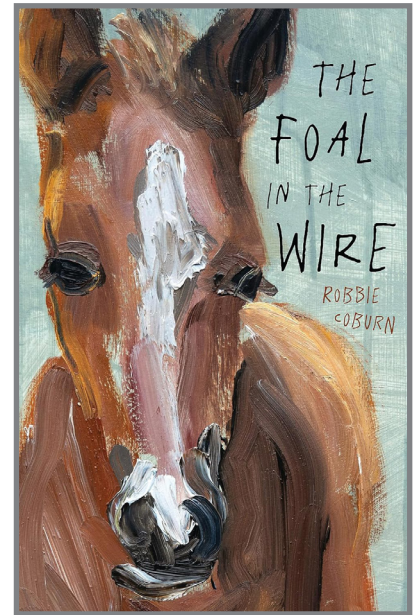


The Foal in the Wire

AUTHOR
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RECOMMENDED FOR: Lower to Mid Secondary
(Violence, Sexual References, Suicide Ideation)

SYNOPSIS

Sam, a teenager, lives on a farm with his mother and emotionally distant father, a horse trainer. His parents are constantly at loggerheads and Sam feels unloved and unwanted.

Haunted by trauma and depression, struggling with school and disillusioned with his home life following the death of his older brother, Sam's life changes when he finds a wounded foal tangled in barbed wire in one of the paddocks at the edge of their property.

In the course of rescuing and caring for the foal he becomes close to Julia, a troubled girl from the next property, who lives with a father who drinks too much, and who shares her grief for her lost mother.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robbie Coburn is a contemporary Australian poet. His poems have been published widely in magazines and anthologies and his books include *Ghost Poetry* (2024), *And I Could Not Have Hurt You* (2023) and *The Other Flesh* (2019). He has been featured at The Wheeler Centre and La Mama Poetica, appeared as a guest at literary festivals including the Sydney Writers' Festival, Canberra Writers Festival, Newcastle Writers Festival and Perth Poetry Festival, and run poetry workshops for youth mental health organisation Headspace.

You can find out more about Robbie at www.robbiecoburn.com.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THE NOTES

Dr Robyn Sheahan-Bright AM operates justified text writing and publishing consultancy services, and is widely published on children's literature, publishing history and Australian fiction. Her publications include *Paper Empires: A History of the Book in Australia 1946–2005* (co-edited with Craig Munro) (UQP, 2006). In 2011, she was recipient of the CBCA (Qld) Dame Annabelle Rankin Award, in 2012, of the CBCA Nan Chauncy Award for Outstanding Services to Children's Literature, and in 2014, the QWC's Johnno Award. In 2021, she was appointed a member of the Order of Australia.

STUDY NOTES

- Before reading, examine the cover of the novel. What does it suggest about the novel's themes?
- After you have read the novel, examine the cover again: what does it suggest to you now?

HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES (HASS)

Dysfunctional Families and Domestic Violence

- Sam's parents are always fighting and he feels unloved and ignored; Julia's father beats her in his drunken rages, and she feels trapped in her home. Both are trying to cope in impossible circumstances. What effect has such a dysfunctional home life had on these two teenagers?
- Neither teenager identifies what they are experiencing as domestic violence, physical or verbal. One of the insidious aspects of such behaviour is that it becomes 'normalised' by repetition. Discuss the issue, and research appropriate responses to it.

Grief and Depression

- Sam feels invisible at home, and at school his only friend Alex is no friend at all. He belittles Sam's family home and his parents' occupation. He uses his 'friendship' to bully Sam. This has led to what is sometimes called suicidal ideation. Discuss with students this sensitive topic and the support Sam might have been given had he not found the foal, fallen in love with Julia and healed himself.
- The death of Sam's brother has left its marks on him and his parents. The loss of her mother haunts Julia. Discuss the impact of grief and the relationship between it and depression.

Romance

- 'When Sam writes of his first time with Julia he describes it as: 'like holding a body/ and cradling a ghost/ at the same time.' ('First Time', p 64) What do you think he means by this?
- Julia describes her fear of becoming close to Sam ('Fear', p 45). How does past trauma impact on her ability to love Sam and how does she overcome that?

Coming of Age and Rite of Passage

- Sam and Julia's discovery of the foal leads to both entering a new phase in their lives; they grow and mature via their interaction with the foal. How do they both change?
- Survival is mentioned a number of times in the text. What does the novel suggest about the character traits necessary for survival?

Treatment of Animals

- Animals that are injured are generally euthanised, as the foal would have been, had Sam's father discovered it. Conduct a debate about this issue, based on some further research.
- Some people deliberately mistreat animals. Sam recalls his brother's advice, that 'if you care for an animal, he said,/ they will care for you too,/ even save you.' ('Rain', p 49). Discuss this statement, and share examples from students' own lives.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE & LITERACY

Narrative Person, Narrative Perspective and Tense

- This is a first person, present tense narrative in Sam's voice; he uses the personal pronoun 'I' throughout. Re-cast one of the poems in Julia's voice and compare the various versions written by students.
- There is a deliberate lack of capitalisation throughout, with the exception of the pronoun 'I', the first word in each poem, and the names of the two teenagers Sam and Julia. Why do you think the poet has chosen to selectively capitalise in this way?
- The novel employs symbols such as foals and ghosts. What other symbolism did you notice in this novel?

Literary Devices

- Find examples of the use of literary devices in this verse novel, using the below to identify examples:
 - Simile
 - Metaphors
 - Personification
 - Other.

Rhythm, Pacing and Use of Language

- The language used in these free verse poems is beautifully paced; there is such a careful selection of words to create a distinct rhythm. The line breaks contribute to this rhythm, for example, sometimes a line break is used after one or

two words, sometimes after 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 or 9 words. This guides the reader to pronounce lines in a particular way. Discuss what you observe about the rhythm of this writing and its effect on meaning.

- Titles of the poems are evocative of feelings, for example, 'Stay', 'Thinking', 'Fear', 'Furtive'. They are also obtuse and suggestive eg. 'Aperture' (p 56). Why is this title used for this poem? What other titles did you find evocative?

Structure

- The structure of the story can be analysed in terms of key narrative features used to engage the reader's attention and to shape the work. This verse novel is divided into three parts, each headed with a title: 'Waiting Foals'/'Mercy Horses'/'Wounded Animals'. In each part there are 25/7/8 poems. Within each of these parts, each poem begins and ends with enormous clarity. Which poem's beginning or ending did you find particularly arresting?

Setting

- Description in setting can be evoked via a complex range of literary devices and can employ all the senses, for example, the description of the abandoned objects, including the old Ford model car body, in the creek is poignant. The foal finds a safe place amongst these abandoned things. The two children think: 'we can be invisible here.' ('Creek House', p 18). Discuss the description of setting here and in other poems in this novel.

Characters

- A select list of characters includes Sam and Julia, and minor characters—Sam's parents, Julia's father and Alex. Recollections give the reader an insight into Sam's brother's nature as well. Which character was most intriguing and why? Which character would you like to have heard more about?

Activities

- Read Julia's letter to Sam (pp 107–108). Then write a reply.
- Write a diary entry by Sam's mother about her feelings for him.
- Write a poem describing arriving at a place, using descriptive language like 'Creek House' (pp 14–18) in this novel.
- Choose the title of any poem in this novel and write your own poem reflecting that title.
- The title of this book refers to the foal, but also has a metaphorical implication. What other title might the book have had?

AUTHOR OF NOTES

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