International Journal of Linguistics, Literature and Translation
ISSN: 2617-0299 (Online); ISSN: 2708-0099 (Print)
DOI: 10.32996/ijllt
Journal Homepage: www.al-kindipublisher.com/index.php/ijllt

Care and Attentiveness between Abby and Horses in Jane Smiley's The Horses of Oak Valley Ranch Series

Wu Limin

PhD and Associate Professor, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies

Corresponding Author: Wu Limin**, E-mail:** wlmadainlove@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Pulitzer Prize winner Jane Smiley's The Horses of Oak Valley Ranch series contains five novels about a girl named Abby and her equine friends. Drawing on animal ethics and interspecies ethics, this paper examines the manifestations of care and attentiveness in the interspecies relationships between Abby and horses. The paper demonstrates how mutual understanding and affection develop through multiple channels of communication, including visual, vocal, auditory, olfactory, tactile, and kinaesthetic interactions. Abby's sensitivity to horses' individual personalities, emotions, and needs enables her to respond appropriately to their behaviors and respect their subjectivity. Meanwhile, the horses also actively demonstrate their attention, affection, and consideration toward Abby, revealing their capacity for emotional attachment and interspecies companionship. Through these reciprocal interactions, Smiley challenges anthropocentric assumptions about animal intelligence and agency and advocates a dialogical paradigm of human–animal relationships grounded in mutual respect, care, and attentiveness.

KEYWORDS

Care; attentiveness; interspecies communication

ARTICLE INFORMATION

ACCEPTED: 10 October 2026 **PUBLISHED:** 15 November 2026 **DOI:** 10.32996/ijllt.2026.9.11.22

1. Introduction

The communication between Abby and horses in Pulitzer Prize winner Jane Smiley's The Horses of Oak Valley Ranch series is full of care and attentiveness. Just like her mother, Abby treats animals with care and attentiveness, and receives care and attention from animals as well. She doesn't agree with her father's Cartesian view of horses— "Daddy tells me that horses only know two things, the carrot and the stick, and not to fill my head with silly ideas about them…" (Smiley, 2009: 3). In Daddy's eyes, horses are a herd without any minds rather than distinctive individuals. However, Abby thinks differently. She is sure of their individuality and intelligence. For instance, in the last novel of the series, Abby insists that "It was Gee Whiz again. His whinny was distinctive—sharp and steady, like the note of a brass instrument. Dad didn't think that horses were saying anything with their whinnies, and maybe they weren't saying 'See you later' or 'Watch your step,' but I knew that their whinnies were so individual that they were saying 'This is me'" (Smiley, 2013:117).

Unlike Daddy, Abby's mom appreciates animals' wisdom and cares for them tenderly. She once argues with her husband about the intelligence of animals after the dog Rusty, through her whining, alerts the Lovitts in time to the mares who suffer from thirst due to the accidental turning-over of their water trough. Facing the question of how Rusty knows the mares' situation, Daddy insists that horses don't talk to dogs, while Mom defends them by saying — "'Horses don't have to talk to communicate. If they want to eat, they nose their food tubs. If they want to get out, they kick the door of the stall'" (Smiley, 2010:194). Mom tries to convince Dad that Rusty's discovery of the accident is not a coincidence, but rather evidence that animals communicate with one another in their own ways.

Like her mother, Abby believes that animals have intelligence, emotions, dignity, and desires. They long for attention, care, and love. Moreover, the interaction with horses brings huge joy and satisfaction to Abby— "I liked having those dark eyes watching me, wondering what I might want. I liked having those mobile ears pricked in my direction. I liked that large presence near me" (Smiley, 2013: 230). Through attentive interaction, she knows each of them personally and understands them well. Abby is aware of their different propensities and will adapt herself to their various conditions. For instance, she figures out that "I learned that when Pie in the Sky tried to refuse, he was testing me to see if I was in charge, and when Blue refused, he really was just scared"

Copyright: © 2026 the Author(s). This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC-BY) 4.0 license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). Published by Al-Kindi Centre for Research and Development, London, United Kingdom.

(Smiley, 2012: 159). Abby is attentive enough to realize that the same behavior in different horses can have different meanings. For example, she summarizes that "Horses stiffen for all sorts of reasons— one of them is laziness, another is stubbornness, another is fear, and another is simply not knowing what the rider wants" (Smiley, 2011: 137).

Abby's care for horses can be traced in many aspects, such as feeding and watering them daily, training with them, playing with them, observing them attentively, talking with them, and petting them gently. Her tenderness to them during the feeding time or checking time at night can be found throughout the series, such as in the fifth novel Gee Whiz: "Marcus and Lincoln stayed where they were, but Blue and Jack came over, and I snaked my fingers into Blue's coat, which had a soft, warm feel. I gave everyone a couple of pieces of carrot and a scratch around the ears. Jack sniffed my pockets but wasn't pushy" (Smiley, 2013: 15). Abby pays close attention not only to their appetites but also to their other needs, such as the tactile and corporeal communication. The way Abby interacts with animals is what Josephine Donovan suggests about the feminist animal care ethic— "listening to other life-forms regardless of how alien they may seem to us and incorporating their communications into our moral reaction to them" (2006: 315).

There are many places in the series that contain harmonious communication between Abby and horses with care and attentiveness. Unfortunately, the previous scholarship hasn't done enough relevant research yet. Based on theories of animal ethics and interspecies ethics, this paper will analyze Abby's interactions with horses in the novels and synthesize the interspecies ethics held by Smiley through her writings.

2. Care and Attentiveness between Abby and Three Mares

In the series, especially in the first novel The Georges and the Jewels, the communication between Abby and three mares —Blue Jewel, Star Jewel, and Roan Jewel— reflects their mutual care and attentiveness.

Near the end of the novel, Abby and the three mares are resting beside the pool down the hill. Leaning her back against a tree trunk, Abby falls asleep with the mares grazing nearby. When she wakes up, she finds herself surrounded by the mares, among whom Blue sniffs her hands and then noses her leg. Facing Blue's poking, Abby responds to her by saying— "I'm all right" (Smiley, 2009: 210). Star blows out of her nostrils as an answer to Abby. Abby can't help laughing. In response, Roan whinnies. Abby lifts her hand to pet Blue on the nose and face, and Blue steps closer. Abby strokes her around the eyes with the other hand tenderly, during which Blue stretches her head out with her ears flopping and sighs. Then Abby sighs. The other two mares come closer. Star sniffs Abby's jeans and then her foot. In reaction to her, Abby puts her fingers in the mane hair just behind Star's ears and tickles, which Star seems to enjoy very much. During this time, Roan has a thought and walks around the tree to the back of Abby, and snuffles her neck and shirt with warm breath. Abby is surrounded by them. At this moment, Blue starts licking her shirt, and then her neck, chin, and cheek. Abby feels the intimate contact— "Her licks were firm and moist, but not hard or pushy. I realized that this was what it must be like to be a foal and to have your dam lick you" (Smiley, 2009: 211).

Abby knows how to communicate with the mares the way they like. Their interactions are carried out not only through vocal and auditory ways, but also through olfactory, gustatory, tactile, and kinaesthetic ways. Their mutual attentiveness and care can be found in their loving gestures toward one another. The gentle stroking, tickling, laughing, petting, as well as sniffing, nosing, whinnying, snuffling, and licking are the expressions of mutual care and affection. It's not hard to find that even the sighs from both Blue and Abby are an expression of comfortable relaxation. Blue's licking reminds Abby of how a foal feels when being licked by his or her dam. Moreover, her licking implies the deep love she feels for Abby. The common ways of intraspecies communication can also be found in interspecies communication. Love is universal across species.

In sum, the depiction of harmonious communication between Abby and the three mares exhibits their mutual attentiveness, attachment, affection, intimacy, and care, all of which are important features of a dialogical interspecies relationship.

3. Care and Attentiveness between Abby and Jack

In addition to the three mares, Abby also has a close relationship with the colt Jack. The communication between them manifests their mutual care and attentiveness.

Jack loses his mom Pearl when he is still a one-month-old foal. Both Abby and her mom cry over the tragedy and feel sympathy for Jack. From then on, Jack receives attentive care from Abby. Shortly after Pearl's death, Jack is still waiting for his mom to come back. Abby spends as much time as possible accompanying Jack. Besides feeding Jack with milk, Abby often stands outside Jack's stall to watch and pet him with tickles, light brushings, and smooth strokes on his neck and body, which brings pleasure and comfort to Jack. Abby also consoles and encourages Jack through such words as "It's going to be all right, little guy. You'll be all right" (Smiley, 2009: 67). Out of sympathy and love, Abby treats Jack attentively. On top of satisfying Jack's basic appetite by feeding him, Abby catches every opportunity to stand by his side, watching him, approaching him, petting him, stroking him, and talking to him. Abby is very clear about what Jack needs through her observation and interaction. She manages to make him comfortable and happy via verbal and nonverbal ways, such as visual, vocal, auditory, tactile, and kinaesthetic ones. To Abby's mind, Jack's welfare is her welfare.

The bond between Abby and Jack grows stronger and stronger as time goes on. When Jack is already eight months old, Abby still visits him as frequently as possible. Whenever Abby appears outside his barn, Jack will trot over to the fence, stretch his head out for a pat, and follow Abby. Jack's whinny is the warmest and most touching greeting to Abby. In Abby's eyes, Jack is a kind and

affectionate horse. When Abby leads him out of the barn to take a walk, Jack turns around her and puts his head down for her to pat. Abby feels Jack's inner world by paying close attention to his actions and his voice. As to this, Traci Warkentin says: "humans can, with careful attention, understand some basic qualities of gestures and behaviors to the extent that attentiveness to nonverbal communication can inform an ethical response, particularly in moments of direct human-animal interactions" (2010: 109). In Abby's eyes, Jack is such a valuable existence that she feels grateful for the opportunity of knowing him and interacting with him. Abby will never forget patting and touching Jack, for they both draw satisfaction from their tactile and kinaesthetic interaction. For Abby, every whinny and nicker from Jack contains meaning, and she is willing to know more about him. Behind all this is Abby's love for Jack, which can be directly found from her own words— "I murmured, 'They like you, big boy. They like you. But I love you'" (Smiley, 2013: 167).

To sum up, the care and attentiveness between Abby and Jack in their communication help to form a strong bond across species. With each other's company, they enjoy intimate interaction through various channels, which greatly increases their mutual understanding and attachment. In short, it is through a dialogical paradigm that their interaction is carried out.

4. Care and Attentiveness between Abby and Blue

Besides the three mares and Jack, Abby also has a harmonious relationship with Blue. The interspecies communication between Abby and Blue is filled with care and attentiveness.

Adopted by the Lovitts after his former owner dies, Blue becomes Abby's horse. For Abby, her relationship with Blue is more a friendship than any other kind of relationship— "I had never known a horse who felt as much like a friend as Blue" (Smiley, 2012: 43). Even at their first encounter, they interact smoothly: "I let him sniff my hand, which he did, then I started petting him down the neck. He liked it. But he wasn't spoiled, because he didn't all at once start looking for treats the way some horses do" (Smiley, 2011: 5). Blue and Abby get to know each other through his nose and her hands, respectively. Abby pays attention to Blue's slightest movements and remains aware of his mood. In fact, this attentiveness is from both sides. Blue also pays attention to Abby during their interaction— "He had a way of paying attention to me rather than to everything else. It was as if he was wondering about me, and waiting to see what I was going to do, but not making suggestions or demands" (Smiley, 2011: 226). Blue is attentive when being with Abby. His attention to her is out of curiosity and care. On the other side, Abby appreciates Blue's attention to her without taking it for granted. Being mutually attentive paves the way for further efficient communication.

In addition, Blue and Abby play games together. Abby wants to teach Blue to connect an action of looking away with getting a carrot. On the seventh attempt, Blue learns the connection. He will look at Abby and her hand first, and then will look away till Abby gives him the carrot. Abby thinks that Blue is a smart horse. They both enjoy the game very much. During their interaction, they remain attentive to each other so that the game can go on successfully. This complete involvement from both sides shortens their distance, intensifies their mutual affection, and sharpens their awareness of each other's unique existence— "It is hard to describe how it felt to teach Blue this trick. It was like having him read my mind, but also like reading his mind. For me, he was the only horse in the world at that moment, and I felt like I was the only being in his world, too" (Smiley, 2011: 229). In fact, their face-to-face intersubjective communication strengthens their interrelatedness, which is just like what Cynthia Willett contends— "playful encounters between creatures with different modes of self-awareness are a source for the codevelopment of a biosocial self" (2014: 28).

In sum, Abby and Blue accompany each other and play games together. They are attentive to each other in their daily interaction, which enhances their mutual understanding, care, and affection. Their friendship is a dialogical interspecies relationship that Smiley advocates.

5. Care and Attentiveness between Abby and Gee Whiz

In the fifth novel Gee Whiz, Abby and Gee Whiz cooperate with each other well in the training exercise. Before the training, a close connection already exists between them through their daily interaction, which abounds with care and attentiveness.

From their first encounter, Gee Whiz shows great interest in Abby— "Gee Whiz lifted his nose and, very gently, sniffed my hair and then my shoulder" (Smiley, 2013: 66). Abby's brother Danny explains that Gee is curious, and curiosity means intelligence. In their later communication, besides their interactions at feeding and watering times, there are three interludes that increase their mutual understanding and affection. The three episodes all originate in Gee's unexpected escape from the pasture.

The first time, Gee is found standing and looking at Abby in the yard while Abby is going to feed them in the morning but a bit later than usual. The door latch of the gelding pasture is later found to be unlocked by Gee. Surprised as she feels, Abby approaches Gee without hurrying. She pets him down the neck and takes hold of his forelock, to get him to turn with her and go back. Facing Abby's leading, Gee doesn't resist— "he just pivoted and followed me, arching his neck, flaring his nostrils, and snorting slightly, as if he wanted a good whiff of me. He truly was the most curious horse I'd ever known" (Smiley, 2013: 93). In fact, Gee's unlocking the door is a practical joke commonly seen in some horses. Willett explains that "There is also a fair share of practical jokers, like an Arabian gelding showing off his ability to unlock not only his stall door, but those of his mates" (2014: 54). Abby understands it, and doesn't blame Gee for his sudden appearance, but shows love and patience by petting him first and then leading him back. She is attentive to Gee's behavior and appreciates his curiosity.

On the other side, Gee is willing to follow Abby closely and smells her out of curiosity and interest. When they get to the gelding pasture gate, Gee twists his head away and trots to the mare pasture, sniffing noses with each mare in turn. Having no carrot in her pockets, Abby runs to the barn and gets a small bucket with a few handfuls of oats— "This I shook as I came back to him, and he did prick his ears, and he did take a bite while I was opening the gate again, and he did allow me to lure him inside the pasture…" (Smiley, 2013: 94). It's crucial to notice that in Abby's eyes, it is Gee who allows her to lure him back into the gelding pasture. Abby knows Gee's ability well and feels grateful to him for his cooperation. She holds a respectful attitude towards animals and appreciates their subjectivity.

The second time, Gee unlocks both the latch of the gelding pasture and that of the mare pasture, and the horses are discovered everywhere in the back yard one evening. Without much difficulty, all the horses are led into the barn except Gee and Oh My in the back yard, plus Beebop in the front yard. Soon Oh My is led into the barn after eating up half of the apples, while Gee is left alone with Abby, who shows great patience with and understanding toward him, and knows how to communicate with him in the way he likes. Abby deliberately turns and walks away from him, slowly leans down and picks tufts of grass and puts them in the plate with the apples. Then she puts the plate on the mounting block near the barn and walks away from it, with a few apple chunks in her hand. Gee walks toward the plate, sniffs it, and begins eating. During this time, Abby moves slowly toward him and holds out an apple chunk. Gee takes it, but Abby doesn't get closer. Instead, she turns and walks away. After several seconds, Gee starts following her.

Through this game of feeding and walking away several times, Gee develops a great interest in interacting with Abby, and nuzzles her out of curiosity and affection. Abby pets him down the neck and tickles him under the forelock, and finally leads Gee into the barn. During their interaction, despite their different intentions at that time, Abby carefully and respectfully leaves Gee enough space to think and decide. She is patient and attentive to Gee, and cares about his feelings. Moreover, she knows well how to arouse his curiosity and how to express her love for him by petting and tickling. Gee is attentive to Abby's movement and curious about her. He expresses his interest and affection by nuzzling Abby. Their interaction is full of mutual attention, care, and love.

The third time, Gee runs away out of the gate and heads down the driveway because the gate is accidentally left open. Mom drives the car slowly with Abby to follow Gee. According to Abby's observation, Gee seems as if he is exploring. With a carrot in her hand, Abby gets out of the car and approaches him, trying to communicate. Abby takes a very loud bite of the carrot and says "Mmm. Delicious" (Smiley, 2013: 187). In response, Gee flicks his ears and wrinkles his lips. Abby continues talking with him—"Gee Whiz. Gee Whiz. It's much nicer at home than it is out here. We have such nice hay and some very good oats, and apples and more carrots" (Smiley, 2013: 187). Gee flicks his ears again as an answer. However, when Abby steps toward him, Gee trots off. Like last time, Abby trots away from him, which arouses Gee's interest right away. He follows and comes up to her, nudging her hip with his nose. Nevertheless, Abby walks away. Gee steps toward her and nudges her again. During this time, Abby takes out the carrot to feed him. Finally, Gee is led home by Abby without any resistance.

It is not difficult to find that Abby and Gee are playmates who enjoy each other's presence. The interaction is bilaterally active and friendly. Abby treats Gee attentively and tenderly, while Gee is deeply attracted by Abby and longs for intimate interaction. When walking together with Gee on the road, Abby detects another merit of her equine friend—noblesse oblige, which means a nobleman being kind and courteous because it's part of his job to do that. The noblesse oblige comes from Abby's feeling of "Gee Whiz not following me or pulling me, but accompanying me, looking here and there, pausing from time to time" (Smiley, 2013: 189).

In Abby's eyes, Gee is a gentleman accompanying her, which implies her respect for her equine friend's subjectivity and soul, as well as her appreciation of his kindness and care. Even when Abby has no carrot or apple, Gee still walks alongside her. He is so considerate and kind that Abby doesn't need to hurry to keep up with him. He kindly adjusts his tempo to Abby's, and accompanies her nicely all the way. As to Gee's escape, Abby, based on her understanding of him, explains to her mom that "I don't think he wants to run away. I think he wants to investigate" (Smiley, 2013: 188). Abby knows Gee's curiosity and capability well, and shows great understanding toward him. She is attentive to his needs and manages to cater for them. It is just like what Donovan mentions— "On the individual level, the caring response must include a determination of a person's or animal's needs" (2007: 188). In fact, their interaction involves what Willett describes about several key layers for a multispecies ethics: "1) attunement through rhythms, smells, affect-laden tones or other often preconscious channels of biosocial signaling; 2) face-to-face, nose-to-crotch, or alternative modes of intersubjectivity; and 3) community or cohabitation that may conjure a felt sense of place or home through social expectations" (2014: 83). Both Abby and Gee know how to attune themselves to each other, have face-to-face and other modes of intersubjective interaction, and both of them feel a sense of home with each other's company in one community.

Near the end of the novel, a harmonious picture is presented to the reader when Abby and Gee pay close attention to and care for each other in their interaction: "He looped back again, and trotted around me a couple of times, his eye on me…I had no idea what he was thinking, but it was really quite flattering to have this free, energetic animal attending to me…I gave him a pat, then I stroked him down his neck and over his flanks, on both sides. He seemed to like that" (Smiley, 2013: 235-236).

For Gee, Abby is the one that he cannot take his eyes off. His repetitive trotting back to Abby is the best proof to show his affection and care for her. Gee is eager to communicate with Abby and longs for an intimate relationship with her, which can be found from his insistence on closing their distance. Abby feels thankful for his attention, and knows how to make him happy in return. She

expresses her care for him by patting as well as stroking him. Meanwhile, Abby is attentive enough to discover that Gee likes her pats and strokes. In short, the interspecies communication between them is filled with care and attentiveness, which Smiley advocates as the basis for interspecies interaction through a dialogical paradigm.

6. Conclusion

In the series, with mutual respect, care and attentiveness, Abby and her equine best friends interact with one another in a harmonious and intimate way. Their interspecies communication is carried out through multiple channels, such as visual, vocal, auditory, olfactory, tactile, and kinaesthetic ones. With their active interactions increasing, Abby and the horses understand and love each other more deeply, thus moving towards a dialogical interspecies relationship.

Nevertheless, there is still some cruelty hidden in such harmonious interspecies relationships. That is, Abby has to bear the separation from some horses because her Daddy's job is to buy and raise the horses, and sell some of them to make a living. Smiley doesn't avoid such helpless facts, but reveals this dilemma in our daily life, which involves making ethical choices about animals. Facing dilemmas like this, Smiley expresses her expectation through Abby's wish: "And because I was thirteen, I had four and a half years to be patient until I was eighteen and could do things my way, which would be to keep the horses around maybe for the rest of my life, and even though they were expensive… I would get some kind of a job and support them, rather than having to sell them all the time." (Smiley, 2011: 259)

Abby's wish is a beautiful wish. Horses won't be sold any more but will live peacefully and happily with their human friends. In fact, Abby's wish is also Smiley's wish. The novelist herself expects such interspecies harmony. For her, the human-horse relationship is dynamic, which needs renewing every day. Horses are individual subjects with their own minds, desires, talents, disabilities, histories, and personalities. All the parts of their heads and bodies function in connection with one another to send messages, and express meanings and feelings, some of which can be understood by humans while some can't (Smiley, 2004: 271).

Considering Smiley's understanding and appreciation of horses, it is no wonder that the interspecies relationship between Abby and horses is depicted as dynamic and dialogical instead of static and monological. In these interspecies communications, humans and animals are attentive to each other with care and love. It is of great importance for humans to listen to animals, pay attention to them, and show care and respect for them. It is also significant to realize that animals also gaze back, pay attention to people, and have affection for their human partners. Only in this way can we truly hear their voice and see their subjective reality, which paves the way for a dialogical interspecies relationship.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Publisher's Note: All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers.

References

[1] Donovan, Josephine. (2006). "Feminism and the Treatment of Animals: From Care to Dialogical." Signs 31 (2): 305-329.

[2] Donovan, Josephine. (2007). *"Attention to Suffering: Sympathy as a Basis for Ethical Treatment of Animals." The Feminist Care Tradition in Animal Ethics. Eds. Josephine Donovan and Carol J. Adams*. New York: Columbia University Press. 174-197.

[3] Smiley, Jane. (2004). A Year at the Races: Reflections on Horses, Humans, Love, Money, and Luck. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

[4] Smiley, Jane. (2009). The Georges and the Jewels. New York: Yearling.

[5] Smiley, Jane. (2010). A Good Horse. New York: Yearling.

[6] Smiley, Jane. (2011). True Blue. New York: Yearling.

[7] Smiley, Jane. (2012). Pie in the Sky. New York: Yearling.

[8] Smiley, Jane. (2013). Gee Whiz. New York: Yearling.

[9] Warkentin, Traci. (2010). "Interspecies Etiquette: An Ethics of Paying Attention to Animals." Ethics & The Environment 15(1): 101-121.

[10] Willett, Cynthia. (2014). *Interspecies Ethics*. New York: Columbia University Press.