



Book Club Discussion Questions

The Zookeeper's Wife by Diane Ackerman

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?