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## E(lwyn) B(rooks) White

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### About this Person

**Born:** July 11, 1899 in Mount Vernon, New York, United States

**Died:** October 01, 1985 in North Brooklin, Maine, United States

**Nationality:** American

**Occupation:** Writer

**Other Names:** White, Elwyn Brooks

PERSONAL INFORMATION:

Education: A.B., Cornell University, 1921.

### AWARDS:

Litt.D, Dartmouth College, 1948.

Litt.D, University of Maine, 1948.

Litt.D, Yale University, 1948.

Litt.D, Bowdoin College, 1950.

Litt.D, Hamilton College, 1952.

Litt.D, Harvard University, 1954.

L.H.D, Colby College, 1954.

National Association of Independent Schools Award for *The Second Tree From the Corner*, 1955.

Gold Medal for essays and criticism from the National Institute of Arts and Letters, 1960.

Presidential Medal of Freedom, 1963.

Laura Ingalls Wilder Award, 1970.

National Medal for Literature, 1971.

Gold Medal for essays and criticism from the National Institute of Arts and Letters, 1973.

Fellow of The American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1973.

Pulitzer Prize, 1978.

### WORKS:

## WRITINGS BY THE AUTHOR:

## Selected Books

- *The Lady Is Cold* (New York & London: Harper, 1929).
- *Is Sex Necessary? Or Why You Feel the Way You Do*, by White and James Thurber (New York & London: Harper, 1929; London: Heinemann, 1930).
- *Every Day Is Saturday* (New York & London: Harper, 1934).
- *Farewell to Model T*, as Lee Strout White (New York: Putnam's, 1936).
- *The Fox of Peapack and Other Poems* (New York & London: Harper, 1938).
- *Quo Vadimus? or The Case for the Bicycle* (New York & London: Harper, 1939).
- *One Man's Meat* (New York & London: Harper, 1942; London: Gollancz, 1943; enlarged edition, New York & London: Harper, 1944).
- *Stuart Little*, illustrated by Garth Williams (New York & London: Harper, 1945; London: Hamilton, 1946).
- *The Wild Flag: Editorials from The New Yorker on Federal World Government and Other Matters* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1946).
- *Here Is New York* (New York: Harper, 1949).
- *Charlotte's Web*, illustrated by Williams (New York: Harper, 1952; London: Hamilton, 1952).
- *The Second Tree From the Corner* (New York: Harper, 1954; London: Hamilton, 1963).
- *The Points of My Compass* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962; London: Hamilton, 1963).
- *Correspondence* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962).
- *An E. B. White Reader*, edited by William W. Watt and Robert W. Bradford (New York: Harper & Row, 1966).
- *The Trumpet of the Swan*, illustrated by Edward Frascino (New York: Harper & Row, 1970; London: Hamilton, 1970).
- *Essays of E. B. White* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977).
- *Poems and Sketches of E. B. White* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981).

## Other

- James Thurber, *The Owl in the Attic*, introduction by White (New York & London: Harper, 1931).
- *Another Ho-Hum*, edited with tag lines by White (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1932).
- *A Subtreasury of American Humor*, edited by White and Katharine S. White (New York: Coward-McCann, 1941).
- Roy E. Jones, *A Basic Chicken Guide for the Small Flock Owner*, introduction by White (New York: Morrow, 1944).
- Don Marquis, *the lives and times of archy and mehitabel*, introduction by White (New York: Doubleday, 1950).
- William Strunk, Jr., *The Elements of Style*, revised, with an introduction and a new chapter, by White (New York: Macmillan, 1959; revised 1972; revised again, 1979).

## Letters

- *Letters of E. B. White*, edited by Dorothy L. Guth (New York: Harper & Row, 1976).

### BIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY:

Elwyn Brooks White is one of the finest craftsmen in the specialized literary form known as the familiar or personal essay. In addition, in his long and productive career as essayist, poet, and commentator on contemporary mores, White has found time to write three children's books, one of which, *Charlotte's Web* (1952), must surely be one of the most widely read and best beloved of this century.

Of himself, White has said "I was born of respectable people in Mount Vernon, New York [on July 11] 1899.... There was an iron vase on the lawn and a copy of *Wet Days at Edgwood* on the library table. My parents came from Brooklyn: I presume they moved because Mount Vernon sounded tonier and would be better for the children."

Writing modestly, self-effacingly, and with a distinctively bemused-seeming detachment, White has occasionally been criticized for not being sufficiently serious. It has been implied that his concerns are not of acceptable magnitude. The charge is not well taken. White's central question has ever been the very question that his fictional "mouse," Stuart Little, asks of a class of fifth graders: "How many of you know what's important?"

Ill-founded, the criticism of White may nonetheless be understandable, for two reasons. First, White's hard-won answers to the question of "what's important" seem, at first, deceptively simple. And, second, his answers are couched with a skilled rhetorical diffidence, and in literary forms that, themselves, are not commonly associated with grand pronouncement: the children's book and the essay form as it has been practiced by minor masters such as William Hazlitt and Charles Lamb.

White's modesty must not be confused with naiveté, however. His self-deprecatory tone of bafflement or nostalgia verges frequently on the ironic. And irony is not an instrument either of disinterest or of naiveté, as any reader of Jonathan Swift or of Thomas Mann well knows.

What has, in fact, been important throughout the long and distinguished writing career of E. B. White is not difficult to infer: the relationship of government to the people; the relationships of governments to each other--especially, perhaps, after 1946, when White had been sent to San Francisco as correspondent to cover the formation of the United Nations; the integrity of the natural world from which we seem to become ever more alienated; and, above all, the integrity of the individual--his freedom, his independence from insidious and malignant manipulation by bureaucracy, advertising, and pervasive hucksterism. Nature herself--especially as seen in the very small--has ever been close to White's heart, as have friendship (see White's *Letters* and the concluding two sentences of *Charlotte's Web*) and writing itself ("a misspelled word is an abomination in the sight of everyone," says Stuart Little. "The main thing I

try to do is write as clearly as I can," says White).

After attending Mount Vernon High School, where he occasionally had an essay, a poem, or a story published in the school's paper, White proceeded to Cornell University, where his writing and literary interests were fostered in the classes of Professors Bristow Adams, Martin W. Sampson, and William S. Strunk, Jr., whose freshman English textbook White was to revive years later as *The Elements of Style* (1959). Already as a freshman, White served on the editorial board of the *Cornell Daily Sun*, of which he became editor-in-chief in 1920. In 1918 White enlisted in the Students' Army Training Corps at Cornell. On graduation in 1921, he worked briefly for the United Press and with the American Legion News Service before embarking in a Model T Ford on a cross-country trip with his college friend, Howard Cushman, who years later was to provide White with firsthand observations of the trumpeter swans in the Philadelphia zoo--information White needed for his third children's book, *The Trumpet of the Swan* (1970). White's Model T has been fondly memorialized in his essay "Farewell My Lovely" (1936), to be found in the collection *The Second Tree From the Corner* (1954).

Beginning in the fall of 1922, White worked for nine months as a reporter and as a columnist for the *Seattle Times*. He took a summer cruise to Alaska in 1923, beginning the voyage as a first-class passenger, but working for his passage on the return trip and quite happily observing the paying customers. Later in the same year, White returned to New York, and for the next two years he was production assistant and copywriter for two advertising agencies. It is amusing, in retrospect, to note that immediately after White's graduation from Cornell, in July of 1921, William Strunk, Jr., had written White to say that he, Strunk, had made an initial contact for White with a Cornell alumnus in a New York advertising agency, offering assurance that White "could write good English, and that [he] had ideas."

White's advertising career was short-lived, however. The *New Yorker* magazine was founded by Harold Ross in 1925, and in that same year White had his first piece, "Defense of the Bronx River," published in that magazine. He joined the *New Yorker* staff half-time in 1927, and from that day he has retained that affiliation and, in biographical reference works, has listed the *New Yorker's* address as his own.

White began his *New Yorker* writing anonymously in the "Notes and Comments" section. He continued and expanded his contributions in the form of captions, headlines, pithy and ironical tag lines for news breaks, and portions of the "Talk of the Town" section. Occasionally, he served as drama and music critic as well. In 1929 White married Katharine S. Angell, who was already an editor on the *New Yorker* staff when White arrived, and who, in fact, may first have suggested to Ross that he hire White. Their son, Joel, was born in 1930.

In 1938 the Whites took up residence on a farm in North Brooklin, Maine, from where White continued not only his work for the *New Yorker* but also began new writing enterprises. The Whites' removal to Maine, where in 1957 they set up full-time residence, is of central importance to the creation of *Charlotte's Web*, a book that is, among other things, a celebration of the seasons in a rural life.

At the time of the *New Yorker's* founding, Harold Ross had written out his vision of the form and the tone that the magazine was to have: "*The New Yorker* will be a reflection in word and picture of metropolitan life. It will be human. Its general tenor will be one of gaiety, wit and satire, but it will be more than a jester. It will not be what is commonly called sophisticated, in that it will assume a reasonable degree of enlightenment on the part of its readers. It will hate bunk...."

In E. B. White, Harold Ross had found precisely the writer most congenial for writing in just the voice he sought for the magazine, although it may well be arguable that White himself created the style and the tone that has been definitively that of much of the *New Yorker* for the last half-century. Marc Connelly said that E. B. White "brought the steel and the music to the magazine."

The *New Yorker* years were fruitful personally, as well as professionally, for White, not only allowing him scope for experimentation and for refining his own writing style, but also bringing him association with like minds, friendships, and the collaboration with his fellow staff writer, James Thurber, with whom White wrote *Is Sex Necessary?* (1929), a spoof of the fast-multiplying and ponderously intellectualized genre of tomes and handbooks on sexuality which has infested the market since then.

From the earliest *New Yorker* years to the present time, White's writing, his career, and his reputation have flourished. He has had published a steady stream of collections of his essays, volumes of poetry, and his three children's books, and he has edited, with his wife, *A Subtreasury of American Humor* (1941), the preface of which is a significant statement on the subject. Beginning in 1948, a stream of honors began to be bestowed on White in recognition of his contribution to American letters. Today, still, he resides in Maine. The bulk of White's manuscripts, papers, and letters has been donated to his alma mater, Cornell University, where they are available for the perusal of scholars. They are vast in quantity, in White's words "the largest collection, in the library, of any American writer."

It is with White's unique voice that any discussion of his work must begin. Although Harold Ross's stylistic expectations for his *New Yorker* may have had an effect on White, his highly individualistic manner of writing seems already to have been distinctly set even by the time he first came to the magazine. Thus, for example, in a letter to his brother, Albert, White, a mere ten years old, wrote: "Received your letter with much rejoicing. I had to ask ma how to spell rejoicing and I don't know as I have it right yet. Please excuse me if I didn't or rather excuse ma...."

Evident in this letter are stylistic characteristics that would not merely remain with White, but also would become hallmarks of his style: the colloquial, conversational tone effected by the omission of the subject ("I") in the opening of the letter; the ironical exaggeration implied in the word "rejoicing"--more fitting for the birth of a savior than for the receipt of a letter from brother "Ally"; the artful simulation of colloquial speech in the locution "I don't know as I have it right yet"; and the ironical "excuse me ... or rather excuse ma"--a kind of rhetorical pulling the rug out, and a kind of verbal repetition for effect which remained typical of White over the

years and may be seen, for example, considerably later in the essay "A Boston Terrier" (1939): "The ad says: 'A dog's nervous system resembles our own.' I don't think a dog's nervous system resembles my own in the least. A dog's nervous system is in a class by itself. If it resembles anything at all, it resembles the New York Edison Company's power plant...."

First, we see here White's frequently expressed skepticism about the hard sell. But more important, in terms of style, the first device to be noticed is the triple repetition of "a dog's nervous system" and the double use of the word "resembles." This is a sort of syntactical backing-and-filling that must in some measure account for the unique quality of White's voice--a voice that seems recognizable anywhere, since, as James Thurber said, "no one can write a sentence like White's or successfully imitate it."

Other characteristics typify White's prose as well. Barbara Rogers has astutely remarked on White's sparing use of connective words, on his preference for the full and abrupt stop, on his sparing use of modifiers, and on his preference always for the precise and the concrete term--all qualities traceable in the seemingly off-hand passage on the dog's nervous system. The most exhaustive empirical study to date of the specific linguistic characteristics of White's prose style is the 1959 Ph.D. dissertation by J. W. Fuller ("Prose Style in the Essays of E. B. White"), as yet unpublished. But since much remains to be explained about the manner in which White attains his effects, further studies could be enlightening.

It was in 1938, after eleven years of active, urban, peripatetic employment by the *New Yorker*, that White moved first to Maine. From there, he continued to contribute to the magazine as much as ever, giving up neither his association with the *New Yorker* nor his interest in the city itself, but expanding his scope to include the frequently more pastoral ruminations for his monthly essays for *Harper's* in the "One Man's Meat" column. And it was only after the move to Maine that there came into White's life the measure of disengagement and simplification which seems to have been a precondition for the longest works he would write--for his three children's books. Of these, the first is *Stuart Little* (1945).

*Stuart Little* is an episodic story of a quest, having for its protagonist a two-inch-tall picaresque hero. The book is episodic, perhaps because it had been so long coming--twenty-two years, by White's account. White's reconstruction of the book's evolution, published in the *New York Times* (6 March 1966), tells the story: "Stuart Little ... came into being as the result of a journey I once made. In the late Twenties, I took a train to Virginia, got out, walked up and down in the Shenandoah Valley in the beautiful springtime, then returned to New York by rail. While asleep in an upper berth, I dreamed of a small character who had the features of a mouse, was nicely dressed, courageous, and questing. When I woke up, being a journalist and thankful for small favors, I made a few notes about this mouse-child--the only fictional figure ever to have honored and disturbed my sleep."

Over the years White developed the tale "in self-protection," adding episodes one by one to satisfy the demands of eighteen nephews and nieces who routinely asked him to tell stories--a task at which "I was terrible." In 1938, at the suggestion of his wife, White submitted *Stuart Little* to a publisher, who rejected the book. Seven years later, White recalls, "I was almost sure I was about to die, my head felt so queer. With death at hand, I cast about to discover what I could do to ease the lot of my poor widow, and again my thoughts strayed to Stuart Little." In the spring of 1945, White completed the book, and Harper accepted it for publication: "Stuart was off at last, after a pardonable delay of some fifteen years."

*Stuart Little* consists of fifteen loosely connected chapters concerning the hero, who is introduced in one of the more striking first sentences of modern literature: "When Mrs. Frederick C. Little's second son arrived, everybody noticed that he was not much bigger than a mouse." Whether, indeed, Stuart is a mouse remains open to speculation. White insisted that he was *not*, but the author lapsed occasionally and called him one. In a letter to his editor, Ursula Nordstrom, shortly after publication of the book, White objected to Harper ads referring to Stuart as a "mouse." Wrote White, "this is inaccurate and probably better be abandoned. Nowhere in the book (I think I am right about this) is Stuart described as a mouse. He is a small guy who *looks* very much like a mouse, but he obviously is not a mouse. He is a second son." But then, alas, White was forced to add, in the same letter, "(I am wrong, Stuart is called a mouse on Page 36--I just found it. He should not have been.)"

Mouse or not, Stuart is a plucky fellow, just under two inches tall, whose somewhat random adventures show him to be brave, ingenious, enterprising, and of romantic inclination. For the first seven chapters--the sequence of which could be rearranged without damage to the tale--all these adventures evolve from Stuart's size, the logical consequences of which White has imaginatively extrapolated with all the ingenuity of Jonathan Swift plotting Gulliver's stay in Lilliput. Stuart sleeps in a little bed made out of four clothespins and a cigarette box; he is lowered down a bathtub drain to retrieve a ring Mrs. Little had dropped; he fetches grounded ping-pong balls; at some hazard, he crouches inside the piano to push up sticking keys when his brother, George Little, plays the piano. His life is beset with danger and obstacle: he must find means to shut off a water faucet the handle of which is larger than he is, and he must pay for a bus ride when the dime needed for fare is much too large an object for him to manage. Danger lurks for him in the form of Snowbell, the great, sharptoothed family cat. He narrowly escapes disaster when he is whirled up into a rolling window shade. He demonstrates debonair insouciance and panache as he pilots a model sail boat, *Wasp*, through mountainous waves in a race on a pond in Central Park. Stuart emerges victorious for the ship's grateful owner, a "surgeon dentist" by the name of Dr. Paul Carey, who serves the story later by furnishing Stuart with the little automobile he needs to pursue his ideal beloved.

This beloved is the little bird Margalo, who, George Little thinks may be a "wall-eyed vireo," but who Mrs. Little thinks looks "more like a wren." After the introduction of Margalo, Stuart's adventures take on a measure of purposefulness and sequence as she, fearing Snowbell, disappears in the tenth chapter, and Stuart goes in pursuit of her. Like any knight errant, Stuart is tempted and distracted during this pursuit. On one occasion he takes over an elementary classroom for the sick teacher, Miss Gunderson, who, says the superintendent of schools, may be suffering from Rhinestones. The classroom setting gives opportunity for White to editorialize with some pithy maxims, such as teacher Stuart's contention that "a misspelled word is an abomination in the sight of everyone."

After the classroom interlude, Stuart is seriously diverted--tempted--from his path only once. He meets the lovely Harriet Ames, whose head came just above Stuart's shoulder, and for whose graceful appearance we have White's testimony in a letter he wrote to

Garth Williams, the illustrator, that Harriet was taken from figure number twenty-one in the Montgomery Ward catalogue. After misadventures with a novelty-shop canoe in which Stuart had intended to take out Harriet, and after demonstrating to the cool young lady his classy crawl stroke, Stuart is left by Harriet "alone with his broken dreams and his damaged canoe."

"Stuart slept under the canoe that night," but the next morning he filled his little car with five drops of gasoline and set forth once again, driving till he encountered a telephone lineman who had seen many birds--but no Margalo. Still, as the lineman says, "a person who is heading north is not making a mistake, in my opinion," and Stuart agrees: "I rather expect that from now on I shall be traveling north until the end of my days." Stuart climbs into his car once again. "The sun was just coming up over the hills on his right. As he peered ahead into the great land that stretched before him, the way seemed long. But the sky was bright, and he somehow felt he was headed in the right direction."

The conclusion to *Stuart Little* may make the reader think of the end to Milton's *Paradise Lost*--the challenge of the brave new world to Adam and Eve as they venture out on their own responsibility--a parallel that White acknowledges. White always uses established classic themes, and this use is a conscious one.

Stuart the adventurer, Stuart the searcher, is a dashing and spunky hero, a precursor perhaps to William Steig's admirable and dashing Abel in Steig's 1976 children's book, *Abel's Island*. Stuart is pictured at the head of the first chapter by the artist Garth Williams standing just as White describes him, hat in one hand, cane in the other, one leg gracefully athwart the other, with tail curled gracefully behind. It is his almost reckless adventurousness which propels Stuart into the perilous situations the extrication from which makes for much of the story's suspense. Stuart's physical fitness, compounded by a touch of his vanity, causes the window-shade predicament as, swinging on the cord, Stuart attempts to prove to the cat, Snowbell, "what good stomach muscles he had." And his general masterfulness is nowhere better exemplified than in the harrowing sailboat race. Washed overboard in the storm, in the midst of dangerous flotsam, "Stuart had no intention of drowning. He kicked hard with his feet, and thrashed hard with his tail, and in a minute or two he climbed back aboard the schooner, cold and wet but quite unharmed. As he took his place at the helm, he could hear people cheering for him and calling "Atta mouse, Stuart! Atta mouse!"

"Atta mouse!," most especially in this context, may serve well as a point of entrance to an understanding of just how White achieves his literary effects. "Atta mouse!" exemplifies most specifically, first, White's use of the colloquial, of ordinary, homely, middle-of-the-country expressions. And, second, it demonstrates the manner in which these very ordinary expressions rhetorically deflate or undermine a particularly lofty passage just preceding.

In this instance, "Atta mouse!" is particularly humorous following the description of the heroic swimmer, the brave helmsman. When Margalo enters the story, White works similarly. "Who are you? Where did you come from?" asks Stuart, and Margalo answers, "My name is Margalo,... I come from fields once tall with wheat, from pastures deep in fern and thistle; I come from vales of meadowsweet, and I love to whistle." The Longfellowesque locution, undermined by the simplicity of "and I love to whistle," with its jingle-rhyme of "thistle" "whistle," illustrates precisely the technique of rhetorical contrast employed by White so frequently--a technique by no means limited to dialogue, but used by White in his own narrative voice as well: Stuart "alone with his broken dreams and his damaged canoe"; or Stuart on his outing with Harriet, when "at suppertime he took his ax, and felled a dandelion." In the same vein is the contrast when the storekeeper at Ames's Crossing tells Stuart of the lovely Harriet we are about to meet, and Stuart, sounding like W. C. Fields, perhaps, asks, "What's she like?... Fair, fat, and forty?"

If "Fair, fat, and forty" sounds like Fields, or Harry Truman, we may note that a good deal of the book sounds like other people's voices. Parody is, in fact, one of the main devices by which White achieves his effects. Thus, Stuart in the sailboat race, "an adventurous little fellow [who] loved the feel of the breeze in his face and the cry of the gulls overhead and the heave of the great swell under him," recalls a reading of Robert Louis Stevenson or R. M. Ballantyne. "BEWARE OF A STRANGE CAT WHO WILL COME BY NIGHT," reads the note some pigeons write to warn Margalo of Snowbell, a warning in deadpan imitation of a third-rate Gothic tale. The opening sentence of the fourth chapter--"One fine morning in the month of May when Stuart was three years old, he arose early as was his custom, washed and dressed himself, took his hat and cane, and went downstairs into the living room to see what was doing"--reminds readers of the first appearance of Squire Allworthy in Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones*--or of many another eighteenth-century gentleman. Again, though, one should be aware of the slight deflation, even here, effected by the concluding words "what was doing" instead of, for example, "what the new day might bring."

And if parody and comical juxtaposition are devices of White's individual sentences, those same devices lie at the very heart of the conception of the entire book. For the whole book is, after all, a parody based on juxtaposition--a parody of the brave and adventurous picaro/quester in pursuit of "what is important." But this hero is neither a knight errant nor even a Huck Finn, but the little fellow "not much bigger than a mouse ... [who] ... looked like a mouse in every way."

And to demonstrate that this is not over-interpreting, as E. B. White occasionally likes to suggest that readers of his stories are apt to do, there is White's own testimony for the significance of Stuart's quest: "Stuart's journey symbolizes the continuing journey that everybody takes--in search of what is perfect and unattainable. This is perhaps too elusive an idea to put into a book for children, but I put it in anyway," White wrote in a 1955 letter. And nine years later, again, he wrote to a young admirer: "'Stuart Little' is the story of a quest, or search. Much of life is a questing and searching, and I was writing about that. If the book ends while the search is still going on, that's because I wanted it that way. As you grow older you will realize that many of us in this world go through life looking for something that seems beautiful and good--often something we can't quite name. In Stuart's case, he was searching for the bird Margalo, who was his ideal of beauty and goodness.... If the book made you cry, that's because you are aware of the sadness and richness of life's involvements and of the quest for beauty."

The central question in this book, both for Stuart Little and for E. B. White, may well be the one that substitute teacher Stuart Little puts to his young fifth-grade charges: "How many of you know what's important?" One student, Henry Rackmeyer, has an impressive

answer: "A shaft of sunlight at the end of a dark afternoon, a note in music, and the way the back of a baby's neck smells if its mother keeps it tidy." "Correct," says Stuart. "Those are the important things." Six pages later Stuart's pupil Katharine (Mrs. White's name too) does not want to surrender her "tiny pillow stuffed with sweet balsam" because it reminds her--she blushes--of last summer. And Stuart replies, "Don't know as I blame you.... Summertime is important. It's like a shaft of sunlight." "Or a note in music," adds Elizabeth Acheson. "Or the way the back of a baby's neck smells if its mother keeps it tidy," says Marilyn Roberts.

If, after reading *Stuart Little*, we ponder for a moment the charge that White's concerns are not sufficiently serious, or that his concerns seem frequently to be ephemeral, we may reassure ourselves, even without the additional testimony in White's letters, by the answers to Stuart's question, adding to those simple answers--summertime, a note in music--the lyrical conviction of the telephone lineman at the book's conclusion, as he tells Stuart that "following a broken telephone line north, I have come upon some wonderful places.... [Swamps] where cedars grow and turtles wait on logs.... I know fresh lakes in the north, undisturbed except by fish and hawk and, of course by the Telephone Company, which has to follow its nose...." But, again and typically, the poetical is kept decorously in bounds by the undermining prosaicism of the "Telephone Company." It is as though E. B. White kept ever in mind the advice of Martin Sampson, his old mentor at Cornell: "To be frank, to use one's brains, to write what is in one to write, and never to take oneself too damned seriously or too damned lightly."

Finally, as splendid a character as is E. B. White's Stuart Little, the mock epic hero seen through the wrong end of the telescope, the picture of him would not be what it is without the contribution of the illustrator, Garth Williams. If Stuart becomes part of American folklore, it will be in the shape of Williams's line drawings: Stuart standing dapper before the story's first chapter, Stuart swimming his mighty crawl stroke for cool Harriet Ames, Stuart portaging his canoe, or, most extraordinarily, in the several lovely miniatures: Stuart hiding in a garbage can in a "grove of celery," Stuart tumbling upside down in the garbage among strands of spaghetti, head-first in a walnut shell half, Stuart felling the dandelion with his ax, or Stuart opening a tin of ham to go with the dandelion milk for supper.

Garth Williams was indeed a fortunate find for White's publisher. Long before publication--as early as 1939--Eugene F. Saxton, at Harper, had written White (not for the first time), asking how the book was progressing and suggesting as possible illustrators Robert Lawson, who had done the artwork for Munro Leaf's *The Story of Ferdinand* (1936), James Daugherty, author-illustrator of *Andy and the Lion* (1938), or Ernest Shepard, illustrator of Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* (1931). Splendid as any of these would have been, surely we cannot regret the happy collaboration of White and Williams, which continued with such extraordinary success in *Charlotte's Web*. In the Cornell archives there are enough letters from Williams to testify to the cordial working partnership of White and himself.

Saxton persisted in nudging White, whose progress on the book was hardly rapid, writing him in 1941, "You once spoke of finishing *Stuart Little*. If that is still in the realm of possibles, let me know...." And in 1945, finally, the Littles had their child. The reaction of several notables was immediate. Harold Ross came into White's office, White reported, "and pointed out that I had used the verb 'born' in the first paragraph. 'God damn it, White,' he said, 'you should have had him adopted.'" Edmund Wilson, White recalls, met White and said, "I read that book of yours. I found the first part quite amusing, about the mouse, you know. But I was disappointed that you didn't develop the theme more in the manner of Kafka." Other responses came from the heartland, as White recollects. "The next thing that happened was that three fellows turned up claiming that *their* name was Stuart Little, and what was I going to do about *that*? One of them told me he had begun work on a children's story; the hero was a rat, and the rat's name was E. B. White ... he phoned Ursula Nordstrom at Harper's to alert her." White also got letters, presumably from librarians, complaining that the ending of the story does not tell whether Stuart Little found the bird, but, as White put it, "A fence that can throw a librarian is as nothing to a child."

More positively, Phyllis McGinley wrote White that she had read the book and was having it reread to her by her husband. "I can't see why all the rest of the writers don't stop writing and let you do the country's books for a while...." Her husband was proposing to adopt Stuart. And though periodical reviews were mixed, the *London Observer* agreed with McGinley, noting that "the only point of comparison it [*Stuart Little*] has with usual children's books is that the adults will never let their moppets get a chance to read it."

The one fly in the ointment was the response of Anne Carroll Moore, head of the Children's Department of the New York Public Library, and, at the time, doyenne of children's books in this country. Throughout 1939, Moore had written White impassioned letters praising his talent and expressing her joy at the prospect of his writing a children's book. After she had read the book in galleys, however, Moore wrote Katharine White a fourteen-page letter strongly advising that White withdraw the book from publication, and she urged Ursula Nordstrom and Harper not to publish it. As White wrote later to Frances Clarke Sayers (Moore's successor at the New York Public Library), however, Moore, out of regard for White, did not publish her view. Sayers also had reservations, writing White that she thought the "fantasy was not completely conceived, nor that it said anything positive to children." She spoke of feeling troubled at the thought of "the birth of Stuart to human parents, in this day when even the youngest child knows the facts of life," and she expressed similar views in *Tomorrow* magazine. And Leonard Lyons, the gossip columnist, wrote his column in the *New York Post*, 23 November 1945, predicting "there will be a to-do about the New York Public Library's reluctance to accept *Stuart Little*, the children's book by E. B. White."

Since the time of those early teapot tempests, *Stuart Little* established itself as one of the classics of American children's literature. Murmurs of dissatisfaction concerning Stuart's genesis are rare. He may not even be a mouse in the first place, after all--and this sophisticated age, one hopes, is more tolerant of a child who may just happen to look like a mouse.

White's second book for children, *Charlotte's Web*, unlike much of *Stuart Little*, has a bucolic setting. It is a book that derives most profoundly and most immediately from the life and the thought of E. B. White after he moved to his farm in Brooklin, Maine. And it is a book that moves between two levels of plot, both interwoven by significant, dominant themes. First, there is the tale of the title character, Charlotte, a spider, *Aranea cavatica*, and her friend, the somewhat lumpish pig, Wilbur, born the runt of the litter. Wilbur, originally to be slaughtered, is saved and weaned by eight-year-old Fern Arable and taken over then by Fern's uncle, the farmer

Homer L. Zuckerman, who still plans to slaughter Wilbur. Zuckerman takes him first to the fair, where Wilbur's friend, Charlotte, miraculously saves him by weaving in a web above his pen the startling word "HUMBLE." After that "miracle," amusingly associated by the silly folk with the pig, Wilbur, rather than with the spinning spider, Wilbur is taken back to the farm to live a contented and pampered life. But Charlotte, alas, spins her last web and deposits eggs for her 514 offspring in Wilbur's crate at the barn, and then, at their birth, she dies. Wilbur, however, remains true to the promise he made Charlotte, pledging his friendship to her offspring "forever and ever."

The other plot, the plot that critic Roger Sale views (dubiously) as the plot for adults, is the story of Fern Arable, who, through the course of the story, grows up. For the first sixteen pages, *Charlotte's Web* is a more or less distanced, realistic, third person account of Fern's saving Wilbur, and of the doings in the barnyard. Beginning on page sixteen of the book, however, Wilbur speaks, is personified, and suffers more or less human emotions and fears and pangs and even boredom. And like Wilbur, the other animals in the barnyard speak, too, the sheep and the geese foolishly and impolitely about Wilbur's imminent demise, Charlotte about her past, about her arachnid nature (White had done extensive reading and had taken voluminous notes on spiders before writing the book), and about the plans she has for saving Wilbur's life. Not only do the barnyard animals speak, but Fern understands them as well, and she reports their conversation to her mother. Mrs. Arable is worried by her unusual daughter, and she takes her to Dr. Dorian, who reassures the mother, suggesting we all might hear more if only we had the ears to listen, and suggesting what does come to pass--that Fern's barnyard fascinations will lessen. And so it is that, precisely at the moment of Wilbur's glory, when he wins the prize at the fair, Fern is preoccupied with one young Henry Fussy. Fern wants nothing more at this moment than to sit with Henry in the gondola of the ferris wheel, looking far across the countryside. Sometime before this, already Fern's interest in the goings-on in the barnyard had slackened. No longer did she overhear the animals. In the last half of the book, she is no more than a silent bystander to the adventures and the drama of the rescue of Wilbur by his friend Charlotte.

*Stuart Little*, first conceived long before the Whites moved to Maine, contains passages in celebration of the city. *Charlotte's Web*, on the other hand, seems to have developed directly and exclusively out of White's joy in his own rural existence. He had observed spiders closely and had studied them intensely. The successive drafts of the opening of the story, all preserved in the Cornell archives, attest that in draft after discarded draft White had begun by dwelling lovingly on the coziness, the comfortableness, the mood, and the ambience of a barn. White's letters attest to his pleasure in the rural life. And, finally, the story of the almost slaughtered pig, Wilbur, was anticipated by White's essay "Death of a Pig," published first in the *Atlantic Monthly*, January 1948, and collected in *The Second Tree From the Corner*.

*Charlotte's Web* has prompted some bizarre overinterpretations, such as that of John Griffith, who perceives in Wilbur's plight "a desperate existential situation," and who sees in the extraordinarily realistic and unsentimental Charlotte, *Aranea cavatica*, a "fantastic character from fairyland," who dies "tired and alone."

Yet *Charlotte's Web* is unquestionably a rich and a contemplative book, deserving of the high praise given it by the distinguished critic and author Eleanor Cameron, who puts it on her shelf along with *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, *Little Women*, and *Pinocchio*. It is a book that sounds again, seriously and eloquently, White's deep concerns and his basic and recurrent perceptions. Interwoven between the barnyard narrative of Charlotte and of Wilbur on the one hand, and the story of Fern's passage from childhood to preadolescence on the other is White's thematic preoccupation with friendship, with the warm glow of the pastoral, and with the cycle of the rural year.

First, it is Charlotte's friendship that saves Wilbur, and it is to Charlotte that Wilbur pledges to give to her offspring "friendship, forever and ever." And it is on the same note, too, that the book ends, with classical balance, with two of the finer sentences in contemporary literature: "It is not often that someone comes along who is a true friend and a good writer. Charlotte was both." This epigrammatic conclusion suggests major concerns both of the book and of its author. And if Charlotte's lifetime total of four written words is deemed a rather minimum prose sample, one must recall rule number thirteen of Strunk and White's *Elements of Style*: "Omit needless words," and White's own statement in an interview, "The main thing I try to do is write as clearly as I can." Charlotte was clear.

White's second theme entails, specifically, the celebration of the barn, and, on larger scale, the celebration of the rural year. In a letter, White himself has called the book "pastoral, seasonal ... concerned with ordinary people...." Of the nine successive surviving drafts of the story, several begin with descriptions of the barn and of the "dressing" in Wilbur's pen. These, however, are static openings, and as was his habitual wont, White eventually discarded the descriptive beginnings and substituted the fast-moving opening: " 'Where's Papa going with that ax?' said Fern...." The loving barn description was retained--merely moved to later in the book, becoming the opening of the third chapter. And throughout the book, White has interspersed similar celebrations of one aspect or another of the farm and of the whole round of the rural year, with its cycles of life and death.

It is important to understand that this song of praise to country life is to be viewed not so much as modern, romantic, perhaps escapist, or nostalgic, but rather as an extension in a mainstream of a major Western literary tradition, a tradition traceable for millennia, carried through Vergil's *Eclogues*, and then on through such eighteenth-century achievements as James Thomson's "The Seasons." And just as in Thomson's poem and in Haydn's 1801 oratorio based on it, lyrical intermezzos punctuate White's book. Thus, mid-plot and mid-action, in chapter six, we find: "Early summer days are a jubilee time for birds. In the fields, around the house, in the barn, in the woods, in the swamp--everywhere love and songs and nests and eggs.... On an apple bough, the phoebe teeters and wags its tail and says 'Phoebe, phoe-bee!' The song sparrow, who knows how brief and lovely life is, says, 'Sweet, sweet, sweet interlude....'"

That melodious interlude does not merely paint a sweet rural picture. It sounds another theme, softly melancholic, within this book--the classical note of *et in arcadia ego*--that announces that even in the midst of life, there must come death (even in paradisaical Arcadia, Death enters eventually). Other mood-filled contemplations of the time--of year or of day--pervade the book, as when Fern is in the barn with Wilbur and, though knowing it is supertime, cannot bear to leave: "Swallows passed on silent wings, in and out of

the doorways, bringing food to their young ones. From across the road a bird sang 'Whippoorwill, Whippoorwill!' ... he [Wilbur] loved life and loved to be a part of the world on a summer evening."

The degree to which White was himself aware of what he was doing (all his protestations to the contrary notwithstanding) is indicated by repeated statements in his collected letters, as when he tells Gene Deitch, who intended to make a film of the book, "the film should be a paean to life, a hymn to the barn, an acceptance of dung"--a notion White has repeated more than once. And if further evidence is sought, one need merely recall and ponder the name of Dr. Dorian (the Dorians--the early inhabitants of fabled Arcadia) and farmer Zuckerman's first name, Homer.

The rural year, the sweet melancholy of death, and the final birth and the renewal out of the ashes--these are the timeless notes White sounds in this "simple" children's tale. Out of the winter earth comes, always, a new setting forth. The death of Charlotte means the life of her progeny. "We're leaving here on the warm updraft," the little spiders call to Wilbur as they rise on balloons they have spun for themselves. "This is our moment of setting forth." And, inescapably, the reader must again think of the song and the glorious history of settings forth in literature--Adam and Eve in *Paradise Lost*, of Gawain, of the Grail questers, of Huck Finn on his river, and, by no means least, of Stuart Little, from the last sentence of whose story we recall: "he peered ahead into the great land that stretched before him,.... the sky was bright, and somehow he felt he was headed in the right direction."

Repeatedly in White's letters we may read of his exasperation with those who would trivialize his noble theme for commercial purposes, making the story end happily, usually by eliminating the death of Charlotte. White knew perfectly well what he was about; as he wrote to a children's literature class in 1973, "Charlotte was a story of friendship, life, death, salvation."

To understand how the expression of these linked themes is achieved we must look once again at White as a craftsman, as one of the most exacting prose stylists of the English language, revising endlessly and laboriously in order to give the illusion of easy and offhanded grace which he so often attains. Whatever the themes, after all, and whatever the plot, and however live the characters are, they must be constructs of the prose style itself. And this prose style, like any other, is constituted of words, and of sentences--that is, of diction and of syntax. If we perceive accurately what White has wrought, usually after repeated and laborious drafts, with words and with sentences, then we shall understand the machinery that makes *Charlotte's Web* the book it is.

The diction of *Charlotte's Web* is distinctive and describable. The book opens: "Where's Papa going with that ax?" said Fern to her mother as they were setting the table for breakfast." These words are simple and basic. *Simple* and *basic* are not terms to cover numinous impressions. They mean that the words are not Latinate, but are short, commonplace, and that they bespeak their homely Anglo-Saxon origins. Nor is there, etymologically speaking, a Latin derivative in the lovely two sentences already cited which end the book. And the last sentence, "Charlotte was both," ends the book on an acoustically muted note that befits the gentle ending that is, in a way, a continuation.

The characters, too, assume their reality from the words in which they are described or from their very names. Dr. Dorian and Homer Zuckerman have already been mentioned. Charlotte, smart in all senses of the word, bears a name that is the French analogue of Karl. Her name evokes perhaps an aura of the troubadours and of medieval romance.

The farm family that owns the famous pig is named Arable. The plowable farm is arable. The Plowables own the land to be plowed. One Arable child, Fern, has an intimate relationship with all natural creatures. The fern is a plant so ancient that its earliest evidences are fossilized, are paleographic. Mrs. Arable is simply referred to as Fern's mother or Mrs. Arable. She dreams of deep freezers, as any generic missus would. And Mr. Arable is Mr. Arable, simply, *The Farmer*, not further distinguished, and thus a cousin of Lois Lenski's pasteboard character Farmer Small in *The Little Farm* (1942). The pig is called Wilbur, an amiable, if perhaps somewhat stuffy, name. And so, in the tradition of English novelists from Fielding through Dickens and on to the present, White has baptized his characters with names that fit their beings.

Further, the characters are described in vivid words. Templeton, the rat, incarnation of moral putridness, is introduced first as he "crept stealthily along the wall and disappeared into a private tunnel that he had dug between the door and the trough...." *Dug*, *door*, and *trough* are thick and plow-nosed words, not open, clean, easy words with healthy, pure vowels and crisp consonants. *Dung*, *dugs*, *dinginess*--we can make a catalogue of such words in White's book.

Wilbur, by contrast, is delineated by his individualistic mode of speech. To make a character speak like himself is an art any dramatist and most novelists must master. Wilbur's manner of speaking is uniquely his own. Simple, straightforward, Wilbur announces: "Attention please!" he said in a loud, firm voice. "Will the party who addressed me at bedtime last night kindly make himself or herself known by giving an appropriate sign or signal!"

The bullhornlike sensibility of the opening and the ingenious pedantry--"himself or herself ... sign or signal"--betoken a cerebral circuitry in the pig that has all the convolutions of a railroad track in arable Kansas. In these characterizations, by way of the dialogue, White demonstrates the capacity to surmount his own voice in order to inhabit the spirit of his creations.

White plays other games as well with diction. Again as in *Stuart Little*, there is the use of incongruous juxtaposition. At one point, Lurvy, the hired man, forces medicine down ailing Wilbur's throat. And the next paragraph White begins, "Darkness settled over everything"--a sentence suited not so much for maintaining the mood for a medicated porker as, perhaps, for a description of chaos the first night before God created the universe out of the void. Humorous in itself, the tonal juxtaposition reminds us again, too, that we have to do with a mini-epic--a rape of a lock, for example. Or, a close call for a pig.

On the subject of individual words, consider the writing of Charlotte--of whom White says "she was a good writer." The scene is crucial. Wilbur does not win the prize as the largest, biggest, fattest pig at the fair. As there again rises the specter of Wilbur's



slaughter, rescue must come from somewhere. But from where? Templeton, typically, is scavenging among the foul remains of a picnic--an old deviled ham sandwich and a wormy apple--and he finds a bit of old newspaper from which he tears a word. It will be the talisman, the instrument of Wilbur's salvation, as sweet Charlotte, in her dying last act, weaves neatly into the center of her final web the great word *HUMBLE*. Somewhat similar to the situation in A. A. Milne's *Winnie the Pooh* (1926), in which the misapprehended words *North Pole* or *trespassers* assume their own magical qualities, nobody at the fair is completely certain of the precise use of the word *humble*. They all seem to have the dictionary definition, more or less: "Not proud," and "near the ground." Charlotte believes it is fitting for Wilbur: he is indeed not a proud pig, and he is, physically speaking, "near the ground."

White makes the most of the joke, continuing it for some length:

"Look!" cried Fern. "Look at Charlotte's web! Look what it says!"

The grownups and the children joined hands and stood there, studying the new sign.

" 'Humble,' " said Mr. Zuckerman. "Now isn't that just the word for Wilbur!"

Later, an admiring woman, looking at the livestock, points out that Wilbur

"isn't as big as that pig next door, .... but he's cleaner. That's what I like."

"So do I," said another man.

"He's humble, too," said a woman, reading the sign on the web.

The glorious non sequitur is authorial genius of a sort almost to defy analysis. Wilbur is not humble, nor is *humble* the word anyone would think of to describe him. The word is simply askew for the occasion, a good joke. The magic word is itself common and unpretentious, simple, yet misunderstood, and it turns out, in all its--not wrongness, but simply irrelevance--to be the "open sesame" that clinches Wilbur's salvation and sinecure.

If this sharp focus on the examination of the individual word seems labored, it nonetheless reflects E. B. White's own artistic preoccupation. The word *humble* (and all the subtle humor deriving from it) was not arrived at by accident. Evidence in White's manuscript drafts demonstrates the author's pondering of choices that occur in the actual narrative.

Words make sentences. And in the rich and flexible English language, there is, for the cunning craftsman, ample opportunity to highlight, to underscore, or to establish meaning itself by the syntactic arrangement of words into larger logical units. As a stylist, White does not overlook his opportunity. Consider, for example, the playful use White makes of what we may call the syntactic counterpart of what, in music, is termed a "crab canon" (going, presumably, with equal ease in either direction, as does a crab). With a frog in his pocket, Fern's brother, Avery, is swinging from a rope in Zuckerman's barn: "Avery straddled the rope and jumped. He sailed out through the door, frog and all, and into the sky, frog and all." The syntactic mimesis of the act by the phrase sequence--up, down, up--is noteworthy. The concluding sentences of the book--"It is not often that someone comes along who is a true friend and a good writer. Charlotte was both"--also show White's mastery of syntax. The first of these two sentences has the neoclassical poise, balance, distance, and the decorum--the proverblike conclusiveness--of, perhaps, a line from Samuel Johnson's "The Vanity of Human Wishes." Classically, it draws credibility from its very clarity. As for the last sentence--"Charlotte was both"--exegesis would be but a diminution of the impact of its brevity. For many of the fine passages in *Charlotte's Web* we may, indeed, use an eighteenth-century definition of poetry: "proper words in proper places"--the *mot juste*.

White is an artist of the word and of syntax, not of sustained plot and of epic scope. His preferred mode of expression is the personal essay. Of his three short novels, all for children, *Stuart Little* is criticized occasionally for its episodic nature, and the third, *The Trumpet of the Swan*, has not universally been considered successful. And so, in *Charlotte's Web* we may well be seeing E. B. White at his best.

That, at least, is how reviewers generally have perceived it. Edward Weeks, writing in *Atlantic*, said, "though I am not usually attracted by stories that personify animals, this one is absolutely delicious. I warn you it may be wise to have two copies in the house--one for the children and one for their parents." And Pamela Travers, in the *New York Herald Tribune*, stated: "such tangible magic is the proper element of childhood and any grown up who can still dip into it--even with only so much as a toe--is certain at last of dying young even if he lives to be ninety."

Among the few negative responses to the book, the most puzzling may be that of Anne Carroll Moore, who wrote in the *Horn Book Magazine*, "I may as well confess that I find *Charlotte's Web* hard to take from so masterly a hand. There is no one whose writing I more deeply regard in the adult field. *Stuart Little* disappointed me but thousands of people liked it." Specifically, Moore found Fern's mother offensively dumb. Of the other characters, she noted, "Fern, the real center of the book, is never developed. The animals never talk. They speculate. As to Charlotte, her magic and mystery require a different technique to create that lasting interest in spiders which controls childish impulse to do away with them."

If Moore's conclusions about *Charlotte's Web* seem eccentric, we may conclude on a happier note with the summary statement of one of White's most distinguished colleagues and contemporaries. Writing in the *New York Times* in October 1952, Eudora Welty said:

What the book is about is friendship on earth, affection, and protection, adventure and miracle, life and death, trust and

treachery, pleasure and pain, and the passing of time. As a piece of work it is just about perfect, and just about magical in the way it is done. What it all proves--in the words of the minister in the story which he hands down to his congregation after Charlotte writes "Some Pig" in her web--is "that human beings must always be on the watch for the coming of wonders...."

"At-at-at, at the risk of repeating myself," as the goose says, "Charlotte's Web" is an adorable book.

White's last children's book, *The Trumpet of the Swan*, was published in 1970. Its protagonist is a mute trumpeter swan, even though White had never seen such a bird. There is, in the White archives at Cornell, a rich and amusing correspondence between White and his old college friend, Howard Cushman, a Philadelphia whom White asked to photograph and to observe closely the trumpeter swans at the Philadelphia Zoo, as well as to obtain other information about Philadelphia and about sentimental popular songs of a decade or two earlier, which the talented swan protagonist, Louis, named after Louis Armstrong, plays on his trumpet.

The first hint that the idea of *The Trumpet of the Swan* was beginning to form in White's mind is in an unpublished letter dated 21 July 1965. White wrote Cushman, "If I get to Philly in the near future it will be because I am irresistibly drawn to your Zoo's bird park, where, as you probably don't know, a pair of Trumpeter Swans (with an assist from a second female) recently hatched five cygnets. I have never seen a Trumpeter Swan, and this would be my chance. The N. Y. Times had a lovely pix of them...."

The story, in brief, is that eleven-year-old Sam Beaver, camping with his father in western Canada, sees a clutch of swan eggs hatching. Sam Beaver, as befits his last name, befriends the swans, and stays in touch with them till the end of the story. Insofar as he is a child growing up, we may see a parallel to the story of Fern in *Charlotte's Web*. On the other hand, unlike Fern, Sam does not grow alienated from the natural world. Near the story's end, in fact, Sam is brought to the Philadelphia Zoo, where Louis the swan is negotiating with the Head Man in Charge of Birds to let his beloved female, Serena, fly back to Canada. Sam, having retained his love for animals, takes a job at the zoo, and in the last chapter, in sharp contrast to Fern, Sam, again camping at the same Canadian lake with his father, hears his beloved swans--and keeps the knowledge of them as his own.

Louis's adventures are episodic, in the vein of *Stuart Little*'s, although not to the same degree. The story was written much more rapidly than that of *Stuart*, and perhaps, therefore, it is more integrated, even though the plot is not woven nearly as tightly as is the story of *Wilbur*.

At story's outset, Louis's father is dismayed that his offspring cannot talk. There is some banter and some paternal explaining of the word *dumb*. The swans, who speak English among themselves, go to Red Rock Lakes, Montana, for the summer. Young swan Louis finds his friend, young Sam Beaver, again (the plausible and the implausible is no issue whatsoever in this story), and he goes to school with Sam, where he learns to write. Louis's further communication with human beings will be by way of chalk and a slate board. Time, then, contracts in the tale; the next spring arrives, and Louis, back again in Canada, falls in love with the graceful Serena. But, sadly, he cannot say "ko-hoh," as any courting swan must.

The cob, having his son's amatory interests at heart, takes matters in his own wings, flies to Billings, Montana, plummets himself through a music store window, and absconds with a trumpet. Henceforth, Louis travels with a slate, a pencil, and the trumpet on a red cord around his neck. He is troubled, however, because the trumpet was stolen, and he resolves to earn the money to pay back the music-store owner in Billings. First, through the good offices of Sam, Louis gets a job as counselor and trumpeter at Camp Kookoskoos, where he plays volleyball, rescues a young boy (for which he earns a medal, which also goes around his neck), and plays taps in the evening. At this point in the story, the adventures seem arbitrary. There could have been more; there might have been less--as was the case in *Stuart Little*.

Realizing that he needs something approximating fingers in order to play the three valves on his trumpet properly, Louis has Sam slit the webbing between his "toes"--a painless operation, albeit a bit unnerving to read about.

Louis's next adventure is to go to Boston in order to float gracefully ahead of a swan boat, playing his trumpet. He stays at the Ritz, and he causes consternation by ordering twelve watercress sandwiches. When asked whether he wants them with mayonnaise or without, having never tasted mayonnaise, he orders eleven without, and one with. He is admired and he draws crowds as he plays on his trumpet the old song "There's a small hotel with a wishing well." (Regarding the exact words to this song, there is an amusing unpublished correspondence between White and Cushman.)

As Louis's fame spreads, he is invited to Philadelphia to play in a nightclub for \$500--an offer he accepts, still remembering the debt to the music-store owner which he is determined to make good. Louis is given free room and board at the Bird Lake in the Philadelphia Zoo, in return for which he plays free concerts on Sunday afternoon. For ten weeks he stays there with the three other trumpeter swans, until, one blustery night, Serena is driven by the storm to land in the same zoo. His passion aroused, Louis, at dawn the next morning, plays for Serena "Beautiful Dreamer," as the other animals listen, enchanted. In one of the more lyrical passages of the story, White describes this dawn scene. Danger threatens, however. The zoo administration sees its opportunity, and Serena is about to be pinioned, that is, to have her wing tips clipped so that she will not fly away again. Louis, seeing the threat, hurtles himself at the zoo keeper and thus prevents the mutilation. He proceeds to tell the Head Man in Charge of Birds that he is in love with Serena and would like to take off with her. Sam, Louis's old friend from chick days, arrives and works out a compromise with the Head Man. Serena and Louis will be permitted to take off for their native habitat. They promise that they will, every once in a while, deliver a new baby trumpeter swan back to the Philadelphia Zoo.

Louis and Serena return to Red Rock Lakes. Louis gives his father his accumulated earnings, \$4420.78, which the old cob returns to the music-store owner. And Louis and Serena go on to establish their own family--or families--generations of eggs and little swans. And when, annually, they fly south, they keep the promise, and do, on occasion, deliver a baby trumpeter swan to the zoo.

Sam Beaver now has his job in the zoo. And still, as in former days, he on occasion goes camping with his father in the Canadian woods. And there he hears Louis's trumpet--and keeps his own counsel.

*The Trumpet of the Swan*, which would be a splendid accomplishment for a lesser writer, does not stand comparison with *Charlotte's Web*, or even with *Stuart Little*, particularly well. Nonetheless, the book is adventurous, imaginative, and it has some touching moments, such as the incident of Louis's care for Serena when she is driven into the zoo at night by the storm.

The degree to which it differs from *Stuart Little* and from *Charlotte's Web* is signaled early, by the first sentence: "Walking back to camp through the swamp, Sam wondered whether to tell his father what he had seen." Though certainly not a dull beginning, this is hardly as actively dramatic as "Where's Papa going with that ax?" or the inimitable opening of *Stuart Little*.

The plot, although linked (which is to say, events evolve from Louis's muteness and his trumpet), is loose and episodic. We do have, as in both White's other children's books, the remarkable communication between animal and human, even though each book differs subtly from the other two in this regard. In *Stuart Little*, there is, of course, the initial question of whether Stuart is a mouse at all. Aside from that by no means minor issue, however, we accept that animals talk to animals and that only Stuart talks with human beings. In *Charlotte's Web*, Fern understands the animals until she reaches a certain "maturity," and the fact that she unfortunately but inevitably reaches that "maturity" is one of the significant concepts of the book. In *The Trumpet of the Swan*, the swans speak (and Louis writes) English. Not only that, but the cob, Louis's father, has a mode of speaking that can only be said, again, to mimic the grandiloquent posturing of W. C. Fields. "Look out!" says the cob in one instance. "Look out for the fox who is creeping toward you even as I speak, his eyes bright, his bushy tail out straight, his mind lusting for blood, his belly almost touching the ground!..." The cob is given to rhetorical bombast and hyperbole, and his wife, Louis's mother, treats the cob's grandstanding with calm practicality. Again we have a parody, a comic strip almost at times, in the Blondie and Dagwood vein.

Even aside from the matter of the birds' communication, *The Trumpet of the Swan* may be the least plausible book. *Charlotte's Web* violates the laws of nature with restraint, never gratuitously, but only and exclusively in furtherance of its most basic plot. *Stuart Little* has adventures, car rides, boat races, and such, which exist for their own delightfulness, but which are not necessary--though certainly allowed--in furtherance of the plot. They do all together, however, help to create the picture of Stuart as the debonair character he is. In the case of Louis, however, plausibility is thrown to the winds. It is not even an issue. That, in itself, is not an evaluative judgment (after all, there is no universal law of aesthetics that says plots must be coherent, and that actions must arise organically out of plots). White, almost with bravado, it seems, throws down the gauntlet--a trumpet-playing swan who, without further ado, writes in English on a slate and who bargains with a human zoo keeper.

There are those among the reviewers who seem measured in their enthusiasm, as, for instance, the reviewer in the *Times Literary Supplement* who termed Louis a "sort of feathered Louis Armstrong," adding, "whether you care for this sort of thing or not depends on your sense of humor."

Still, generally, the book was well accepted. Paul Heins, writing in the *Horn Book* magazine, opined that the story was "carried along by the author's characteristically understated style, which extracts the essential humor from the most unprepossessing of situations and often spills over into uproariously ludicrous episodes." M. A. Dorsey, in *Library Journal*, seriously questioned the "easy acceptance of literate Louis by numberless human characters," but he also praised the book, saying that "a good deal of interesting nature lore is an unobtrusive part of the story" that "humor abounds and beauty--of nature, of relationships, of time passing--shines through the simple, ultimately convincing narrative."

Perhaps the most significant praise, however, came from John Updike, who wrote, "E. B. White's third novel for children joins the two others on the shelf of classics,... [This] is the most spacious and serene of the three, the most imbued with the author's sense of the precious instinctual heritage represented by wild nature. Its story most persuasively offers itself to children as a parable of growing, yet does not lack the simplicity that never condescends, the straight and earnest telling that happens upon, rather than veers into comedy."

*The Trumpet of the Swan* is the only one of White's three children's books without the illustrations by Garth Williams. On the whole, however, the pictures by Edward Frascino (and one by White himself) were well received by reviewers, including Updike, who wrote that "drawings less vague than Frascino's might mar more illusion than they abet."

White's swan song is not an unfitting conclusion for the great contribution he has made to imaginative literature for children. This last book, as much as the first two, asks once again the question put by Stuart Little to the fifth graders, "How many of you know what's important?" And the answer, as ever in White's writing, remains essentially the same: art (music, in this instance); friendship; nature; and growing up--or older--within time, within the circle of nature's seasons. Truly we may apply Charlotte's epitaph one last time: "It is not often that someone comes along who is a true friend and a good writer." For the world's children, E. B. White has, indeed, been both.

#### Papers:

White's papers are in the E. B. White Collection at Olin Library, Cornell University, with the exception of the manuscript for *The Trumpet of the Swan*, which is in the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York City.

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