

A Conversation with Gin Phillips

Q: There's an interesting dynamic between man and animal at play throughout the story. The setting is an environment where humans are viewing animals in captivity, then the humans find themselves captive in the zoo as well. How much did the zoo setting influence the plot of *Fierce Kingdom*?

A: For me, the zoo is a place where I have a very geographic sense of the different phases of my son...and of how those phases have flared so brightly and then evaporated. Once upon a time—when he was two—he liked to climb a stone turtle, but he had forgotten the turtle entirely by the time he was three. Once he loved the merry-go-round, but then a guy with a weird voice spoke to him while he was riding, and that was it for the merry-go-round. In the zoo, I'm focused on my son's present moment—his odd obsessions and hilarious quirks and stubborn habits—while also being constantly reminded of all the other versions of him that had disappeared.

The truth is that as your child grows up, you lose him over and over again. You get a new child in return...but that old version is lost.

So there's that personal connection for me, but, yes, the zoo also works on a broader level. I liked the idea of setting a story in a very domestic, suburban kind of setting—somewhere recognizable to every parent. The zoo fits that label: safe and familiar and unthreatening. And that's how we think of mothers sometimes, isn't it?

But the zoo is not only that. It also has a darker current—there are wild things in boxes. Alongside strollers and cotton candy, there are sharp teeth and claws and the promise of everything that is undomesticated. There is power.

I think that sense of complexity works well for what plays out in the story. Joan and Lincoln wind up feeling trapped, so there is that echo of the caged animals, but Joan is also smart and strong and sure. She has power.

Q: Motherhood is associated with animalistic maternal instincts. Joan is portrayed as a fierce and powerful mother who will do anything to protect her son. How do her actions play up those instincts?

A: I knew from the beginning that I wanted one of Joan's most distinctive traits to be that she takes action. There is nothing passive about her. She does not waste time whining or dithering. She doesn't have the luxury for that kind of wasted time and energy, but it's also just not who she is. In each moment, she looks at the threat and at what action is most likely to keep her son safe, and that's the choice she makes. For most of the book, she keeps that focus without wavering.

And, of course, one of her greatest assets is her knowledge of her son. Knowing the ebb and flow of his moods, knowing what will distract him or comfort him or frighten him—those details become survival tools.

Q: The entire plot takes place over the span of three hours. What were some of the challenges of such an intense time frame?

A: I actually loved working within the frame of the real-time pacing. In some ways, it made the writing simpler because there was so little space for backstory. Every bit of the story takes place within the zoo walls, and there's room only for the smallest fragments of life before the zoo. Otherwise, you wreck the pacing and lose the intensity. That made picking and choosing those fragments a really compelling—fun, actually—challenge.

Those limits kept me focused, and that helped me to be ruthless with cutting anything not essential.

Q: The story is told from the point of view from multiple characters, including one of the shooters. What was it like trying to get into his head?

A: I thought it was crucial that Robbie have some qualities that all of us could recognize—a tendency to blame others and an unwillingness to take responsibility himself. Lack of direction...laziness...self-hatred— they're not such uncommon traits.

Ultimately, this is a book about connection, most obviously between mother and son, but also much more broadly. I want readers to recognize something in Robbie—to have a flash of someone they went to school with or someone their kid used to hang out with. I think to have the shooters as completely faceless and unknowable diminishes the evil.

I think there's something scarier about seeing something human in Robby and realizing he can do this anyway.

Q: Today, homegrown terrorism is a real and looming threat. It is also a topic that many people avoid. Did you have any reservations about writing about this subject?

A: Sure. But I also felt strongly that this book wasn't about shooters or even a shooting—it's ultimately about good, not evil. It's about the ways we are bound us together.

I also think every parent I know worries about this—you worry when you get on an airplane with your child, and you worry where the exits are in a movie theater. Your child comes home from school and talks about how they practiced a drill for an intruder alert.

All of that surely ties into a deeper, more general fear of ‘what if something happened to my child?’ We’re inevitably aware of all the endless dangers out there. That’s part of parenting—embracing the joy and not being overcome by the fear.

Q: What is the role of stories in the book?

A: Most of the major characters have stories that resonate with them and—to different extents—form them. Lincoln has his superheroes and villains. Joan has her 1980s spy show. Robbie and Mark have their alien war movie. Joan keeps crafting a narrative of Lincoln’s life, moment by moment. Even Kailynn has her father’s stories, which spark her own reaction to a life-or-death situation.

In all their forms, the stories connect the characters to their pasts and to their hopes. I think it works that way in real life—we watch or read or listen to stories, and they show us what the world is. They help us imagine who we want to be and who we don’t want to be.

Q: Joan’s single-minded focus on her son is at times at odds with her desire to help others in the zoo. How did you see those two competing impulses?

A: I don’t think you can write about motherhood without acknowledging that there is a certain selfishness in it. I would do anything for my child...but where does that leave me in terms of *your* child? What do I do when the greater good comes up against what works best for me and mine?

I think ultimately Joan is faced with a broader definition of mothering. How big of a role do we have in the life of someone else’s child? What do we owe to strangers? Mrs. Powell clearly had an impact on Robbie—enough so that his memories of her alter his plans. Teachers, too, fit into the idea of mothering as a wider and deeper responsibility—we shape the people around us. We owe something to each other, even if we’ve just met. Even if we’ve never met.