



The Zoo: The Wild and Wonderful Tale of the Founding of London Zoo: 1826-1851

Isobel Charman

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The founding of a zoo in Georgian London is a story of jaw-dropping audacity in the Age of Empire. It is the story of diplomats, traders, scientists, and aristocratic amateur naturalists charged by Sir Stamford Raffles with collecting amazing creatures from all four corners of the globe.

It is the story of the first zoo in history, a weird and wonderful oasis in the heart of the filthy, swirling city of Dickensian London, and of the incredible characters, both human and animal, that populated it—from Charles Darwin and Queen Victoria to Obaysch the celebrity hippo, the first that anyone in Britain had ever seen. This is a story of Victorian grandeur, of science and empire, and of adventurers and charlatans.

And it is the story of a dizzying age of Empire and industrialization, a time of change unmatched before or since.

This is the extraordinary story of London Zoo.

The Zoo: The Wild and Wonderful Tale of the Founding of London Zoo: 1826-1851 **Details**

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From Reader Review The Zoo: The Wild and Wonderful Tale of the Founding of London Zoo: 1826-1851 for online ebook

Jennybeast says

Very enjoyable story of the founding of the London Zoo, told through mini-biographies of many of its founders. The book flows right along, with fascinating (and frequently appalling) detail -- very well written, very well researched, with a believable presentation of some interesting people. It's a hard read -- I think that zoos perform a critical part in the chain of conservation, but when you're taking a look at the behavior of early naturalists, the loss of life they casually deemed acceptable was truly astounding. Not surprising, perhaps, and paving the way for better and more humane things, but still a potent reminder of the callousness of our species.

Carolyn Thomas says

Ms. Charman takes the unusual approach of writing about the founding of the London zoo from the perspective of various people connected with it, from Sir Stamford Raffles (1824 - 1826) whose vision it was to create London's very own "Jardin des Plantes" like the one in Paris, a place where animals could be observed and studied and not just enjoyed by the rich, to the Earl of Derby, President of the Zoological Society of London from 1847 - 1851.

In between are chapters on: architect; medical attendant (my personal favorite); animal preserver; head keeper; "corresponding member" - Charles Darwin, a chapter I found long and tedious.

It's actually a very sad story because no-one had any idea how to care for the exotic animals entrusted to the society and large numbers of them died, not just in captivity but in misery.

The time period has been thoroughly researched using sources such as newspaper articles, weather reports, personal correspondence and diaries, but in order to recreate atmosphere and emotions Ms. Charman has also imagined scenarios, thoughts and reactions. The overall result is interesting, if a little dry.

Lydia says

A very interesting account of the early days of London Zoo. As an animal lover, I found there were more sad stories than happy ones; but it's interesting to see how attitudes towards animals have changed over the years. Despite its initial difficulties however, I find myself more in favour of the zoo than before. I'm not an anti-zoo person anyway but this is a tale of real effort to observe and learn about animals rather than simply entrap them for human pleasure. The fact that, to this day, the gardens remain a place for scientific study and the advancement of animal welfare is a testament to the fact that zoos can be a force for good.

I liked this book and its on a topic I had no prior knowledge about. Very informative, factual and piques your interest to read more.

Annie says

Reader, I skimmed this book. Isobel Charman's *The Zoo: The Wild and Wonderful Tale of the Founding of London Zoo, 1826-1851* is the kind of historical writing that I loathe, unfortunately. While Charman did her

homework by digging through the archives of the Zoological Society of London, she writes this history as though it's a novel, full of little vignettes of city life and the thoughts and emotions of the men who created London Zoo. The Zoo's history is, on its own, interesting enough to sustain my interest. That's what I wanted. So I skimmed to get the historical details and ignored what I saw as filler...

Read the rest of my review at A Bookish Type. I received a free copy of this book from NetGalley for review consideration.

Diana says

Book received from NetGalley.

Prior to reading this book, I believed the London Zoo was started when the animals of the Tower of London were moved to a better living area. I had no clue just how wrong I was. This book goes into the founding of the Zoological Society of London and the aristocracy that fought to bring the zoo to life. So different from what I believed. I have to admit this book will not interest everyone, and I did skim a few areas that seemed to drag which is why I lowered the rating for this book. I think this would be a great book for someone who enjoys this era of history and I will likely buy a copy for my research shelves.

Jan-Maat says

I have only myself to blame. You know when they say 'don't judge a book by its cover' it is actually sound advice and not just one of those implausible sayings like 'two heads are better than one' - really? How are you going to get your clothes on then?

I looked at the back cover and read the description, a book about the founding of London Zoo, great! But oh, good grief. You know how books are made into films, but also how sometimes a novelisation is made from a film - this is not so much a non-fiction or a history of the early years of London Zoo, more like a novelisation, except it is not a novel. Alternatively you could see it as an adult's version of a children's book - more words, no colourful pictures, but really, really simplistic, but for all the dead animals it would be ideal for TV.

There are seven chapters each about a figure involved in the Zoo's story as Charman tells it: Stamford Raffles (back from founding Singapore and possible founder of the Zoo (view spoiler)), Decimus Burton (the original architect (view spoiler)), Charles Spooner, who might have been the first vet at the zoo (view spoiler)), John Gould the taxidermist who had a lot to do with the zoo in its early days (view spoiler), Devereux Fuller, head keeper in the mid 1830s, Charles Darwin (who has to be in the book so the reader will recognise at least one person in the book), and the 13th Earl of Derby (why not). Each chapter is told from the point of view of each of those people in a demi-fictional style so how they felt, what they thought, blah, blah, blah, but none of it is referenced, so reading you don't know if they actually did think or feel what the author claims or if it is all a load of bollocks (as we say in the vernacular).

You might say, that this sounds like the perfect book for the post truth, fake news, bite sized, multi-media focused world of today, and to be sure someone will love it, but not me. Aside from that I don't know what the author has just made up and what is trueish - though my sense from the Darwin chapter that Charman has liberally telescoped things together and grossly oversimplified in a patronising manner does not give me confidence for the rest. However the book has finally withered what ever sympathy I might have had for the

idea of zoos open to the public which now strikes me as acceptable as tying small children to poles and using them to scrub chimneys clean, however I am not sure that was her intention.

It was also a grating and frustrating book. Come the second chapter on Decimus Burton I thought was he given a brief or did he form a conception of what was required of purpose built enclosures for exotic (view spoiler) animals? For example running water, drainage, heating, ventilation, appropriate light and so on? Well Charman wasn't interested in the business end like that but she does say that Burton looked at his watch and cleared his throat to signal to the foreman to tell the builders to get a move on. Hmm. Burton's experience was in designing villas for the wealthy and the occasional church, one of his brothers was one of the early Egyptologists, but if he visited a model dairy or a cavalry barracks to see how they managed mucking out the animals I don't know. The Regents Park site was however damp and plagued by rats - which presumably pleased the carnivores who otherwise didn't get fresh meat.

The original impetus was to promote the scientific study of animals, it quickly emerged that this was very necessary since the Zoological Society of London and its employees had no real idea how to feed or house or care for the animals which they bought. Many died. Particularly in winter. Visitors were restricted to members of the society or those willing to pay a shilling and bearing a letter from a member of society. They liked to poke at the animals with parasols and walking sticks and they could buy cakes from concession stalls to feed to the animals. They liked to watch the bears climb up and down a pole all day. It turns out that cake surprisingly is not the foundation for a good diet for lions, apes or kangeroos. Many died. The enclosures were quite small and with the diet of cake and being poked and prodded the animals were stressed and irritable. When they fought and hurt each other there was no where to remove them too for them to recover. Many died. The keepers did not like to be too busy and so preferred to feed the beasts a single mega meal each day. Animals suffered from constipation. They tried the same medicines on animals as on people, but with no idea how much to vary the doses: castor oil, chamomile, digitalis, laudanum and in extreme cases - holding the animal down and massaging its stomach. Many died. The taxidermist was kept busy. Visitor numbers were maintained by shipping in new exotic beasts which might be extensively advertised and promoted, and eventually by opening a concession stand to sell cake to human visitors (a novel idea apparently), and finally by allowing the general public to visit. The general impression is of when not abuse, neglect, no doubt some of the people involved were well meaning in a broad sense, but one feels that human entertainment was the main driver, it is certainly hard to see what science was achieved beyond slowly realising how many varied ways you can kill animals.

It is a surprise that London Zoo has managed to continue as a going concern and tourist attraction to the present day, Charman doesn't manage to explain that, the implication is that getting a hippopotamus turned everything around which seems unlikely unless it was a very learned hippo able to doctor the other animals and advise on diet and lifestyle, perhaps that it neither a wild nor a wonderful enough tale?

Rena Sherwood says

You think that at my age (48) I would stay away from any book that has a subtitle that goes something like, "The Wild and Wonderful Tale of ..." because the resulting book will be anything BUT wild and wonderful. And yet, idiot that I am, I read this anyway.

The second warning sign that I ignored was that the chapters were devoted to PEOPLE and not animals. This is supposed to be the story of a zoo. I want to read about ANIMALS. If I wanted to read about people, I'd pick up some other book.

The third warning that I ignored was the first sentence, "They couldn't save the animals." And the book went

on to mostly chronicle dead and dying beasts. There's also long sections on animal dissection. Isobel Charman never reveals why these animals died. Kangaroos commit suicide, others develop diseased lungs -- why? Your guess is as good as anyone's.

There are occasionally some interesting bits (like the time a rhino got loose) but mostly this is a nightmare of dead and dying animals, one after the other.

The Notes shows all of the places where the author did research. She sure did a lot. I wonder why hardly any of it made it into the book. She also reveals that she made conjectures about certain events and personalities. I think that's called "fiction".

Laura says

This is either a three or a four, depending on how much you love learning about the first zoo in the world.

Or rather, how much you love learning about what Lord someone said to Lord someone else, as they tried to found the first zoo. Yes, it started out quite slowly, but after the first chapter, it started to move on to more interesting things, such as the first veterinarian, and how Edward Lear and Charles Darwin became involved in the zoo.

It is a sad book, at times, as we see animal after animal die from the air pollution of London, as well as the cold. The visitors liked to poke at the bears, and feed the animals with sticky buns. And then, of course, the animals dying all over the place. It is sort of hard, so many years later, to realize that they were doing this all by the seat of their pants, it was all such a new concept.

I have been to the London Zoo, though it is not the same as it was in Victorian times. In fact, going there, I have my favorite overheard quote:

A man and his toddler child are walking, and the child stops to look at some pigeons.
"Pigeons?" the father shouts, "we didn't come here to look at no pigeons."

So, if you want to find out more than you ever thought you possibly could about the London Zoo, then this is the place for you. If you have a mild curiosity, and no more, you will find that although there are some interesting bits, you might find yourself saying "who cares", far too often.

Thanks to Netgalley for making this book available for an honest review.

Nikki says

Reviewed for The Bibliophibian.

The cover promises the “wild and wonderful” tale of the founding of the London Zoo, but it isn’t really very wild, though you might decide it’s still wonderful in its way. It certainly was a heck of a task, and the fact that the London Zoo still exists is amazing considering some of the difficulties they had. The style is rather fictionalised — mentioning exactly what Charman imagines the protagonists of the story think and feel — and it doesn’t always stick very closely to the founding of the zoo itself. For example, there’s a whole chapter on Darwin, at least as long as the others, and yet of all of them he has almost nothing to do with the actual business of the zoo.

It’s not all about the zoo, then, but the story it tells is an interesting one, and I did enjoy the stories of men that might have been left out of the story in another time — the first vet, the keepers, etc. The people who did the day to day work on the ground, not just the people who designed the buildings or paid for things.

A little slow, really; it was a bit too fictional to give me the sort of details I want in my non-fiction, but too dry for my tastes as a work of fiction.

John Newcomb says

I really enjoyed this book. Seven very different people, all involved in the founding and development of London Zoo, are considered in a semi fictional account but intricately researched consideration of this unmatched institution. You have famous figures like Sir Stamford Raffles (the founder), Decimus Burton (the architect) and Charles Darwin (the scientist) along side the head keeper with his alcohol problems, an animal doctor (before vets were a thing) and a skin preserver (whose work is still on show in the Natural History Museum). Finally we explore The Earl of Stanley, the aristocratic president and Naturalist whose legacy to the nation is the zoo we have today. It is a wonderful insight to Victorian science, art and life. Highly recommended.

Clayton says

The history of the London Zoo has some intriguing elements to it, but this novel fails to inspire excitement. Sectioning the timeline into individual characters allows for a focus on little-known names, but it also detracted from a cohesive narrative with payoff. For example, Darwin’s story fades away, as does the mystery of why the big cats keep dying. If one wants to understand sentence fragments, there are plenty to study here. Odd switches between verb tense also kept drawing me out of the narrative. The level of research and history present moves this up for me, as I did learn something, but it was somewhat of a chore to work through.

Julie says

Charman does a wonderful job in describing the beginnings of the London Zoo. Each chapter highlights a different time period and a individual or individuals who were involved with the zoo during that time period including, a zoo keeper, a founder, gardener and an animal doctor. Even Charles Darwin gets a chapter for he was a corresponding member of the zoo and used the resources of the zoo in his work and research. I think I was most shocked at the deaths of a lot of the animals that came to live in the zoo and how the zoo personal tried everything they could think of to prevent the loss of the exotic animals.

Beth says

I liked the approach that led me into the history that felt like I was reading a novel. It was exciting that the founder, Sir Stamford Raffles, had the idea to create a Zoo for England that would improve on the one in France. He had begun collecting specimens to be brought back from his stint working for the East India Company but they burned aboard ship and he had to begin again. Like any start-up now, he had to interest rich people who would be ardent Zoological amateurs or professionals in giving money, find a place to keep the animals, hire an architect to build buildings to house the animals, talk the authorities into letting him go ahead with project, then hire keepers and fledgling veterinarians and finally, generate sufficient income to feed the animals and pay the help. No wonder he, who had been in bad health died early in life. The story continues with those who think a museum of stuffed birds and animals would make easier study than live ones. So many died from not understanding that their original habitat had to be replicated to keep them in good health.

I did skip the segment about Darwin's travels because I have read of them elsewhere, but I do recommend trying the first third of the book.

Steef says

I enjoyed reading this book, although I do have mixed feelings about the effectiveness of mixing historical facts with a fleshed out novelisation of occurrences presumably found in correspondence and other sources. I think it only works occasionally here.

My biggest qualm with this book is about the chapter on Darwin, which seems like an attempt by the author to shoehorn a famous person into the story. But I felt like that had nothing to do with the origins of the London Zoo, or only casually at most. Besides, his story has been told many times before.

Still, I did enjoy reading it, most of the time.

Alex Howard says

I think I understand what the author was trying to do with this book, to try and put some empathy into the main players involved in the founding of London Zoo. But the problem with this as a way of retelling real events is that too much of the story is concerned with wondering and imagining what a particular person was thinking or feeling at any given moment. The problem with having a non-fiction story that weaves fact with what 'probably happened' means that you spend the whole read wondering what is true and what the author made up.

Also I have a problem with just a retelling of a story like the founding of London Zoo, which was both ambitious and important, but also dark and upsetting, just through the lens of the people who were around at the time and not in any wider context of how zoos have improved since then. A lot of animals died in the name of science and showing off exotic animals, and it feels very strange to not mention explicitly the mistakes that were being made. For example, at one point there's a mention of feeding the big cats milk to try and improve their health. I feel like this would be a good moment to mention that adult animals (except some

humans) can't digest lactose? This is when it becomes very obvious that the book was not written by someone involved in Zoology, and I think it suffers for that.

In addition to this, there are also several times where the story deviates quite widely from any actual important events at the zoo. The most egregious of this is the chapter about Darwin, which basically amounts to 'Darwin went to the zoo and saw some orangutans'. It felt very pointless.

All in all it's not like this was a bad book, just left me feeling frustrated because this is a subject I am very interested in. 3 stars because I did learn some new things about the Zoo's founding, and the bibliography will be a useful way to continue reading about this story. In the end, it was the writing style that let this book down.
