

The Rabbit

Catherine Cole

University of Wollongong

The boy turns the pages of the book, his fingers carefully tracing the words as he reads. *It is a sunny day and Jim and Annie are going to a farm.* He looks carefully at Jim in his neat blue shirt. Annie is wearing a red and white dress. She has golden hair like her brother and very blue eyes. They smile on each page, waking in beds covered with striped blankets, going to school in an orange bus, eating pink ice creams with their friends. The farm has a cow and a field with an apple tree. Some chickens peck at the ground. Jim will milk the cow and Annie will collect the eggs, the boy reads. There is one brown egg and six are white.

The teacher gives the class a different book each week, old books, their blue covers written on already by other children. The boy finds something companionable in the previous readers' words and little sketches, as though they are pointing out things that he might miss. In one book Jim and Annie have been to the zoo, in others to the circus and to a supermarket to buy food. They have visited a friend in hospital and Jim has decided he'll become a doctor when he grows up. They have gone on holidays to a far-away mountain and learned how to ski on its snowy slopes.

The boy likes the books with animals in them best. The black and white cow gazes at him over a white painted fence. The chickens peck at bright green grass. A yellow bird sits in the branches of the apple tree, its head thrown back, musical notes rising from its open mouth. When Jim goes with the farmer to milk the cow a little dog goes with them. Jim and Annie have many opportunities to play with animals. The boy hopes for such times one day.

The boy's mother sits in the corner and listens to him read. Sometimes she repeats the words after him.

Let's buy some oranges today, Jim.

Watch me ski, Annie.

Sometimes the boy prefers to read silently, it helps him store the words in his head, to imagine the world of Jim and Annie better, the lives that go on after the story has ended, when the hens are back on their perches and the cow is milked. The dog and the farmer will sleep after helping Jim to milk the cow. The boy has even made up his own Jim and Annie stories, placing them both in parks and schoolrooms and markets such as the one in his old village. He can't imagine them fitting into his village. He would advise them not to smile so much, or laugh or shout too loudly as they did when they ate their ice creams and slid down the snowy slopes.

'Read, read,' his mother says so he makes some more words for her. *Look, it's raining Jim*, and she says them back to him.

The boy looks at the dog, the cow, the chickens. Hears the sounds they make though he doesn't make these sounds out loud. He would like to hear the dog bark. It would make a high sound because it is just a little dog. The chickens would make a deep clucking which would rise in pitch if they became agitated or afraid. In the past he has been guilty of chasing chickens, of enjoying the acceleration of their clucking as he ran after them. He has never chased a cow or any big animal. Not a donkey or a goat though he has been tempted to do so. To run after any animal now seems improbable: not even Jim or Annie could do that in here.

When he reaches the end of the story the boy goes back to the start. It is easier to read it the second time around, to pronounce the words more confidently once he knows how the story ends. *It is Saturday and Jim and Annie are going to their uncle's farm.* What the boy would like to see in this story is a little furry rabbit. There has not been one in any story so far though Jim and Annie have seen tigers and elephants and horses and pigs. At the zoo they stretched their heads backwards to take in the height of a giraffe and laughed at the monkeys in their cages. Their uncle's farm would be the ideal place for a rabbit. There is plenty of grass under the apple trees. The rabbit might even eat one of the fallen apples, though the boy is not sure if this should be part of a rabbit's diet. He will have a rabbit one day, this is his dream, a white rabbit with

long white ears through which you can see the pink flush of the skin underneath. A nose as pink as Annie's and Jim's cheeks and eyes as pink and glistening as the ice cream they ate.

'Read,' his mother says and he pretends not to hear.

His rabbit will live in a neat box into which he will place clean straw each day. When the weather is good he will let his rabbit out to hop around on the grass. His fingers long for the touch of soft fur, thick and sweet scented, the warm pulsing body of the animal underneath. In a market in his old country the market trader let him stroke a rabbit once. He gazed into rabbit eyes fringed with long lashes and touched his own nose to the rabbit's twitching one. If he can afford it one day he will buy a boy and a girl rabbit and they will have many babies, and then, like Jim and Annie, they will have a farm.

Now his mother is making the sad sound she often makes, so low it is sometimes hard to hear it. He stares down at the book, at the primary brightness of it, not wanting to turn his head. It is the sound of a very low note from an ancient musical instrument or the deep growl of a wild dog. He has heard it so many times now he wonders if this is what links human beings to animals, some wild thing inside each person that attempts to escape through their mouths. In this place he has heard it rise from the throats of all the women but also from some of the men. They sit silently, sometimes they rock, and when they try to speak there comes instead this deep, terrible note, so low it could be the last breath of the dying. He waits until it has passed but then it comes again so he opens his book and reads more loudly.

What a lovely day to go to the farm, Annie.

I hope the chickens have laid some eggs, Jim.

It has passed.

He hears the rustle of his mother rising. She touches her hand to his back, says, 'come'. He puts the book neatly on the pile by his bed and follows her through the centre and outside into the sun. Some women are sitting under an awning and they call to his mother softly. 'Go,' she says towards the swings that have been set up for the smallest children. 'Play'. He looks across at the children there, swinging slowly backwards and forwards in the heat. Can she not see he is too old for their games? The centre's children don't go high like Jim and Annie when

they rode on the swings at the circus, their feet pointing upwards so you could see the soles of their shoes. He would rather go back inside and look at his books, but he wants to please his mother. He does not want her to growl again like an animal. When she is in the sun with the other women the sound, for the moment at least, goes away.

He walks instead to the centre's perimeter and looks towards the outer fence with the barbed wire on top. From here he often listens to the sounds of passing cars and the voices of people waiting to come in to visit. There is nowhere secret here in which to hide a rabbit, even if he could ask a visitor to sneak one in for him. And there is so little grass there is nothing for a rabbit to eat.

He waits for his mother until the dinner bell. They eat then watch television. He reads his stories. They pray. Once he used to impress his teacher with each newly learned word and the way in which he understood Jim and Annie and the bright and free lives they led. Once he used to tell his teacher about the life he would lead when he was allowed to go with his mother to a new home, a farm perhaps with a cow and chickens and a dog and lots of rabbits, though the teacher told him that rabbits on farms are not popular in Australia. Or perhaps he and his mother could just live in a square house and a garden like those he saw from the bus when they brought them here. But it has been so long he doesn't bother the teacher any more with his dreams. Annie and Jim will remain the same age in the blue books with other children's messages scrawled across them but he is getting older and his dreams, like his memories of the village and its animals, the chickens and hard working donkeys, the goats and rabbits, are beginning to fade. Jim and Annie will live their bright and simple lives, milking a cow, collecting the hens' eggs, stroking the pliant fur of a little dog who understands through the touch what a burden it is to be a human sometimes.

The lights are out and he calls goodnight to his mother. Her reply is soft. 'May God watch over you, my son.' He prays for her to sleep well too, free from nightmares, for what they have lost, for the dead, for the living. He prays for his longed-for rabbit.

Just as he is slipping towards sleep he hears again that low, desperate, animal growl. Does it come from his mother? The whole building seems to sigh it. And then from his own throat he hears a more terrible sound. The cry of the rabbit as the market trader took it from its box for a customer and with one neat, sharp crack, broke its neck.