

Ann Littlewood Zoo Mysteries: Interview Questions

Why do you write zoo mysteries?

I was weaned on Nero Wolfe and Erle Stanley Gardner, followed by Dick Francis, Sue Grafton and many other mystery writers. I loved the Dick Francis books because of the details about horses. I read every book I could find about animals. Eventually this interest led to a career as a zoo keeper. As an adult, when I decided to give fiction a serious try, it was natural to write a mystery with lots of animals in it. A zoo is a wonderfully complex setting, with all those animals and their different requirements and behavior, full of animal people with all the usual conflicts and visitors bringing their expectations and opinions. And I hope to use “zoo-dunnits” to tell people about wild animals and their difficulties in today’s changing world.

How do you know about zoos?

After finishing college in Portland, Oregon, I had the opportunity to volunteer at the Oregon Zoo. That led to a job as animal keeper that I held for 12 years, working mostly in the Nursery raising young animals. We did a lot of wildlife rehabilitation as well. I left that world for a career in business writing, but I always missed it. Writing *Night Kill*, and now *Did Not Survive*, is a way for me to reconnect with that amazing environment. I visit zoos; read animal books; follow online news and chat forums for zoos, biology, and conservation; and keep up my membership in the American Association of Zoo Keepers.

Why did you choose elephants as major characters in *Did Not Survive*?

Despite thousands of years of close contact, elephants are terribly challenging animals for people to accommodate. In captivity, they are difficult and expensive to maintain because they are so strong and smart. They need the companionship of other elephants, physical exercise, and mental stimulation to thrive. Delivering these requires deep expertise and long-term funding. That’s in captivity. In the wild, they need large expanses of natural areas, and they need not to be shot for their tusks or their destructiveness. Elephants are magnetic, iconic, and delightful. They are also dangerous. Elephants kill over 200 people a year in India alone. African elephants get more publicity, but Asian elephants, featured in *Did Not Survive*, are far more endangered. All elephant species are in big trouble because we are putting roads, farms, and towns where they live. We are cutting down the forests and buying their tusks and other body parts. *Homo sapiens* doesn’t always coexist well with elephants, and we have the ability to exterminate them. In *Did Not Survive*, I wanted to explore these issues and get people thinking about what it takes for us to leave other species what they need to survive.

Why did you set fictional Finley Memorial Zoo in Vancouver, Washington?

I wanted to invent my own zoo! So I couldn’t use a real zoo. Vancouver is just across the river from Portland, where I live, and it doesn’t have a zoo. Because it’s so close, it’s easy for me to visit so that I can work in some local color, and of course, the whole Northwest ethos applies just as well to Vancouver as to Portland. I think the Northwest has a lot to offer in fiction—a

dramatic landscape, challenging weather, and a tolerance of individualism. I created Finley Zoo as a small, struggling zoo for two reasons. One is that it's easier to get people killed off in a second-rate zoo. The second is that I wanted to show Finley Memorial Zoo improving as it adopts modern housing and husbandry for its animals. Oh, and it's named after William L. Finley, the renowned conservationist, who helped found the Audubon Society of Portland.

How much is Iris Oakley, your protagonist, like you?

Iris started zoo keeping younger than I did. She dropped out of college (I didn't) and she's more adventurous. Her social skills are not that great (some would say mine aren't either!), but she really pays attention to animals and understands what's going on with them. Her dogs are a major source of emotional support. I am far more timid and conventional than Iris! Perhaps she's the challenging daughter I never had.

Where do you plan to take the series in the future?

Finley Zoo will continue to improve, but much of the action will move outside the zoo into different situations involving animals. I have a lot of goals for the series. One is, of course, to write entertaining mysteries with different animals featured in each one. I want the animals to be as real as the human characters and readers to learn a little bit about them. Another goal is to explore the ways people and animals interact, in the zoo setting and others such as a dog show, a circus, and so on. My most important goal is to present conservation issues. This is the hardest one for me, because I am very passionate about how badly humans are treating the planet, and it is hard to keep from preaching and imploring. I soft-pedaled this in *Night Kill*, but hit a few more issues in *Did Not Survive*. I will continue to feel my way and try to listen to my readers. At the end of each story is an author's note encouraging people to take action to support natural habitats. A portion of my royalties goes to conservation organizations. As the series generates more income, I plan to dedicate a fixed portion to conservation.

Who are your favorite authors?

Number one is always Portland's own Ursula LeGuin. William Gibson is another favorite. I re-read *Zodiac* by Neal Stephenson every few years. On the mystery side, right now I'm enjoying Craig Johnson (Wyoming sheriff Walt Longmire), Peter Bowen (brand inspector Gabriel Du Pre), Val McDermid, Julie Kramer, and Kerry Greenwald, as well as the usual favorites such as Laura Lippman, Sue Grafton, Lawrence Sanders, and Sara Paretsky. I like thrillers, especially Michael Connelly, but I avoid grisly serial killers and sex torture. I want to be entertained, not appalled. I can't write books and keep up with all of them! Books that I loved that don't fall into a genre category include *Kalimantan* by C.S. Godshalk and *The Penelopiad* by Margaret Atwood. In non-fiction, I'm a fan of Jared Diamond and Bryan Christy and Craig Childs. (I'd better stop now).