DESCRIBING HORSES

A GUIDE FOR WRITERS

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Introduction

In his Author Note at the beginning of *War Horse,* Michael Morpurgo describes a painting of the horse Joey, the horse that inspired the novel: "... a splendid red bay with a remarkable white cross emblazoned on his forehead and with four perfectly matched white socks." And at the beginning of chapter one Joey tells us that his mother had "... the strength and stamina of an Irish draught horse..." In those few words he provides all the physical details we need to know in a physical description of a horse – the breed or type of horse, clues about its physical size, the colour of its coat, and the white markings on its face and legs. In the opening pages of *War Horse,* which is told from the first-person point of view of the horse, we also discover the individual personalities and temperaments of three different horses, including the 'spindly-looking' colt, Joey. Notice how Morpurgo uses horse terminology in context without needing to explain it, allowing his (young) readers to discover these terms – perhaps for the first time – and demonstrates his own knowledge, subtly telling the reader 'Trust me, I know what I'm talking about.' This is the sort of writing we should be aiming for in our own descriptions of horses.

Here we'll concentrate on the physical description of horses. You create a personality and attitude for a horse in the same way that you would for a human character. The extent to which you anthropomorphise an animal will depend on the level of realism you want to achieve (or not) and whether the horse serves as a character in your story.

I'm also going to include some background information about horses here, a little bit of history, some biology, and a little bit about the place of horses and horse-like creatures in mythology. There are also a few ideas about the sorts of things that horses might symbolise in a story.

1 | History & Types

The horse's earliest ancestors appeared around 55 million years ago, with the modern Equus evolving about five million years ago. 15,000 years ago, horses were found in Europe, Eurasia, Beringia, and in North America. The traditional view is that in North America, horses became extinct around 8,000 years ago and there were none on the continent until the Spanish introduced them in the 1500s. But there is some documentary, archaeological and fossil evidence that suggest that some Native Americans had horses before the arrival of the Spanish.

Domestication of horses began around 4,000 BC. Some cultures became closely associated with horses. Genghis Khan, for example, united many nomadic tribes and went on to establish the Mongol Empire in the thirteenth-century. Mongol warriors relied on their horses, and many had three to five horses with some having as many as twenty. It is said that a warrior's horse would come at his whistle and follow him like a dog. The horses used in that period are thought to survive relatively unchanged in present-day Mongolian horses.

The Romans appear to be the first people to selectively breed horses for appearance and other traits, but it wasn't until the Middle Ages that they were selectively bred for particular tasks such as racing, pulling heavy machinery or wagons, or for carrying warriors.

Horses are naturally a herd animal, preferring to live in groups or to have contact with other animals, including humans. Horses can become anxious if they feel isolated, which is why lone domesticated horses often share their stable with a companion animal such as a cat.

Horses are prey animals and their first reaction when faced with a threat is to flee, though they will stand and defend themselves or a foal when flight is not possible. There are very few predators large enough (or brave enough!) to take on a horse, but foals and old or sick adults are at risk from smaller predators.

Black bears are unlikely to try and attack an adult horse, but grizzly bears do kill cattle and could take a horse unawares. But horses can move quickly and if cornered, they do fight back – they kick and bite!

Large cats such as cougars, pumas, and panthers may attack older or weaker horses. Bobcats are smaller and would only tackle a foal or a very weak adult. African lions are twice the size of mountain lions and could kill a horse. Large alligators are fast, strong, and thick-skinned

and so could realistically attack an adult horse. In the ocean, large predators such as sharks pose a risk to horses.

Coyotes hunt in packs and can pose a risk to foals but not to adult horses. Packs of wolves have been known to attack horses, but only if they are desperate for food -- sheep make much easier targets, they don't fight back. Large domestic or wild dogs are unlikely to be able to kill a horse, but they could cause serious injury.

Wild & Feral Horses

The only surviving species of wild horse is Przewalski's horse, also known as the *takhi* or Mongolian wild horse. An endangered species, it became extinct in the wild but was reintroduced to Mongolia's Khustain Nuruu National Park in the 1990s.

Feral horses are born and live in the wild. They are untamed but are descended from domesticated horses. There are herds of feral horses in various places around the world. There are also semi-feral horses which are privately owned but graze freely in the wild.

Wild and feral horse herds are usually made up of small bands or 'harems' made up mares, foals and immature horses of both sexes led by a dominant mare. There is typically a single herd stallion, though other less dominant males may remain part of the herd. Younger stallions are driven out and must join other groups, or they may challenge the herd stallion for dominance. Stallions typically stay on the outer edge of the herd, watching for predators and ready to discourage the approach of other males. Fights between stallions over dominance or usually brief and may amount to little more than a non-contact dominance display that demonstrates and maintains the status quo. Lucy Rees' book *Horses in Company* (2017) is a study of social interactions of horses in the wild and it challenges the traditional theory that there is an overall dominance hierarchy (or 'pecking order') within a herd.

The minimum herd size for a sustainable, genetically diverse population is 150-200 horses.

Horse Breeds & Types

Horse breeds are divided into three broad categories based on temperament. 'Hot bloods' with speed and endurance, 'cold bloods' more suitable for slow and heavy work, and 'warmbloods' that are a cross between the two and were developed for riding.

The Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations maintains a Domestic Animal Diversity Information System, and this

database lists over 4,000 breeds of horse from almost 200 countries. I'm not going to make any attempt to cover horse breeds here. The *Wikipedia* article 'List of Horse Breeds in DAD-IS' has a table listing them, showing which breeds come from which countries. There aren't articles for every one of the breeds, but you can find a list of those horses and ponies that do have articles in the 'List of Horse Breeds' entry.

It is worth noting that a pony is not a young horse, it is a horse of a particular size (see below) or a particular breed. Generally speaking, ponies have shorter legs and shorter necks, wider barrels, broader foreheads, and heavier bones. Coats are often thicker as are manes and tails. Some say that ponies are more intelligent and have calmer temperaments, but that probably depends on the individual.

A *cob* was a sturdy pony that was traditionally used as a working pony in the United Kingdom, with the Welsh cob being the best-known modern example. Romany travellers used horses of this type for pulling the traditional 'gypsy' caravan. Before the introduction of large draught horses, cobs were used in farming and for moving felled trees. At various points in history, they were used in coal mines (pit ponies), for pulling heavy guns and military equipment, and for mounted infantry (see rounceys below).

Draught horses or dray horses (draft horses in US English) are large horses of several different breeds that were bred for farm labour such as pulling ploughs in the days before modern tractors. They were also used to pull large wagons such as those used for delivering barrels of beer to English pubs. Among the better-known breeds of working horse of this kind are Breton, Clydesdale, Irish Draft, Percheron and the British Shire horse. To compare the size of these horses with other types, see 'Horse Sizes' below.

You may also have heard of some types of horses associated with medieval knights and warfare. If you are writing about knights in armour – whether in historical fiction or fantasy stories, the *Wikipedia* article 'Horses in the Middle Ages' is a good place to start your research. Below I will briefly mention some of the horses from that period – known collectively as 'chargers': these were types of horse rather than particular breeds.

Destrier – Referred to in contemporary sources as the 'Great Horse', the destrier carried knights into battle and was used in tournaments and jousts. It was highly prized by knights and men-at-arms but was not common due to its cost. More common were the other two types of chargers (see below).

Destriers were usually stallions and were bred and raised specifically to be war horses. The horses were not especially tall, averaging fourteen to fifteen hands, but they were stronger and more muscular. They had powerful hindquarters and were able to spring and sprint forwards, change direction quickly and come to a sudden stop. Images show them as having broad heads and strong jaws. As well as carrying an armoured knight, in battle the horse wore armour of its own. It was ridden only in battle or in a tournament – the knight rode another horse such as a palfrey when travelling.

Courser – Lighter, faster, and more manoeuvrable than a destrier, the Courser was also ridden in battle by knights and men-at-arms. More common than the destrier and less expensive, the courser was also used for cavalry, as a messenger horse, and may also have been used off the battlefield for hunting. These tended to be less well trained than Destriers, a fact reflected in their cost.

Rouncey – This was an all-purpose horse used for riding, as a pack horse, and which could also be trained for use in battles. A rouncey was cheaper to buy than a courser. In war they could be used by knights and men-at-arms, and they were also used by mounted archers. This type of horse was originally used for farm work.

Palfrey – A palfrey was a lighter-weight horse with a smooth gait that made it comfortable for riding over longer distances. It was an expensive horse, favoured by nobles, knights, and ladies. The palfrey was shorter and longer than a Destrier and probably of similar cost. It was used for riding, hunting, and for ceremonial occasions.

2 | Biology & Anatomy

Ages & Life Stages

Modern domestic horses have an average life expectancy of twenty-five to thirty years, but a few survive into their forties and perhaps beyond. The oldest horse on record is believed to have been Old Billy who lived to be sixty-two.

Females carry their young for about eleven months. A foal can stand and run soon after it has been born. They are usually born in the spring and are weaned when four to six months old. Horses can reproduce from the age of eighteen months, but domesticated horses are usually prevented from mating until they are three years old. Maturity is reached at four years, but the bones of some, especially larger breeds, may continue to develop up to the age of six.

Be aware that in some competitions, a horses actual age is used to determine eligibility to compete, but in others a year is added to its 'age' every January (northern hemisphere) or August (southern).

Terms used to describe horses of different ages and sexes include the following:

Foal – A horse of either sex less than one year old. Domesticated foals suckle from their mothers and are weaned when aged four to seven months.

Yearling – A horse of either sex between one and two years old.

Colt – A male horse under the age of four. In some places and in some sports, a colt is a male horse under *five* years old, be sure to check the details for your location and environment of your story.

Filly – A female horse under the age of four. In some places and in some sports, a filly is a female horse under *five* years old, be sure to check the details for your location and environment of your story.

Mare – A female horse of four years or older.

Stallion – A non-castrated male horse of four years and older.

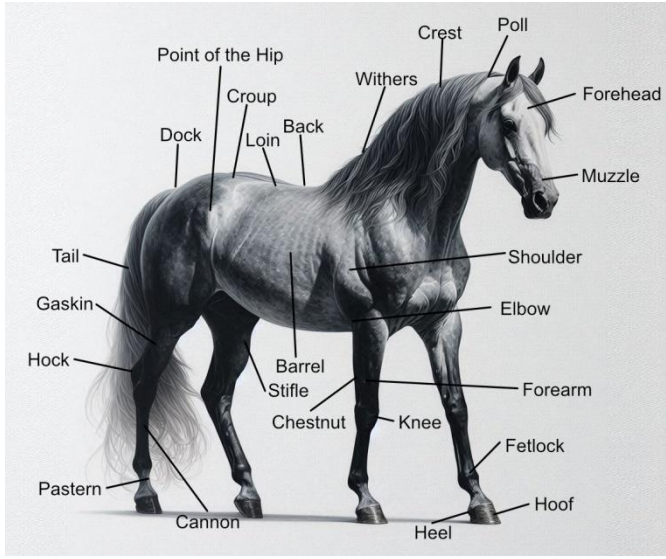
Gelding – A castrated male horse of any age.

Horse Anatomy

Humans and horses have many bones and muscles that are similar, but some aspects of horse anatomy – especially the legs and 'feet' – are

very different to the arms, legs, hands and feet of humans. To see a comparison, Google 'horse anatomy compared to human'.

This diagram has labels for the main visible anatomical details that you might refer to in a description. Below I've included definitions for some parts to avoid confusion. You can find more detailed diagrams and lists of parts in *Wikipedia* articles 'Equine Anatomy' and 'Skeletal System of the Horse'



Back – Where the saddle sits; begins where the withers ends and extends to the last thoracic vertebrae.

Barrel – The body, containing the rib cage and major internal organs.

Cannon – Also referred to as the cannon bone. Part of the leg between the knee or hock and the fetlock joint, in a similar position to the human shin.

Chestnut – A hard callus-like growth on the inside of each leg.

Coronet – Also called the coronary band. A ring of soft tissue just above the horny hoof.

Crest – Upper ridge of the neck where the mane grows.

Croup – The topline of the hindquarters, consisting of the sacrum and gluteal muscles and extending from the hip bone to the dock of the tail. Sometimes called the rump.

Dock – The live part of the tail made up of bone, muscle, and ligaments. Sometimes referred to as the 'root' of the tail

Elbow – Joint of the front leg at the point where the body of the horse meets the leg.

Ergot – Horn-like callus on the back of the fetlock joint.

Fetlock – Situated between the cannon and pastern bones of all four legs. Equivalent to the ball of the human foot but looking more like an ankle.

Flank – Situated between the last rib and the front of the hind legs, where the barrel of the body meets the legs.

Forearm – The part of the front leg between the knee and elbow.

Forehead – the flattish area on the front of the head between the poll, the eyes and the arch of the nose.

Forelock – Front part of the mane, which hangs between the ears down onto the forehead.

Gaskin – Large muscle on the hind leg, above the hock and below the stifle, equivalent to the human calf muscle.

Girth – Also called the heart girth. Area behind the elbow of the horse, where the girth of the saddle would go. The point where the barrel of a healthy, non-pregnant horse is greatest in diameter.

Hindquarters – Large, muscular area of the hind legs, above the stifle and behind the barrel. The term is also used for the back end of a horse.

Hock – Area on the hind leg between the gaskin (shin) and the cannon bone, equivalent to the human ankle.

Hoof – The part of a horse's foot that comes into contact with the ground. The tough outer covering is similar to a larger, stronger version of a human fingernail.

Knee – Large joint in the front legs above the cannon bone, equivalent to the human wrist.

Loin – Area equivalent to the waist, positioned behind the saddle area of the back and the croup of the hindquarters.

Muzzle – the chin, mouth, and nostrils of the face.

Pastern – Strong, slanted section of leg bone between the fetlock joint and the top of the hoof.

Poll – Sensitive, bony area located at the top of the head, between the ears, at the base of the skull, where the head and neck join.

Shoulder – Large, sloped area on the front of the body between the neck and the chest made up of the scapula and associated muscles.

Stifle – Joint in the upper rear leg which corresponds to the knee of a human.

Withers – Highest point of the thoracic vertebrae, above the tops of the shoulder blades. The height of the horse is measured at this point.

If you want to describe the anatomy of a horse's hoof, there are a couple of good labelled diagrams in the *Wikipedia* article 'Horse Hoof'

Eyesight

Equine eyes are among the largest of land mammals. The eyes of a horse are typically brown but, as mentioned below, can be hazel, amber, green, or blue. A horse can also have different coloured (dichromatic) eyes on each side.

Having its eyes on the side of its head means that the horse has a range of vision of about three-hundred-and-fifty degrees horizontally. Its forward binocular vision is sixty-five degress and the rest is monocular. A horse raises its head to increase its binocular vision of distant objects and lowers it for closer objects. It has two small 'blind spots' – a cone directly in front of its face that comes to a point between three and four foot in front of it, and one behind its head that extends along its back and behind its tail when it is facing forward. This range of vision makes it particularly good at spotting predators and other dangers and its vision is very sensitive to motion.

Horses are not colour blind, but they have two-colour (dichromatic) vision, meaning they can see blue and green colours but cannot distinguish red. They have much better night vision than humans and can still make out obstacles in conditions where we would see nothing. Their eyes are less able to adapt to sudden changes in light, so that coming from dark to light will dazzle a horse for longer and moving from light to dark may disorient it as it takes time before it can see clearly again.

Horses can suffer from near-sightedness, with about a third of domestic horses having the condition. Horses in the wild are more likely to be far-sighted.

When a horse rolls its eyes such that the whites are visible, this is a sign of fear or aggression.

Horse Sizes

The height of a horse is usually measured in *hands.* A 'hand' was originally equivalent to the width of a human hand, including the thumb, when it was held flat. It was originally used in Ancient Egypt. Today a hand is standardised to mean four inches and the abbreviation is hh (you can remember it as 'hands high'). The height of a horse is measured from the ground up to its withers, the point of the shoulder bone above the front foot. The head and neck of a horse can be rise above or dip below this point, but the height of the withers remains pretty much constant.

A horse that stands five feet high at the withers is fifteen hands tall – five feet equals sixty inches, divided by four gives fifteen hands. The height is then increased in increments of an inch – 15.1, 15.2, 15.3 – with 15.4 becoming sixteen hands.

A typical domesticated horse used for riding will be from fourteen to sixteen hands high and weigh between 840 and 1,210 lbs. Larger riding horses are from 15.2 hh up to 17 hh, weighing from 1,100 to 1,320 lbs.

Draft horses are from fifteen to eighteen hands and weigh from 1,000 to 2,200 lbs. – that's just over a ton.

A *pony* is a horse that stands 14.2 hh or less when fully grown. This is not a hard and fast rule, with other heights being used in certain situations and with horses of certain breed being regarded as ponies whatever their height. Miniature horses or ponies are specific breeds that reach relatively short heights when grown. The Shetland pony is around ten hands in height and is regarded as a pony (the clue is in the name), but the Falabella, which is around seven or eight hands is a miniature horse and not a pony. Do your research and make sure you use the right terminology.

The largest horse on record is thought to have been a Shire horse called Mammoth, born in 1848. He stood over twenty-one hands high – that over seven feet or two metres – and weighed one-and-a-half tons. The smallest was Thumbelina, a miniature horse born in 2001 who was a little over four hands high and weighed fifty-seven pounds.

If you're wondering about the load-bearing capacity of miniature horses, as a rule of thumb, you should not load it with more than about twenty percent of its own weight.

In terms of pulling capacity, a horse can pull ten to fifteen times its own weight for a short distance, depending on the breed, age, and fitness of the horse. During a normal working day, a horse can comfortable pull about one-and-a-half times its own weight in a cart. More weight needs more horses.

Horsepower (hp) is a unit for measuring the power output of engines or motors. It was originally introduced to compare the output of steam engines with that of draught horses. It has now been replaced by the watt for the measurement of power. 1 hp is around 740 watts. The peak output of a horse is almost 15 hp, but for sustained work it is 1 hp.

Donkeys & Mules

Horses and donkeys (also called asses) share common ancestors, something that is more obvious when you compare them to the wild Przewalski's horse. Horses and donkeys can also mate. If a female horse mates with a male donkey, they produce a hybrid called a mule. When a male horse mates with a female donkey, their offspring is a hinny. Both mules and hinnys are believed to be sterile, but there have been a small number of cases where female mules have given birth.

Donkeys and horses are also related to zebras, and zebra-donkey hybrids are also possible, bearing such unlikely names as a zonkey, zedonk, or zebrinny. The gestation period for a donkey is 11 to 14 months and usually a single foal is born, though occasionally there are twins.

A male donkey is called a jack (which is why we have a jack ass) and a female is a jenny or jennet. Young donkeys are foals. Donkeys are smaller than horses, ranging in height from thirty-six to fifty-four inches high at the withers, equivalent to about nine to thirteen hands. In poorer countries a working donkey may reach the age of 15; in prosperous countries they can live from 30 to 50 years. The bray of a donkey lasts for around twenty seconds and can be heard up to two miles away. Donkeys have a reputation for stubbornness, but this may simply be because they have a stronger sense of self-preservation than horses.

Asses were first domesticated around 3,000 BC by the Ancient Egyptians or Mesopotamians. Wild asses in Africa are a critically endangered species.

3 | Colours & Markings

Horse Colours

Except where specified below, horses typically have brown or black eyes – that is, dark coloured irises surrounded by white. You rarely see the white of a horse's eyes, unless it opens them widely, and this only occurs when it is in a heightened emotional state – fear or anger. 'Tiger Eye' is found in Puerto Rican Paso Fino horses and is characterised by yellow, amber, or bright orange irises. It is transmitted genetically.

The terms used to describe coat colours may be specific to a geographic location or historical period – there are terms that are used in North America, for example, that are not used in England. The terms below are mostly British and American, and I have tried to indicate those that it would be fine to use in, say, a Western novel but not in a Regency romance.

Brown: This includes most horse colours that don't fit into any of the specific colour categories below. There are many shades of brown from light to almost completely black. Shading of different body parts can range from black to reddish or golden brown.

Black: Less common than brown, but not rare. Some 'black' horses are a very dark brown that may fade after long exposure to sunlight. A true black horse has a blue-black coat that does not fade. A black horse will be completely black except for white markings on the face or legs.

Bay: Bay is a reddish colour, ranging from dark to bright. The mane and tail may be black and there may be black shading on the lower legs.

Chestnut: This is a reddish colour with no black – the main and tail are the same colour as the body or perhaps a little lighter. A darker coloured coat may be referred to as 'liver chestnut'. A lighter reddish to tan colour is a sorrel.

Palomino: A golden, yellowish, or tan colour with a paler flax-coloured or whitish mane and tail. Colours range from very light to almost chocolate brown, but always have a lighter main and tail. 'Palomino' is Latin American Spanish and means 'young pigeon'.

Buckskin: A yellowish, cream, or golden colour with a black mane, tail, and shading on the legs. The colour is said to resemble the tanned hides of certain types of deer.

Roan: Roan is when the colour of a horse's coat has an even mixture of whitish hairs through it. Depending on the base colour, a roan may be referred to as a bay roan, a black roan, a blue roan, a red roan, or a strawberry roan.

Pinto: Here there are large patches of colour over the horse's coat. A *Tobiano* has large black or brown patches over a mostly whitish coat; an Overo has large whitish patches over a mostly brown or black coat. Pinto is an American term. In British English *piebald* is used for a horse with white on black patterns, and (less commonly) *skewbald* for patterns of white on any other colour.

Gray: Gray horses may be born any colour and their coats lighten as they shed their foal coat and as they age, some becoming completely white. The difference between a true white horse and a grey is that greys have dark skin, which can be seen wherever the hair is thinner – especially around the eyes, muzzle, and flanks.

A *dapple grey* has light coloured spots – the 'dapples' – against a darker coat, or light colours against a lighter coat, or both across different parts of the body. The main and tail can range from almost white to almost black.

A *flea-bitten grey* has a light-coloured coat with small reddish-brown speckles or 'freckles'.

White: Pure white horses where both the hair and the skin are white (or pink) are very rare. They have brown or blue eyes and tend to have lighter coloured hoofs.

A *cremello, perlino,* or *smoky cream* has a chestnut base coat but the hairs are a pale cream or light tan colour that may appear almost white. A cremello horse often has blue eyes.

A 2016 study by Saskia Wutke et al. analysed historical preferences for horse colours (based on genetic data) since horses were first domesticated around 3,500 BC. Spotted coats appear to have been more common in the Bronze and Iron Ages, while solid colours became dominant in the medieval period. Selective breeding for coat colour, among other preferred features, appears to have begun during Roman times. Separating horses into different types for different uses occurred in the Middle Ages. Based on the figures in the Wutke paper, we can draw some rough conclusions:

- In 4,000 BC and earlier the main coat colours were bay, black and leopard spotted, with bay and leopard dominating.

- Between 4,000 and 2,700 BC (the Neolithic to Copper Ages) tobiano, chestnut, and sabino are included, with bay and black being dominant.
- During the early Bronze Age (2,700-1,600 BC), bay and leopard spotted colours dominate with black not far behind.
- The Middle and Late Bronze Age (1,600 to 900 BC) saw black increase in popularity with black also being a dominant colour. Sabino and tobiano increase in popularity, leopard becomes less strong, and chestnut increases somewhat.
- In the Iron Age (900 BC to 400 AD), silver and cream become significant colours for the first time. Bay remains a dominant colour and chestnut increases. Black becomes a little less dominant. Tobiano increases and leopard remains more or less stable at a relatively low level.
- During the Middle Ages (after 400 AD), solid colours dominate, with chestnut being the most popular, bay next, then black. Leopard remains relatively stable and Tobiano decreases somewhat. Silver remains a relatively less dominant colour, about equal with leopard.

The terms used for genetic analysis don't exactly match those listed earlier. I found a useful summary table of 'Equine Coat Color Genetics' on the UC Davis Veterinary Medicine website.

Markings

As well as coat colour, you can also describe the markings of a horse – these are chiefly notable on the face and lower legs.

White facial markings, from largest to smallest, are:

Bald – A broad white marking that stretches from forehead to the end of the muzzle and across the whole width of the front of the face.

Blaze – A white strip that that runs down the centre of the face and may be broader near the forehead and close to the muzzle.

Stripe – A white band down the centre of the face that tapers at the top and bottom.

Snip – A white spot on the muzzle between the nostrils or just below them.

Star – A white spot on the forehead.

These markings can occur in combination, e.g. a snip plus a star, and there are also a number of variations.

White leg markings begin at the hoof and extend up the leg. From smallest to largest they are:

Heel – a white spot on the heel.

Coronet – a narrow band just above the hoof.

Half-Pastern – extends from the hoof halfway up the pastern.

Pastern – extends from the hoof up to the pastern.

Sock (or boot) – covers the fetlock and covers an area below the halfway point on the cannon.

Half-Cannon (or half-stocking) – extends from the hoof halfway up the cannon.

Stocking – Extends from the hoof to the knee or hock. In irregular stocking has one side that goes higher than the other.

The Fédération Equestre Internationale produces a form for completing a more detailed description of a horse – a PDF version can be found at:

https://inside.fei.org/system/files/ID_of_horses_2014.pdf

4 | Movement & Behaviour

There are two categories of horse movement or gait, the natural one used by all horses without training and the 'ambling' gaits which are taught.

The natural gaits, in increasing order of speed, are walk, trot, canter, and gallop. When a horse breaks into a canter or gallop, its breathing is in time with its step, one stride equals one breath. A horse may hold its breath briefly when it jumps an obstacle, breathing out when it lands.

Walk – The walking speed of a horse is three to five miles an hour, depending on leg-length and stride – shorter legs and/or shorter stride equal slower walk.

The walk is classed as a four-beat gait, in that each of the four legs comes into contact with the ground during one cycle of the walk. At different points in the cycle, the horse has two or three legs on the ground – when it has two legs on the ground, they are always diagonally opposite front and rear legs.

The horse steps forward with a front leg and then raises the diagonally opposite hind leg. The first front leg touches the ground and the other front leg is raised. As a hind leg comes forward and touches the ground, the front leg on the same side rises and steps forward and you briefly see the legs on the same side forming a V-shape under the body of the horse. The pattern of raising feet is front-left, hind-right, front-right, hind-left and the cycle repeats in a steady even beat. The horse moves its head and neck in a slight up and down movement to help it maintain balance. The rider feels a gentle side-to-side movement from the horse's hips as the hind legs step forward.

Trot – The trot is a two-beat gait where two diagonally opposite legs leave the ground at the same time and there is a 'moment of suspension' when all four legs leave the ground. The speed of a trot is between five and eight miles an hour, with a slow trot sometimes referred to as a jog. In some sports a trot can reach much higher speeds. Again, the legs on each side of the horse seem to form a V-shape under it as it moves.

Canter – The canter is a three-beat gait. There are two forms of canter, one where the left front leg steps forward further than the right (left-leading) and one where the right front leg leads. In a left-leading the canter the three beats are: Right hind leg up and forward; (2) both left hind leg *and* right fore leg; (3) left fore leg (reaching furthest forward).

It is the rear legs that propel the horse forwards and there is a moment in the cycle when it is only one rear leg that is in contact with the ground and a moment of suspension when all legs are off the ground and bent under the horse.

The speed of a canter is from about ten to seventeen miles per hour. A *lope* is a slower form of canter, averaging eight to twelve miles per hour.

Gallop – The gallop is similar to the canter but becomes a four-beat gait. Like the canter it begins with the non-leading hind leg. Beat two is the second hind leg, beat three the non-leading foreleg, and beat four the leading foreleg. In the moment of suspension, when all four feet are off the ground, the legs are bent under the horse. In some old paintings, suspension is shown with all four legs extended, but photographic evidence shows this to be wrong.

A gallop reaches speeds of twenty-five to thirty miles per hour, with the highest speed over a quarter mile being fifty-five miles per hour.

Distances

At a gallop, a horse can travel for up to a maximum of two miles without stopping, though a mile to a mile-and-a-half is about average. Some horses are bred and trained for long distance endurance and so can gallop a little further. Pushing a horse beyond this can cause serious health problems for the horse and in extremes can result in its death.

At a slow canter or a trot, a horse can travel for about an hour covering between eight and ten miles.

At walking pace, a horse can travel for seven hours or more – with occasional breaks – and cover about twenty miles.

Riders travelling long distances at speed, such as Pony Express riders, changed horses regularly. In the pre-telegraph days, riders could carry letters between the Atlantic and Pacific coasts – a route of about 1,900 miles – in about ten days. Posts, where the rider changes horses, were about ten miles apart. Riders covered between seventy-five and a hundred miles in ten-hour stints.

The famous British highwayman Dick Turpin, according to a novel by William Harrison Ainsworth, travelled from London to York, a distance of two-hundred-and-twenty miles, in one night on his horse Black Bess. Even if he'd changed horses as regularly as a Pony Express rider, he couldn't have made it. And even if he had, he wouldn't have been able to walk. Or become a father.

Swimming

Horses are typically good swimmers and improve with experience, but whether they take to swimming depends on the individual horse. Some horses may panic in water and there will be problems if a horse's head goes under the water – horses cannot hold their breath and so may inhale water and be at risk of drowning. Horses breath only through their nostrils, not their mouths. They also don't like getting water in their ears as they don't drain like ours do.

Before getting into water, horses may 'paw' at it on the shoreline. When getting into water, the rider needs to be aware of the steepness of the bank of a river and the unevenness of the river bottom near the bank. In the sea, there is a danger that the seabed may slope away suddenly. When swimming with a horse a rider should avoid strong currents, white water, and large waves.

Horses float, in part, because they can hold quite large amounts of air in their lungs. But they are heavy animals and in deep water will only have their head visible above the surface. Swimming requires more energy, like galloping, and a horse will quickly become tired. They can only swim for relatively short periods – five to ten minutes is about the limit unless horses have been specially trained for swimming.

Can a rider stay on the horse while it swims? Maybe, but it is better to swim with the horse, holding on to its mane and floating beside it. Be aware that a swimming horse kicks out strongly – you don't want your character to get kicked. Unless you do, authors are mean sometimes.

Depending on where a horse is swimming, other risks can include blue-green algae, jellyfish, snapping turtles, sharks, or alligators. Around freshwater, insects may be an annoyance and the horse might need to be checked for leeches after a swim. When they leave the water, horses may roll around in the sand or the grass.

There are some great videos on YouTube of horses swimming, including one where dolphins swim with a horse and rider.

Horse Riding

Horse riding is a skill that I do not possess. My only experience is riding a very tame pony that belonged to a friend of my parents when I was about eleven. If I had a bucket list, one of the things on it would be to ride at a gallop along a sandy beach and into the shallow water. In my head, the horse is grey. All of which is to say that I'm not the person to tell you how to write about horse riding.

The equipment used – saddles and tack and all the rest – vary from country to country, as does the advice on how best to ride and control a horse in different situations. Horse riding skills – in patriarchal societies referred to as horse*man*ship – also change over time, so you need to be aware of practices in use during the time period in which your story is set. Culture plays a part too – the ways in which Native Americans rode would have been very different to those of European arrivals in their country.

To write about riding, you need a good book that provides details appropriate to the time and place of your story's setting, and to its milieu – whether that be horseracing, polo, hunting, dressage, military battles or parades, the Wild West or the days of knights in shining armour.

In your research, try and include texts written during the period about which you are writing – first-hand accounts tell you not only about the practices of the day but also about the beliefs and attitudes. Also read modern accounts about that period. Books written in between the two may reflect the values of their own time and contain inaccurate information. Try not to use fiction by other authors as your research, you don't know how good their fact-checking might have been. Non-fiction sources may also throw up unusual and quirky facts that you can use to add depth and colour to your stories.

For modern riding techniques, videos on platforms like YouTube or Vimeo can show you things that it is much harder to pick up from a book.

Obviously, first-hand experience of riding horses is the ultimate form of research, but it isn't available to everyone.

Horse Behaviour

Listening & Communication

Horses communicate through body language, physical contact, and sounds. Physical contact includes mutual grooming, nuzzling, biting, kicking, and nudging with the shoulders to get another horse to move.

Vocal sounds produced by horses are limited but include nickering, squealing, snorting, and whinnying or neighing. They may also sigh, grunt, or groan. When fighting or afraid, horses make something closer to a screaming sound.

The *nicker* (or whicker) is a vibrating sound made by the vocal cords with the mouth closed. A quiet nickering sound made when the horse approaches another horse, animal, or a person is a greeting – the horse equivalent to a hello. When a stallion nickers more loudly and intensely, accompanied by shaking of the head, he is saying that he

wants to mate. Mares make much softer nickering sounds to their foals.

A *snort* is a short, harsh sound made by forcing air through the nostrils with the mouth shut. It is typically heard when a horse is startled or checking for danger. They often hold their head up when snorting, staring at whatever is concerning them.

A *blow* is a quieter, shorter exhalation through flared nostrils and may be made with the head lowered. The sound may indicate curiosity or may be made when the horse is startled or shying. When two horses meet nose to nose and blow on each other, this a greeting. If they continue to blow and engage in nuzzling, they regard each other as friends.

A *squeal* is made with the mouth shut and means 'no'. When two horses meet and blow on each other and then one or both proceeds to nip the other, stomp their feet, strike out with their hooves, or squeal then they are not friends.

The *whinny* or neigh sounds like a squeal followed by a loud nicker and is often made with the head held high as the horse looks for horses or people and may be used to call out to those who are out of sight.

Body language includes ear position, neck and head height, foot stomping, and tail swishing.

Bared teeth indicate anger and a threat that the horse intends to bite. Submissive horses, especially foals, may extend their necks and clack their teeth to try and appease a more aggressive horse.

The Flehmen response is a movement – the curling back of the upper lip – that many animals make in response to smell. Many hoofed animals do this and so do domestic cats and big cats. In horses, the Flehmen response is often accompanied by a pulling back and raising of the head. This response serves to channel inhaled scents to the vomeronasal organ that allows the animal to better smell certain substances including pheromones. Stallions exhibit this response, especially in relation to the urine of mares, and mares who have just given birth show it around their foal. Care must be taken not to mistake this with other causes for the baring of a horse's teeth which can indicate pain and/or a threat of biting.

If a horse makes a chewing motion when it is not eating, this may be an attempt to ease tension, or it may be a submissive gesture. Chewing the tongue can also be an indication of pain or discomfort from dental problems or soreness caused by a harness or bit.

When a horse raises its head and neck, this means it is alert and it may also exhibit signs indicating that it is tense, perhaps because of an

awareness of danger. A lowered head and neck may be a sign of relaxation but may also indicate fatigue or illness.

The external part of a horse's ear, the pinna or auricle that acts as a funnel for sound, can rotate through about a hundred-and-eighty degrees. This allows them to focus on the direction from which a sound is coming. If both ears are facing forward, the horse is usually concentrating on something in front of it. If the pinna are tense, the horse is sensing potential danger, if they are more relaxed it is just being attentive.

Horses rotate their ears independently, the ear often turning towards whatever the horse is seeing through the eye on that side of its head. It may turn its ear backwards if it becomes aware of something approaching from the rear. In working horses, a horse may have one ear forward to listen to the environment ahead and one turned back to listen to the instructions of its human handler.

A distinct ear position is the flattening of both ears back against the head. If this is accompanied by rolling of the eyes so that white becomes visible, this is a sign of pain or anger and a warning that aggressive behaviour may follow. Laid back ears accompanies by swishing of the tail or stomping or pawing are signals of discomfort, irritation, or anxiety. If the mouth and lips are also tense, this may indicate that the horse may bite.

Ears laid back in a relaxed position indicate that the horse is relaxed, drowsy, fatigued, or bored. This may be accompanied by a relaxed lower lip.

The range of a horse's hearing is different to that of humans, 55 Hz to 34 kHz as compared to the human range of 20 Hz to 20 kHz. Humans can hear lower sounds, but horses can hear much higher sounds. It is believed that horses can hear things up to two-and-a-half miles away.

Tail movements can also communicate a horse's feelings. A slight swishing may be used to dislodge biting insects, but more aggressive swishing is a sign of irritation, pain, or anger. A tail tucked tightly against the body may indicate discomfort caused by pain or cold. Tension or excitement may be indicated by a raising of the tail, but if this is accompanied by flared nostrils, snorting, and intense focusing of the eyes and ears, the horse is expressing concern.

As prey animals, horses have a high level of environmental awareness and can read the body language of other animals, including humans. A human who behaves aggressively risks being treated as a predator and one who behaves nervously may be regarded as submissive, allowing the horse to be dominant.

For more on understanding the body language of horses, have a look at the article 'How to Read Your Horse's Body Language' on the *Equus* magazine website.

Eating

Horses are naturally grazing animals and will spend most of the day foraging. Their digestive systems are designed to deal with a constant stream of small amounts of food. Domesticated horses prefer to be fed on a regular schedule and can become stressed if this schedule is disrupted.

Some plants are poisonous to horses – you will need to research which ones occur in the location of your story. Common ones include bracken fern, also known as brake or eagle fern, hemlock, ragwort (tansy ragwort or groundsel), oleander, red maple (acer) leaves, and yew trees.

Sleeping

Horses can sleep standing up or lying down. When standing, ligaments and tendons in the legs and the rear kneecaps – the 'stay apparatus' – 'lock', allowing them to relax their muscles without falling. Lying down makes them more vulnerable to predators, and in herds some horses remain alert while others lie down to sleep.

Horses need around two-and-a-half hours sleep per day, which they gain through a series of fifteen-minute standing naps. They also need a couple of hours REM sleep every few days, which is easier for them to achieve when lying down. If they do not receive sufficient REM sleep, they can become sleep-deprived and may collapse. Younger horses sleep longer than mature adults.

Stress & Anxiety

Lack of companionship or absence of stimulation can cause psychological problems in domesticated horses, and these can result in compulsive behaviours. Behaviours that act as warning signs include rocking motions, walking in circles, kicking walls or doors, and chewing on wood.

5 | Horses in History, Myth, and Legend

The Greek god Apollo was referred to as Phoebus, meaning bright, and associated with the sun. Poets often refer to the sun as Phoebus. Horses were said to pull the sun across the sky, giving rise to the concept of a 'chariot of fire'.

Bucephalus (or Bucephalas) was the horse of Alexander the Great (356–323 BC). The taming of Bucephalus is one of the most famous stories about Alexander. In Plutarch's *Lives,* the horse is offered to Philip, the king, for a large price – but the horse was 'vicious and unmanageable' and reared up when someone tried to mount him. The king's son, Alexander, makes a bet that he can tame the horse and, showing that he understands why the horse was distressed, he goes on to do so. In the *Alexander Romance,* the horse is depicted as a man-eater in a stable littered with human bones. Bucephalus was Alexander's war horse and a major part of the Alexander legend.

Babieca (or Bavieca) was the warhorse of the medieval Castilian knight El Cid. Several stories exist about the horse – that El Cid chose a poor horse causing someone to exclaim 'Babieca!' (stupid); that it was a horse from the Babia region od Spain, and that it was a gift from a barbarian and so named 'Barbieca'. Like Alexander's horse, El Cid's became legendary and it is said that El Cid that the horse be buried with him.

The Trojan Horse was a wooden horse used by the Greeks during the Trojan War which took place sometime between 1260 and 1180 BC. The Greeks used the wooden horse to enter the city of Troy, which had been under siege for ten years, and this enabled them to win the war. Homer's *Iliad,* an epic poem about the war makes no reference to the wooden horse, but it ends before the final assault on Troy. The story of the 'Sack of Troy' is a lost epic poem. The wooden horse is referred to as a story about the war in *The Odyssey.* The Roman poet Virgil also retells the story of the horse in the *Aenid.*

In the best-know versions of the story, the wooden horse is said to have been left as a gift by the Greeks for the people of Troy. It is taken through the gates into the city and then, after dark, Greek soldiers who had hidden inside emerge and open the city gates, allowing their comrades to enter and attack.

Two alternative explanations have been offered about what the wooden horse might have been. It might have been a ship with a carved horses head at the front, and soldiers may have been hidden on

the ship. Or it may have been a large battering ram or siege engine that was shaped like a horse.

As a metaphor, a 'Trojan Horse' is a danger that someone unwittingly invites behind their defences – it was used in this way to describe viruses used to attack computers.

Winged horses feature in the mythologies of many countries around the world. *Pegasus* appears in Ancient Greek mythology, aiding Bellerophon in his fight against the Chimera and in later stories appears as the steed of Perseus. *Tulpar* is a winged horse (or swift horse) in Turkic mythology and is used as an emblem in a number of states. The concept of an exceptionally fast horse being said to have wings isn't a surprising one. Another suggestion put forward is that it brings together the practices of riding and hunting with birds of prey.

The *unicorn* is a legendary creature known since at least the time of the Ancient Greeks when they were regarded as being living creatures rather than mythical ones. The unicorn was described as an 'Indian ass' with a single horn about twenty-eight inches in length. The horn of a unicorn, said to be made of alicorn, was believd to have magical and medicinal properties. It was thought to neutralise poisons, and cups made from the horn were used by those who feared being poisoned. The tusk of the narwhal has sometimes been passed off as a unicorn horn.

The Physiologus is a Christan text written sometime between the 2nd and 4th centuries AD. It features allegorical stories about animals and mythical creatures, including a unicorn which can only be tamed by a virgin. Images of a maiden with a unicorn, its head on her lap as it sleeps, are found in medieval art. The story is an allegorical depiction of the Incarnation, with the maiden representing the Virgin Mary. Leonardo da Vinci noted that a unicorn's trust of maidens could be used by hunters to trap one while it was asleep on her lap. Another suggestion, known in Shakespeare's time, was that hunters could stand in front of a tree and goad a unicorn into charging; they would step aside at the last moment and the unicorn's horn would be embedded in the tree, trapping it.

One suggestion is that the description of a horse-like creature with a single horn originated as a description of a rhinoceros. Marco Polo expressed disappointment when he finally got to see a 'real' unicorn and his description is very definitely that of a rhino.

A *centaur* is a creature from Greek mythology that has the upper body of a human and the lower body and legs of a horse. The *Wikipedia* entry for 'Centaur' lists the names of dozens of centaurs in mythology,

but the most famous is probably Chiron. While centaurs were typically thought to be wild, lusty and heavy drinkers, Chiron rose above his nature and learned the arts and medicine, becoming a teacher. In *The Achilleid*, Chiron is the mentor of Achilles. He is often depicted as having human front legs rather than those of a horse.

A possible source for the origins of the centaur is rooted in the experience of tribes who encountered men on horseback for the first time – at first glance they might have been seen as a hybrid of man and horse.

Horses in the Bible

In Habakkuk 1:8, it is said of the Chaldeans – "Their horses also are swifter than the leopards, and are more fierce than the evening wolves: and their horsemen shall spread themselves, and their horsemen shall come from far; they shall fly as the eagle that hasteth to eat."

Job 39:19-25 has a description of a horse going into battle:

Hast thou given the horse strength? hast thou clothed his neck with thunder?

Canst thou make him afraid as [leap like?] a grasshopper? the glory of his nostrils is terrible.

He paweth in the valley, and rejoiceth in his strength: he goeth on to meet the armed men.

He mocketh at fear, and is not affrighted; neither turneth he back from the sword.

The quiver rattleth against him, the glittering spear and the shield.

He swalloweth the ground with fierceness and rage: neither believeth he that it is the sound of the trumpet.

He saith among the trumpets, Ha, ha; and he smelleth the battle afar off, the thunder of the captains, and the shouting.

The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse appear in Revelation 6:1–8 – "... I saw, and behold a white horse: and he that sat on him had a bow; and a crown was given unto him: and he went forth conquering, and to conquer ... there went out another horse that was red: and power was given to him that sat thereon to take peace from the earth, and that they should kill one another: and there was given unto him a great sword ... I beheld, and lo a black horse; and he that sat on him had a pair of balances in his hand ... I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him. And power was given unto them over the fourth part of the earth, to kill

with sword, and with hunger, and with death, and with the beasts of the earth."

The first horseman has been interpreted as being Christ or the Antichrist, the second is war and bloodshed, the third famine, and the fourth the incarnation of death.

6 | Symbolism & Literature

Symbolism

Horses have come to symbolise many things, both positive and negative (remember the Four Horsemen?). An obvious and mundane concept related to horses is that of transportation and travel. Before the invention of mechanical engines and bicycles, the horse was the preferred form of transport. It was also a beast of burden and so is associated with strength, endurance, and determination. Wild horses are associated with freedom and spirit. In warfare, horses represented strength, bravery, and valour. And as transport for noblemen and kinds, they represented majesty. The sleek musculature of short-haired horses was also represented in art as a form of beauty.

White horses, along with unicorns, are associated with purity and spirituality. The white horse symbolises purity in Buddhism and before he became Buddha, Prince Siddhartha had a white horse named Kanthaka.

The term 'dark horse' is used to describe someone with hidden and unsuspected abilities, often an underdog who unexpectedly wins some kind of victory or a competitor about whom little is known. The phrase originated as horse racing sland and referred to a horse about which people have been 'kept in the dark'. Benjamin Disraeli used the term in his novel *The Young Duke* (1831), which may be its first use in print.

The French word for horse is *cheval*, which gives us words such as cavalry, chivalry, and cavalier.

Horses in Literature

Dick Francis was a steeplechase jockey who became a bestselling crime novelist, setting his stories in the world of horseracing. His autobiography, *The Sport of Queens* was published in 1957 and his first novel, *Dead Cert* in 1962. He published more than forty novels and his son Felix collaborated with him on later novels and continued to write them after Dick Francis died in 2010.

Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote,* originally published in Spanish in two parts in 1605 and 1615, is regarded as the first modern novel. The protagonist, Don Quixote, makes his journey on his horse Rocinante (or Rosinante) and his sidekick Sancho Panza rides a donkey called Dapple. These two are the prototypes of every buddy movie and cowboy duo that have appeared since. Like many things in Cervantes story, the horse Rocinante has two sides – in the beginning he is a tired old work horse and then he becomes, at least in Quixote's mind, the

trusty steed of a knight-errant. Rocinante is the comedy version of Alexander and El Cid's warhorses.

Tim Cope's *On the Trail of Genghis Khan* is a non-fiction account of the author's three-year, 6,000 mile trip from Mongolia to Hungary – on horseback. It's an epic journey from the icy steppes through the desert of Kazakhstan and into Europe. It is the kind of book you should read if you want to write an epic fantasy journey.

Anna Sewell's *Black Beauty* (1877) is told in the first person by the horse, Black Beauty. It's depiction of human cruelty to horses is credited, at least in part, with ending the use of 'bearing reins' which were used to hold a horse's head in an unnatural and painful position. Although it is now regarded as a children's novel, it was originally written for adults and intended to promote moral values including better treatment of horses. There have been a number of film and television adaptations, but none are particularly faithful to the novel.

Walter Farley's *The Black Stallion* (1941) is the first in a series of twenty books about a black stallion and its offspring. In the first novel, the horse Shêtân and a teenaged boy are shipwrecked on a desert island and must rely on each other to survive. After they are rescued, the boy trains the stallion to be a racehorse. A film adaptation was released in 1979.

Mary O'Hara's *My Friend Flicka* (1941) is a coming-of-age story in which a ten-year-old boy is given a given a horse in an attempt to teach him responsibility. He chooses a beautiful but 'untameable' filly, Flicka. When the horse is injured, the boy nurses her back to health and the two become inseparable. A film adaptation featuring Roddy McDowall as the boy was released in 1943. The author wrote two sequels, *Thunderhead* (1943) and *Green Grass of Wyoming* (1946), both of which were filmed.

Laura Hillenbrand's *Seabiscuit: An American Legend* is an account of how an unlikely underdog went on to become American Horse of the Year in 1938. A film adaptation featuring Tobey Maguire was released in 2003.

Felix Salten's *Florian: The Emperor's Stallion* was first published in German in 1933. The story is told from the horse's point of view, and his adventures are set during the last days of the Hapsburg empire in Austria. Several historical figures appear during the course of the story. A film adaptation was released in 1940. Salten also wrote *Bambi.*

Michael Morpurgo's *War Horse* (1982) is the story of Joey, a horse owned by a fifteen-year-old boy that is sold to the British Army for

service in France during the First World War. The events of the war are depicted from the point of view of the horse as he encounters a number of different characters. The story was successfully adapted for the stage and a film adaptation was directed by Steven Spielberg in 2011.

Jack Seely's *My Horse Warrior* (1934) is a non-fiction account of 'the horse the Germans could not kill' during the First World War.

Robin Hutton's book *Sgt. Reckless: An American Warhorse* (2014) is an account of the career of a horse in the Marine Corps during the Korean War. The horse was called Reckless and Hutton calls her 'the greatest war horse hero in American history.'

Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) features a race of intelligent talking horses called the Houyhnhnms, whose name is meant to sound like the neighing of a horse. The civilised horses are the masters in their land and are contrasted with the savage humanoid Yahoos, who are reduced to the roles of beasts of burden or livestock. Maybe this was an inspiration for *Planet of the Apes?*

Jeremy James's *The Byerley Turk: The Incredible Story of the World's First Thoroughbred* is the story of one of the three horses that are the ancestors of the modern thoroughbred. The Turkish horse is captured in battle in 1679 and is returned to Britain by Captain Robert Byerley.

Paul Morand's *Milady* (1933) is the story of Captain Gardefort, a squire of the Cadre Noir of Saumur, and his mare Milday.

Enid Bagnold's *National Velvet* (1935) is set in the 1920s and is the story of a fourteen-year-old girl who trains a horse, The Piebald, to become a steeplechaser. The novel was significant in its day for having strong female characters in its heroine and her mother. In 1944 Elizabeth Taylor starred in the film adaptation.

Nicholas Evans's *The Horse Whisperer* (1995). The title character is a trainer with a remarkable gift for understanding horses who is hired to help an teenager and her horse recover following a terrible accident. A film adaptation, directed by and starring Robert Redford, was released in 1998.

Leo Tolstoy's short story 'Kholstomer: The Story of a Horse' is the story of Serphukovsky (or Serpukhovskoy), contrasting the animal's natural altruism with the moral values of humans. It contains a long description of a horse over six hundred words long – a detailed sort of writing which would be out of place in a modern short story or novel, but worth reading as an example.

C.S. Lewis's *The Horse and His Boy* (1954) is part of the Narnia series and features two talking horses, Bree and Hwin, who – like the protagonist Shasta – were taken from their homeland. They join him and a girl fleeing from a forced marriage as they try to escape to Narnia.

Mark Twain's novel *A Horse's Tale* (1906) is partly told in the first-person by the horse, Soldier Boy. It begins, "I am Buffalo Bill's horse..."

Sir Walter Gilbey – *The Great Horse, or The War Horse from the Time of the Roman Invasion till its Development into the Shire Horse* (1889). The second edition of 1899 is available as a free ebook on the Project Gutenberg website.

Richard Berenger – *The History and Art of Horsemanship* (1771, 2 vols.). Berenger was 'gentleman of the horse' to King George III. A PDF of the book can be accessed via the Internet Archive website (archive.org). Interesting as a glimpse of horsemanship and the culture of its day rather than as an accurate history of earlier ages.

Xenophon – *On Horsemanship* (also translated as *The Art of Horsemanship*). Written in Ancient Greece in about 355 BC by the historian and soldier Xenophon, this is the second oldest surviving text on the selection, care and training of horses. Xenophon writes about the training and duties of a horse soldier in a separate work, *Hipparchicus*, written about the same time. You should be able to find free ebook editions of the complete works of Xenophon online.

Kikkuli – *Training the Chariot Horse* (1,345 BC). Kikkuli was horse-master to the Hittite king Suppililiuma and he wrote what is the oldest surviving text on the care and training of horses. It was preserved in cuneiform on four clay tablets and is a day-by-day training regime for horses that includes swimming. It doesn't make for fascinating reading, being little more than a list of exercises and advice on feeding, but it is historically and linguistically significant.

Horses in Poetry

I looked through a couple of collections of horse poems to see if I could find any descriptions of horses, but most poets seem to concentrate on humans riding horses or on comparing people (unfavourably) to horses. One piece that did catch my eye was this extract from Byron's *Mazeppa:*

> 'Bring forth the horse!' The horse was brought;
> In truth, he was a noble Steed,
> A Tartar of the Ukraine breed,

Who looked as though the Speed of thought
Were in his limbs – but he was wild,
Wild as the wild-deer, and untaught,
With spur and bridle undefiled;
'Twas but a day he had been caught,
And snorting with erected mane
And struggling fiercely but in vain,
In the full foam of wrath and dread,
To me the Desart-born was led.

Sources

Wutke, Saskia, et al. 'Spotted Phenotypes in Horses Lost Attractiveness in the Middle Ages.' *Scientific Reports* 6, Article #38548, 7th December 2016. https://doi.org/10.1038/srep38548

Also by Paul Tomlinson