of both the husband and wife. On page 15 she writes of Jan: "Balding, with a crown of dark brown hair, Jan needed a hat to fight burn in summer and chill in winter, which is why in outdoor photographs he's usually wearing a fedora, giving him an air of sober purpose." That sentence alone shouts that Ackerman studied photos of Jan to get to know him, so she could portray him properly. Not only the people, but Ackerman goes into great detail about all the animals as well. She spent one paragraph stating all the noises of the zoo when dawn breaks. Throughout the book there are paragraphs that follow this pattern. One paragraph describes many different bugs in a collection, for example. The book needs to be read slowly so that one can catch all

of the intricate descriptions. Because Ackerman goes above and beyond with her descriptions it is very easy to visualize and feel the scene that Antonina is experiencing.

I say Antonina because the book is mainly about her. Antonia is the zookeeper's wife, after all. The most interesting aspect of the book is that a lot of Antonina's own words are in it. Ackerman says in the *Author's Note* that she drew from the memoirs, Antonina's "autobiographical children's books, such as *Life at the Zoo*; Jan Zabinski's books and recollections; and the interviews Antonina and Jan gave to Polish, Hebrew, and Yiddish newspapers" (10). She goes on to say, "Whenever I say Antonina or Jan *thought, wondered, felt*, I'm quoting from their writings and interviews." This brought the book to a much more intimate level so that the reader feels like they know the Zabinski's very well by the end of the book.

The ending brings the reader to 2005 when Ackerman is walking through Warsaw and the zoo. She offers a last detailed description of the city and how they have recovered from the monstrosity that happened there.

The Zookeeper's Wife was a New York Times Bestseller and won the 2008 Orion Book Award. In early 2017, ten years after the book was published, it became a film starring Jessica Chastain, Daniel Brühl and Johan Heldenbergh.

REVIEWED BY GRACE VENTURA