

E. B. White

Elwyn Brooks White has written three books for children, each one of them a classic in its own time: *Stuart Little* (1945), *Charlotte's Web* (1952) and *The Trumpet Of The Swan* (1970). His work for adults is equally known: *The Lady Is Cold* (1929) and *Is Sex Necessary?* (1929), essays which he wrote with James Thurber, to mention but two publications. He has also been a regular contributor to the humor columns of *Harper's* and the *New Yorker* magazines.

Charlotte's Web is White's most famous contribution to children's literature. A little girl called Fern stops her father from slaughtering Wilbur, a pig who is born a runt. Bottle-fed on the best milk, Wilbur grows up strong and sturdy. It seems the question of his death, this time for the larder, must inevitably crop up again. But in the barn where he is kept Wilbur attracts the sympathy of Charlotte, a clever spider who promises to save her friend. Accordingly she spins a series of webs, into which are woven redeeming slogans, beginning with "Some Pig." The human community is justifiably amazed by this, and Wilbur is taken to the fair to be exhibited, accompanied of course by Charlotte. The ruse is altogether successful: Wilbur saves his bacon and lives out his days in peace. *The Trumpet Of The Swan* concerns Louis, a cygnet born without a voice. This defect is remedied when his father procures him a human trumpet. Louis quickly becomes a virtuoso, gives concerts in Boston's Public Garden, and makes a small fortune by doing so.

Far-fetched perhaps, but White has the finesse and lightness of touch to make it all work. It is this quality that links him with some of the best children's writers of the past (Kenneth Grahame is the obvious example) and gives him a particular niche in the present. One wishes that more children's writers could combine fantasy and delight in the way White does; but one knows that it is much, much harder than it looks. White himself admits that he took twelve years to write *Stuart Little*.

E. B. White was born in 1899 in Mount Vernon, New York, and

was educated locally. He graduated from Cornell University in 1921, after service in the First World War. He later joined the staff of the *New Yorker*, where he met his wife, a former editor. In 1938 the Whites moved to a farm in Brookline, Mass., where they have lived ever since.

To date *Charlotte's Web* has sold over three million copies in softback, and *Stuart Little* just under half that number. Hardback sales of these two books amount to over two million.

The Pied Pipers

Interviews with the influential
creators of children's literature

by Justin Wintle and Emma Fisher

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Q *Many outstanding American authors have also been journalists. Why is this? And what in your view does journalism do for a writer who has other ambitions?*

A I was a journalist first, an author second. A good deal of my life was spent with the *New Yorker*—I was a commentator, a reporter, and a memoirist. I submitted everything that came into my head and out of my typewriter, including poems. Journalism, the life of quick action and deadlines, is good discipline for a writer, and I still have the instincts and habits of a journalist, though I am no longer actively engaged in writing for a periodical.

Q *All your books, for young and old readers alike, are characterized by elegance and humor. Where did these qualities come from?*

A If, as you suggest, there is any elegance, any humor in my work, I haven't the slightest idea of the source of such qualities. When humor shows up in a person's writing, it seems to me it is because the writer has a natural awareness of the curious ironies and juxtapositions of life. Jane Austen seldom wrote anything funny, but her novels are masterpieces of humorous expression.

Q *On the subject of humor, does it come out of the fantasy in your children's books? Or does the fantasy come out of the humor? If I am making an impossible distinction, could you please say why?*

A When you ask whether, in my books for children, the humor comes out of the fantasy, or whether it is the other way round, you are asking me a question I can't answer. I would think that fantastical episodes or situations have a tendency to evoke humor. A lot depends, I suppose, on what a writer does with his material. There is a place in *Charlotte's Web* where the pig boasts that he can spin a web, and he makes a try at it. Perhaps there is something essentially comical about a pig trying to spin a web—I don't know. But whether there is or isn't, the way a writer develops the theme is crucial.

Q *What are the differences between writing for children and writing for adults in your experience?*

A What are the differences between writing for children and writing for adults? In my experience, the only difference (save for a very slight modification of vocabulary) is in one's state of mind. Children are a wonderful audience—they are so eager, so receptive, so quick. I have great respect for their powers

of observation and reasoning. But like any good writer, I write to amuse myself, not some imaginary audience, and I rather suspect that it is a great help if one has managed never really to grow up. Some writers, I have noticed, have a tendency to write *down* to children. That way lies disaster. Other writers feel they must use only the easy words, the familiar words. I use any word I feel like using, on the theory that children enjoy new encounters and that I don't gain anything by depriving myself of the full scope of the language. When I mentioned a "very slight modification of vocabulary," I was really alluding to the state of one's mind—which has an effect on the state of one's vocabulary.

Q *In Stuart Little the book opens with a woman giving birth to a mouse. There would be something nauseous about this if it happened in an adult novel, but in a children's book it can stand. Does this point to something essential about what a children's book is?*

A The arrival of Stuart as the second son of Mrs. Frederick C. Little would have been completely unacceptable had I entertained any monstrous ideas about the matter, or had I introduced it gradually and in detail. It all happens in the first sentence and without the slightest suggestion of anything untoward or disagreeable. You have to make the leap boldly, if you are going to jump at all. As the story develops, it becomes clear that Stuart is a boy who happens to look like a mouse. The whole business is so fantastical as to rule out any anatomical embarrassment, such as a woman giving birth to a mouse. The first chapter of *Stuart Little* was written about fifty years ago, and in that innocent day children were not privy to the facts of life. Today, they are better informed about mammalian birth, and I suppose a few of them have moments of wondering about Stuart. But for the most part they accept the event without question, which is the happy approach.

Q *What made you want to write your three books for children? Were they in fact written for children? And (the obvious question I'm afraid) what were the origins of each one?*

A My first book for children was not begun with book publication in mind. I had a small son and several small nephews and nieces, and occasionally I wrote an episode in the hope of amusing them. A dozen years or more went by before *Stuart Little* emerged as a book. My second book for children was written because I had an urge to bring the characters in my own barnyard into a sustained story. I used to raise a spring pig, for butchering

in the fall and I never much cared for this deliberate murder, so I invented a way to save a pig's life. *Charlotte's Web* was an easy book for me to write because of my intimate connection with the main characters. I wrote *The Trumpet Of The Swan* when I was visited by the idea of a Trumpeter Swan who came into the world without a voice.

Q *There are two themes common to all three of your children's books. The first is the anthropomorphic one, the animal as a participant in human society. How would you compare your kind of anthropomorphism with that of other writers (e.g. Richard Adams in *Watership Down* or Kipling's *Jungle Books* or the Doctor Doolittle books)? Is it a means of gentle satire?*

A I think all anthropomorphism is satirical. I can't compare my kind with the style of other writers—I'll leave that to somebody else.

Q *The second theme is that each of your characters struggles against and masters incredible odds. Louis the Swan overcomes his muteness by learning the trumpet; Wilbur the pig is saved from slaughter when his friend Charlotte the Spider learns to write inside her web; and Stuart Little simply manages to survive. Is this a theme you have been aware of?*

A None of my books was written to a theme. Life is a struggle, and there is always the question of survival uppermost. So it is not surprising that these three stories, although completely different one from the other, have a common thread running through them.

Q *Given the similarities of your three children's books, how in your opinion have you developed as a children's writer?*

A I don't understand your ninth question. There is some question as to my having "developed" as a children's writer. I may just have been going downhill without knowing it.

Q *When *Stuart Little* was still in manuscript it was deplored by Anne Carroll Moore, then a leading authority on children's literature in the States. Many years later you wrote a piece claiming that her response was based on a judgment that you had broken certain "inflexible rules" when writing for children. What were those inflexible rules, and how have they changed since then?*

A I can't say what was in Anne Carroll Moore's mind when she tried to get me to withdraw the manuscript of *Stuart Little*.

I think she was dead set against an American family having a mouse-boy. I think, too, she found my story inconclusive (which it is), and it seems to me she said something about its having been written by a sick mind. I may be misquoting her, as I haven't got the letter in my possession. There were undoubtedly some rules a writer was supposed to follow when writing for children, and I guess I smashed a few of them, knowingly or unknowingly. Today, all rules are off; the sky is the limit.

Q *When you wish to "make a point" in your children's books you do it by humorous demonstration, never by preaching. The term "low seriousness" I expect would make you jump; but what would you call it?*

A A writer who isn't "serious" isn't a writer at all. My books are serious books. But a man doesn't have to give up jumping and dancing and singing just because he is a serious man. I dive into a story the way I dive into the sea, prepared to splash about and make merry.

Q *Several critics have found that the ending of *Stuart Little* is inconclusive—in fact a non-ending. Do you ever feel the same way about it? Can something which is essentially humorous in fact have an ending?*

A There have been complaints about the ending of *Stuart Little*. Children, by and large, want to know whether Stuart ever found Margalo, and whether he got home. But I deliberately left the matter hanging. The story is the story of a quest—specifically, the quest for beauty. Life is essentially inconclusive, in most respects, and a "happy" ending would have been out of key with the story of Stuart's search. Once in a while, to my great delight, a young reader perceives this and writes me a letter of approbation.

Q *Both *Stuart Little* and *The Trumpet Of The Swan* contain school scenes, lessons in which conventional methods of teaching are sent up. Is this because you object to the way you were educated?*

A The schoolroom scenes in *Stuart* and *The Trumpet* got in there naturally. I did not introduce them, or concoct them, in order to comment on my own schooling. I was educated in a period when schoolrooms were dull and unimaginative, when discipline was firm, and when not much effort was made to give scholars free rein. If the schoolrooms in my books are a bit on the disorderly side, perhaps it is a subconscious attempt on my part to raise a rumpus and break the monotony. But I am glad I

went to schools that made no bones about teaching me to read and write and spell. Too many youngsters nowadays enter college not knowing how to read and write and spell, more the pity. Even a monotonous atmosphere has its virtues, for it compels the scholar to invent ways to lift himself out of his boredom, and sometimes this takes the form of creation.

Q *"People believe almost anything they see in print" — the Spider's excuse in Charlotte's Web. Is that true? And in what sense would a child "believe" in the fantasies you have created?*

A Children obviously enjoy fantastical events. The dullards among them soberly question the happenings and ask, "Is it true?" But most children are quite able to absorb and enjoy fantasy without questioning it, even when they are aware that they are momentarily inhabiting a world quite different from the real one.

Q *In Charlotte's Web you make it a point that the girl, Fern, never talks to any of the animals, only listens to what they say. Why did you stop there?*

A In *Charlotte's Web* there is no conversation between animals and people. Animals talk to animals, people talk to people. Fern is a listener, and a translator. This is basic to the story. It also provides a story that is much closer to reality. Animals do converse — not in English words, but they converse.

Q *Perhaps Charlotte's Web is your most popular book because its characters are so fully blown. Did they just come from what you considered the nature of the animals in question, or were they derived from elsewhere too? Is Templeton unscrupulous simply because he is a rat, or because he reminds you of someone as well?*

A The characters in *Charlotte's Web* were based on the animals I happened to be living among — the spider, the rat, the pig, the geese, the sheep. Templeton does not remind me of anyone — he is unscrupulous because he is a rat.

Q *What is the appeal of writing children's books to you?*

A It amuses me to write children's books — perhaps that is what you mean when you ask, "What is the appeal. . ." But I am not mainly a writer of children's stories. For every children's book I've written, I have written four adult books.

Q *Have there been distinct influences? What was the effect of working with Thurber? Were you brought up on Huckleberry Finn?*

A I was not brought up on *Huckleberry Finn*. And I don't recall that working with Thurber had any profound influence on me, although it was a pleasure.

Q *Have you read the work of other contemporary children's writers? If so, whom would you single out for praise or scorn?*

A I am not well-read in contemporary literature for children and am not in a good position to comment on other authors.

September, 1974

PIGS AND SPIDERS

MY FRIENDS IN THE ANIMAL WORLD

by E. B. WHITE, author of *CHARLOTTE'S WEB*reprinted from McClurg's Book News January 1953. 49.

I have been asked to tell how I came to write *Charlotte's Web*. Well, I like animals, and it would be odd if I failed to write about them. Animals are a weakness with me, and when I got a place in the country I was quite sure animals would appear, and they did.

A farm is a particular problem for a man who likes animals, because the fate of most livestock is that they are murdered by their benefactors. The creatures may live serenely but they end violently, and the odor of doom hangs about them always. I have kept several pigs, starting them in spring as weanlings and carrying trays to them all through the summer and fall. The relationship bothered me. Day by day I became better acquainted with my pig, and he with me, and the fact that the whole adventure pointed toward an eventual piece of double-dealing on my part lent an eerie quality to the thing. I do not like to betray a person or a creature, and I tend to agree with Mr. E. M. Forster that in these times the duty of a man, above else, is to be reliable. It used to be clear to me, slopping a pig, that as far as the pig was concerned I could not be counted on,

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later, when it was time to return to New York, not wishing to part with my spider, I took a razor blade, cut the sac adrift from the underside of the shed roof, put spider and sac in a candy box, and carried them to town. I tossed the box on my dresser. Some weeks later I was surprised and pleased to find that Charlotte's daughters were emerging from the air holes in the cover of the box. They strung tiny lines from my comb to my brush, from my brush to my mirror, and from my mirror to my nail scissors. They were very busy and almost invisible, they were so small. We

and this, as I say, troubled me. Anyway, the theme of *Charlotte's Web* is that a pig shall be saved, and I have an idea that somewhere deep inside me there was a wish to that effect.

As for Charlotte herself, I had never paid much attention to spiders until a few years ago. Once you begin watching spiders, you haven't time for much else—the world is really loaded with them. I do not find them repulsive or revolting, any more than I find anything in nature repulsive or revolting, and I think it is too bad that children are often corrupted by their elders in this hate campaign. Spiders are skillful, amusing, and only in rare instances has anybody ever come to grief because of a spider.

One cold October evening I was lucky enough to see *Aranea Cavatica* spin her egg sac and deposit her eggs. (I did not know her name at the time, but I admired her, and later Mr. Willis J. Gertsch of the American Museum of Natural History told me her name.) When I saw that she was fixing to become a mother, I got a stepladder and an extension light and had an excellent view of the whole business. A few days

all lived together happily for a couple of weeks, and then somebody whose duty it was to dust my dresser balked, and I broke up the show.

At the present time, three of Charlotte's granddaughters are trapping at the foot of the stairs in my barn cellar, where the morning light, coming through the east window, illuminates their embroidery and makes it seem even more wonderful than it is.

I haven't told why I wrote the book, but I haven't told why I sneeze, either. A book is a sneeze.

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Peter F. Newmeyer. The Annotated *Charlotte's Web* New York: HarperCollins, 1994