

Synopsis of *War Horse* the novel, by Michael Morpurgo

Joey's earliest memories are of being sold off at auction to a drunk farmer called Ted Narracott, who bought him to spite one of his fellow farmers in the parish. Ted's young son Albert (aged 13) immediately takes a shine to the foal. When Albert asks his mother why Ted bought the horse – when the family are clearly struggling to keep up the mortgage repayments on the farm – his mother simply explains that "your father is not himself when he's like that".

Nonetheless, Albert is overjoyed with this new addition to the farm. He makes it his life's work to train the horse up to be the strongest and most handsome in the village, and names him Joey. Joey is devoted to his new master and the two become inseparable. Joey also makes a new friend of the Narracotts' farm horse, Zoey.

One night, Albert's father tries to bring Joey out to plough but, distrustful of him, Joey kicks out and Ted returns to the house defeated, and with a pronounced limp. The following morning Ted and Albert return, Albert's face red with tears. Albert has a choice: either he trains Joey to plough, and pull his weight on the farm, or Ted will be forced to sell him in order to keep up the mortgage payments. Albert rises to the challenge, succeeds in getting Joey to plough, and his father agrees that he can keep him.

Albert and his father are always at loggerheads and Joey begins to distrust Albert's father further. Joey's mother defends her husband, explaining that money worries and the threat of the war prey constantly on his mind and lead him to drink. She asks Albert to try to understand his father's tempers a bit more, and be grateful for everything he's done for him.

One night, Ted Narracott comes back to the stable to fetch Joey, and this time uses Zoey as a ploy to get him to leave the stable quietly. He leads Zoey and Joey into town where soldiers have gathered in the square. Captain Nicholls agrees that Joey is the best horse in the parish and buys him from Ted for the war effort. With tears in his eyes, and admitting that he's treated everyone badly – particularly Albert – Ted bids goodbye to Joey. Joey is devastated and just when he has given up all hope of ever seeing Albert again, notices him running towards him. Albert pleads with Captain Nicholls to accept him into his army but, now 16, he is too young to go. He entreats Nicholls to do everything

he can to take care of Joey, and promises him that one day he will find him. Captain Nicholls gives Albert his word.

Joey is to be trained up to be a cavalry horse, and work starts immediately. Captain Nicholls enlists Corporal Samuel Perkins to take on the task, but Joey immediately takes a dislike to his brash manner, and his strict and harsh methods. However, Joey develops a real fondness for Captain Nicholls. Nicholls confides in Joey and tells him about his concerns about the war as though he were an old friend. He sketches Joey in his book, and promises to send copies to Albert. Eventually, he demands that Samuel Perkins train Joey with more care and consideration.

As the horses are taken out on the last manoeuvres before going to war, Joey meets Nicholls' good friend Captain Stewart and his tall shining stallion, Tophorn. The next day, the two horses find themselves on a liner en route to France. Joey gains comfort from Tophorn's presence and they soon become friends. Edging towards the sound of the guns on arrival, the army charge towards the enemy but, all at once, Captain Nicholls is killed in the onslaught.

The next day, Captain Stewart puts Joey into the charge of young Trooper Warren. Devastated at his friend's sudden death, he gives him firm instructions to take good care of Nicholls' horse.

Joey and Tophorn see very little action in the coming months as they are used for transport instead of mounted infantry. It is a bitter winter of snow and sleet. Trooper Warren lifts Joey's spirits by coming to speak to him often. Before long, however, the horses are forced out onto the battlefield again amidst shells, death and destruction. One day, Tophorn, Trooper Warren, Captain Stewart and Joey find themselves directly within enemy lines. Unlike the rest of the horses, Joey and Tophorn manage to survive the barbed wire that has claimed so many of their companions' lives. Inevitably, Captain Stewart and Trooper Warren are soon taken prisoner by the Germans.

Now within German ranks, Herr Hauptmann takes Joey and Tophorn under his wing, and despite his protestations, is reluctantly persuaded that the two horses need to be used to transport wounded and dead soldiers to and from the trenches. The horses are hailed as heroes. Joey and Tophorn are befriended by a young French girl called



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Emilie and her grandfather, whose farm they use for shelter. Emilie does all she can to take care of Joey and Tophorn. Having lost her family in the war, the horses become her sole reason for living. When she is struck down by pneumonia, it is for them that she stays alive.

One day, it is decided to move the hospital further up the valley, and so the horses are handed back to Emilie and her grandfather for good. Joey can go back to what he does best: good old fashioned farm work. But their idyllic summer on their farm is short lived and the soldiers soon return to claim Joey and Tophorn back for the war effort. Emilie is devastated, but vows that she too will see them again.

The next few months prove to be the hardest. Food is scarce and conditions harsher than ever. They and four other horses – Heine and Coco, and two twin flaxen ponies called ‘the two golden Haflingers’ work together through the terrible stench of war. The cold stinking mud, and lack of proper food, soon shrink the horses to half their original size, and their bodies become covered in sores. Many others are shot dead as a result and Tophorn begins to struggle every day to keep up.

That summer, however, now away from battle and free to roam as they please, Joey and Tophorn come under the command of the kind soldier who had looked after them within the German ranks: ‘mad old Friedrich’ – Herr Hauptmann. Hauptmann takes a particular shine to Tophorn.

The day soon comes when it is time to return to battle, but as they charge in, Tophorn’s strength leaves him and he collapses and dies. Friedrich and Joey are both devastated. As the shells begin to explode around them, neither is able to leave his side. As danger nears, Friedrich tries desperately to save Joey, but having left it too late to make his escape, he is struck down by a mortar shell.

That day and night, Joey – frozen by fear – is unable to move but, pushed on by hunger, escapes the gunfire. He wanders lonely and terrified through the war torn French countryside, wounding one of his legs almost fatally. He eventually arrives in No Man’s Land. Delighted at this miraculous sight, both sides send in an emissary to decide who should take ownership of the lost animal. Having argued the toss, the British come out the winners.

Barely able to walk now, Joey is brought to the British Army’s veterinary wagon. At the hospital, Joey, caked in mud, is greeted by Sergeant Thunder and Major Martin and is commandeered by a young, red-faced young boy, whom he recognises as his Albert. Albert remains oblivious until, with his best friend David’s help, he cleans Joey up and Albert and Joey are finally reunited.

However, their joy is only short lived. The strain of the last few months has taken its toll, and Joey develops the life threatening condition lock-jaw. Major Martin is convinced there is nothing they can do for him, but David persuades him that they vowed to do all they could for each and every one of their horses – now is not the time to give up. So Albert, David, Sergeant Thunder and Major Martin go to work to cure him. After months of care and attention, Joey eventually comes through and, with time, is as good as new. As the war drags on, it claims the life of Albert’s closest friend David. Devastated, Albert is close to breaking point – he just wants to go home.

Eventually, news arrives that the war is over. Inexpressibly relieved Joey is overjoyed and everyone rejoices. However a crestfallen Major Martin reveals he has been given orders to sell all the war horses off at auction in France. Albert is in shock but they are adamant that Joey will not be made to remain in France. Major Martin, Sergeant Thunder and all at the hospital pool enough money to buy him instead.

To everyone’s surprise an old man joins the auction, sending Joey’s price beyond what any of them can afford. Joey suddenly recognises the man as Emilie’s grandfather. The grandfather tells Albert that Emilie recently died. Her wish was that he find Joey and Tophorn and return them to their farm. Having looked far and wide, he has finally found them. However, meeting Albert, and seeing that Joey has finally been reunited with his rightful owner, he decides that Emilie would have wanted them to be together. Albert and Joey can finally go home.

Back in Devon, Albert marries his sweetheart, Maisie Cobblehead (although she and Joey never quite become the best of friends) and he takes over Narracott farm. For Joey and his family, life continues much as before, but one feels that it will never be quite the same again.

