Hello, I’m Kathleen Rooney and I’m the author of Cher Ami and Major Whittlesey, and I think what you need to know about the book is sort of contained in the title. It’s about two characters, based on a true story of World War I, and one is Cher Ami, who is a pigeon, and one is Major Whittlesey, who is an American soldier. And Cher Ami was famous in her day for carrying a very important message that saved a group of soldiers called the Lost Battalion from a friendly fire incident in October of 1918. And Major Whittlesey was the commanding officer of that group of soldiers who ended up being saved, in part thanks to Cher Ami’s message.

So, in this book, you kind of get the structure that the title suggests where you go back and forth, and you hear first from Cher Ami, and then from Major Whittlesey, and it kind of repeats in this pattern across the book, so you get to hear these incidents from different perspectives and hear it in first-person pigeon and then, probably more familiar, first-person human perspective.

And I’m going to read today a passage from after Cher Ami has just arrived along with a bunch of other pigeons from England to France, where she’s going to be trained by the Americans so she can then be sent up to the front lines to do this work that real life pigeons actually did of carrying very important battlefield messages during this conflict. And so, it’s a war story, but it’s also a love story—and both Major Whittlesey and Cher Ami have love interests. And so I’ve chosen to read the scene where Cher Ami is setting eyes for the first time on a pigeon from American named Baby Mine.

Amid the cacophony of the thronged loft, from somewhere on the dropping-dappled straw floor, a soft sound caught my ear: a rattling cough.

Below me hunkered a silvery hen, not doing well but trying to hide it. Private and stoic, she was, even in her obvious illness, the most beautiful bird I had ever seen. The ends of her feathers were tinted faintly pink, like low clouds at sunrise or the smoldering ruins of an ancient city. But it was her smell that nearly knocked me from my perch: the hint of white roses at the edge of happiness.

Without speaking another word to President Wilson, I flew down next to her and asked, “Who are you?” I knew that she might make me sick, too, but I didn’t care.

“USA 15431,” she said, her voice like cinders.

“No, your real name. Where did you come from? What’s wrong?”

Had John come along to care for his Wright Farm birds, as I believe he wanted to, he’d have helped Baby Mine. Anything that ailed a pigeon was curable in his hands. Would these American pigeoneers bustling in their khaki take notice?

If you want to tell whether a human is the type who truly loves animals, the eyes are a giveaway. When Corporal George Gault opened the loft door to cast us our feed, I saw care in his eyes. His accent and the tone of his voice were nothing like John’s, but he had the same patient manner and a similar mustache, though his was pure chestnut, with no strands of gray.

When the seed hit the troughs—vaster than those at Wright Farm, for we were such a huge flock—the other birds flapped over to eat, wings clapping as though in an ovation to the corporal. I remained in the straw next to Baby Mine, looking up and cooing.

“What have we got here?” the corporal said, gently pushing me aside to lift Baby Mine in a spruce, agile hand. “Come on, sweet Baby Mine, we’ll get you fixed in no time. And, Cher Ami, if you aren’t the best-named pigeon this fella’s ever met! Don’t worry about your new friend.”

Carrying her with the same reverence and professionalism that a museum curator might show toward a precious antiquity, he shut the loft door behind them, leaving a faint waft of chocolate in his wake: he always kept it in his pocket, and among us sharp-sniffing pigeons it became a cherished herald of his approach.

But I took little notice of it at the time, or for that matter of the meal the corporal had provided and after which my new loftmates were flapping and jostling. My mind was fixed on Baby Mine—her voice, her smell—trying to braid every strand of her into my memory, as I might work to memorize landmarks and traces that would lead me home.

[Author speaking]

And that’s a little bit of Cher Ami and Major Whittlesey. Thanks!