

The Zoo – Reading Group Questions

The creation of a zoo in Dickensian London is a story of jaw-dropping audacity. It is the story of trailblazing scientists, rival keepers and aristocratic naturalists collecting amazing animals from all around the world – and sending them to what was dubbed ‘the ark’ by the mocking press.

Telling this almost unbelievable true story, Isobel Charman depicts a highly colourful but often forgotten moment in cultural history, through the eyes of extraordinary characters both famous and unfamiliar – from Stamford Raffles, Lord Derby and a young Charles Darwin, to the medical attendant, the head keeper and the showman across town.

- What sense do you get of Dickensian London as depicted by the author? Does this teach you anything new? How does Charman achieve this portrayal?
- Were any passages particularly striking to you? What did you find most illuminating, relevant, or witty?
- Who is your favourite character – human or animal – and why?
- What was your favourite part of the book?
- If you’ve visited London Zoo before, how do you think your experience might change if you visited again now? If you haven’t, do you think you will as a result of reading this book?
- What do you think of the author’s quality of research/evidence – convincing? Relevant? Authoritative? What kind of evidence is used?
- What do you think the author’s views are on the background issues of global empire, domestic reform and industrialisation as depicted in the book? Where do you stand (or would you have stood at the time) on these issues?
- Do you think the author supports zoos in principle in the modern day? Do you? Why?
- Has the book changed your views on any of these issues?
- Have you read/watched any of Isobel Charman’s other works? How do they compare to The Zoo? Would you read more of her books in future?



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