

Brian Gryphon

English 111

A Matter of Decency

What do the recent Chinese New Year, a new movie set to premier next month, and a major religious holiday the same month have in common? And, more importantly, why does that common element suggest the title of this writing? February 3, 2011 is the first day of the Chinese new year. As noted on the chinapage.com website, it is now year 4709 in the Chinese calendar; and under that calendar's 12 animal cycle, it is a Year of the Rabbit (Pei, Ming). Universal Pictures has announced April 1, 2011 as the release date for *HOP*, which according to its entry at IMDB has a cast of major stars and “*tells the comic tale of Fred, an out-of-work slacker who accidentally injures the Easter Bunny and must take him in as he recovers.*” Easter Sunday falls on April 24 this year. You may have deduced that the answer to my first question is “*bunny rabbits*”. The relationship to the title of this essay may be less obvious at first glance.

Every year parents (and others) are inspired to give children a pet rabbit at Easter. A bunny rabbit is just so cute, not as expensive as a puppy, and surely doesn't require as much maintenance as a puppy or even a cat. Sadly, only the first statement is accurate; bunnies are incredibly cute. And so, far too often a bunny is purchased as a pet for a young child without full consideration of the expense and time commitment required. It is often just a matter of months, sometimes just weeks, before the rabbit is no longer wanted. Whether the rabbit is then dumped into the street, turned over to a shelter or just left, forgotten, in a small cage in the garage, it is being abused and horribly mistreated.

A 2002 USDA Rabbit Report found that the average price to purchase a pet rabbit

was “*between \$29 and \$35*”(24) and according to the Capital Area Humane Society website “*the adoption fee for rabbits is \$40 and includes the House Rabbit Handbook.*” The same site has adoptable dogs with fees starting at \$100 and cats available for \$70. But the initial purchase price of a pet is not the sum total of the expense involved. According to the USDA “*on average, rabbit owners spent \$116 on food, toys, supplies and non-surgical veterinarian visits per rabbit per year.*”(25) This does not include the cost of spaying or neutering if not done already. Shelter Outreach Services of Ohio, a non-profit clinic in Columbus, currently charges from \$85 to \$110 per rabbit.

Another point to consider is the myth that a rabbit is a 'low-maintenance' pet. According to the Make Mine Chocolate program literature, “*they require as much work as a dog or a cat.*”(1) A single pet rabbit will become bored; they are very social animals and really need to live with at least one other rabbit; the 2007 AVMA study found the average rabbit-owning household has over 3 rabbits(qt on AVMA web-site). The life expectancy of a well-cared-for rabbit is eight to ten years (CHRS. 1); similar to many full-breed dogs, and not that much shorter than mixed breed dogs or house cats. Certainly a long-term commitment to ask of a young person who just sees a cute bunny.

During that extended life time rabbits need to be stimulated and not ignored; yet they are easily frightened. Many do not like being held, and as the HRS noted in a 2000 Press Release, “*baby rabbits are ground-loving creatures who are energetic, playful and voracious nibblers*”(1) - hardly the quiet, cuddly pet people may be expecting.

Certainly the number of pet rabbits involved is not nearly as large as the number of pet cats or dogs. The pet rabbit population in the USA was estimated in the AVMA report to be 6.2 million (qt on AVMA web-site)– compared to the APPMA. estimated 77.5 million

dogs and 93.6 million cats (qt on APPMA web-site). That puts the number of rabbits at a mere six to eight percent of the total of dogs or cats.

The Humane Society of the United States estimates that there are as many as 50 million feral cats in the United States while the ASPCA estimates 70 million (qt on ASPCA web-site). The Colony Cats web-site includes an estimate there could be as many as one million feral cats in central Ohio alone. It is very difficult to estimate the number of pet rabbits dumped into the wild. There are people who voluntarily act as caretakers for feral cat colonies and who network through a number of organizations and web-sites; and thus can provide at least a rough estimate of the population. If the number of pet rabbits dumped into the wild is also at six or eight percent of the population of ferals that would mean a population of 60,000 former-pet rabbits in central Ohio. That number is probably not accurate.

Cats, although creatures of routine, are very adaptable when necessary; most can survive if abandoned. Domesticated species of rabbits are not nearly so adaptable. Rabbits are very easily frightened and will not adapt to living in the wild. At the 2011 Adopt-A-Valentine event held on February 13, the rabbit organizations would not bring any bunnies to the event unless the organizers committed to having the pet ferrets moved to an entirely different room. As the Make Mine Chocolate campaign of the Columbus House Rabbit Society puts it, "*pet rabbits cannot be set 'free' – it's a death sentence.*"(1)

In order to arrive at even a very rough estimate of the number of abandoned pet rabbits, I consulted Linda Lord's dissertation which found that in 2004 "*animal care and control agencies in Ohio*" took in over 307,000 dogs and cats, but less than 8,000 other animals of all species; less than 3% of the canine and feline total.(50).

Clearly, the number of pet rabbits purchased as Easter gifts and then abandoned is very small compared to wild dogs or feral cats. And rabbits that are let loose rarely live long enough to find a mate and establish a colony. Every November and December, as the year-end gift-giving season approaches, there are any number of organizations reminding people that the purchase of a new puppy or kitten as a gift should be thought through carefully. Easter is the equivalent holiday for bunnies-as-presents. Although the total number of rabbits being purchased and then at risk of abandonment is smaller, those animals are almost guaranteed a short, terrifying life in the wild before experiencing a horrible death. As a matter of decency I must speak out.

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March 20, 2011

Editor, Letters Page

Columbus Dispatch

34 S. 3rd St.

Columbus, OH 43215

Greetings;

Every Spring young children are excited to see toy bunnies, pictures of rabbits or hear the story of the Easter Bunny. In addition this year, the movie *HOP* will open in a few days. Parents are often begged for, or decide to purchase, a live rabbit as a pet for a youngster. I write to counsel caution before doing so.

Although people often think of rabbits as cuddly and easy to care for, neither is true. Rabbits are timid; many are too frightened to be quietly held, much less passed around a group of excited, energetic children. They may well use their claws or teeth to strike out. In addition to injury to your child there is a risk of injury to the rabbit, and the resulting vet;s bill. In addition, domestic species of rabbits have an average life span of around ten years; a very long-term commitment for a young child. Pet rabbits require exercise, play, food and medical care just as with a cat or dog throughout their lives,

Shelters see an increase in the number of rabbits turned in a few months after Easter each year. Although some are adopted others are euthanized due to space limitations. Some people decide, instead, to set their bunnies 'free'. Unlike feral cats who can adapt to life in the street and form colonies, a rabbit that is thrown out will have a short life filled with fear

before it suffers a cruel fate.

I strongly encourage parents to consider purchasing a stuffed toy rabbit or give chocolate bunnies as presents. More information can be found at the web-site of the Make Mine Chocolate program founded by the Columbus House Rabbit Society;
www.MakeMineChocolate.org.

Yours sincerely,

Brian D Gryphon