

Writing to Gene Dietz, White cautioned, "I do hope . . . that you are not planning to turn *Charlotte's Web* into a moral tale. It is not that at all. It is, I think, an appreciative story, and there is quite a difference. It celebrates life, the season, the goodness of the barn, the beauty of the world, the glory of everything. But it is essentially amoral, because animals are essentially amoral, and I respect them, and I think this respect is implicit in the tale."

But how could White remain true to his vision of respectful amorality and still save his pig? That's no easy task, and, in fact, things don't look that good for Wilbur the pig well into the book. And, then, on page 31, Wilbur hears a "rather thin but pleasant" voice: "Do you want a friend, Wilbur? . . . I'll be a friend to you. I've watched you all day and I like you." And with those few words, White's hymn to the barn is launched on an altogether new and dangerous trajectory. Wilbur will be saved by a spider named Charlotte who is both "a true friend and a good writer." But in saving a pig, will we lose a barn? Will the manure still smell when the spiders become prose stylists?

We know now, of course, that White's barn was plenty big enough for both Wilbur's manure and Charlotte's bons mots. Fantasy and reality coexist so amicably on Zuckerman's farm because White did his homework. He studied spiders in his barn, he read about their behavior, he consulted experts about their anatomy. And he came to believe one simple thing: "I discovered that there was no need to tamper in any way with the habits and characteristics of spiders, pigs, geese, and rats." We accept the magic in *Charlotte's Web* because it never violates the reality of the barn. White puts it this way: "In writing of a spider, I did not make the spider adapt her ways to my scheme. . . . My feeling about animals is just the opposite of Disney's. He made them dance to his tune and came up with some great creations, like Donald Duck. I preferred to dance to their tune and came up with Charlotte and Wilbur."

In the January 1948 issue of *Atlantic Monthly*, White published an essay called "Death of a Pig." It is one of his most powerful pieces of prose, yet it is also one of his most simple and direct. The essay describes several days and nights during which White attended a sick pig on his farm. Despite his owner's ministrations, the pig eventually died, and White's grief, understated yet palpable, pours from the pages like sweat. White later contended that this essay, written about a year before he began work on *Charlotte*, wasn't in his mind as he set about saving Wilbur, but that's awfully hard to accept.

"Death of a Pig," after all, is the reality without the fantasy. The pig dies, and life goes on. *Charlotte's Web* gave White the chance to write a different ending. One could say that White feels about pigs as Robert Frost, another New England farmer, feels about walls. Pigs must die, either by their owner's hand or of natural causes, and walls are necessary devices on a working farm. But just as there is something that doesn't love a wall, so is there something that would save a pig.

Discussion questions

1. White loves lists, of the items found in a barn, for example, or of the foods Wilbur eats. Examine one of White's lists in *Charlotte's Web*, and discuss its contents. What does the list add to the book, and why does White describe the items as he does?
2. Friendship is one of the main themes in the novel. Discuss what being a good friend entails for both Charlotte and Wilbur.
3. The cyclical nature of life is also one of White's main themes. We see the seasons change over the course of the story, but we also see the characters change. Discuss the changes in Wilbur, Fern, Templeton, and Charlotte, but also note how they remain true to their essential selves.

Further reading

- Scott Elledge. *E. B. White: A Biography*. Norton, 1984.
- Roger Sale. *Fairy Tales and After: From Snow White to E. B. White*. Harvard, 1978.
- E. B. White. *The Annotated Charlotte's Web*, with introduction and notes by Peter F. Neumeyer. HarperCollins, 1994.
- E. B. White. "Death of a Pig." Collected in *Essays of E. B. White*. Harper & Row, 1977.

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Charlotte's Web

by E. B. White

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Editor's Note: New England is in many ways the region of America's childhood. Many prominent children's authors have come from the area and it continues to be a center for children's publishing. Charlotte's Web, a much beloved tale of friendship and family, represents the richness and the enduring qualities that have made children's literature from New England so appealing to all Americans. Charlotte's Web connects readers with the extraordinary tradition of children's literature in the region, from Alcott's Little Women to the fiction of Robert Cormier.

E. B. White bought a farm in Maine in 1933, and it was there that he developed his love for barns and the animals who live in barns, which led, in turn, to the writing of *Charlotte's Web*, perhaps the most celebrated children's book of the last half century. In many ways, White was a most unlikely children's book author. In 1925, he went to work at the *New Yorker*, founded only months before by iconoclastic editor Harold Ross, and in a few short years, his witty, understated prose helped carve the new magazine's identity.

The idea of writing children's books came to him, first, because his wife, Katharine, also an editor at the *New Yorker*, wrote an annual review of children's books for the magazine. Surrounded every year by the hundreds of books his wife examined for review, he was prompted to turn one of his dreams, about a boy who was two inches tall and bore an uncanny resemblance to a mouse, into a novel. That book, *Stuart Little*, was published in 1948 and, despite a scathing review by Anna Carroll Moore, the influential children's librarian at the New York Public Library, was an immediate hit with both children and adults.

Even after *Stuart Little's* success, White had no particular plans to write further children's books. He was busy turning out editorials in the "News and Comment" section of the *New Yorker*, where he tirelessly promoted the idea of world government in the wake of the horrors of World War II.

But in the summers, when he returned to the farm in Maine, he was raising animals and spending hours observing their behavior in his barn. After the publication of *Charlotte's Web*, he described the novel's gestation in an essay in *Saturday Review*:

"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, and this, as I say, troubled me."

As a farmer, White was obligated to kill the pigs he raised, but as a writer, he might be able to save one. *Charlotte's Web* gave him that chance.

In order to save his pig, White would need to combine fantasy and realism, as he had done in *Stuart Little*. This time, though, he faced a sterner challenge because, in a sense, his goals were contradictory. On the one hand, he wanted, above all, to celebrate barns and what happens in them. To do so required scrupulous observation and unflinching realism. In two of the most exquisite paragraphs in the novel, White describes the barn on Mr. Homer Zuckerman's farm, where the pig Wilbur comes to live:

"The barn was very large. It was very old. It smelled of hay and it smelled of manure. It smelled of the perspiration of tired horses and the wonderful sweet breath of patient cows. It often had a sort of peaceful smell—as though nothing bad could happen ever again in the world. It smelled of grain and harness dressing and of axle grease and of rubber boots and of new rope. And whenever the cat was given a fish-head to eat, the barn would smell of fish. But mostly it smelled of hay, for there was always hay in the great loft up overhead. And there was always hay being pitched down to the cows and the horses and the sheep."

"The barn was pleasantly warm in winter when the animals spent most of their time indoors, and it was pleasantly cool in summer when the big doors stood wide open to the breeze. The barn had stalls on the main floor for the work horses, tie-ups on the main floor for the cows, a sheepfold down below for the sheep, a pigpen down below for Wilbur, and it was full of all sorts of things that you find in barns: ladders, grindstones, pitch forks, monkey wrenches, scythes, lawn mowers, snow shovels, ax handles, milk pails, water buckets, empty grain sacks, and rusty rat traps. It was the kind of barn that swallows like to build their nests in. It was the kind of barn that children like to play in. And the whole thing was owned by Fern's uncle, Mr. Homer L. Zuckerman."

In a letter to a screenwriter, Gene Dietz, who hoped to adapt *Charlotte's Web* for the movies, White once wrote that the novel was "a paean to life, a hymn to the barn, an acceptance of dung." That hymn-like quality is never more apparent than in the paragraphs above. White doesn't just love barns; he finds in them what his biographer, Scott Elledge, has called "a kind of paradise regained." Remember that at the time White was observing the animals in his barn and deciding to save a pig in literature, if not in life, he was also, in the pages of the *New Yorker*, trying to convince a recalcitrant world that internationalism offered humanity its best chance to avoid destroying itself.

White generally shunned politics, but his commitment to the idea of world government—nations relinquishing some part of their autonomy in the interests of peace—prompted him to return to daily journalism and, in effect, campaign for his cause. It became clear rather quickly that even White's crystal-clear prose would not be enough to force nations, including members of the newly formed U.N., to give up much real power. It's not hard to understand why White found barn life preferable to political life, or why, as Elledge points out, he found the smell of manure and other organic matter reassuring. Smells, White once wrote, are comforting because they remind us that "life can be cyclic and chemically perfect and aromatic and continuous." Political rhetoric, on the other hand, offers no such consolations.

Given the glaring contrasts between the postwar world and life on the farm, it would hardly have been surprising if White's portrayal of his barn had been overly idealized, smelling more of sentimentality than of manure. But the greatness of *Charlotte's Web* is that the smells are always organic, and the barn is never a bucolic version of Oz.