

## How My Rabbit Taught Me to Love Wikipedia

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As you can see from the photo accompanying this column, we have a new member of our household: Jackson the Bunny. This is a digital photo of her with our younger cat, Rosie, who has developed a close friendship with this four-month old lop-eared rabbit. When it came time to bring Jackson to her new home, I panicked; after all, I didn't know the first thing about rabbits. I've been around cats since I was a kid, but I'd never lived with an animal with his or her own cage....ah, excuse me, *hutch*. I remembered other kids in my grammar school who owned exotic pets like ferrets, guinea pigs, and hamsters, but the closest I'd ever been to a rabbit was the alley behind our apartment here in Chicago. There are a lot of brown-spotted wild hares living here in the city. We seem to have a family of them living in the garden. Now we have a domestic or "house rabbit" living in my office/music room. Living with Jackson for the past few weeks, I have come to appreciate Wikipedia more and more.

Now, let me begin by saying that I hope you don't reveal this fact to my students. The last thing I would want them to know is that their English 101 teacher is using Wikipedia to research rabbits while at the same time he is telling them to avoid the online encyclopedia at all costs while they work on their research papers. I tell them day after day and class after class that the only true research begins in the library, on select databases or in a journey through the stacks. But what good did those databases and those stacks do me when I tried to find a book on what to feed a young bunny? I started with the Wikipedia. There, I admit it. I feel better already.

Before I found information on what to feed Jackson—whom we named for the Johnny Cash and June Carter song, by the way—I wanted to learn a little more about where rabbits come from. That is, I wanted to know more about their history—what other animals they are related to, how long they have been around, how many varieties exist. Two of my students told me that rabbits are just "rodents with long ears!" Another friend wanted to know if I would take bets on how long it would take for one of the cats to invade Jackson's hutch. I knew word-of-mouth wasn't going to help me any. Before she even came home with us, I also noticed that Jackson was a lot more aggressive than I had been made to believe. Passive and shy? No. The first time we met in the pet store she rushed at me and bit my finger. Terrified of other, predatory animals (like cats)? Well, the first time she met my older cat, Ben, she rushed at him and ran off and hid in the closet. This rabbit was turning out to be a much different creature than what I had imagined. Maybe the Wikipedia would help clear up all of my misconceptions.

I slowly learned of the genetic origins of the rabbit, including the fact that it is not a rodent or in any way related to, for example, a city rat. In fact, Jackson is not all that closely related to the hares in our garden. Rather, she is a recent breed which combines a lop-eared, flop-eared lop and a short-haired Rex. This would explain her velveteen fur, which is cotton-soft but probably not the warmest coat, especially for a Chicago winter. Anyway, as I mentioned earlier, she is a house rabbit and not a wild, dig-up-the-carrots-in-the-garden breed of bunny. I also learned from Wikipedia that she no doubt descends from a long line of domesticated rabbits who were first kept for their fur and meat by European monks in the Middle Ages. For a four-month-old, she's got quite a history!

While I had yet to find what we should feed Jackson, I also learned some disturbing facts. For example, one must be very careful when introducing another rabbit into a household already claimed by an alpha-bunny. Rabbits have been known to become great friends with each other, but they will also claw and scratch their way to the death if they don't like their hutch-mate. This was quite a shock. I flattered myself that I knew something of predator/prey relationships from my high-school biology classes, but I clearly knew very little about the complex psychology of this bunny named after a country-and-western song.

My disbelief came to an end when just last week Jackson burst out of her hutch during feeding time and pounced on my face. She then mangled my copy of Saul Bellow's *Dangling Man* and began chasing Ben around the kitchen. Once I plied her with a small slice of a fresh, organic pear, she calmed down. Nonetheless, the damage had been done—I had a small cut on my face, the cover of the novel was tattered, and Ben was hiding under the bed. So much for survival of the fittest, not to mention the fable of the tortoise and the hare! I know Aesop would have us believe that “slow and steady wins the race,” but take it from me: rabbits are *really* fast.

I don't want to make Jackson out to be a reject from a Stephen King novel, however. As the websites will tell you, she is also very affectionate and, being a pack animal, likes nothing better than sitting at your side. She and Rosie have also become good friends. In the morning, Rosie will take a seat on the radiator next to Jackson's hutch and the two will, I guess, spend some quality time together. Rosie has also tried to share a couple of meals with Jackson, but lettuce and timothy hay don't seem to be her thing.

This talk of food leads me back to where I started: I found a lot of information on the web about what rabbits like to eat. They love greens of all sorts and they are also very fond of fresh hay and small portions of fruit like apples and bananas. Wikipedia has not made any mention of Jackson's aversion to Saul Bellow, however. Maybe she prefers his later novels? Or it could be she's a Philip Roth fan instead.

Given that I could find so little information on rabbits at my school's library and at the local bookstore, I have to thank Jackson for giving me a greater appreciation of the internet and what it has to offer. I am still going to tell my students to look for information which has a stronger foundation than what they find through various online search engines, but even a site as sometimes chaotic as Wikipedia has its charms and at least is a place to get started. Not that I have a lot of time to spend on the Internet now that I am chasing Jackson around the apartment. Last I checked, she had burrowed into a bag of bunny treats. I have doubt that next I will find her and Rosie working on problems in quantum mechanics and reading Shakespeare aloud together. I better keep that copy of Richard Adams' *Watership Down* away from them. It might give them ideas.