Confessions of an Accidental Zoo Curator

Annette Libeskind Berkovits
Tenth Planet Press (Apr 22, 2017)
Softcover $17.99 (335pp)
978-0-9987578-0-3

Berkovits’s humor, passion for her work, and wealth of interesting anecdotes make for a book that is a pleasure to read.

Though Annette Libeskind Berkovits fell into her job as a zoo curator by accident, her engaging memoir shows how her passion, perseverance, and hard work kept her there.

It’s hard to believe that a woman whose entire experience with animal ownership consisted of two days with a puppy as a child and a few months of keeping a tadpole in a jar would one day land a job at the Bronx Zoo and go on to become a world leader in conservation education.

That’s just what happened, though, when Berkovits answered an ad for a volunteer coordinator at an unspecified cultural institution.

Before she’d even started, the position changed to that of an educator. She was expected to immediately begin handling animals such as raptors and snakes while teaching children all about them. Giving up in the face of a challenge wasn’t part of Berkovits’s character, though, and she quickly learned to handle the animals not only in the zoo classrooms but also on television shows like Captain Kangaroo.

Berkovits’s can-do attitude served her well in a career dominated by men. She eventually rose up the ranks and achieved successes such as starting a zoo camp program, introducing teacher training sessions, and developing a science curriculum that would be adopted by schools across the United States, in China, and in Kenya.

Berkovits is a wonderful storyteller who has filled her memoir with detail, insight, and humor. She isn’t afraid to laugh at herself or share her fears, like when a keeper unceremoniously shoved a boa constrictor into her arms on her first day, or when coworkers decided to play an elaborate prank on her.

In addition to the funny and bizarre animal stories are vignettes that explore beauty within chaos (visiting a butterfly preserve amidst a violent uprising in Venezuela), sentimental acts of kindness (when a coworker named a baby wallaby after Berkovits’s father), and the struggles of trying to be an innovator when the administration was happy with the status quo.

There are also acknowledgments of the complicated and personal nature of taking a stance on animal conservation. As an example, she explores how she taught children that Indian villagers contributed to the decline of tigers when they killed them on suspicion of eating their livestock. Berkovits realizes, however, that she herself put up spikes on her condo railings to keep pigeons away. “I began to grasp that where you stand depends entirely on where you sit,” she writes.

This lively and thoughtful memoir allows a peek behind the scenes of a zoo, unconventional education programs, and the conservation movement. Berkovits’s humor, passion for her work, and wealth of interesting anecdotes make for a

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book that is a pleasure to read and that will appeal to a wide audience.

CHRISTINE CANFIELD (April 17, 2017)

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