

# E. B. WHITE AND CHARLOTTE'S WEB

*Editors note: Fifty years ago, on January 19, 1951, E.B. White finished the first draft of Charlotte's Web. The following year, Charlotte was published, and quickly became one of the most beloved children's books of all time.*

BY SCOTT ELLEDGE

WHILE WE do not know exactly when E.B. White began to write *Charlotte's Web*, or when the outlines of its story started to take shape in his mind, we do know the particular circumstances that led him to its theme. White once described them as follows:

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 peculiar 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 all 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. 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.<sup>1</sup>

As it turned out, White's wish came true in the story of a pig named Wilbur who is saved by a spider named Charlotte. They live in the same barn and first become

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acquainted when Charlotte overhears Wilbur lamenting his loneliness and offers to be his friend. Wilbur thinks she is beautiful and, as he gets to know her, finds her fascinating. When he hears that his owner, Mr. Zuckerman, plans to butcher him at Christmas-time, Charlotte calms his fears by promising to save him. A loyal (and talented) friend, she is as good as her word. She makes Mr. Zuckerman believe that Wilbur is an exceptional pig by writing words into the webs she weaves in the corner of the doorway to Wilbur's home in the cellar of the barn. The Zuckerman family and all their neighbors are amazed when they read Charlotte's legend SOME PIG, and take it for a miracle—a mysterious sign. And the wonder grows (as does Wilbur's reputation) when she extends her campaign with other legends: TERRIFIC and, later, RADIANT.

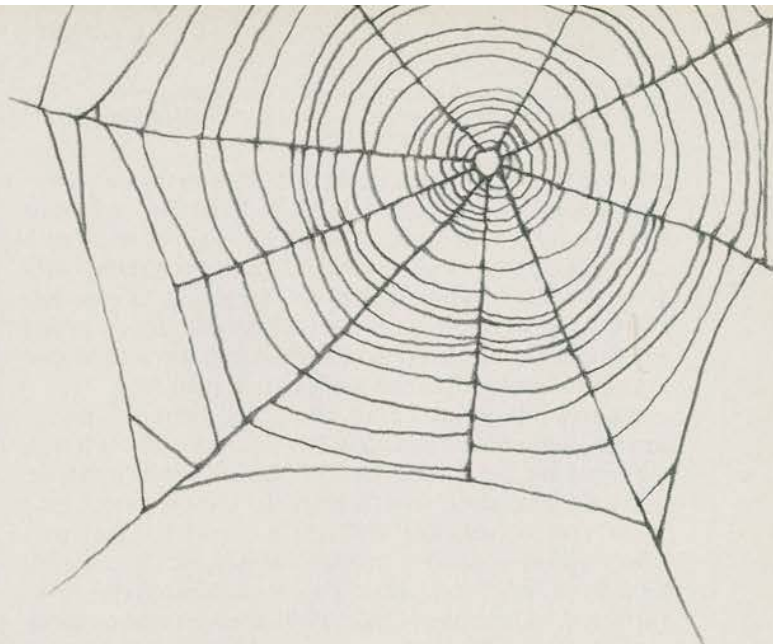
When Mr. Zuckerman takes Wilbur to the County Fair, Charlotte goes along in Wilbur's crate, hoping to help him win a prize and believing that if he does Mr. Zuckerman will not kill him. During the night before the prizes are awarded she weaves one more word—this time above Wilbur's exhibition pen, where all can see it. She chooses HUMBLE for her ultimate praise, a word she thinks appropriate because its dictionary definitions, "not proud" and "near the ground,"<sup>2</sup> fit Wilbur, who has remained modest in spite of his fame. The board of governors of the Fair give Wilbur a special award at a ceremony in front of the grandstand, and Mr. Zuckerman's delight assures Wilbur of a long life.

At the Fair, as soon as she has finished writing HUMBLE, Charlotte turns all her energies to making an egg sac and laying 514 eggs, after which achievement, she knows, she will languish and die. The news of her impending death crushes Wilbur, but when Charlotte says she doesn't even have the strength to get to the crate in which he will be returned to Zuckerman's barn, Wilbur has the wit to persuade his friend Templeton, the rat, to detach Charlotte's egg sac carefully from its place high up on the wall of his pen and bring it to him. Wilbur then carries it safely back home, where, in a scooped-out place in his warm manure pile, the eggs will be safe during the long winter.

When Charlotte's children begin to hatch on a warm spring day, Wilbur's heart pounds and he trembles



E.B. White at age 62.



with joy. When they are all hatched, his heart brims with happiness. The story ends:

Wilbur never forgot Charlotte. Although he loved her children and grandchildren dearly, none of the new spiders ever quite took her place in his heart. She was in a class by herself. It is not often that someone comes along who is a true friend and a good writer. Charlotte was both.

A biographer could cite many events in White's life that found their way into *Charlotte's Web*, but none would add so much to its significance as an event that occurred in 1949, just about the time he began to write the book. In August of that year, in a letter to his friend John McNulty, White reported that the only writing he had done that summer was an introduction to a new edition of the late Don Marquis's masterpiece *archy and mebitabel*. He had, he said, "lost the knack of earning money by putting one word after another." The introduction would "just about put a new sole" on his sneakers.<sup>3</sup> It is hard to believe he was seriously worried about income. He had his small salary from *The New Yorker* for doing newsbreaks; he had income from investments; he had royalties from *Stuart Little*; and "Here Is New York," for which *Holiday* had paid him \$3,000, was such a success that Harper had decided to republish it as a little book in time for the Christmas trade. (By the end of the year, 28,000 copies had been printed, and the Book-of-the-Month Club had selected it as part of a dual selection for January.) Moreover, White could scarcely have felt financially pressed at the same time he and [his wife] Katharine were planning to go to Europe on the *Queen Elizabeth* and he was planning to have a sloop built in a Danish boatyard. In any case, the \$500 he was paid for his introduction to *archy and mebitabel* would have been inconsequential in comparison with the value of certain ideas he may have been reminded of as he read and wrote about Marquis's book—ideas that are important to the story and to the meaning of *Charlotte's Web*.

White had admired Marquis since youth, and now, as he was about to pay tribute to him, he was aware that he resembled Marquis in some ways:

[Marquis] was the sort of poet who does not create easily; he was left unsatisfied and gloomy by what he had produced; day and night he felt the juices squeezed out

of him by the merciless demands of daily newspaper work; he was never quite certified by intellectuals and serious critics of belles lettres.<sup>4</sup>

White had not suffered that much, but he knew something about journalism's "merciless demands," and now, in 1949, he felt, in spite of honorary degrees and other recognition, that "serious critics" had never quite certified him. When White described Marquis as "a parodist, historian, poet, clown, fable writer, satirist, reporter and teller of tales," he also described himself.<sup>5</sup> He also shared Marquis's views of human glory and human folly.

What White wrote about two of the fictional characters in *Archy and Mehitabel* has an especially interesting bearing on *Charlotte's Web*. Mehitabel, he reminded his readers, was "always the lady, toujours gai." Some years later, describing Charlotte to someone who wanted to make a movie of the book, White said, "She is, if anything, more the Mehitabel type—*toujours gai*." Charlotte is like Mehitabel in other significant ways—in her independence and self-confidence, in her wit and competence, in her tough-minded generosity, and especially in her loyalty to herself.

About Warty Bliggens, the toad, White said: "[Marquis] was at his best in a piece like 'warty bliggens,' which has the jewel-like perfection of poetry and contains cosmic reverberations along with high comedy. Beautiful to read, beautiful to think about." The cosmic reverberations are produced by Archy, the cockroach, who describes Warty Bliggens as a toad who "considers himself to be the center of the universe":

the earth exists  
to grow toadstools for him  
to sit under  
the sun to give him light  
by day and the moon  
and wheeling constellations  
to make beautiful  
the night for the sake of  
warty bliggens....  
if i were a  
human being i would  
not laugh  
too complacently  
at poor warty bliggens  
for similar  
absurdities  
have only too often  
lodged in the crinkles  
of the human cerebrum<sup>6</sup>

White was tuned to the cosmic reverberations of that comment on man's disposition to assume that the whole universe was created to serve him, and *Charlotte's Web* would suggest the absurdity of that assumption. Once, in discussing *Charlotte's Web*, White was more explicit; he distinguished a spider from a human being by saying: "One has eight legs and has been around for an unbelievably long time on this earth; the other has two legs and has been around just long enough to raise a lot of hell, drain the swamps, and bring the planet to the verge of extinction."<sup>7</sup> There is no misanthropy in *Charlotte's Web*, but the heroic spider is both more noble and more adorable than any other creature in the story; and though White's purpose was not to preach a sermon, his fable about a heroic spider did contain cosmic reverberations of the same kind as those contained in Archy's wry comment about human beings who resemble the foolish toad.

The manuscript and notes of *Charlotte's Web* do not reveal much about the stages of its composition. The earliest extant draft is written in pencil on yellow sheets, some of them apparently substituted for earlier, discarded sheets, and a few of them apparently added as afterthoughts. All contain stylistic revisions made at the time of first writing as well as later. What White has labeled "First Draft," at any rate, is substantially the story as it finally appeared, except for the four chapters added in the final draft. There is no evidence that White made any essential changes in the original conception of the plot or its characters.

Apparently, most of the first draft was written in 1950, much of it between April 1 and October 15, in Maine. During this period he contributed nothing to "Notes and Comment" [a regular feature in *The New Yorker*], and he cancelled his reservations for the trip to England shortly after having made them. He wrote his editor at Harper that "maybe in the fall," instead of a collection of *New Yorker* pieces, he would "have another sort of book ready." "I guess it depends," he added, "on how many rainy mornings we get between now and fall, rain being about the only thing that brings me and a typewriter together."<sup>8</sup>

When White first met Charlotte A. Cavatica in person, he had called her Charlotte Epeira, because he thought she was a Grey Cross spider, the *Aranea sericata*, which in old books on spiders was called *Epeira sclopetaria*. She looked very much like one of the species of "House Araneas," described as "exceedingly abundant on buildings that are near the water."<sup>9</sup> Shortly after he met her White thought of making her the hero of his story:

The idea...came to me one day when I was on my way down through the orchard carrying a pail of slops to my pig. I had made up my mind to write a children's book about animals, and I needed a way to save a pig's life, and I had been watching a large spider in the backhouse, and what with one thing and another, the idea came to me.<sup>10</sup>

A month later he made an observation that led him to the discovery that she came from a different family than he had first thought. At the same time he discovered how to end her story:

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 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 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.<sup>11</sup>

Before he consulted Gertsch, he had discovered in John Henry Comstock's *Spider Book* a spider called *Aranea cavatica*, which "lives in great numbers about houses and barns in northern New England" and some-



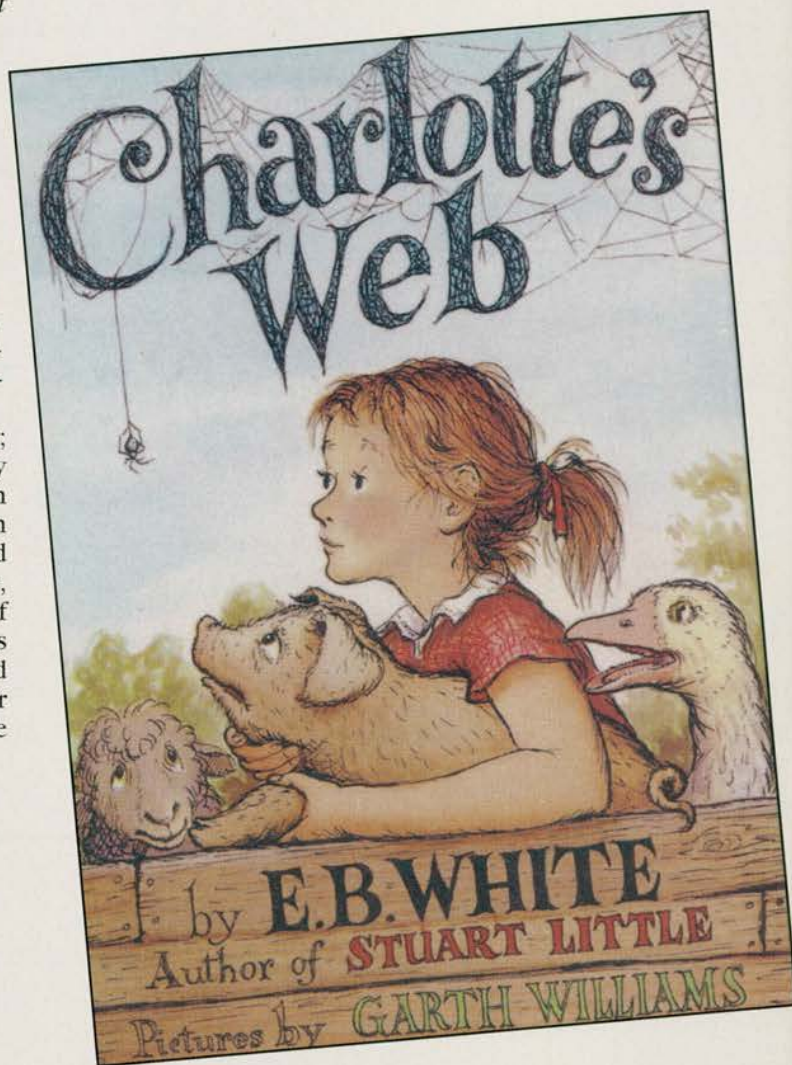
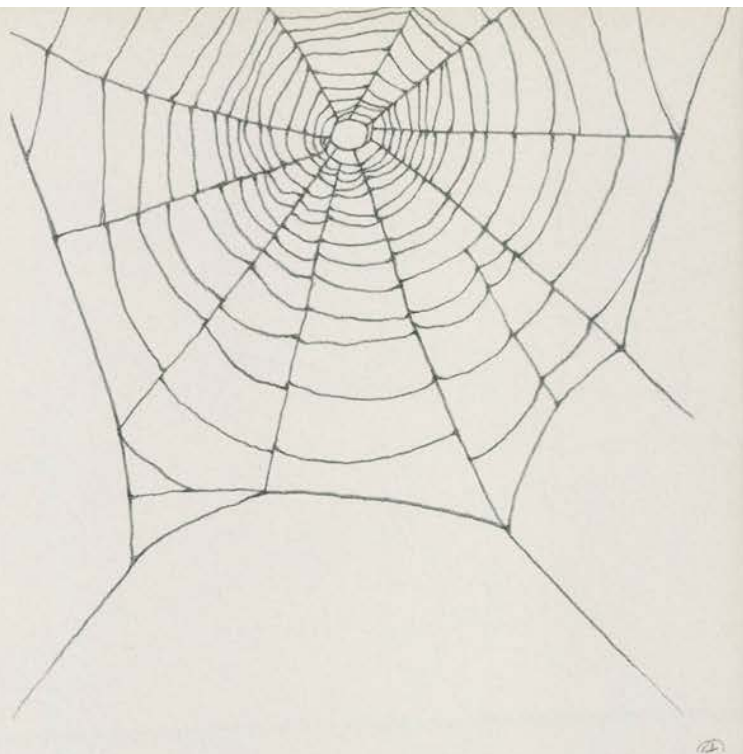
ther goes out to the hoghouse and by lantern-light finds that his sow has littered 11 pigs, one more than she has teats to feed them with. The trouble with all the variations on that opening was that they lacked dramatic action and failed to introduce the girl whose perception and sensibility would gradually lead the reader into the world of the barn. White did not succeed in shifting the emphasis until he hit upon the lead of the final version: "Where's Papa going with that ax?" said Fern to her mother as they were setting the table for breakfast."

In the opening chapters of the revised version, White tells how Fern saves Wilbur, the runt, from her father's ax, and delights in feeding and caring for him till he is 5 weeks old, at which time he has become too big for her to handle and she lets herself be persuaded to sell him to her uncle for \$6. Chapter I of the first draft became Chapter III, and the rest of the text required only a few revisions to accommodate Fern's presence up to the point where she had originally made her first appearance. As he increased her presence in the story White saw in her some of the characteristics he remembered in himself as a boy. In his notes, White wrote: "She loved being out of bed before the others. She loved early morning because it was quiet and fresh and smelled good and she loved animals.... She was small for her age.... She was thoughtful, and a great many things bothered her"<sup>16</sup>—in short, she is a lot like Sam, the boy in *The Trumpet of the Swan*, and she is a lot like White.

**I**N MARCH 1952 the contract for *Charlotte's Web* was signed. In it Harper agreed to pay White no more than \$7,500 in any one year of the royalties earned by the book. In those days the Internal Revenue Service permitted authors to spread out their earnings in this way over the years following the publication of a book. *Charlotte's Web*, however, turned out to be a better trapper than anyone had foreseen: In 1979, when White finally was able, with the permission of the I.R.S., to withdraw the balance of royalties due him, the sum was over half a million dollars—of which, of course, a large part went to pay taxes.

In May the Whites moved to Maine for the summer; in June Andy [White's nickname] had the worst hay fever he'd had in many years; and in July Katharine, in the early stages of hepatitis, had to go to the hospital in Bangor. In August, after some effort, Andy located and purchased two Suffolk ewes for \$125 each. In short, during the waiting period between the completion of the manuscript and its publication the life of the Whites was normal: They wrote, they edited, they were ill, and they farmed. In "Notes and Comment" for September 13 (a month before *Charlotte's Web* appeared), White described a recurrence of his "head" trouble:

Mid-September, the cricket's festival, is the hardest time of the year for a friend of ours who suffers from a ringing in the ears. He tells us that at this season it is almost impossible, walking or riding in the country, to distinguish between the poetry of earth and the racket inside his own head. The sound of insects has become, for him, completely identified with personal deterioration. He doesn't know, and hasn't been able to learn from his doctor, what cricket-in-the-ear signifies, if anything, but he recalls that the Hemingway hero in "Across the River and into the Trees" was afflicted the same way and only lasted two days—died in the back seat of an automobile after closing



the door carefully and well. Our friend can't disabuse himself of the fear that he is just a day or two from dead, and it is really pitiful to see him shut a door, the care he takes.<sup>17</sup>

If the ringing in his ears came from anxiety about Charlotte's debut, White could soon slam doors carelessly. From the first, everyone at Harper was sure the book would be a hit. His editor, Ursula Nordstrom, did not let her admiration impede her usefulness. She persuaded White to change the title of the last chapter from "Death of Charlotte" to "Last Day," and she worked well with Garth Williams, whose pictures had truly, and charmingly, illustrated *Stuart Little*. Through her, Andy had tactfully communicated his notions and his concern about the drawings: Charlotte must be "beguiling," and she must be represented as accurately as possible; in *American Spiders* there was no illustration of *Aranea cavatica*, but there was one of *Neoscona* "that looks like Charlotte, pretty much"; "Smooth legs and smooth abdomen are correct. (Actually, Charlotte's legs are equipped with fine hairs, and these are mentioned in the book, but the overall effect is of smooth, silk-stockings legs.)"<sup>18</sup> It was going to be a good-looking book. It was also going out into a world where only seven years ago *Stuart Little* had sold a hundred thousand copies in its first year. Harper ordered a first printing of 50,000 copies of *Charlotte's Web* and started an intensive advertising campaign a month before the publication date, October 15.

In the pre-Christmas season the book outsold every other title on the Harper list and had to be reprinted. The reviews were good, and the response from friends and acquaintances was reassuring. David McCord said that he had seen the Grand Canyon once and had never been able to talk about it—"It is the same with *Charlotte's Web*." Bennett Cerf guessed that "if there's only one book of the current season still in circulation 50 years hence, it will be *Charlotte's Web*." And Jean Stafford, recovering from a nervous breakdown, wrote:

Dear Andy,

*Charlotte's Web* is the most beautiful and strengthening book I have read in I don't know when, and I think I will commit the entire of it to memory. I give you fully as much credit as I do my good doctors for relieving my terrors. Thank you for this and for everything else you have written and will write.

Yours, Jean<sup>19</sup>

Orville Prescott, in the *Times*, and Lewis Gannett, in the *Herald Tribune*, reviewed the book briefly but favorably. In the *Los Angeles Sunday News* Richard Armour said, "If the story doesn't quite come up to that of *Stuart Little*, it is still better than most children's books." August Derleth, in the Madison, Wis., *Capital Times*, called it "one of those rare stories for young people which bid fair to last longer than their author—a minor classic beyond question."<sup>20</sup>

It did not make the front page of the *Sunday New York Times Book Review*, as most of White's other books have done, but Eudora Welty's review in the special children's-book supplement was an excellent piece of criticism. "The book has," she said, "grace and humor and praise of life, and the good backbone of succinctness that only the most highly imaginative stories seem to grow." Her conclusion that it is "an adorable book," was preceded by a summary, an inter-

pretation (it is "about life and death, trust and treachery, pleasure and pain, and the passing of time"), and a judgment ("As a piece of work it is just about perfect"). On the front page of the *Sunday Herald Tribune Book Review*, Pamela Travers, author of the Mary Poppins books, said that the "tangible magic" of *Charlotte's Web* 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 90." Pamela Travers also reviewed the book in London (where it had been simultaneously published, by Hamish Hamilton) in *The New Statesman and Nation*. The *London Times Literary Supplement* praised the book, noting that "Mr. White's language is fresh and exciting."<sup>21</sup>

Since that first printing of 50,000 copies there have been (nearly) innumerable printings, in several editions. By now over 6 million copies have been sold.\* In its more than 20 translations there is no telling how many copies have been printed. In 1960 *Charlotte's Web* was the "overwhelming" winner in an informal poll conducted by *Publishers Weekly* to discover "the best children's book written between 1930 and 1960." During the 11 years between 1963 and 1973, when *The New York Times* compiled an annual bestseller list for children's books based on bookstore sales, *Charlotte's Web* was always among the top 10; and from 1967 to 1972, it was always first or second. In 1971 it was second only to *The Trumpet of the Swan*. In 1976, when *Publishers Weekly* polled "teachers, librarians, authors, and publishers," asking them to name the 10 best children's books written in America since 1776, *Charlotte's Web* was number one, followed by *Where the Wild Things Are*, *Tom Sawyer*, *Little Women*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *The Little House in the Big Woods*, *Johnny Tremain*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *The Little House on the Prairie*, and *The Island of the Blue Dolphins*. For the past 20 years in America, *Charlotte's Web* has outsold *Winnie the Pooh*, any single Mary Poppins book, *The Wind in the Willows*, *The Little Prince*, and *Alice in Wonderland*.<sup>22</sup>

**C**HARLOTTE'S WEB is a fabric of memories, many reaching back much further in time than White's life on his farm. It is a pastoral fiction written when, more than ever before, White's vision was retrospective and his sense of life was sharpened by his having seen many things come to an end. *The New Yorker* of Harold Ross, Katharine White, E. B. White, James Thurber, and Wolcott Gibbs had become middle-aged—was no longer so carefree as it had been 25 years before. New York itself was not the same city that had drawn the young *New Yorker* writers to it. Joel, White's only son, was no longer a child. White was 50, slightly beyond middle age. And in the 1950s the civilized world itself seemed to be past middle age and failing fast. But for White, the most important things that had passed were the sensations and images of infancy, childhood, and youth; and if he could remember them

\*Today, 17 years after Scott Elledge's biography of E.B. White was published, it is estimated that 1.5 million hardback copies and 9.5 million paperback copies of *Charlotte's Web* have been sold.

clearly, he could remember the self that had experienced them. If he could evoke that self and keep in touch with it, he could imagine a fiction, write a story, create a world that children would believe in and love.

White was especially pleased with Pamela Travers's review of *Charlotte's Web* in *The New Statesman and Nation* because in it she had confirmed White's own theory of communication. She had said that anyone who writes for children successfully is probably writing for one child—namely, "the child that is himself."<sup>23</sup>

Perhaps White was especially able to write for the child that was himself because he had never stopped communicating with it. He had, in fact, never stopped trying to win the approval of the self he once referred to as "a boy I knew." The integrity of White's view of the world owed much to the boy he kept in touch with despite his own loss of innocence. And the clarity and grace of his writing derived in part from the clarity of his vision of that ideal young self:

I think there is only one frequency and that the whole problem is to establish communication with one's self, and, that being done, everyone else is tuned in. In other words, if a writer succeeds in communicating with a reader, I think it is simply because he has been trying (with some success) to get in touch with himself—to clarify the reception....<sup>24</sup>

About what he discovered when he got in touch with himself, we should take White at his word. To a reader of *Charlotte's Web* he wrote: "All that I hope to say in books, all that I ever hope to say, is that I love the world. I guess you can find that in there, if you dig around." And though White does not think much of "diggers," admirers of *Charlotte's Web* need not feel guilty about discussing what and how the story means.

Most of what White loved in the world is represented in *Charlotte's Web*. Essentially it consists of the natural world of creatures living in a habitat filled with objects, animate and inanimate, that White enjoyed seeing, hearing, feeling, smelling, and tasting. The most lyrical passages in the story are celebrations of what's out there—things and actions. Remember, for example, the opening of Chapter III:

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 of harness dressing and of axle grease and of rubber boots and of new rope.

The strong organic smells of manure, perspiration of horses, and the breath of patient cows are as reassuring as the smell of hay. Process and plenitude are at the heart of the satisfactory world of the barn, which is a kind of paradise regained where it seems "as though nothing bad could happen ever again in the world." But, better than any ideal world, the real world of the barn was so full of such a variety of things that no one living there should ever be bored:

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.

Outside the barn there were other accumulations of things, such as the dump, where even refuse was inter-

esting:

Here, in a small clearing hidden by young alders and wild raspberry bushes, was an astonishing pile of old bottles and empty tin cans and dirty rags and bits of metal and broken bottles and broken hinges and broken springs and dead batteries and last month's magazines and old discarded dishmops and tattered overalls and rusty spikes and leaky pails and forgotten stoppers and useless junk of all kinds, including a wrong-size crank for a broken ice-cream freezer.

Wilbur's slops were plentiful and various. For breakfast he might have:

Skim milk, crusts, middlings, bits of doughnuts, wheat cakes with drops of maple syrup sticking to them, potato skins, leftover custard pudding with raisins, and bits of Shredded Wheat.

Even in the rain that Wilbur (like his creator) hated, there were variety and plenitude:

Rain fell on the roof of the barn and dripped steadily from the eaves. Rain fell in the barnyard and ran in crooked courses down into the lane where thistles and pigweed grew. Rain spattered against Mrs. Zuckerman's kitchen windows and came gushing out of the downspouts. Rain fell on the backs of the sheep as they grazed in the meadow.

There were the variety of seasons and the new and plentiful phenomena characteristic of each season:

The early summer days on a farm are the happiest and fairest days of the year. Lilacs bloom and make the air sweet, and then fade. Apple blossoms come with the lilacs, and the bees visit around among the apple trees....

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....The song sparrow, who knows how brief and lovely life is, says, "Sweet, sweet, sweet interlude; sweet, sweet, sweet interlude." If you enter the barn, the swallows swoop down from their nests and scold. "Cheeky, cheeky!" they say....

Everywhere you look is life; even the little ball of spit on the weed stalk, if you poke it apart, has a green worm inside it.

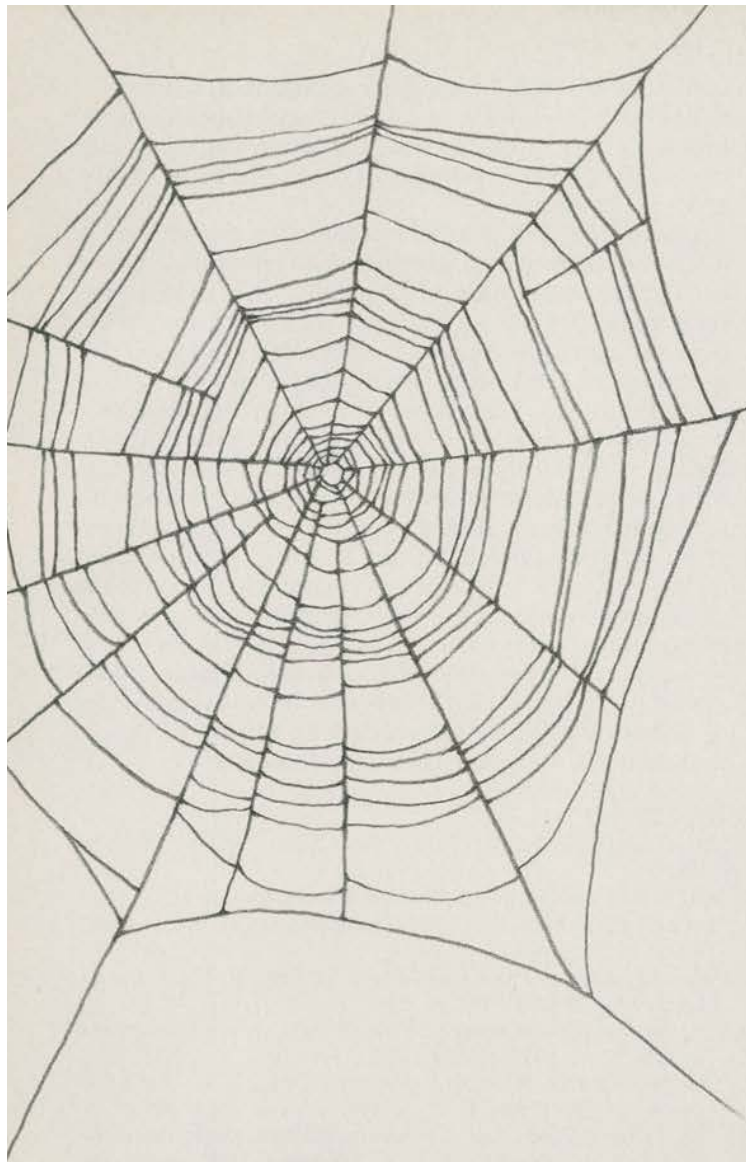
After Charlotte dies, Wilbur understands that life is a sweet interlude, and the knowledge that he cannot live forever only intensifies his love for life in his world:

Life in the barn was very good—night and day, winter and summer, spring and fall, dull days and bright days. It was the best place to be, thought Wilbur, this warm delicious cellar, with the garrulous geese, the changing seasons, the heat of the sun, the passage of swallows, the nearness of rats, the sameness of sheep, the love of spiders, the smell of manure, and the glory of everything.<sup>25</sup>

But that is how he felt after Charlotte had taught him that the smell of manure, the love of spiders, and the glory of everything were three parts of a kind of natural divinity.

In all White's writings the smell of manure (or of such other rich organic matter as leaf mold) is always exciting, promising, or reassuring: It "always suggests that life can be cyclic and chemically perfect and aromatic and continuous."<sup>26</sup> In *Charlotte's Web* it is a part of the glory of everything, and in the lullaby that Charlotte sings to Wilbur it is part of the comforting mystery of life:

"Sleep, sleep, my love, my only,  
Deep, deep, in the dung and the dark;  
Be not afraid and be not lonely!  
This is the hour when frogs and thrushes



Praise the world from the woods and the rushes.  
Rest from care, my one and only,  
Deep in the dung and the dark!"

But the book makes clear that the world White loves is more than a collection of things, natural and man-made, or a fascinating organization of reassuring cyclical, ongoing processes: It is a world in which the motive for creating, nurturing, teaching, encouraging, singing, and celebrating is love. Charlotte sang away Wilbur's loneliness and his fear of death by persuading him that his world was cuddling him in the warmth and protection of its dung and its darkness. But her power to convince him of this benevolence came from her love for him, whom she called her "one and only." It was the love implied in "Sleep, my love" that cured Wilbur's depression and anxiety, that saved his life, and that taught him how to live out the rest of his life.

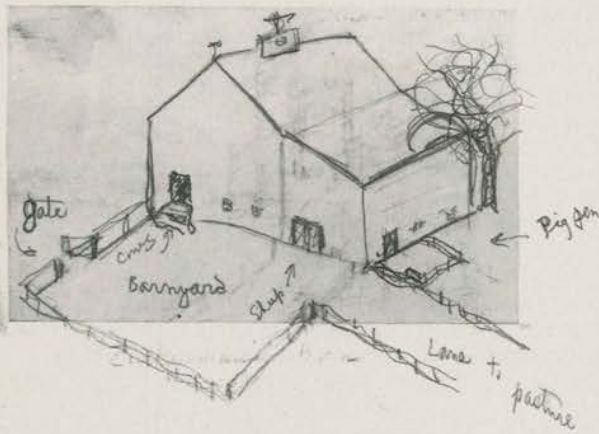
White discovered Charlotte, to be sure, when he was looking for a way to save Wilbur, but in making her the savior he served more than the needs of his plot. By making her an admirable creature, he helped readers free themselves from prejudices against spiders. He wanted to write a children's story that was true to the facts of nature and that, by reflecting his own love and understanding of the natural world, might help others to lift up their lives a little. His story turned out to be more than an idyll. It is a fable that subtly questions the assumption that homo sapiens was created to have dominion over every other living thing upon the earth. It also affirms that heroism is not a sexually determined characteristic, nor is it identical with self-sacrifice. Charlotte does not save Wilbur by dying; she saves him by following her instincts, by using her intelligence, and by being true to her individual self without being false to her general nature. Heroes, Charlotte reminds us, have from ancient times been people in a class by themselves because they used their unusual gifts to protect others.

Wilbur's education in the grim facts of life, including fear and death, begins with learning how to accept such facts as Charlotte's nature, her "miserable inheritance," which includes the instinct to live by killing other creatures. She says it's "the way she's made"; she "just naturally" builds webs and traps flies. "Way back for thousands and thousands of years," Charlotte explains, "we spiders have been laying for flies and bugs." But that fact does not explain what caused such behavior in the first place. She doesn't know

how the first spider in the early days of the world happened to think up this fancy idea of spinning a web, but she did, and it was clever of her, too. And since then, all of us spiders have had to work the same trick. It's not a bad pitch, on the whole.

Charlotte does not know the origin of evil, though perhaps she recognizes its existence when she calls her instinct to kill a "miserable inheritance" and when she says, "A spider's life can't help being something of a mess." Her ethical views resemble those of White's father, who used the word *mistake* for what others called "sins," and those of White himself, who prefers the nonjudgmental word *mess* for what others describe in moral terms.

When Charlotte explains to Wilbur why she saved his life, she gives two reasons: she likes him, and "per-



Zuckerman's Barn

A drawing of Zuckerman's barn that White made to guide him as he wrote *Charlotte's Web*.



haps [she] was trying to lift up [her] life a little." Here, as the skeptical White comes close to the problem of moral imperatives, he is cautious. *Perhaps*, he says, she was trying to lift up her life a little—to transcend her genetic inheritance, or be a little better than she had to be; and when she adds, "Heaven knows anyone's life can stand a little of that," she carefully, as well as humorously, warns that a little concern for moral improvement goes a long way. Unlike Justa the female canary, wife of Baby, Charlotte does *not* "enjoy the nobility of self-sacrifice."

Charlotte's charity has its limits. When Wilbur asks her what she's doing as she begins to weave her egg sac, she answers, "Oh, making something, making something as usual." Wilbur asks, "Is it for me?" "No," says Charlotte. "It's something for *me*, for a change." She pretends, perhaps, to be harder-headed than she is, but she is nonetheless governed by splendid self-interest and self-respect (or perhaps, of course, by self-ish genes).

Charlotte lives and dies a free creature, intellectually as well as instinctively accepting her biologically determined fate. In laying her 514 eggs in her beautifully made sac she is not carrying out the wishes of spider society any more than she is doing it to please her mate. She's pretty sure why she creates her *magnum opus*, in the full knowledge that when it is finished she will die.

Earlier, when she tells Wilbur that she thinks she will not go with him to the Fair because she will have to stay home and lay eggs, and Wilbur suggests that she can lay her eggs at the Fair, Charlotte says: "You don't know the first thing about egg laying, Wilbur. I can't arrange my family duties to suit the management of the County Fair. When I get ready to lay eggs, I have to lay eggs, Fair or no Fair." White does not make Charlotte a victim of anything—even fate. She obeys sensibly the imperatives of being a female spider, knowing that she "has to," and she sounds, in fact, as if she were proud of her part in the great natural scheme, proud of the "versatility" of someone who can write and can also produce 514 eggs—save a friend's life as well as create new lives.

Children's books in the past had seldom faced up so squarely as did *Charlotte's Web* to such truths of the human condition as fear of death, and death itself; and they had not implied the courageous agnosticism that disclaimed any understanding of why life and the world are the way they are. In 1952 few children's books had made so clear as *Charlotte's Web* that the natural world of the barn does not exist to serve the world of the farmers who think they own it. And few children's books have so clearly embodied a love that can cure fear, make death seem a part of life, and be strong without being possessive. Charlotte was "in a class by herself." She was braver and more capable of friendship than Wilbur because she was older and more experienced, and probably because she was a superior individual—that is, a hero. Among heroes, of course, she was *sui generis*.

All of which is to suggest that *Charlotte's Web* was and probably will continue to be a modern book based on the integrity of a humble and skeptical view of the

natural world and of the human beings in it. It gives no support to prejudice in favor of the superiority of human beings, or of one sex over another. It does celebrate a child's generous view of the world and a child's love of that world.

*Charlotte's Web* is a kind of fable, of course; but it is also a pastoral—an eclogue that takes its readers back to an early vision of an arcadia. It is itself a pastoral game, a form of play, and its effects are partly, perhaps heavily, nostalgic. If adults still possessed the world of the barn, they would not be so moved by a description of it. They love its memory because they have lost the original. They also love it because in loving it they are persuaded of its truth and perhaps of its perpetuity. *Charlotte's Web* can be "explained" in Wordsworthian, Blakean, or Proustian ways. As we grow older we lose the vision, but not beyond recall; in the vision of innocence is contained the wisdom of experience; the act of remembrance of things past affirms their value, affirms our value, and creates a sense of man freed from the clutches of time. Readers of *Charlotte's Web* momentarily enjoy this freedom because White succeeded in getting in touch with himself, with "the child that is himself." □

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