

Make Room for Ryder

A Short Story by Sheri Barile

In this month's story, we meet Leslie Garrett, her son Scott, and Ryder, an engaging rooster who has become a living mascot at the rural school near the Garretts' new home just outside of Santa Fe, New Mexico. Leslie is a children's literature author and illustrator whose idea well has run dry. But when she learns the students and staff at Riverside Elementary have become enamored with this animated rooster, she stumbles onto some very good material for her long-overdue book. Let's relax, put up our feet, and make room in our day for the antics of Ryder the rooster.

Preparation & How-To's

- Print a [large-print copy of the story](#). Ask for volunteers to read a section or read the dialogue of the characters like a script.
- Read the story and use the [Discussion Starters](#) at the end to spark a conversation.
- [Pictures](#) can be printed or they can be [displayed on the television](#) during the activity.



Make Room for Ryder

The Story

It was standing room only in the Riverside Elementary School library, where Leslie Garrett was about to give a reading of her new book, *Make Room for Ryder*. The book had just been published, breaking a lengthy bout of writer's block that had caused Leslie's literary agent a bit of panic.

She was under contract for three children's books annually and had already missed two deadlines this year. Her agent had been patient up to a point, acknowledging that her family's recent move to the Santa Fe area had been an expected distraction, but that excuse had run its course. The reading tonight marked the much-celebrated end of Leslie's creative void and the addition of her book to the school library shelves.

Among those in the audience for tonight's reading were the school librarian, the principal, several teachers, about half the student body and their parents, and of course, Leslie's own family—her husband, Keith; her daughter, Sophia, who had graduated and moved on to middle school this year; and her son Scott, who had started at Riverside Elementary as a third grader just a year ago.

Leslie gazed out from her place at the podium, scanning the faces of onlookers and finally coming to rest on that of her nine-year-old boy. His eyes were sparkling pools of anticipation, and she knew he was excited not just by his mother's emerging celebrity here in their new community but also by the fact that the story she was about to read was *his* story, too.

On a table beside the podium, a box rested. It was filled with copies of her book, which she would offer to sign for any who opted to purchase one. There was also a small book easel displaying a copy. It featured a brightly illustrated cover with the title in bold yellow font and a proud, crowing rooster perched on a fence post.

Leslie cleared her throat, took a deep breath, and began reading from page one.

“As he rode through the country on his first day of school, Jessie spotted a ranch with cattle grazing in a field and a hillside that was dotted with dozens of small dwellings.”

Leslie paused to display the illustration she had created. She remembered this scene from one year ago as if it were yesterday. She had been driving Scott and Sophia to Riverside Elementary on their first day of school. The kids’ excited chatter quieted now and then as they took in the scenery of the rural setting that was so unlike the suburban neighborhood where they had gone to school the year before. Leslie planned to let them start taking the bus soon, but until they were acclimated at Riverside, she decided to make the ten-minute drive and drop them off herself.

As they drove east on Domingo Road past a ranch where cows grazed, Scott said, “Mom, what are all those little houses for?”

Leslie glanced out her window and saw the small dwellings. “Oh, I think those are rooster coops.”

When they passed the last row of them, Scott voiced his agreement. “Yes, I see a rooster on the roof of that last coop.”

“I think you’re going to notice farm animals all around your new school,” Leslie told the kids. “There may be cows in the fields right next to your playground. This is all farm and ranch land around here.”

“Cool,” Scott said.

Just a few minutes later, they pulled into the drop-off lanes in front of the school building, where busses were lined up on the left and cars inched by them in the right-hand lane to drop off chauffeured students. As she rolled to a stop, Leslie noticed a Rhode Island Red rooster standing atop a post in the fence that separated the school grounds from a neighboring ranch. A moment later, she noticed something else: with each child that stepped off the bus parked to her left, the rooster issued a throaty crow. Many of the kids returned his greeting with a wave or an enthusiastic “Good morning, Ryder.”



“Hey, those kids are calling that rooster ‘Ryder,’” Scott said, as he opened the car door.

“He must belong here,” Leslie replied. “Try to find out at recess today why they call him Ryder.”

She didn’t realize it yet, but this was the instant that the first seeds of inspiration for a new children’s book were planted.

When Leslie returned to Riverside that afternoon to retrieve her children, Scott was almost breathless with chatter about Ryder the rooster.

“Did any of your classmates explain why they named him Ryder?” Leslie asked.

“Yes, but it was better than just an explanation,” Scott said. “I saw an actual demonstration. Ryder was in the pasture with the cows during recess today. Guess what he does?”

“Well, let’s see,” Leslie said. “Does he dance a little jig for the cows?”

Scott frowned. “What’s a jig?”

“Never mind, that’s not it,” Leslie said. “Does he speak in a baritone voice with a southern accent?” She proceeded to drawl, “That’s a joke, son....that’s a joke, I say.”

“Well, I don’t get it.”

“Sorry, Scott, I was teasing. That was my imitation of a rooster named Foghorn Leghorn. He was in a popular cartoon way before your time.”

“Mom, get serious. Can I tell you what he actually does? He flaps his wings, leaps, and gets just enough air to hop up on the backs of the cows and ride them! That’s why they call him Ryder.”

“That’s actually pretty cute,” Leslie said. “Buckle up, kids.”

At dinner that evening, Leslie and Keith heard the name Ryder mentioned about two dozen times. While Sophia talked about her teacher, a girl she had befriended, and the homework assigned that day, Scott talked almost exclusively about Ryder the rooster.

“Guess what else he does, Dad! He chases balls! Any time a basketball got away from us while we were shooting hoops, Ryder would chase it. Of course, he couldn’t toss it back to us, but whenever one of us guys caught up with it and picked it up, he crowed like he was cheering. He must be the funniest rooster on earth! I wonder if he’ll be on the fence post crowing at us tomorrow morning.”

Tomorrow morning came, and so did Ryder. He stood atop the fence post and called to each of the children stepping off the bus with a hearty “cock-a-doodle-do.”

Then, one morning a couple of weeks later, Leslie was dropping off the children for the last time before they would start taking the bus. When she reached the head of the line in the car lane, she noticed a barren fence post.

“Hey, where’s Ryder?” Scott said with a measure of dismay.

“Maybe he overslept,” Sophia answered.

“Roosters don’t oversleep, do they, Mom?” It was less a question than a pronouncement. “It’s their job to wake everyone else.”

“Well, maybe he had a late night,” Leslie offered. But silently she was hoping that nothing had happened to him—like a coyote. “I’m sure he’ll turn up by recess.”

She watched the kids as they entered the school, and then nosed her car back out onto Domingo Road and headed toward home. After driving for about a mile, she noticed movement on the shoulder of the road just ahead. Soon, she was able to make it out—it was Ryder running as fast as he could in the opposite direction, toward the school. If she had been a cartoonist drawing this illustration, she would have created a speech bubble issuing from the rooster’s beak. It would have read, “I’m late! Oh no, I’m so late!”

“You’re late,” Leslie muttered to herself with a soft chuckle. “But you will be there in time for recess, just like I promised your buddy Scott.”

And later that day, when she picked up her kids, Leslie learned that it was a good thing Ryder had made it to the school by recess. The reason was relayed to her by Scott's teacher, Ms. Bingham, who accompanied the children to the car.

"We had a little excitement during morning recess today," she told Leslie. "It seems a rattlesnake found its way into the playground and got a little too close to Scott."

At this point, Scott interjected. "I heard it rattling, and then I saw it coiled in the grass right at the edge of the basketball court. It was only a foot away from my sneaker!"



Ms. Bingham continued. "The groundskeeper saw the whole thing. Scott froze, and suddenly Ryder lept in out of nowhere and grabbed the snake from behind by the back of the neck. He flung it about ten yards, and it went racing off into higher grass near the pasture. Scott was very lucky."

"Yeah, Mom," Scott said. "Ryder saved the day!"

"That is a very impressive rooster," Leslie said to Scott. She turned to Ms. Bingham, who nodded in agreement. "By the way, the kids will begin riding the bus next week."

The teacher looked at Scott and replied, "Well, don't be surprised if Ryder tries to board with you in the afternoon. Once he develops a special friendship with one of our students, he sometimes tries to follow them home. This year, that student appears to be you."

September drew to a close, and although Leslie wasn't at Riverside Elementary to drop off the kids each morning, Scott reported that Ryder continued to greet them every single day as they stepped off the bus. He had made several friends at his new school by then, but it seemed that Ryder was his best buddy.

Picture day at school was announced for the following week, and when the big day arrived, Scott and Sophia got dressed up and paid extra attention to their hair. The photo session was set up in the cafeteria, where doors were typically left open during the warm weather months to allow for extra ventilation in the kitchen. Scott's third-grade class went in to sit for their group and individual photos at 9:30.

Once all 27 children were seated and Ms. Bingham had taken her place in the center of the back row, the photographer readied his camera and took the first shot. He announced that he would take another before breaking up the group for individual portraits, but before he could snap it, the children all broke out laughing. It seemed Ryder had found his way into the cafeteria and proceeded to run straight to Scott, where he took a leap and landed right in his buddy's lap.

Just for fun, the photographer took the picture with Ryder included, and when the school put together its yearbook a few months later, that was the picture chosen to represent Ms. Bingham's third-grade class. By then, Scott had begun styling his hair with a new twist, mimicking a rooster's comb that spanned his head from brow to crown.

In October, Ms. Bingham sent a notice home with her students requesting a volunteer to step in for her art docent, who was about to have a baby. Leslie gladly offered her services, and soon she was coming to the school once each month to teach an art lesson and conduct an art assignment for the students.

As the children worked on a watercolor painting one day, Leslie glanced out the window to see an entire herd of cattle gathered at the fence bordering their pasture near the school building. It seemed as if they were observing the class, and when she commented about it, the kids burst out in a fit of giggles. A moment later, Ryder hopped up onto a cow's back, and that sent the entire class into roaring laughter. Leslie thought to herself, *What a charming country school this is*. She returned home that afternoon filled with this sentiment and inspiration from her art lesson. It was that day that she started writing her long-overdue book.

Leslie got another glimpse of Riverside's bovine spectators in early June, when Sophia's sixth-grade class graduated, with an outdoor ceremony held on the school grounds. The neighboring cattle converged along the fence line to watch as the principal announced awards and distributed diplomas. When Ryder hopped up onto the portable stage, the principal announced that he had an honorary diploma for the rooster as well. It was tied with a ribbon, which he looped around Ryder's neck. The rooster responded with a robust crow.

Now, three months had gone by and a new school year had begun. In the library, Leslie read from the final page of her book.

"With the diploma swaying from the end of the ribbon looped around his neck, Ryder strutted from one end of the stage to the other, stopping twice to face the crowd and crow with pride. The End," Leslie finished, as she closed the book.

But it wasn't really the end at all, because as the sound of applause filled the room, Ryder came bursting in, right on cue. He flapped his wings, lept, and landed on the table where the box of books and the display easel rested. As if the applause were intended just for him, he issued his signature crow.

"I guess Ryder's story hasn't concluded after all," Leslie said, and the audience responded with laughter.

"Looks like you will be writing a sequel," Scott called out. "I even have a title picked out: *Ryder Runs for School Board*."

The End

Discussion Starters

- How much educational value do you think is contributed by the rural setting of the school in this story?
 - Did you ever have a child or grandchild that bonded with a farm animal like Scott did?
 - What is your favorite farm animal?
 - If you were a teacher at Riverside Elementary, what kinds of lessons might you plan to include farm and ranch life in the curriculum?
 - If Leslie were to write a sequel to the story of Ryder, what do you think she should make it about?
-

Make Room for Ryder

It was standing room only in the Riverside Elementary School library, where Leslie Garrett was about to give a reading of her new book, *Make Room for Ryder*. The book had just been published, breaking a lengthy bout of writer's block that had caused Leslie's literary agent a bit of panic.

She was under contract for three children's books annually and had already missed two deadlines this year. Her agent had been patient up to a point, acknowledging that her family's recent move to the Santa Fe area had been an expected distraction, but that excuse had run its course. The reading tonight marked the much-celebrated end of Leslie's creative void and the addition of her book to the school library shelves.

Among those in the audience for tonight's reading were the school librarian, the principal, several teachers, about half the student body and their parents, and of course, Leslie's own family—her husband, Keith; her daughter, Sophia, who had graduated and moved on to middle school this year; and her son Scott, who had started at Riverside Elementary as a third grader just a year ago.

Leslie gazed out from her place at the podium, scanning the faces of onlookers and finally coming to rest on that of her nine-year-old boy. His eyes were sparkling pools of anticipation, and she knew he was excited not just by his mother's emerging celebrity here in their new community but also by the fact that the story she was about to read was *his* story, too.

On a table beside the podium, a box rested. It was filled with copies of her book, which she would offer to sign for any who opted to purchase one. There was also a small book easel displaying a copy. It featured a brightly illustrated cover with the title in bold yellow font and a proud, crowing rooster perched on a fence post.

Leslie cleared her throat, took a deep breath, and began reading from page one.

"As he rode through the country on his first day of school, Jessie spotted a ranch with cattle grazing in a field and a hillside that was dotted with dozens of small dwellings."

Leslie paused to display the illustration she had created. She remembered this scene from one year ago as if it were yesterday. She had been driving Scott and Sophia to Riverside Elementary on their first day of school. The kids' excited chatter quieted now and then as they took in the scenery

of the rural setting that was so unlike the suburban neighborhood where they had gone to school the year before. Leslie planned to let them start taking the bus soon, but until they were acclimated at Riverside, she decided to make the ten-minute drive and drop them off herself.

As they drove east on Domingo Road past a ranch where cows grazed, Scott said, "Mom, what are all those little houses for?"

Leslie glanced out her window and saw the small dwellings. "Oh, I think those are rooster coops."

When they passed the last row of them, Scott voiced his agreement. "Yes, I see a rooster on the roof of that last coop."

"I think you're going to notice farm animals all around your new school," Leslie told the kids. "There may be cows in the fields right next to your playground. This is all farm and ranch land around here."

"Cool," Scott said.

Just a few minutes later, they pulled into the drop-off lanes in front of the school building, where busses were lined up on the left and cars inched by them in the right-hand lane to drop off chauffeured students. As she rolled to a stop, Leslie noticed a Rhode Island Red rooster standing atop a post in the fence that separated the school grounds from a neighboring ranch. A moment later, she noticed something else: with each child that stepped off the bus parked to her left, the rooster issued a throaty crow. Many of the kids returned his greeting with a wave or an enthusiastic "Good morning, Ryder."

"Hey, those kids are calling that rooster 'Ryder,'" Scott said, as he opened the car door.

"He must belong here," Leslie replied. "Try to find out at recess today why they call him Ryder."

She didn't realize it yet, but this was the instant that the first seeds of inspiration for a new children's book were planted.

When Leslie returned to Riverside that afternoon to retrieve her children, Scott was almost breathless with chatter about Ryder the rooster.

"Did any of your classmates explain why they named him Ryder?" Leslie asked.

"Yes, but it was better than just an explanation," Scott said. "I saw an actual demonstration. Ryder was in the pasture with the cows during recess today. Guess what he does?"

"Well, let's see," Leslie said. "Does he dance a little jig for the cows?"

Scott frowned. "What's a jig?"

"Never mind, that's not it," Leslie said. "Does he speak in a baritone voice with a southern accent?" She proceeded to drawl, "That's a joke, son.... that's a joke, I say."

"Well, I don't get it."

"Sorry, Scott, I was teasing. That was my imitation of a rooster named Foghorn Leghorn. He was in a popular cartoon way before your time."

"Mom, get serious. Can I tell you what he actually does? He flaps his wings, leaps, and gets just enough air to hop up on the backs of the cows and ride them! That's why they call him Ryder."

"That's actually pretty cute," Leslie said. "Buckle up, kids."

At dinner that evening, Leslie and Keith heard the name Ryder mentioned about two dozen times. While Sophia talked about her teacher, a girl she had befriended, and the homework assigned that day, Scott talked almost exclusively about Ryder the rooster.

"Guess what else he does, Dad! He chases balls! Any time a basketball got away from us while we were shooting hoops, Ryder would chase it. Of course, he couldn't toss it back to us, but whenever one of us guys caught up with it and picked it up, he crowed like he was cheering. He must be the funniest rooster on earth! I wonder if he'll be on the fence post crowing at us tomorrow morning."

Tomorrow morning came, and so did Ryder. He stood atop the fence post and called to each of the children stepping off the bus with a hearty "cock-a-doodle-do."

Then, one morning a couple of weeks later, Leslie was dropping off the children for the last time before they would start taking the bus. When she reached the head of the line in the car lane, she noticed a barren fence post.

"Hey, where's Ryder?" Scott said with a measure of dismay.

"Maybe he overslept," Sophia answered.

"Roosters don't oversleep, do they, Mom?" It was less a question than a pronouncement. "It's their job to wake everyone else."

“Well, maybe he had a late night,” Leslie offered. But silently she was hoping that nothing had happened to him—like a coyote. “I’m sure he’ll turn up by recess.”

She watched the kids as they entered the school, and then nosed her car back out onto Domingo Road and headed toward home. After driving for about a mile, she noticed movement on the shoulder of the road just ahead. Soon, she was able to make it out—it was Ryder running as fast as he could in the opposite direction, toward the school. If she had been a cartoonist drawing this illustration, she would have created a speech bubble issuing from the rooster’s beak. It would have read, “I’m late! Oh no, I’m so late!”

“You’re late,” Leslie muttered to herself with a soft chuckle. “But you will be there in time for recess, just like I promised your buddy Scott.”

And later that day, when she picked up her kids, Leslie learned that it was a good thing Ryder had made it to the school by recess. The reason was relayed to her by Scott’s teacher, Ms. Bingham, who accompanied the children to the car.

“We had a little excitement during morning recess today,” she told Leslie. “It seems a rattlesnake found its way into the playground and got a little too close to Scott.”

At this point, Scott interjected. “I heard it rattling, and then I saw it coiled in the grass right at the edge of the basketball court. It was only a foot away from my sneaker!”

Ms. Bingham continued. “The groundskeeper saw the whole thing. Scott froze, and suddenly Ryder lept in out of nowhere and grabbed the snake from behind by the back of the neck. He flung it about ten yards, and it went racing off into higher grass near the pasture. Scott was very lucky.”

“Yeah, Mom,” Scott said. “Ryder saved the day!”

“That is a very impressive rooster,” Leslie said to Scott. She turned to Ms. Bingham, who nodded in agreement. “By the way, the kids will begin riding the bus next week.”

The teacher looked at Scott and replied, “Well, don’t be surprised if Ryder tries to board with you in the afternoon. Once he develops a special friendship with one of our students, he sometimes tries to follow them home. This year, that student appears to be you.”

September drew to a close, and although Leslie wasn't at Riverside Elementary to drop off the kids each morning, Scott reported that Ryder continued to greet them every single day as they stepped off the bus. He had made several friends at his new school by then, but it seemed that Ryder was his best buddy.

Picture day at school was announced for the following week, and when the big day arrived, Scott and Sophia got dressed up and paid extra attention to their hair. The photo session was set up in the cafeteria, where doors were typically left open during the warm weather months to allow for extra ventilation in the kitchen. Scott's third-grade class went in to sit for their group and individual photos at 9:30.

Once all 27 children were seated and Ms. Bingham had taken her place in the center of the back row, the photographer readied his camera and took the first shot. He announced that he would take another before breaking up the group for individual portraits, but before he could snap it, the children all broke out laughing. It seemed Ryder had found his way into the cafeteria and proceeded to run straight to Scott, where he took a leap and landed right in his buddy's lap.

Just for fun, the photographer took the picture with Ryder included, and when the school put together its yearbook a few months later, that was the picture chosen to represent Ms. Bingham's third-grade class. By then, Scott had begun styling his hair with a new twist, mimicking a rooster's comb that spanned his head from brow to crown.

In October, Ms. Bingham sent a notice home with her students requesting a volunteer to step in for her art docent, who was about to have a baby. Leslie gladly offered her services, and soon she was coming to the school once each month to teach an art lesson and conduct an art assignment for the students.

As the children worked on a watercolor painting one day, Leslie glanced out the window to see an entire herd of cattle gathered at the fence bordering their pasture near the school building. It seemed as if they were observing the class, and when she commented about it, the kids burst out in a fit of giggles. A moment later, Ryder hopped up onto a cow's back, and that sent the entire class into roaring laughter. Leslie thought to herself, *What a charming country school this is*. She returned home that afternoon filled with this sentiment and inspiration from her art lesson. It was that day that she started writing her long-overdue book.

Leslie got another glimpse of Riverside's bovine spectators in early June, when Sophia's sixth-grade class graduated, with an outdoor ceremony held on the school grounds. The neighboring cattle converged along the fence line to watch as the principal announced awards and distributed diplomas. When Ryder hopped up onto the portable stage, the principal announced that he had an honorary diploma for the rooster as well. It was tied with a ribbon, which he looped around Ryder's neck. The rooster responded with a robust crow.

Now, three months had gone by and a new school year had begun. In the library, Leslie read from the final page of her book.

"With the diploma swaying from the end of the ribbon looped around his neck, Ryder strutted from one end of the stage to the other, stopping twice to face the crowd and crow with pride. The End," Leslie finished, as she closed the book.

But it wasn't really the end at all, because as the sound of applause filled the room, Ryder came bursting in, right on cue. He flapped his wings, lept, and landed on the table where the box of books and the display easel rested. As if the applause were intended just for him, he issued his signature crow.

"I guess Ryder's story hasn't concluded after all," Leslie said, and the audience responded with laughter.

"Looks like you will be writing a sequel," Scott called out. "I even have a title picked out: *Ryder Runs for School Board.*"

The End

