

Skokie Public Library's Book Discussion Guide

The Zookeeper's Wife by Diane Ackerman

- How did the backgrounds, personalities and philosophies of Antonina and Jan contribute to their success in hiding Jews in their villa and zoo?
- Why do you think there have recently been so many books and movies about ordinary people who helped rescue Jews from Nazi-occupied Europe?
- What seemingly innocuous actions did Jan and Antonina take that aided in their efforts in preserving the zoo as a way station for hiding people?
- Antonina and Jan had a number of close calls that could have resulted in their being caught. Can you talk about some of them and how they got out of some very difficult situations?
- Rys was a child who had to keep a secret. What do you think about Rys and his relationship with his mother? His father? Their unusual pets?
- How does Diane Ackerman's background as a naturalist and a poet inform her telling of this slice of history? Would a historian of WWII have told it differently? And, if so, what might have been left out?
- Did this book give you a different impression of Poland during WWII than you had before?
- 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?
- Do people have a 6th sense and how does it relate to animal instinct?
- The Nazis had a passion for the animals and the natural world. How could Nazi ideology embrace both a love of nature and the mass murder of human being?
- 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 60 years ago and contemporary environmental issues?



Skokie Public Library

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