



Our Zoo

June Mottershead

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Until I brought friends back from school I didn't realise that most people didn't have baby lions in their bedrooms when they were sick, or bring parrots into the house so they wouldn't catch cold.'

Chester Zoo is counted among the top 10 zoos in the world and, with over 11,000 animals and 400 species, it is the most visited wildlife attraction in Britain. Unlike other zoos that owe their existence to philanthropists, explorers or big game hunters, Chester Zoo was the brainchild of one working-class man with a dream he had nurtured since he was a boy: to build a zoo without bars.

June Mottershead was four years old when her father, George, moved his family to Upton, two miles out Chester, to begin the process of turning his dream into a reality. With no other children around to play with - her sister Muriel was 10 years older - June's friends became the animals. Her closest companion was an orphaned chimpanzee which her sister had she hand reared, and for six years the two were inseparable. June soon became the poster girl for Chester Zoo and photographs of her cuddling lion cubs, head-butting a goat or opening the beak of a pelican soon graced the front pages of British newspapers. She was 13 when war was declared on 1939 and, with the backbone of the staff headed for the front, it fell to June to take over as head keeper. Keeping the zoo running while the war waged was no easy task. Despite rationing the animals had to be fed and all of them - penguins, elephants, leopards, tigers, lions, kangaroos and polar bears - needed to be moved into secure locked quarters inside as soon as the air raid siren sounded.

June, now in her eighties, is the guardian of her family's legacy and here in Our Zoo, she tells

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Claire says

Review: Our Zoo by June Mottershead

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Synopsis:

A wonderfully nostalgic memoir detailing the fascinating lives of the working class family behind the phenomenally successful Chester Zoo. When George Mottershead moved to the village of Upton-by-Chester in 1930 to realise his dream of opening a zoo without bars, his four-year-old daughter June had no idea how extraordinary her life would become. Soon her best friend was a chimpanzee called Mary, lion cubs and parrots were vying for her attention in the kitchen, and finding a bear tucked up in bed was no more unusual than talking to a tapir about granny's lemon curd. Pelican, penguin or polar bear - for June, they were simply family. The early years were not without their obstacles for the Mottersheads. They were shunned by the local community, bankruptcy threatened and then World War Two began. Nightly bombing raids turned the dream into a nightmare and finding food for the animals became a constant challenge. Yet George's resilience, resourcefulness and tenacity eventually paid off. Now over 80 years since June first set foot in the echoing house, Chester Zoo has achieved worldwide renown. Here, in her enthralling memoir, June Mottershead chronicles the heartbreak, the humour, the trials and triumphs, above all the characters, both human and animal, who shaped her childhood.

My review:

I was so looking forward to reading this account of how Chester Zoo began, as an animal lover, I'd been enthralled by the TV series of the same name. The book is a little different to the series, which was adapted for TV audiences, but this original account by the youngest Mottershead is equally enchanting.

This memoir focuses very much on the animals and how the grounds of Oakfield were turned into the first zoo without bars, which I found fascinating. The attention to detail is fantastic, the recount captivating.

My only criticism is that I didn't really like so much focus on the war details, which I'm afraid I found a little boring. Obviously the war had a great impact on the zoo so I totally understand it's inclusion; I just prefer reading about the animals.

Emma says

Originally posted on bluchickenninja.com.

June Mottershead was four when her father, George, moved his family to Upton, two miles from Chester, to begin the process of turning his dream into a reality. With no other children around to play with – her sister Muriel was ten years older – June's friends became the animals. Her closest friends became the animals. Her closest companion was an orphaned chimpanzee which she hand reared, and for six years the two were inseparable.

June soon became the poster girl for Chester Zoo and photographs of her cuddling lion cubs soon graced the front pages of British newspapers. She was 13 when war was declared in 1939 and, with the backbone of the staff headed to the front, it fell to June to take over as head keeper.

June is now in her eighties, is the guardian of her families legacy and in Our Zoo, she tells the fascinating story of a working class family with a very unusual home. This story of how her father set out to build a zoo without bars was turned into a six-part drama series currently airing on the BBC.

Stories about animals are basically my kryptonite and this book had many of them. There are plenty stories of hand-reared wild animals and the photographs of chimpanzees helping to build their own enclosure will melt your heart. This is a fascinating story of the every-day struggles and make-do attitude by the entire Mottershead family.

The story was told in chronological order with a few anecdotes outwith the timeline which was slightly confusing. I did feel that the story ended very abruptly and I turned the page expecting there would be more. But overall I loved this story and the only problem I had with it was the length. I would have quite happily read another 100 pages.

If you like these sorts of books I would also recommend Jeremy and Amy by Jeremy Keeling. This is the true story of a zoo keeper, an orangutan and one mans dream of turning a derelict pig farm in Dorset into a cageless sanctuary for primates.

*I received a copy of this book from Headline in exchange for an honest review.

Jordan McCartney says

Having watched the TV series as well as having been to the Zoo, it was obvious that I would read the book.

The book provides a detailed account of how the Mottershead family came to starting the Zoo, the problems that developed from the resistance of the villagers in Upton, the struggles of having to feed a Zoo full of animals during the Second World War when the country was rationing food, and the innovations they made to overcome these challenges.

The writing is more conversational than anything, particularly when stating that she no longer remembers the names of a certain person or animal, or that she wasn't there but this is what happened.

Our Zoo is full of descriptions regarding the people that worked at the Zoo, those that invested in it, and the different types of animals that were obtained over the years. As well as giving a lot of factual information surrounding the history of the beginning of the Zoo, the author makes excellent use of humorous anecdotes which would keep the reader entertained and interested throughout - certainly my favourite parts. Pictures of animals and certain events throughout the book have been used to help elaborate parts of the book.

The only small negative thing about the book is that some may be confused when the author talks about events in a non-chronological order. Nevertheless this is only in certain parts and for the most part the book makes for an easy read.

Trish says

Read for an honest review for netgallery

I have to say the tv show sparked my interest in wanting to read this book and I'm glad it did. This book was lovely, it wasn't an autobiography and it wasn't a novel i would class it as somewhere in between. It gives you a view of how things were for her as she was growing up, a true account rather than the tv series. You get to know the family and the workers of the zoo on an in depth level. It provides in depth descriptions about the war and the troubles that the zoo faced around this time, but also about the zoos troubles in general.

The only criticism i have is that there are some parts where it jumps back and forward which does make it hard to keep up but this can be over looked because of how good it is.

Its worth a read, there were parts that made me giggle but there were also more serious parts which make you stop and think.

AnnemariemcBrearty says

Been reading this book since just after Christmas was reading it too a client I work with. They loved it so did I. Adorable and fascinating story what an i year childhood

***Thea 'Wookiee'sMama' Wilson* says**

'The real story of my life at Chester Zoo'

With this is something I don't do very often and that is read and review non-Fiction title.... in fact this is Gizzimomo's Book Shelf's first non-fiction review and it takes a lot for me to be interested enough in a subject to warrant digging out further information on but in this case I just had to..... and it's hard not to review the book without a few words about the recent BBC dramatisation of the Mottershead's story, Our Zoo as it inspired me to learn more which, in turn, led me to this book.

What an amazing mini-series it was too. I'm not sure whether people outside of the UK have had the opportunity to see Our Zoo yet but if you do it's a wonderful little series and worth digging out if you can find it.

The Plot Of The Story:

So what we have is June Mottershead's memoirs regarding the beginning of Chester Zoo and her family's struggles for acceptance, their fight to get the zoo off the ground in the 1930's and it was really a huge up-hill struggle for them, from the villagers where the zoo was to be based being against them from the offset, through all the toils and tribulations of the Second World War.

George Mottershead had a dream to transform a ramshackle old house into a place for young and old to experience wildlife that they would have never seen before. It was a dream that he was determined to reach fruition as he moves his wife, his children and his parents into a small rural village just outside of Chester. He could never have imagine the fight he would have on his hands..... the derelict land he buys with a house in terrible state needs fixing up before he can fulfil the dream of the animals, money is tight and bankruptcy looms. He faces the wrath of the villages as they campaign to stop him in his tracks, every inch he gains is a fight, but it's a fight George is determined to win.

It is an inspiring story full of love and loss, jealousy and prejudice and a whole zoo full of the weird and the wonderful. All seen through the eyes of the youngest member of the Mottershead family, who was just a little girl when the whole thing began, who grew up with the zoo and watched it all unfurl before her eyes and grow into the Chester Zoo that we know today.

The Characters:

The Mottershead family:

George and Lizzie Mottershead - The husband and wife team who began the zoo, parents to June and Muriel.

June Mottershead - Just 4 years old when it began, she was raised with the animals and had a chimpanzee as a best friend for many years.

Muriel Mottershead - June sister, ten years older than her younger sister and the zoo's first official zoo-keeper.

Albert and Lucy Mottershead - George's parent and June's grandparent, had a huge influence on the zoo in the early days and lived on site with the family.

A zoo full of animals - What's a zoo without it's occupants and there are some real character among them like Mary the chimp, the polar bear and the penguins.

The Book's Setting (Time and Place):

The Time - The story spans several decades but begins in the 1930's in a time where few people had seen a wild and foreign animal, it continues through the Second World War and beyond.

The Place - In the village of Upton-By-Chester, Cheshire. Rural England with all it's pride and prejudices, often small-minded and unwilling to accept change. Small villages in England aren't always the easiest places to live even today, trust me as I grew up in one, as everyone knows everyone's business, they are very cliquy and newcomers are newcomers for a very long time after arrival.

The Writing:

It's harder to judge this book on it's writing as it's not fiction and is based on real truths but June Mottershead lived through the whole experience and her insights are very revealing and give us a glimpse into her world back then. It was a hard slog for the family but the results of their fight still remain today in the wonderful Chester Zoo which wouldn't even exist if the family hadn't gone through all of the tough times to make it the zoo it is today! June has retold her family's amazing true story in a lovely manner, sharing sweet little tidbits on what really went on behind the scenes while keeping it very earthly with no bells and whistles, sticking to the plain truth making it the perfect companion to the mini-series.

Final Thoughts:

If you enjoyed the TV show then this is a must read companion to the show as it gives a deeper insight into what happened, although keep in mind that the makers of the show have made changes to the story for dramatic effect, something that June is quick to point out at the beginning of the book. This doesn't make the truth any less dramatic though, if anything it makes it all the more real. If you didn't see the show and want to read a book about triumph over tragedy then give this one a go, if you're interested in zoos in general and what goes into starting and running them, then again this is the book for you. Give it a go, it's a great read!

Elizabeth says

I've been really enjoying the Secret Life of the Zoo on Channel 4 so decided to read this book about how Chester Zoo began. It's a wonderful story about a man determined to make his dream of a zoo without bars come true and who managed to succeed to make it a success against all odds with the help of his family. Told from the viewpoint of his youngest daughter June, I particularly love her tales of the special relationships and close bonds she formed with some of the animals including Mary the chimp, Punch the polar bear, Minnie the tapir, Pelly the pelican, Rob Rob the macaw and Christy the lion. Warning - just like the Secret Life of the Zoo it is quite an emotional roller-coaster as we experience the family's successes and failures while establishing the zoo and get attached to the animals in their care.

Max says

It is an incredible and inspiring story which provides a fascinating insight into Chester Zoo's early years and the ingenuity and drive needed by the Mottershead family to try to create something unique and special, 'a zoo without bars'. I'm glad the story of how Chester Zoo began has been recorded. I was sad to hear that June Mottershead sadly passed away less than a year after the book was published, she was in her late eighties.

Tessa says

Imagine growing up living at a zoo with lions, bears, elephants, and so many more exotic creatures. All the while, none of them are behind the bars of a regular zoo. The founder of the Chester Zoo, George Mottershead had always dreamed of having a zoo of his own where there were no bars. During the process of

building the zoo there were lots of struggles but also lots of triumphs. The readers are taken on the journey of getting permission for the zoo, building the zoo, and getting animals to fill the zoo. The person who tells us about this amazingly true journey is June Mottershead, the daughter of George. It is definitely an action packed, and suspenseful book.

The book quality was very good. The description was done very well. There was lots of detail to help you visualize the zoo. I also liked that they included pictures of the progress of the zoo in sectioned off areas of the book. It was a page turner book, especially as they tested out the no bars to keep the animals in at the zoo idea that George had. I can't think of anything that would've made this book better, it was perfect the way it was.

I think a potential audience for this book would be animal lovers! It is all things animals in this book. I think since this is a real zoo, and it is still around to this day, it would be interesting for people who have visited or want to visit this zoo to read it and get the history of it from someone who was there through it all!

Overall I really enjoyed reading this book. It had funny moments but also sad moments, but I thoroughly enjoyed every minute of it and I will definitely read it again one day and I highly recommend it!

Karen says

Fascinating true story. Recommended for animal fans and history fans alike.

Fhsanders54 says

A fascinating account of Chester Zoo between its founding by her father George Mottershead and her marriage to the Head Keeper Fred Williams in 1950. It was a huge and risky family undertaking, desperately underfunded for years until the local gentry realised that the zoo was a serious zoological proposition not just a circus show. Extremely hard work for the family and the few staff particularly during the deprivations of the second world war, life became easier once the zoo became the North England Zoological Society with adopters and sponsors. Mr Mottershead's progressive and humane views allowed plenty of space light and fresh air for his collection of animals and the reduction of physical barriers by the digging of wide moats to create islands. June's personal recollections plus good research also gives us a broad social history of life in Cheshire in the 1930s and 1940s. At an individual level one meets zoo workers as family members, refugees, orphans together with many aristocrats who donate generously.

Phrynnne says

I enjoyed the TV show very much so of course I was interested to read this book written by the daughter of the man who created the Chester Zoo. It was an easy read, basically made up of little anecdotes written as and when the author recalled them.

June Mottershead was part of the development of the zoo from when she was four years of age. I think I enjoyed the early stories the most especially the ones about Mary the chimpanzee who was June's best friend for several years.

As everything was viewed from June's perspective it was sometimes hard to feel how her father actually

coped with all the hardships which were maybe better presented in the TV show. It was interesting that Mew, her sister, who gave up everything to be part of the zoo in the early days went away in the war and effectively never came back. I was left wondering why.
So, an interesting account but an incomplete one which left me a little unsatisfied.

Jill Smith says

This is an entertaining book full of old fashioned family values and a determination to make the best of every situation.

June Mottershed recounts her childhood growing up in a zoo. Her father George set out to make his family home into a zoo even when the odds were stacked against him. His wife, her mother, took on the plans with June's sister Muriel and grandparents accepting the challenge. The local community did not rally behind them for fear that such a place would lower the tone of the area. George pressed on with one scheme after another to make the venture a success.

The odd situations the family found themselves in seemed to be the norm to June. Why her friends thought it was odd that she played with a monkey and cared for lion cubs, she couldn't fathom.

When he was a child, George had told his parent that he would build a zoo without bars, and that's what he did. He was a natural promoter and developer, even through war and tough times, he found a way to feed the animals and create a world class zoo.

The result is Chester Zoo which I recently enjoyed visiting when we were in England. I loved the spin off show 'Our Zoo' and that show is what caught my interest in visiting the zoo. We were not disappointed. Hearing a lion roar while we travelled above the enclosure on the monorail.

Christelle says

Really interesting to find out how Chester Zoo was created, all the effort that was put in, especially by the family. When I go to the zoo next, I will certainly think about what the family and supporters went through to make it such a success.

Aly says

3.75

I've never heard of the Chester Zoo before, so I obviously didn't see the BBC series about it. I saw this book at the bookstore and couldn't resist buying it when I read that it was about a woman who grew up in a zoo. In 1930, June Mottershead's father realized his dream of opening a zoo and transforming the family land to accommodate wild animals . Tapirs, monkeys, parrots, porcupines, bears, lions, flamingo and many more animals and fishes.

June write about her experience living in a zoo and her father's plan to make thrive the business and his numerous ideas to avoid having to close down. Being a teenager during WW2, she will also talk about those years, how it affected their lives.

There's funny stories, like when a bear tried a few times to escape and one day ended up in June's house, and the unusual friendship between animals. There's sad stories too, but nothing too heartbroken because like June said, death was normal and part of the experience.

My only complain is about the ending. Way too abrupt ! She's talking about the man she married and the wedding day and then suddenly the end. Come on, I wanna know what happened with the zoo. What's the rest of the story ? Or when was the last time she set foot in it ? She married in her twenty and with a man who worked at the zoo so it can't be that her life there ended with the wedding, right ? So it felt like an unfinished story to me but it was still a fun read.
