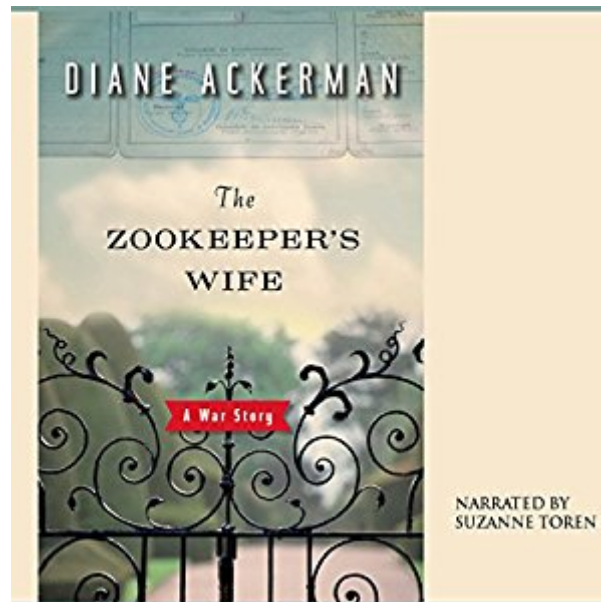


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# The Zookeeper's Wife: A War Story



## Synopsis

A true story--as powerful as Schindler's List--in which the keepers of the Warsaw Zoo saved hundreds of people from Nazi hands. --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

I feel bad knocking this book because the story of Jan and Antonina Zabinski is one of two amazing people in Warsaw during the German occupation who demonstrated courage, brilliance, resilience, and humanity in the face of the grossest barbarism this planet has seen. Yet, Diane Ackerman has placed me in this position with her absurdly overblown writing, her precious turns of phrase, and her inability to establish a coherent timeline or storyline for what she's relating. I made note of more outstanding examples of her jarring images: "In a darkness that deep, fireflies dance across eyes that see into themselves." "Once its sprightly melody had been a favorite of hers, but war plays havoc with sensory memories as the sheer intensity of each moment, the roiling adrenaline and fast pulse, drive memories in deeper, embed every small detail, and make events unforgettable." "Meanwhile, the brain piped fugues of worry and staged mind-theaters full of tragedies and triumphs, because unfortunately, the fear of death does wonders to focus the mind, inspire creativity, and heighten the senses. Trusting one's hunches only seems a gamble if one has time for SEEM...." It seems Ms. Ackerman imagines herself to be the mistress of human senses and is writing beyond her material at hand. Too bad, because she had access to primary sources, to Antonina's extraordinary diary, which I wouldn't have minded reading without its being filtered through this author. Nonetheless, the awful times in Poland and Warsaw come crashing through

Ackerman's writing anyway. One wonders how any people at all survived German barbarity. The story of the Warsaw ghetto and its brave and tortured souls is vividly rendered, although not in a coherent fashion, as one has to dance from one chapter to the next to get a real sense of its nightmarish horror. The Zabinskis, particularly Jan, risked the lives of their son and daughter to harbor utterly wretched Jews ("Guests") in the labyrinthine zoo quarters. Bold young Polish Jews sabotaging the Germans would find a harbor there, even for short periods of time until they could be moved again to another safe harbor in the active Polish underground. It's a terrifying and remarkable story which made me think what I would have done in similar circumstances as a free person, knowing the crass injustices, blatant torture, and outright murder going on around me. This book also tells of a mother's overpowering love for her son. At every turn, Antonina protected Rys as best she could, with varying degrees of success. We aren't sure of Rys's age, but I guess he was between 8 and 12 during the most awful events. Ackerman constantly returns to this mother/son relationship as a recurring theme, as it must have figured prominently in Antonina's diary. I wished this story had been handled by another writer, but it hasn't been. It's still worth reading, as the events and tales of rescue and survival are so stirring that even bad prose can't detract from them. So I recommend this book, even if you cringe at the rhetorical nonsense it sometimes contains.

There are many stories that continue to come out of the WW II experience, stories of courage, love and survival in the face of near hopeless situations inflicted upon the globe by Nazi Germany, and, thankfully, biographies of heroes whose moral convictions were stronger than the destructive forces of Hitler's cadre. *THE ZOOKEEPER'S WIFE* is yet another unknown story, a true tale of survival of the human spirit pitted against what seemed to be the end of the world in Poland. Yet this book is not 'just another war story'. As presented by the astute investigator and gifted writer Diane Ackerman, whose many books include 'A Natural History of the Senses', 'An Alchemy of Mind: The Marvel and Mystery of the Brain', 'The Moon by Whale Light - and Other Adventures Among Bats, Penguins', 'Crocodilians and Whales', 'A Natural History of Love', 'Deep Play', 'Cultivating Delight: A Natural History of My Garden', 'The Rarest of the Rare: Vanishing Animals, Timeless Worlds', and anthologies of poems such as 'I Praise My Destroyer: Poems' and 'Jaguar of Sweet Laughter: New and Selected Poems', this is a magical tale about a couple in Warsaw whose roles as zookeepers allowed their shared appreciation for animal life and ways of adapting to devise ingenious ways to protect many of the Jews from the Warsaw Ghetto from mass execution. Jan and Antonina Zabinski were Polish Christian keepers of the Zoo when the Germans under Hitler's scheme of world domination and purification of Europe for the chosen race of Aryans began. Ackerman quietly builds

her setting by concentrating on the special gifts of these two remarkable people in caring for the animals of the zoo: her descriptions of the various members of the menagerie are at once comical and insightful. When Hitler's move into Poland began the Zabinskis, long friends with the many Jews who lived around them, devised clever ways to turn the zoo and their own villa into a safe haven for the increasingly threatened annihilation of their friends who happened to be Jewish. Throughout the horrors of the German destruction of the city and the attempts of the Warsaw Uprising, led in part by Jan Zabinski, the couple maintained an atmosphere of calm and grace for the some 300 Jews in their hiding. Using the Zoo as a shield to deflect occupying German interest in animal studies as a part of their theory of purification, and as a means to gather food in the Jewish Ghetto for the 'animals', they were able to feed their 'guests' and provide papers and documents to aid the escape of the Jews who chose to flee Poland. And after the war the Zabinskis continued to refurbish the zoo and offer sanctity to those Jews whose lives had been so devastated during the crush of Warsaw. Ackerman is a master craftsman and her depth of scientific knowledge about the animal kingdom makes her ability to relate this story of 'The Zookeeper's Wife' match the inordinate amount of research about her subjects to create an important document about an historical fact previously unknown. And yet her ability to invest her story with poetic force is always evident: '...war plays havoc with sensory memories as the sheer intensity of each moment, the roiling adrenaline and fast pulse, drive memories in deeper, embed every small detail, and make events unforgettable. While that can strengthen friendship or love, it can also taint sensory treasures like music. By associating any tune with danger, one never again hears it without adrenaline pounding as memory hits consciousness followed by a jolt of fear...It's a terrific way to ruin great music'. There are times in this fine novel when the reader is jarred from the flow of the story being told by Ackerman's insertions of data or stepping in to remind us that she interviewed some of the survivors in her research: the drama of the tale is diluted momentarily by facts and figures and names, moving the reader away from the visceral experience of the Zabinski's story to remind us that we are reading a documented biography. Yet in the end the book is so powerful, so overflowing with gracious writing and so full of the indomitable human spirit that such small 'flaws' become inconsequential. Ackerman has unveiled another great moment in the histories of human kindness during times of war, and we are the richer for it. Highly recommended. Grady Harp, September 07

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