

*Neighs and Norms: Societal Messages in Children's Horse Literature*

**An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)**

by

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### Abstract:

Representations about horses are widespread in our culture, however, there is not much literature focusing on what messages narratives of horses are sending. As children are being socialized into society media plays a part in the process of how they obtain their values and ideals. Using some literature from the equestrian community and qualitative coding, this study conducted preliminary research on what messages horse books are sending children. It examined six books, *National Velvet*, *Horse Crazy*, *My Friend Flicka*, *The Black Stallion*, *A Horse Called Wonder* and *Misty of Chincoteague*. Results show messages of power and control, embodiment, dreams, and gender.

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## Process Analysis:

I had often wondered, why was there such a thing as “horse girls”? Why did the stereotype exist, and why was it gendered? Anecdotally I asked people if they had ever gone through a horse phase, a time when they were obsessed with horses in one way or another. Most of them had, and they too wondered why horses were seen to be girly things. Not too long ago, there was the stereotype of the triumphant male cowboy. When did the stereotype turn into little girls portrayed as, oftentimes negatively, obsessed with horses? I personally had a horse phase. I would play with horse toys and go on imaginative adventures. I would read horse books and be transported into a different world. I had never even been on a horse until a birthday party in second grade—and I did not even really love it all that much—but horses still held my attention. So when it came to pick a topic for my thesis I came back to this question of horses. One of my main interactions with the topic was books, so why not study horse books? I decided to study popular horse fiction books, choosing an equal number of boy and girl protagonists. I was working off the assumption that girls would read books with boy and girl protagonists, while boys would only read books with boy protagonists. Therefore, because the target audiences would be different, the messages the books send might be different, and could explain why horses would be so popular with girls.

Ultimately, this did not turn out to be the case. I started coding. I actually enjoyed the initial coding. It was interesting to see emerging themes develop and connections between the books. I had not read fiction in a while and I got caught up in the characters and their stories. I was pleasantly surprised by both *Horse Crazy* and *A Horse Called Wonder*. They were both written for a more juvenile audience than some of the other books, but I also knew that *Misty of Chincoteague* was written for younger children as well and I did not have any preconceived

notions going into that book. I realized that in my initial research, *A Horse Called Wonder* and *Horse Crazy* both were presented as more feminine than the other books. I recognized that even I, as the researcher, had an unconscious bias against the most “girly” books.

This project helped me realize how easily unconscious bias can slip through. It also helped me develop skills of adaptation and improve my critical thinking. During the coding process, I would mark down the page numbers but not write out the full quotes. I had created more work for myself by not doing both aspects from the beginning. Thankfully, my sister agreed to help me and I spent an afternoon at her house where she and I typed up the already marked down quotes in the books. After I finished with the first round of coding, I realized that there were almost no significant differences based on whether or not the protagonist of the book was male or female. I did not know what to do. I had the original question, but no back-up plan. I had to learn how to be flexible. After meeting with my thesis advisor, we were able to take my initial question and adapt it. While we were not able to definitively say why the stereotype of a horse-loving girl is out there, we were able to examine the messages that the horse books themselves were sending. The equestrian sport itself is mostly female dominated, so we were able to look at literature there, as well as literature on books and socialization in general to see if the messages the books were sending out matched, or if there were any other ideas represented.

I think that this switch in topic taught me the most important lesson of the whole project, that there is not necessarily always the ‘right’ way of doing things. I had reached a point in the project where I was just extremely frustrated. I felt as if I couldn’t write a section of the paper without knowing what another part was going to say and vice versa. I felt trapped. I was so focused on getting the sections ‘right’ and making them ‘good enough’ that I delayed even starting writing them. Once I realized that I did not have to measure up to this abstract concept of

perfection, I was able to sit down and write the sections, knowing that they might not be the best, but that at least I had something down. And even if they were not the best, that my worth and value as a person was not defined by the quality of what I wrote. I was able to write what I knew I wanted to say and trust that what I did not know what to say would come later. Thankfully, it did. Through revision and adjustments, I was able to write a thesis of which I can be proud. It may not address the original question, and I am sure that it is not perfect, but it raises interesting points. It raises interesting and important points that address the messages that children are learning from horse books. Through this process I was also able to examine the messages I was getting from society, and the messages that I was telling myself.

## Introduction:

Horses are a prevalent part of our culture from the mythical western to “My Little Pony”. As with any other part of culture they have a long and varied history of representation. They are represented in conquering statues, stories of centaurs, carriers of medieval knights, and tools of Native Americans (Birke & Brandt 2009, p. 190). In looking at the cultural prevalence and significance of horses, I was struck by the myriad of the representations. However, while there is some research on actual human interaction with horses there is little comprehensive discussion on how the media portrays horses and what their representation might mean. Books are one way of media portrayal. One specific type of children’s book comes to mind, the horse book. Horse books also have a long and varied history. Peaking in the 1950’s, while the genre may have, “by necessity, some overlap in plot, horse books otherwise offer a surprising breadth: of style, setting, and tone” (Macy 2018). Horse books may have a surprising variance in style, but do they send some of the same messages? Do the messages in the books portray similar things to what the literature on horse and human interaction says? And what do the messages mean in a larger cultural relevance? To attempt to answer these questions, I examined six horse books, *My Friend Flicka*, *National Velvet*, *Misty of Chincoteague*, *Horse Crazy*, *A Horse Called Wonder*, and *The Black Stallion*. I explored the messages that they may send to the children that read them in relation to the literature relating to horses and to other societal ideals.

## Literature Review:

Horses can mean a variety of things to different people. One feature, however, that is highly present in the discourse is the aspect of being one with a horse. Because the horse and rider are closely linked, they can each become an embodiment of the other (Birke & Brandt

2009, p. 190).

Humans and horses have a unique form of communication that occurs through the body. It is not merely through spoken or signed words that this occurs, as Mead would argue, but through a co-created and understood way of communicating (Brandt 2004, p. 313). This communication can cause the feeling and act of transcending social boundaries, between male and female, between human and horse, etc. (Birke & Brandt 2009, p. 196).

This feeling of oneness also relates to the idea of power and control. Horsewoman Dominique Gioia Scaggs says on NPR, "To be in control, or out of control, on a galloping horse is a wild feeling," she says. "You are one with it. You just feel the power underneath you. And that's part of the attraction" (Nelson & Silva 2011). She loves feeling the power and the wildness of riding, while also knowing that it is something she can control. Author Peggy Orenstein agrees calling horses, "sources of power and motion and transformation" (Nelson & Silva 2011). The feeling of being in control can also be helpful through adolescence, when people often do not have much control over what is happening. This feeling of power and being in command can give an outlet to feelings of uncertainty (Rhyno 2010).

Horses can also be a powerful aspect of imagination. Focusing on the quality of oneness can bring about the dream of actually becoming the horse, a sort of mythical quality (Birke & Brandt 2009, p. 196). An MIT graduate student, Laurel Braitman, says, "Horses and dolphins and unicorns — these are all borderland creatures; gateway animals to other worlds," she says. "They help us imagine wonderful other ways of being in the world. They let us be cowgirls and oceanographers and mermaids and princesses." (Nelson & Silva 2011). Riding or reading or interacting with the horse community can allow children to unlock their imaginations.

## Gender

Overall, gender in relation to horses is complicated. While not strictly regulated by rules and leagues as other sports, gender differences do emerge. In the amateur levels, women dominate the equestrian sport. However, in the more industrialized aspect of the sport, like racing, men are much more likely to be involved (Birke & Brandt 2009, p. 191). On one hand, horses allow for the transcendence of gender boundaries, while at the same time reinforcing the differences between them.

Gender in general is more nuanced than simply masculine or feminine, but most of the research I found presents it in this binary. So, in this paper I will use masculine and male as the traditional cultural connotations of these words, and will do the same for feminine and female, while acknowledging that there are many more aspects of gender not discussed here.

The traditional mode of horse training calls for women to take on many masculine traits. They must be physically strong and take on dirty jobs such as mucking out stalls (Birke & Brandt 2009, p. 191). Thus, emerges the idea of the tomboy. When a researcher studied how children construct tomboy identities, she found that a tomboy was "someone who 'does boy', but with a female body," but that someone who only partially identifies as a tomboy, "was generally understood as performing a form of girl which includes some 'boy things'" (Paechter 2010, p. 226). Tomboys defined themselves as either identifying with traditionally masculine traits, or in strong contrast with an opposite identity of a 'girly-girl' with strong feminine traits (Paechter 2010, p. 226). Girls that break gender norms and act in a traditional masculine manner risk being sanctioned for their behavior (Traeen & Wang 2006, p. 443). But those that are interacting in a horse community are not penalized for breaking feminine conventions and have access to freedoms that they might otherwise be denied (Traeen & Wang 2006, p. 439, 443, Birke &

Brandt 2009, p. 190). However, the horse community is not completely devoid of femininity.

There is a difference between the more private, localized, specific horse community and the wider public world of competition. Ribbons are added, long hair is faked, and a certain feminine “elegance” is valued. In advertising, the traditional feminine ideal beauty standard is also upheld portraying a horse rider as thin, white, and attractive (Birke & Brandt 2009, p. 192, 190).

Within the private world, however, there are also aspects of traditional femininity wrapped up in horses. The nurturing aspect of horse care would be considered feminine, and obtaining the skills it takes to care for a horse is attractive to girls (Nelson & Silva 2011). For instance, a study of Norwegian riders found that the female riders paid more attention to taking care of the horse, and feeling close to it, than men (Traeen & Wang 2006, p. 439).

However, it is important to examine gender in relation to males as well. When talking about gender it does not simply refer to the female side of things, but also refers to males as well, and the insights that can be gained from examining their relationship with horses. Natural Horsemanship is a training method that pulls from the cultural connotations of a cowboy. Presenting a tough, rugged man who at the same time is gentle and sensitive with his horse still is dominated by the mythical portrayal of a cowboy figure. Jackson Katz talks about how the cowboy can become part of a fantasy world for men. In response to change they can retreat into a hyper-masculine fantasy to try and reclaim a supposed loss of traditional masculinity (Katz 2013, 00:43:45-00:44:05). In this training method there is also the aspect of the “old horsemen”, the wise and gentle old man whom one would turn to for advice. Again, in this training method while most participants are women, those higher up on the ladder, the trainers and leaders, are men (Birke & Brandt 2009, p. 191).

Because we are looking at gender in relation to horses, the gender of the horse itself can

be relevant. Oftentimes, the assumed default gender of a horse is male. Men sometimes insists on riding stallions. Additionally, when focusing on breeding it is the male line that is assumed to have all of the power. The mare is either thought to be temperamental and troublesome, or does not matter and has no effect on the foal. The wild stallion is also praised for its power and savagery, but must be tamed and domesticated—feminized—to be used in any practical matter (Birke & Brant 2009, p. 193).

### **Socialization**

Socialization is the process in which children come to understand their world. It is the process that teaches them societal norms, beliefs and values. Along with other agents of socialization such as parents, peers, school, etc., media is an agent of socialization (Little & McGivern). The media that I focus on is children's books. Books can be beneficial to a child in many ways. They also send messages to the children that read them. A 2011 study comments that, "Children's books are a celebration, reaffirmation, and dominant blueprint of shared cultural values, meanings, and expectations" (McCabe, Fairchild, Grauerholz, Pescosolido, & Tope, 2011, p. 199). This same study shows that books send messages by what they leave out as well as what is present. The researchers surveyed 5,618 children's books and found that male characters are mentioned nearly twice as often in titles and 1.6 times as often as central characters. They say that this symbolic annihilation may affect how children view gender (McCabe et al. 2011, p. 197). Whether messages of gender or otherwise, children receive messages from media that affects how they view the world.

I am interested in what messages and socialization children are receiving from horse books, and if these messages are representative or not of the discussed literature about horses.

## Methods:

For this study I looked for popular children's fiction about horses to analyze. To get the sample, I conducted various Google searches. I searched for the phrase "horse books" and marked down how often a book appeared across four websites. I then did the same for a search of "books for horse girls", marking down books for two websites, and for the search "books for horse boys" using four websites. In the search, I skipped any website listing books for adults, non-fiction books, or lists of only picture books. I then added searches on the list section of the website Goodreads for "horse books", "horse books for kids", and "best horse books for kids", with four, three, and two results respectively. For the Goodreads portion I only included the top ten results on any of the lists. Any series listed I simply included the first book of the series in my tallies. Combining the Google searches and the Goodreads searches brought the total up to twenty websites examined. I then had a list of twelve books with four or more mentions on the websites.

I then further narrowed down the list by Accelerated Reader level. Accelerated Reader is a way of measuring the reading level of the book, for example, a book with an AR level of 4.7 would be read by someone in the 4th grade in the seventh month of school. I wanted to have books that would be read in childhood. So I eliminated any books that had a reading level above the 7th grade. This eliminated *Seabiscuit* and *Black Beauty*. I also wanted to survey an equal number of books with boy protagonists and girl protagonists. I eliminated *War Horse* because it is narrated from the point of view of the horse and would be hard to compare to the other books' human narrators. I also eliminated the novel *The Horse and His Boy* for a similar reason as the horses in that book talk and would change the fundamental dynamic of the novel. Because of time constraints I also eliminated *King of the Wind: The Story of the Godolphin Arabian* as it

was by the same author as *Misty of Chincoteague* and fundamental story differences made it difficult to do a comparison.

This left me with 6 books: *The Black Stallion* mentioned 15 times with a male protagonist, *Misty of Chincoteague* mentioned 14 times with a male and female protagonist, *My Friend Flicka* mentioned 11 times with a male protagonist, *A Horse called Wonder* mentioned 6 times with a female protagonist, *National Velvet* mentioned 4 times with a female protagonist, and *Horse Crazy* mentioned 4 times with a female protagonist. The books were chosen with regard to the relationship between the horse and child protagonist. While they may also fit into secondary genres, such as a coming of age novel or a friendship story, they are truly "horse books" as they are primarily focused on the relationship between human and horse. Using Google searches may call into question the expertise of those listing the individual books. However, by cross referencing other websites and keeping a tally of how often the books appeared, it assures that the books are those more likely to have been read by children, or at least have shaped the understanding of horse literature for children.

### **The Books**

*The Black Stallion* is by Walter Farley and was first published in 1941. It tells the story of a young boy, Alec, who is shipwrecked and saved by a black stallion. When he returns to New York he is determined to race, somehow, with the stallion. *Misty of Chincoteague* is by Marguerite Henry and was first published in 1947. It tells the story of Paul and Maureen who are resolved to own the wild mare Phantom and her foal, Misty, as they wrestle with both getting the Phantom to race, and with the idea of freedom. *My Friend Flicka* is by Mary O'Hara and was first published in 1941. The narrative of this book is of a daydreamer, Ken, trying to make his

dream of having his own colt on his father's ranch a reality. *A Horse Called Wonder* is by Joanna Campbell and was first published in 1991. It is the first book in the *Thoroughbred* series and tells the story of Ashleigh, who moves to a new ranch and is determined to keep a new foal, Wonder, from being sold. *National Velvet* is by Enid Bagnold and was first published in 1935. In this book, the main character, Velvet, and her sisters inherit horses, and Velvet endeavors to compete in the Grand National horse race. *Horse Crazy* is by Bonnie Bryant and was first published in 1988. It tells the story of three girls at a riding club, Stevie, Carole, and the new girl, Lisa. The girls must learn to find friendship as they work towards an overnight horse camping trip.

All six books are still in print. *Misty of Chincoteague* is a Newberry medalist, and all but *A Horse Called Wonder* have been adapted to film and/or a television series. The popularity of these books reassures the idea that, though they were taken off a Google search, these books hold a firm place in our cultural landscape and have been read, or at least representative of books read, by children for the past seventy or so years.

### **Analytic Strategy**

For this study I used qualitative coding and analysis techniques. I coded for specific words and phrases representing ideas in the book, adding new codes and ideas as they appeared. Qualitative analysis is useful in coding such things as books because a phrase or word may not be exactly the same, but may still fit into the same category because it elicits the same meaning. I coded each book initially for wildness (with words such as "wild," "crazy," "savage," etc.) and Gender (with references to "acting like a girl," "being too old to cry," "becoming a man," etc.). However, some other themes also emerged such as dreams, money, death, etc. I eliminated and condensed some categories in a second read through and continued to refine and redefine my

codes as the process went on and patterns emerged. As I typed out all the codes, I was able to recognize some instances of a word or phrase occurring as not relevant. And I continued to look at the codes in relation to the theory and analyzed them accordingly.

## Results:

### **Embodiment**

Five of the six books have an aspect of embodiment. A character may express the feeling of being one with the horse or comment on the communication between the two. In *National Velvet* the main character says, "...with this spot of luck, she and the creature together, breathing like one body, trying even to death, till their hearts burst" (Bagnold 1935, p. 130). Sometimes, like in *National Velvet*, the embodiment is focused on when the character and horse are racing. With the characters pushing as hard as they can, they are as open to the horse as they can be, communicating and ultimately feeling one with the horse. Other times there is a more general feeling of togetherness caused by this communication. For instance, in *Horse Crazy*, "Sometimes, it seemed to Carole that Cobalt could practically read her mind" (Bryant 1988, p. 63). In the books, the fact that the humans and horses are communicating is taken as a given. They do not need spoken language to do so, but rely on communication of the body (Brandt 2004, p. 313). And that communication of the body can lead to the actual embodiment, the transcending of the boundaries between human and horse. (Birke & Brandt 2009, p. 190). In *My Friend Flicka* this embodiment is stated rather openly, "He really meant, *she's me*. It felt as if his father was asking him to be torn apart" (O'Hara 1940, p.170). Ken, the main character, has formed such a bond with the horse through the communication, that when asked to part with it, he feels that he is asked to get rid of a part of himself.

### Power and Control

In the books we also see aspects of power and control. In all of the books, the characters must overcome obstacles. They may have issues with school, have to overcome financial constraints, or have to deal with uncooperative parents. These are all circumstances that kids have to deal with, and often without any control. In *A Horse Called Wonder*, Ashleigh's parents tell her about a horse she is raising, "We know you've gotten attached to her, but you have no control over whether she's sold or not--none of us does, except Clay Townsend" (Campbell 1991, p. 140). Ultimately Ashleigh succeeds in convincing the owner to keep the horse, but does so in spite of her lack of control over other's decisions. She realizes that she only has control over her own actions, so she takes charge and is empowered (Nelson & Silva 2011).

This feeling of control can come from overcoming obstacles, but sometimes even riding the horse is an obstacle in itself. Taming something wild and bringing it under your control, but still knowing the extent of its power is a liberating feeling in contrast to the lack of control felt in everyday life (Nelson & Silva 2011). As one character says in *Horse Crazy*, "When she was on a horse, she was in a world where *she* was in control. Carole couldn't control Stevie any more than she could control her father—or than she could have controlled her mother's illness—but she could control Delilah" (Bryant 1988, p. 42).

Another aspect of the lack of control comes from growing up. Adolescence is a time of complication, uncertainty, and change (Rhyno 2010). All of the books' protagonists are in early to late adolescence, ranging from about ten in *Misty of Chincoteague* and *My Friend Flicka*, to sixteen in *The Black Stallion*. Many of the books comment on the change that occurs to a character over the course of working with the horse. And some confront the worries of growing up directly. In *National Velvet*, "'All the same it's awful to grow up.' said Velvet. 'All this

changing and changing, an' got to be ready for something'" (Bagnold 1935, p. 36). While growing, children do not have any control over the changes happening to their own bodies, but they can have control over the powerful body of the horse to which they relate.

These same ideas may relate to the concept of death. While not in the literature, the books are full of references to death. In some, there are only a few passing references to death, but other books like *National Velvet* and *My Friend Flicka* have thirty-five and fifty-three references respectively. In one way or another the characters explore death. It could be from Velvet's young brother, trying to comprehend death: "'Oh, he's dead. Ages ago.' 'Who died 'im?' 'Nobody died him. He just did.' 'Well, whur's he now?' 'Well dead, Donald. Like everybody. Everybody dies.'" (Bagnold 1935, p. 27). The lack of control felt by confronting the realities of death may be similar to confronting the realities of growing up.

The books may also send out messages of socialization over the perceived correct response to death--grief, but moving on. In *My Friend Flicka* the mother explains to her child why the rooster crows, "'They crow for the morning coming.' 'but when awful things happen?' 'Still--there's a morning--' 'But if things *have died--*' She didn't answer, 'Mother?' he insisted. 'Even then--there's a morning--'" (O'Hara 1940, p. 339). Death is a part of life that children must learn to confront, and books may help them do so.

### **Dreams**

Imagination is also a prevalent theme. The characters dream of things and engage in make-believe play. This imagination can allow the children to more properly realize what they want to be; to allow them to try out different identities (Nelson & Silva 2011). In *A Horse Called Wonder* the main character thinks that she wants to be a jockey, so she starts to make-believe, "Without realizing what she was doing, Ashleigh straddled the paddock rail and leaned

forward in a jockey's crouch, picturing herself galloping around the training oval..." (Campbell 1991, p. 41). She can try this identity out and realize that it is what she actually desires.

In the books, many of the dreams are of things the characters are wishing for that eventually will be fulfilled throughout the novel. The characters realize that the fulfillment of the dream is more than they could have ever imagined. They see that dreaming is important, but that the fulfillment of the dream changes things. Ken, a notorious day-dreamer, realizes his responsibility to live in the real world when he gets his horse, Flicka. Horses can give people a perception of security, self-confidence, and the responsibility of caring for someone (Traeen & Wang 2006). Ken used his dream world as a safe-haven from the realities of life where, "no one knew he was there; and safe, because he had everything his own way; pleasant, because there were no unhappy endings. In the real world just about everything had an unhappy ending or tripped him up somehow, but *there*, there were no endings at all--" (O'Hara 1940, p. 123). But Ken abandons his dream world for the responsibility of the real world as he continues to grow in self-confidence and is more secure with his idea of himself. He has, "the feeling of going off into a daydream and his eyes wandered... but he pulled himself back. Flicka... he couldn't leave them." (O'Hara 1940, p. 241). Ken has a responsibility to and a bond with the horse. This bond is at the root of dreams about horses (Birke & Brandt 2009, p. 196). Dreaming can both show what characters want and the importance of imagination in realizing dreams, and it can show how characters can use their bond with horses to overcome daydreaming in order to take responsibility.

## **Gender**

Many of the girls in the books would identify with being a tomboy. They may express it both in the doing of boyish actions and in the rejection of anything "girly-girl" (Paechter 2010, p.

226). Ashleigh in *A Horse Called Wonder*, for instance, takes pains to distinguish herself from her more traditionally feminine sister, "Even when they were small, Caroline had loved clothes and used to dress up whenever she could. While Ashleigh had raced around on her pony, Caroline had sat in the backyard reading a book or experimenting with nail polish" (Campbell 1991, p. 4). And Velvet in *National Velvet* literally dresses as a boy to get into the Grand National horse race, "Girls! Said Velvet, stopping still beside him so that they all drew up. "Who's to know I'm a girl?" She cupped her face in her two hands so that her straight hair was taken from it" (Bagnold 1935, p. 75).

However, there are still many traditional feminine stereotypes present as well. In *Misty of Chincoteague* one of the children is told to, "Quit acting like a girl, Maureen!" (Henry 1947, p. 41). In *Horse Crazy* the presentation of femininity is also tied to class connotations and the appearance of wealth. When Lisa, the new girl whose "mother still liked to dress her up like a doll" (Bryant 1988, p. 16) comes to the stable, she is shocked to see how old and worn out their clothes look, except for Veronica, the rich girl of the stable, who is portrayed as snobbish, but also coded as feminine.

The scorn that Veronica receives is also indicative of an aspect of femininity that is valued in stables. Though many more traditional masculine activities happen in horse communities, more feminine nurturing activities happen as well (Traeen & Wang 2006, p. 439). Veronica is looked down upon because she does not take care of her horse herself. Another girl says, "She hasn't got the first idea how to take care of that beautiful horse of hers. Cobalt would be better off living in the wild than with Veronica." (Bryant 1988, p. 57). Veronica is looked down upon as both being too feminine in terms of dress and attitude, but not feminine enough in terms of being nurturing to her horse.

The private and public world is something that shows up in *National Velvet*. Velvet does not expect the public to be so interested in her win, but they consider it such a scandal that she is inundated with reporters and marriage requests. Under new public scrutiny, her femininity is considered open for discussion (Birke & Brandt 2009, p. 192, 190). As one quote says, "What was so piquant in the papers was that in a row of beauties, 'it was the plain one that did it.' This was somehow full of salt." (Bagnold 1935, p. 286).

Gender, however, does not merely refer to the female gender. Males have gender norms as well and socialization messages tell them how to act too. In *My Friend Flicka*, the boy, Ken, does not portray the traditional masculine attributes and is decried for being too much of a day dreamer. Ken feels as if he has to be a certain way to please his father. His father's actions confirm Ken's suspicions. He wishes that Ken would have chosen a sensible colt that he could train up saying, "it would have taught him something, made a man of him. But what can he do with this poor little filly?" (O'Hara 1940, p. 216). His father portrays violent masculinity (Katz 2013, 00:13:37-00:14:45). He is the head of the household and a very traditional masculine figure. He is easily angered and is described as wild or says things savagely (O'Hara 1940, p. 210, 173). His father fits the stereotype of the cowboy fantasy. He clings to the masculine ideal when things seem to undermine him, whether that be financial troubles, Ken's decision on choosing a wild filly to raise, or even his wife's choice on where to put the cows. He says on that last decision, "I'll say there's a reason," he bawled. 'I told him to put them in Seventeen. That's why--who's running this ranch?' . . . 'Whose business is it to give orders to the men?' roared Rob." (O'Hara 1940, p. 278). The struggle between his father's more traditional masculinity and Ken's less traditional version makes up much of the book. Ken is much more gentle and ultimately tames his Filly through this gentle love, "Flicka, who loved his hands, and had never

felt the touch of them except in gentleness and affection" (O'Hara 1940, p. 259). Ken ultimately portrays a more feminine version of himself to overcome the obstacles in his life. While his father still praises the traditional masculine aspects, he ultimately shows that he accepts Ken when he chooses not to shoot Flicka, "He patted her head: 'You win, Flicka.'" (O'Hara 1940, p. 323).

However, in other books, traditional masculinity is rewarded. In *Misty of Chincoteague*, Paul, a male, is the one who gets to ride the horse in the race, over a female, Maureen, who tells him, "You won, Paul," she said, blinking. 'You'll ride her better anyhow.'" (Henry 1947, p. 141). In *The Black Stallion*, the male main character believes that he cannot show emotion, "What was the matter with him? He was too old to become emotional." (Farley 1941, p. 61) And in all of the books, no matter what the gender of the protagonist, the mentor in the situation is male. Sometimes the mentor is not sure of the protagonist's dreams but comes around as in *A Horse Called Wonder*, "Times are changing. I've got nothing against women in the business, but it's a dangerous sport for a woman." Ashleigh wasn't going to let him get away with that excuse. "It's just as dangerous for men!" (Campbell 1941, p. 89). Other times the mentor is eager and willing to help, but the achievement is seen as the men's as much as the women's like in *National Velvet*, "There are men who like to make something out of women." (Bagnold 1935, p. 109). This stereotype of the "old horseman" (Birke & Brandt 2009, p. 191) shows that even in books that have non-traditional portrayals of gender roles, the male is still assumed to be in charge.

In the horse, too, the male bloodline is seen as the one reigning supreme, but with mares contributing to the negative parts of a horse's personality (Birke & Brant 2009, p. 193). In *My Friend Flicka*, they are afraid that Flicka will take the traits of her mother instead of her father,

“he could imagine her fighting the rope--behaving as she had behaved up there in the corral and the stable--behaving like Rocket--Loco.” (O’Hara 1940, p. 235). The female is still continually devalued while the male is valued.

This assumption is also visible in simply the character count in the books themselves. While reading *The Black Stallion*, I was struck with just how masculine it seemed to me. I realized that not only was it the sole book written by a male author that I surveyed, but also that the majority of the characters were male. Out of the seven more prominent characters, only one, the mother, was a female. This is the same in the other books where the protagonist is male. In *My Friend Flicka*, only one of the characters is female, the mother. In *Misty of Chincoteague* only the grandmother and the other child character, Maureen, are females. All of the other incidental characters, from the fire chief, to those trying to buy horses, are male. In the books where the protagonist is a girl the split is more even. *A Horse Called Wonder* has four female characters and seven male characters. *National Velvet* has four female characters and three male characters. *Horse Crazy* has four female characters and only two male characters. However, in all of the books, the position of authority still rests with a male character.

### Conclusions:

Through an exploration of these books we can see that they teach messages to children. An examination of six books, *My Friend Flicka*, *A Horse Called Wonder*, *National Velvet*, *Horse Crazy*, and *Misty of Chincoteague* was undertaken. The books were coded and examined through qualitative research methods. The books match much of the literature on the horse community itself, revealing that both societal messages, and community specific messages are present. They show children that power can be found even when there are circumstances beyond control. They

portray dreaming as a necessary part of imagination and important in understanding desires, realizing those dreams, and taking responsibility. They offer mixed messages of gender, sometimes challenging, while other times reinforcing traditional gender norms. But ultimately, they allow children to experiment with the boundaries of gender and present different sides to the story.

The implications of this study are related to socialization. Books can tell us valuable things about the world around us. They can tell us messages about the ideals of society and teach norms. Horse books in general have a large community behind them, with the popularity of horseback riding, and with the cultural phenomenon of the horse in general. With such a cultural context, the messages horse books send to the children that read them are not something that has been widely studied. Horses are something that some children obsess over. Whether, they have their own horse to ride, or are merely getting the experience from reading, watching, or playing make-believe stories about horses, children are affected by the stories they are exposed to.

Further research could examine what the children themselves are understanding from the books. While content analysis as an adult may see things from a larger cultural context, children may interpret some of the messages differently. There could also be an exploration of more books as the sample size in this study was limited by time constraints.

Horse books tell stories of embodiment, power, imagination, and gender roles. They have the potential to reach a large audience of children and contribute to the socialization process. Children learn societal values and ideals when the larger than life figure of the horse is brought to them in stories to which they can relate.

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