

An abstract painting featuring a central vertical stroke of white and light pink, surrounded by thick, expressive brushstrokes in shades of brown, orange, and dark grey. The background is a textured, light blue-grey. The overall style is gestural and painterly.

# THE FOAL IN THE WIRE

ROBBIE  
COBURN

TEACHERS RESOURCES



# THE FOAL IN THE WIRE

## ROBBIE COBURN

### Teachers Resources by Robyn Sheahan-Bright

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# INTRODUCTION

*we will never know how he/found himself that way,/wounded, trapped and alone./  
he won't survive without us./maybe we were all waiting/to find each other* ('Waiting' p. 52)

*The Foal in the Wire* is an astonishingly raw and beautiful verse novel about survival, love and the bonds between humans and animals from an important young Australian poet.

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.

*The Foal in the Wire* is the deeply moving and inspiring story of Sam, his love for a girl, Julia, and the horse that brings them together.

## BEFORE & AFTER READING THE NOVEL

- 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?
- After you have read the novel, read about it in reviews and articles and use the notes below to examine the text more closely.

## THEMES & CURRICULUM TOPICS

Several themes relevant to curriculum topics (HASS, English Language & Literacy, and Visual Literacy) might be identified in this novel:

### HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES (HASS)

<<https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/humanities-and-social-sciences/hass/>>

### DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILIES AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

**Key Quote:** I am always alone in this house, even when my parents are here. ('Only Child', p 27)

**Discussion Point:** 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?

**Discussion Point:** 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

### Key Quote:

My brother died in the practice pen  
after being thrown and stomped on  
by a bull.  
there was nothing glorious about it,  
no arena or cheering crowd

just his body lying motionless in the dirt, ('Brother', p 26)

*Discussion Point:* 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:

I think about going down there,  
And never coming back up ('Thinking', p 32)

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.

*Discussion Point:* The death of Sam's brother has left its marks on him and his parents. The loss of her mother haunts Julia:

Julia thinks that when  
we lose someone,  
they are still always following us  
and that's why we can't  
let go and move on.' ('Ghosts', p 41)

Discuss the impact of grief and the relationship between it and depression.

## ROMANCE

### Key Quote:

in this first moment  
we both tremble  
as if we share the same body ('First Time', p 63)

*Discussion Point:* '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?

*Discussion Point:* 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 & RITE OF PASSAGE

### Key Quote:

it's not our fault  
we don't know how  
to be treated properly. ('Growing', p 75)

*Discussion Point:* 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?



*Discussion Point:* 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

*Key Quote:*

as kids we were told  
that once a horse's legs break  
the pain is too much  
for them to live with  
and they usually never get better.  
dad said horses didn't know  
what it meant to be born or to die.  
that there was no fear.

only a horse's body aches.' ('Euthanasia', pp 11–12)

*Discussion Point:* 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.

*Discussion Point:* 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

<https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/english/>

Study the writing style employed in this verse narrative, and examine the following sub-topics:

### VERSE NOVELS AS A GENRE

*Discussion Point:* The Verse Novel is a unique art form telling an extended narrative in a series of connected poems. The form often employs first person and it also often employs multiple narrators. The writing is generally very personal and immediate. Such novels often trace a rite of passage for a teenage protagonist as well. This novel is told solely from Sam's point of view; it describes his personal crisis and also that of his friend, Julia. These are viewed through the prism of the event which brings them together — the foal becoming tangled in fence wire and needing care. A verse novel also often canvases a social issue or issues in the context of a character's personal journey. Several themes are also canvassed in the novel (see above). Discuss the work in terms of the tropes of this genre. Read primary and secondary sources as a background to this activity. [See **Bibliography**.]

### NARRATIVE PERSON, NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVE & TENSE

*Discussion Point:* 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.

*Discussion Point:* 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?

## SYMBOLISM

*Discussion Point:* The novel employs symbols such as foals and ghosts. What other symbolism did you notice in this novel?

## LITERARY DEVICES

*Activity:* Find examples of the use of literary devices in this verse novel, using the table below to identify examples.

<b>Simile</b>	'like a seedling trampled by horses' ('Mercy Horse', p 77)  'his eyes look like the surface of a dam beneath the moon.' ('Two Screams', p 81)
<b>Metaphors</b>	
<b>Personification</b>	
<b>Other</b>	

## RHYTHM, PACING AND USE OF LANGUAGE

*Discussion Point:* 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.

*Discussion Point:* 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, for example:

Beginning:

All day I think about dying. ('Thinking', p 32)

Ending:

and no amount of screaming  
will change that. ('Blame', p 54)

*Discussion Point:* Which poem's beginning or ending did you find particularly arresting?

## SETTING

*Discussion Point:* 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

*Discussion Point:* 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?

## WRITING TASKS

*Activity:* Read Julia's letter to Sam (pp 107–108). Then write a reply.

*Activity:* Write a diary entry by Sam's mother about her feelings for him.

*Activity:* Write a poem describing arriving at a place, using descriptive language like 'Creek House' (pp 14–18) in this novel.

*Activity:* Choose the title of any poem in this novel and write your own poem reflecting that title.

## VISUAL LITERACY

<https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/the-arts/visual-arts/>

*Activity:* Create a graphic novel interpretation of an incident in this novel. [See **Bibliography.**]



*Activity:* Design a new cover for this book.

*Activity:* Create a book trailer for this verse novel. [See **Bibliography.**]

## FURTHER QUOTES FOR DISCUSSION

**1.**  
I tell Julia about the bodies  
of horses  
dad has buried on the farm.  
she says they are everywhere  
beneath her  
on their side of the fence too.  
she starts to cry  
as she stands over  
the trembling creature  
noticing the confused, fearful eyes. ('Euthanasia', p 13)

**2.**  
Alex teaches me  
that I am not enough,  
and won't ever be.  
  
he teaches me how to shrink.' ('How to Shrink', p 31)

**3.**  
he was the hero  
and I was only his sidekick ('The Kelly Gang', p 34)

**4.**  
but I always think about dying  
and how I want the ache  
in my head to stop.

I plan on walking out  
into the paddocks one day  
and not stopping

until I disappear.  
instead, I think of the foal  
and how he will need me  
tomorrow. ('Stay', p 43)

**5.**  
sometimes wounded people need space  
and to be alone so they can heal. ('Talk', p 95)

**6.**  
in the distance  
the light you will never see  
if you don't stay and wait for it. ('After', p 110)

## FURTHER ACTIVITIES

1. Compare this novel to other young adult verse novels. [See **Bibliography**.]
2. Design a poster to advertise this book.
3. The **title of this book** refers to the foal, but also has a metaphorical implication. What other title might the book have had?
4. **Debate any of the topics** covered in these notes, or suggested by the novel.
5. Identify and study the **poetry techniques employed in this verse novel**.

## CONCLUSION

*The Foal in the Wire* is a sensitive and evocative verse novel that resolves itself – not to be resolved. Both Sam and Julia have changed, and both have moved on, but where they will end up remains to be seen. And yet, they have gained the strength and self-belief to face the journey with optimism.

## 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.robbiacoburn.com](http://www.robbiacoburn.com)



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## SEE EXTENSIVE LISTS OF VERSE NOVELS AND INFORMATION ABOUT THEM HERE:

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## 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.