Letters of E. B. White Study Guide

Letters of E. B. White by E. B. White

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

Since this is a collection of letters by E.B. White over the course of his adult life as a writer, editor, husband, father and friend, there is no plot other than the unfolding of his interesting and varied life. White is known, or should be known, to every American as the author, with William Strunk, of "The Elements of Style" as well as the fictional children's books, "Stuart Little" and "Charlotte's Web." Probably few, including longtime readers of The New Yorker magazine, know that E.B. White was for 56 years in charge of that publication's "news breaks," those outlandish, absurd or just plain unintelligible mini-clippings from other publications with dry witticisms attached that were (and sometimes still are) one of the brightest spots in those pages.

Born into a family of six children in Mount Vernon, New York in 1899, Elwyn Brooks White notes in an introduction that he did not have the unhappy childhood some deem necessary for a writer and was "neither deprived nor unloved." The letters trace White's early adventures at Cornell University, a leisurely motor trip across the country with a friend and then his rather uncomfortable beginnings in the writing world at an advertising agency in New York City. After a period of time commuting to the city from his parents' home in Mount Vernon, N.Y., White moves to New York and shares an apartment with some college friends while freelancing. One of the publications that accept White's early work is the embryonic New Yorker, whose irascible editor Harold Ross eventually offers him a job doing news breaks. White finds his literary home at the magazine, as well as his future wife in fiction editor Katharine Angell.

White's office mate at The New Yorker is none other than humorist James Thurber, and they get on so well that the two collaborate on "Is Sex Necessary?", a satirical look at the sex-obsessed American culture. However, White finds the magazine confining and he yearns for the countryside and someplace compatible with his high-strung nature.

Not long after their marriage. White and Kate buy a farm in Maine from which White continues to contribute to The New Yorker while also writing a bucolic monthly column for Harper's Magazine. Kate, the divorced mother of two children, and White have a son, Joel, who becomes an acclaimed boat builder. Working as fiction editor at The New Yorker, Kate stays in an apartment in New York during the week and escapes to the farm on weekends. For five uninterrupted years, White lives and works as a farmer and writer and eventually looks back on those years as some of the best of his life although other commitments would eventually demand that he leave this peaceful setting for periods of time. His always-close touch with nature and the land provide the basis for "Charlotte's Web," among many other naturalistic fables.

However there is also something else behind the decision to live in the country. In a lengthy foreword, novelist John Updike (who was an early protégé of White at The New Yorker) mentions what White himself describes in a letter of Oct. 28, 1943 as "a nervous crack-up" which was followed by lengthy psychiatric care. In a note to his biographer, Scott Elledge, from 1982, White says his "panic fear" is not of death, but something "amorphous, lacking in form." He frequently mentions to his wife his world-weariness

and need to withdraw for the sake of his artistic pursuits. White seems to have been successful in masking his psychic troubles behind a persona of the simple, good-hearted lover of nature and good writing constantly bemused by the world and its inanities.

For intermittent periods, White occasionally returns to New York City if needed at The New Yorker or for some other literary project. However, his, and Katherine's, home remains the farm in Maine where White finds a measure of serenity and the time and space to follow his artistic yearnings. The success of "The Elements of Style" and "Charlotte's Web" provide the material means for his contribution to this rural homestead, although Katherine's health declines more rapidly than his. She dies some 20 years before White, leaving him alone with his (happy) memories and advancing infirmities. He dies in 1985 at his home in Maine.

Mount Vernon, 1908-1917

Mount Vernon, 1908-1917 Summary and Analysis

The first chapter that takes the reader from E.B. White at nine to 18 years old, is prefaced with a brief autobiography of his early years. White reveals that, despite the fact he comes from a loving, caring family, he is from his earliest years dogged with a kind of nameless anxiety that nagged at him constantly. White begins writing while young "to assuage my uneasiness and collect my thoughts," that he was a busy writer well before adolescence. White tells us that his father, Samuel Tilly White, was born into a working class family in Brooklyn, N.Y. and started out as an apprentice in a piano business. He learned everything he could about the piano, as well as how to play it, and was a successful businessman who could afford his family a comfortable upper middle class life, White relates. White's father is 45 when he is born, and his mother 41. Jesse Hart White, his mother, also was born in Brooklyn of Scottish background. Her father, William Hart, was an itinerant portrait painter who later became the first president of the Brooklyn Academy of Design. White's grandfather Hart moved from Brooklyn to Mount Vernon late in life, and White's parents soon followed. There they had seven children—three girls and four boys, one of whom died in infancy. They were Marion, Clara, Lillian, Albert, Stanley and Elwyn (E.B. White).

White feels closest to his two brothers, Albert and Stanley, who were close in age but far apart in personalities. Stanley, who White describes as "a redhead like his grandfather Hart, tall and rangy and bespectacled," was his favorite sibling of all the brothers and sisters and the one he spent the most time with while growing up. Stanley, also known as "Bunny" and "Bun," taught his little brother Elwyn to read while he was in kindergarten, by handing him a copy of the New York Times and showing him how to sound the syllables. He also taught E.B. the harmonic circle on pianoforte, as well as the principles of physics by illustrating them in a humorous manner. White says he was a nervous, fretful child who worried about everything from the delicacy of the human body to the brevity of life and what lay beyond, as well as the mysteries of the church and God. Writing became for him a refuge, a place to calm his spirit and organize his mind. The family's big, fortress-like house became for White just that—a safe haven from the world and from life

Due to his father's business manufacturing parts for pianos, White is exposed to a variety of musical instruments in the family home including violins, guitars, banjos, cellos, mandolins and drums. Despite his love of music, White says he was "too lazy to follows it to its source" and never learned to play an instrument. His sister Lillian, a vivacious redhead, was socially adept and had many boyfriends. Lillian helped her little brother Elwyn with some of the social graces. She was the only one of the sisters who went to college—Vassar—where she graduated. She later married a Wall Street broker named Arthur Illian and became Lillian Illian, "a dubious triumph in alliteration." White relates that when it was time for him to enter kindergarten, he fought his parents with all

his strength and hated it. He especially loathed a fat girl who thought him cute and wanted to hold his hand, which he "pulled away in revulsion."

If school was uncomfortable for White, his summers and especially the month of August when the entire family boarded a train to Belgrade Lakes, Maine for the month of August were sheer delight. White spent his time canoeing on Great Pond, chasing frogs and salamanders, sipping birch beer and cruising in the one-cylinder launch his brothers had built. By high school, White says, he was still "skinny and small" but intrigued by the fact some of the girls were starting to wear silk stockings. He spent a lot of time ice-skating with one of those girls named Mildred Hess, and although they never embraced he remembers "what it was like to be in love before any of love's complexities or realities or disturbances had entered in, to dilute its splendor and challenge its perfection."

The first chapter concludes with several letters White wrote his brothers, Al and Stan beginning when he was nine years old. By the time he is 10 years old, White seems to have established a certain structure or format in his letter writing: general observations of events in the human world peppered with wry witticisms, followed by somewhat detailed descriptions of events in the plant and animal world. For example, in a letter to Albert White of April 21, 1910 White tells his brother that he received his last letter "with much rejoicing," but adds that he had to ask his mother how to spell rejoicing and still is not sure that he has it correct. If it is not spelled correctly, White adds, "please excuse me if I didn't or rather excuse Ma." Then follows a lengthy and detailed account of the Whites' garden, of which seeds have germinated and which have not, and horticultural prospects for the summer. In a May 14, 1916 letter to Stanley White, Elwyn reports on his brother Al's purchase of a 1910 Buick in order to impress the girls. However, the machine bellows so much smoke that a man came running up to ask where the fire was. White's letter ends with a discussion of the relative merits and profitability of raising pigeons versus chickens. White concludes that pigeons are easier and more profitable.

Cornell and the Open Road: 1917-1925

Cornell and the Open Road: 1917-1925 Summary and Analysis

This chapter contains letters beginning after White graduates from Mount Vernon High School to his employment at The New Yorker in that magazine's early start-up days. It includes the period of time when he and college chum Howard Cushman took off on a cross-country journey in a Model T roadster after their junior year in college as well as his time as a freelancer in New York while trying unsuccessfully to find a newspaper job. White had some confidence in himself as a writer because of his campus job as a reporter for the Cornell Daily Sun, which along with his fraternity membership had made him a BMOC (big man on campus). During his time at Cornell, White became good friends with Howard Cushman, editor of The Widow, and with fraternity pal Gustave Lobrano. Among the faculty, White made friends of Bristow Adams, Martin Sampson, and William Strunk—with whom he was later to collaborate on the hugely successful "The Elements of Style," a guide to graceful writing and expression.

In a December 1918 letter to his mother from Cornell, White parodies the style of poet Robert Browning and constructs a sort of prose poem filled with internal rhymes in a sing-song cadence: "There's been nothing extraordinary happened of late—there'll be lots more to do when we're able to skate. Just at present the pond is quite infirm of purpose and it wouldn't be that I would step on its surface." In this chapter, White's letters reveal him stepping into a campus feud over journalistic ethics of the Sun student newspaper, and obliquely courting a young woman named Alice Burchfield to whom he writes about his summer camp job, his job with United Press International and his struggles to get established as a journalist in New York City. The courtship ends after a botched marriage proposal and White decides to go "on the road" with Howard Cushman, who meets him in New York after flunking out of Cornell.

However, before embarking on his journey, White departs UPI for a job as a "dirty publicity person" for an employment agency, writing human interest stories about the efforts of the company to find work for the unemployed, and pitching to the newspapers. Through family connections, White wrangles an interview with Adolph Ochs, publisher of The New York Times whom he describes as "interesting but not interested." Ochs advises White to get a job on a small newspaper and learn all the ropes before trying to get a job on a major metro daily. Instead, White leaves the publicity firm to work for the American Legion News Service—a bigger public relations firm with national clients. In a 1922 letter to Alice Burchfield, White writes that "publicity is new, and, like other new things, it is overpaid and consequently has been exploited."

When Howard Cushman finally arrives on the scene, White is thoroughly disgusted with publicity and ready for something new. The two hatch a plan to travel around the country in White's Model T roadster. They load the car with a tent, bedding, cooking utensils, clothes and assorted odds and ends and set out on their route from college

town to college town where they hope to cadge food and lodging from fraternity brothers and friends, and to sleep outside otherwise. Their goal is to take jobs when needed but mostly cultivate idleness and their literary ambitions.

White is obviously in love with Alice Burchfield but she has reservations about his seemingly inability to add more to their relationship than whimsy. On their motor trip, White devises and elaborate scheme to stop in Ithaca to see Alice at Cornell, waiting on a bridge where he expects her to cross. However, he completely misses her and then writes her a prolix and painful letter in which he tries to explain what happened, or did not happen.

In an April 1922 letter to a friend, Whiter tries to explain his literary ventures with Howard Cushman ("Cush") involving an attempt to write and syndicate a humorous travel column that parodies the usual travel lingo. The editor of the Buffalo (NY) Times tells the two college boys he likes their idea and will buy a column a day at $1 apiece, suggesting that they try to syndicate the piece to other papers as well. White says that, despite their best efforts to pitch the idea to several Eastern dailies, there have been no more nibbles. In a long letter to his mother, White describes their side-trips through Kentucky, West Virginia and Ohio including their exploration of numerous caves in Kentucky and failed attempt to hire onto Spark's Circus which was traveling in the region.

White, in the same letter to his mother, compares the nature of rivers to the human populations that live in their watershed. In New York, the "well-groomed Hudson [hustles] businesslike and blue about its business" while in Kentucky "where the populace drawls and sits leisurely on front porches, we have the muddy Ohio, creeping indolently down a smiling valley, blending its pretty brown with the greens in the field." White and Cushman stopped in Lexington to visit a horse race, where White won a needed $24.60 by betting on Auntie May. Flushed with success, they also stopped to place bets on the horses at Churchill Downs where they lost everything. White then composed a sonnet to the winning horse and sold it to the Louisville Herald, which published it on the front page. White's payment compensated him for his losses at the track.

White outdoes himself in several letters to his parents from Montana where he gives detailed, vivid descriptions of their adventures. His biting wit also shines through. He describes a celebration in Walker, Montana that coincides with one of two days each year when the local Indian population receives government checks. In the parade is a wagon depicting "Uncle Tom's Cabin" complete with "a Negro band" that provided hot notes as the cabin rolled down the street—without Uncle Tom. "Where was Uncle Tom?" White asks rhetorically. "No one knew. I had a suspicion he was the second cornetist from the right but it was a thing I said nothing about. What a flutter of banners!—and what am I writing all this for...?"

In a letter to his parents of July 16, 1922 from Hart's Ranch in Melville, Montana where the two college men stopped to work, White thanked them for sending him some money and itemized some of his purchases which makes an interesting comparison with the

prices of today. For example, White bought a good pair of boots for $5.50, a shirt for 90 cents, and a tank full of gasoline for 45 cents per gallon and a malted milk for 20 cents, The pair make some money working at the ranch, then lose some money, then the car breaks down and they have it fixed. On the road again, they head to Seattle where White lands a job as reporter for the Seattle Times at the salary of $40 per week. He soon trades in the Model T for a coupe, and jumps at the opportunity to write a daily column. However, White is undeterred when he realizes that the purpose of the "literary" column is to promote classified advertising in the newspaper. His first column appears on page one of the paper, but subsequent columns appear in the classified section. Pleased with the opportunity, White nevertheless pushes on until he is laid off as part of an overall cutback in June 1923.

In a letter of October 1922 to Alice Burchfield, White describes the Seattle Times as "very highbrow, very conservative, very rich and entirely unreadable." He expresses his amazement at the newspaper plant with five huge presses located in the center of town, and the fact reporters and photographers are driven to their assignments in company cars. White writes that he finds the winter rains in Seattle "a trifle depressing" but says he will stay on as long as possible because he has finally landed a newspaper job. In a Jan. 2, 1923 letter to his brother Stan, White reports that he has been taken off the city council beat because he could only write about local politics in a humorous way, and is routinely sent on assignments for the Sunday magazine where he makes $4 extra for every story and avoids confrontations with local politicos. In a February letter to Alice Burchfield, White describes a snowstorm that is not much by eastern standards but everyone in Seattle thinks was a disaster. White confesses that he is tired of the newspaper and tired of Seattle, and that he is ready to move on.

With money saved from his newspaper job, White buys a first-class ticket on the SS Buford to Skagway, Alaska and plans to go as far north as Siberia. In Skagway, he takes a job on the ship as a deck hand and gets acquainted with "brooms, mops, pails of slop water, and other paraphernalia of the great service world" as he learns to serve night lunch to the wives and sisters of the Chamber of Commerce in the dining saloon. After a trek to the Pribiloff Island, the Arctic ice pack, East Cape and Nome, the ship stops in Seattle on its way to San Francisco. White leaves the ship, sells his car, and boards a train for New York, with a stop in Buffalo to see Alice Burchfield. Then he returns to his Mount Vernon home to face the same old challenge—how to make a living as a writer.

The New Yorker—Early Days 1926-1928

The New Yorker—Early Days 1926-1928 Summary and Analysis

After his return from the cross-country jaunt, E.B. White lives with his parents in Mount Vernon, N.Y. for two years while he commutes to advertising jobs in New York City that he hates. By November 1925, White is living with three other Cornell graduates and barely surviving when he notices a new magazine in Grand Central Station—the fledging New Yorker with Eustace Tilley on its cover. White is immediately smitten and begins to submit short items and poetry, which are published and for which he is paid. Founder Harold Ross finally encourages White to join the staff, and when he first comes into the office he meets not only the irascible editor but also Katharine Angell, the fiction editor, who is to eventually become his wife. When he joins the New Yorker staff, White literally does everything from writing "news breaks," quirky clippings from other newspapers with amusing or ironic headlines, to filling in for the drama and movie critics, to contributing to the Comment and Talk of the Town departments. White writes that "the cast of characters in those early days was as shifty as the characters in a floating poker game." In this chaos, accentuated by the tantrums of Harold Ross, E.B. White and James Thurberto share a common office ("a sort of elongated closet").

In this bachelor phase of his life, White lives with friends in an apartment in New York and writes to his old chum, Howard Cushman, that he would like to see him and his newborn daughter, describes his employment and domestic situation, and describes his trip to Europe. He also writes to Jean Flick, the travel agent wife of his college friend, Gus Lobrano, to congratulate them both. White disappears from the offices of The New Yorker and writes to Harold Ross that he is taking a vacation in Maine in a small shack, where he has befriended a cricket, and invites Ross to stay with him if he should come to Maine. With an address book Christmas present to Ross in 1927, White includes a note of gratitude with his own address in New York. The following June, White writes another chummy letter to Ross from Paris, where he is taking an authorized vacation.

White's wry humor is evident in a memo he sends to Ross upon his return regarding efficiency, in which he reports on time used to create a newsbreak for the magazine by pasting as compared with typing. White reports four minutes looking for the paste, one minute "applying paste to clipping and fingers," two minutes to the men's room to wash his hands, 30 minutes talking to a friend he encounters in the men's room, half-minute for the return, and so on. He concludes: "re efficiency: Hooey."

The Most Beautiful Decision, 1929-1930

The Most Beautiful Decision, 1929-1930 Summary and Analysis

Although 1929 brings catastrophic news about the American economy, ironically it is a terrifically good year for E.B. White both personally and professionally. He marries Katherine Angell, the divorced daughter of a successful Boston businessman with two young children. She had joined The New Yorker in 1925 to keep her mind off the impending breakup of her marriage and to learn job skills in the likely event she would need to become economically self-sufficient. At first reluctant to pursue a relationship with White because of her seniority and two young children, Katherine at last decides he is the right man for her. She leaves New York to get a divorce in Reno, marries White, and both are at their desks the next day. Most of the letters in this period are to Katharine, and many reflect White's joy and good feelings about finding his soul mate. Reflecting on their wedding years later, White said: "It was a very nice wedding—nobody threw anything, and there was a dog fight." Once they return to their jobs, the two newlyweds communicated often through interoffice memos, some of which White turns into cartoons, to the delight of Katherine. In one of these 1929 cartoons, White depicts himself in knickerbockers and a floppy hat, sitting pensively and gazing into space, with the caption: "E.B. White slowly accustomed himself to the idea that he had made the most beautiful decision of his life."

In the same year, White and office mate James Thurber collaborate on a satire of the then-fashionable torrent of sex books on the market, "Is Sex Necessary?" A collection of his poems, "The Lady Is Cold," was published as well. To his brother, Stanley, White writes of his regret that he has left New York to work as a landscape architect in Florida because he wants Stanley to provide drawings for his book of poems. White praises his brother, assures him that he will be a big success, and says he prefers writing and drawing because both provide artistic satisfaction at a very elemental level.

In a series of letters to Katharine from the summer camp in Ontario where he and James Thurber ("a tall, misty visitor about whom nothing much is known, wandering aimlessly about camp") decide to spend time in the spring and summer of 1930, White writes of his pleasure at being in nature, his longing for his wife, and the excitement and challenges of forming a step-family. In one letter to her, he confesses his "moments of despair" about their situation, with her two children and commuting to work in New York City, but tells Katharine that simply pausing in her home office while she is away is sufficient to remind him of their bond and permanency. In another, he writes to Katharine in the guise of Daisy, their Scottish terrier, who reassures Mrs. White that E.B. White loves and respects her as a "present person" and not as a "future mother" of their child. On July 4, he writes to tell Katharine that he has arrived at the camp after his car breaks down and is fixed, carrying one of the campers with him.

White describes taking a canoe trip with Thurber to Huckleberry Island on Lake Ontario to see a loon's nest, his repairs to a camp motorboat, the beauty of the setting, and Thurber busily making sketches for Harper's as well as the camp newspaper, the Otter Bee. Through most of the summer, White continues his fusillade of happy epistles to Katharine, but in September he writes to his friend Jim Wright from St. Luke's Hospital in New York City that he has fallen ill with hepatitis but is recovering despite "a whispering campaign among the interns that I have pernicious anemia and am a goner." By October, White is back at The New Yorker and exchanging interoffice memos with his wife, in which he discloses that he has sold a story, "The Lady Is Cold," for $13.30 that he uses to buy her flowers.

16 East 8th Street: 1931-1936

16 East 8th Street: 1931-1936 Summary and Analysis

This period is, according to commentary provided by his daughter, among the happiest and most productive of E. B. White's life. The six years he and his new wife and family spend in Greenwich Village are a time when both Katharine and E.B. White are immersed in their careers at The New Yorker, rubbing shoulders with such writers as Ring Lardner, Frank Sullivan, S.J. Perelman, Louis Mumford, John O'Hara, Ogden Nash and Dorothy Parker as well as cartoonists James Thurber and Peter Arno among many others. Both earn good salaries at the magazine and E.B. can double his pay by contributing a couple of articles per week. In 1930, Katharine and E. B. rent a cottage on the coast of Maine where the entire family could be assembled for the summer and both Whites could continue their work for the magazine from a distance. In 1934, White's third book, "Every Day Is Saturday," a compilation of his commentary in the magazine, is published. After three years of spending summers in rental quarters in Maine, the Whites purchase a farm in Brookline where they spend most of the remainder of their lives.

In an early 1931 letter to his friend Gus Lobrano, White announces the birth of their son, Joel, by caesarian section, which is followed by blood transfusions for Katherine. After a speedy recovery, however, she is back at home with the baby, only to be stricken by another malady known as pilitis. Katharine then faces six weeks of bed rest in another hospital, but by June the Whites are ready for their first summer in Maine. E.B. White sets out in his car with Daisy, the Scottish terrier, Mrs. Lardner, their elderly Irish domestic servant, and most of their luggage. Katharine arrives a few days later by train with Joel. Meanwhile, White returns in July to Mount Vernon, N.Y. to visit his parents in the midst of a heat wave, then puts in some time at The New Yorker where he discovers he is "cordially hated at the office, treated in a surly manner as the perpetual vacationist" and complains to Katharine that "the weather is fiendish—humid and hot, the air unbreathable."

White writes to Katharine on Oct. 6, 1931 in Putney, Vermont where a visit with friends has been extended because of Joel's pneumonia, and describes horse races at the Danbury Fair, a fizzled local attempt at a holdup and the purchase at Sears Roebuck of a pair of sandals for Joel for 78 cents. White tells Lobrano in a December 1931 letter that he seems happily immune to the economic suffering caused by the depression, largely because of the success of The New Yorker, and is pinch-hitting as a theater critic during the absence of Robert Benchley. However, White says, "criticism is about the most difficult kind of writing and has to be more accurate, more just, and less self-conscious than most screening. Takes a lot out of a man." By 1932, White sends an interoffice memo to publisher Harold Ross complaining that promotional ads for the magazine that attempt to describe its contents are downgrading and should be limited to just a catalogue of contents. Another memo to Ross in 1935 quibbles with the use of the

term "Department of Corrections" in the magazine, and suggests instead "We Stand Corrected."

To Katharine, E.B. White writes in September 1935 of his hassles in trying to help his mother sort through her belongings before selling the family home in Mount Vernon, after the death of his father. About a week later, he writes to her again to describe work on painting the house and other domestic trivialities and, almost in passing, responds to her previous letter telling him that she has had a miscarriage by saying: "Be patient. I'm sure that you will pull out of this with flying colors." He then asks whether he has left three checkbooks on his desk, as if the miscarriage were nothing more serious than a collapsed soufflé. By early spring 1937, White writes to his friend and former co-worker Christopher Morley to thank him for an offer of the position of editor of The Saturday Review, and to underline the fact he does not want the job because he says he is no editor and is comfortable with his position at The New Yorker as "office boy de lure," who goes about what he describes as routine chores, occasionally contributing pieces. White also describes himself as "a literary defective" that does not read books and is not acquainted with contemporary authors.

Soon afterwards, he writes to Katharine that his mother—who moved to Washington after the death of her husband—is riddled with cancer of the liver, gall bladder, and colon and is expected to live only a few months, in pain. White tells his wife that he and his siblings have decided to tell their mother post-surgically that her problem is gall stones and not to mention cancer because she does not seem to understand diseases and has difficulty facing reality. The possibility of staying in a rented seaside cabin near Washington with a friend is presented, and failing that White says he is prepared to place her in a good nursing home in the Washington area. The goal of all these plans is palliative care, or affording her "whatever small amount of happiness and ease life can still hold." On May 16, 1936 he writes to his brother Stanley of their mother's death, apparently peaceful, resolved and filled with spiritual contentment and some pain. White expresses his astonishment that both their mother and father have died within one year. In an Aug. 6, 1936 letter to friend Gus Lobrano, White invites him to come for a visit in North Brookline, Maine and enjoy such earthly pleasures as gentle rain, fresh flounder for breakfast, morning fog, ripening blueberries and corn.

E.B. writes to Katharine in the fall of 1936 that Joel is considering an invitation to a picnic supper and is infatuated with an ad for Camel cigarettes in the comics about an undersea diver whose digestion is improved by smoking Camels. When Joel goes to bed, White reports, he has to play the piano very loud to drive the deep-sea creatures out of his son's head. As usual, White gives copious details of his bucolic life on the farm with updates on chickens, dogs and sailing conditions.

At the end of the year, White gets into a tussle with Alexander Woollcott about testimonial advertising for Seagram's. Woollcott sent letters to friends and acquaintances asking that they give him Seagram's for Christmas. Offended, White wrote to Woollcott that his letter had caused the Christmas season to become "pervaded with the faint, exquisite perfume of well-rotted holly berries." Ross published both letters together in an issue of The New Yorker. In a follow-up letter to Woollcott,

White reminds him that he once worked in an advertising agency and knows the tricks and devices of the trade all too well, but does not condemn them outright. White says he is offended by the snobbish appeal of testimonials in which a supposed cognoscente shares his private tastes with the public in hopes that the masses of uninformed slobs will emulate him. "After all, a man's personal excesses are his own business," White writes. "Privately, I may wish you joy of the lady [Seagram's] but publicly I must give so lewd an alliance a jab, mustn't I?"

One Man's Meat: 1937-1941

One Man's Meat: 1937-1941 Summary and Analysis

In 1937, White already is dreaming of making their Maine home a year-round residence. Always attuned to the cycles of the earth, E.B. could barely endure spring without experiencing incubation of eggs and blossoming of trees. Both E.B. and Katherine have deep ties, emotional and professional, to The New Yorker but by 1938 he convinces his wife to try year-round residence in North Brookline. Once they move in, Katharine receives a steady stream of manuscripts and scripts in the mail as she continues in the role of fiction editor and reviews children's books. E.B. continues to produce newsbreaks for the magazine on a regular basis as well as occasional commentary pieces. Before leaving New York, White negotiates an agreement with Harper's magazine to write a monthly column from Maine, called "One Man's Meat" for $300 a month. In this new role, White develops into a master of the informal essay and continues to write this column for several years. Although their personal situation is quite comfortable, both Whites continually question living in retreat on a farm when another world war is brewing. Despite their reservations, this is a productive period for E.B. as his book of poems, The Fox of Peacock; sketches with the title Quo Valiums; and A Sub treasury of American Humor are published, the last of these a collaboration with Katharine.

White's interest in movies is evident in a March 13, 1937 letter to his brother Stanley, sparked by the realization that they are both Tarzan fans. White says he would like to write a complete study of movies, or the cinema, as opposed to what movie critics churn out on a daily basis. One chapter in the book, White tells his brother, would be devoted to the sounds of movies when one closes his eyes. Another focus of interest will be the different types of man-made trees in Hollywood from the hollow tree, to the rope ladder tree, the all-purpose tree and "the flat crotch tree for Janet Gay nor and one other." In response to a piece in The New Yorker that White writes under the nom de plume of P.B. Public bemoaning the disappearance of the American touring car, a car dealer in Omaha writes to "Publico" that he has a 1930 seven-passenger touring car in perfect condition for $300. White immediately cables the seller that he will be delighted to take the car.

In May 1937, E.B. White writes to his wife to explain his pending separation from The New Yorker and to explore its financial impacts. He says he is quitting his job because he is not satisfied with how he is using his talents and because he is in a rut. E.B. tells Katharine that, Thoreau-like, he wants to come and go like the wind, dropping in on his family occasionally for meals and company, hanging out in railroad stations, libraries and parks and perhaps writing. The point, he tells Katharine, is to reclaim man's ancient privilege of going and coming in a whimsical, rather than reasonable, manner." However, he asks that if anyone inquires what he is doing, she not be specific about any writing project since he has not in mind. White does some financial calculations through the artist's rose-colored glasses and explains that with an adjustment in his investments

to yield a monthly income, the sale of their Pierce Arrow car, and general belt-tightening the White bank account should survive intact. The striking thing about this letter, written from White's farm in Maine to his wife in New York City, is its boyish fantasy coupled with his rather indirect approach and his obvious attempt to charm her into acquiescence. For all that, however, the tone of the letter seems somewhat oblivious of the emotional impact of such a venture on his wife.

White writes to his Cornell friend, Charles Muller, in July to invite him for a period of sailing and loafing along the Maine coast, not to exceed 10 days because of the extra work his absence creates for Katharine. He urges his friend to stay with him at the farm for a couple of days first as a hedge against the Astrid's (sailboat) diet of beer and stewed periwinkles. Then, on Aug. 18, 1937, White dispatches a picture postcard of the Maine coast to New Yorker Publisher Harold Ross with the simple message: "Enjoyed working in your shop very much. Will always remember it. Yrs gratefully, E.B. White." In a Jan. 8, 1938 letter to James Thurber, White confesses that his sabbatical has become "an unholy mess" during which he has not produced any work, broken his wife's health and his own spirit, as well as several valuable old lampshades. Despite the pristine, Currier & Ives-like winter weather in Maine, White tells his friend that when the lease on their rented house expires he may be forced to resume writing for The New Yorker because their own house is not winterized. In what clearly seems a depressed mood, White tells Thurber that he is tired of seeing President Franklin D. Roosevelt always smiling and laughing and may write a piece "What's So Funny?" in which he asks the president "what the hell he is grinning about."

After the death of Katharine's father and the stress of handling her parents' estate, she is exhausted. So the Whites take a vacation in Bermuda and White muses in a letter to Gus Lobrano on the irony of taking an airplane that travels at 250 miles per hour in order to be on an island and ride a bicycle. Despite a vigorous tourist trade promoted by a large advertising budget in American papers, Bermuda is still peaceful and restful, White says. In mid-April he writes to Thurber that everyone is eagerly awaiting the return of him and his wife Helen to New York. White tells his colleague that he is planning to move his family to Maine in early June, and "I guess I'm going into the authoring game again" with the completion of a collection of ballads and songs and a book of "casuals." White also mentions that he is about half-finished with a children's book. Later that month he writes to Katharine in New York to update her on work at their farm in Maine, and by May he writes to Harold Ross at The New Yorker offering to return on June 1 to do newsbreaks. Ross refers him to Ike Shuman, the latest in a string of editors Ross hires to run the magazine, and then does not let them run it. In a letter to Shuman, White thanks him for assigning a piece on answers to hard questions because "any money at all that I can get my hands on these days seems like a fine thing."

In September 1938, White is embarrassed when Harper's magazine runs a promotion about the appearance in its columns of White's "One Man's Meat," which he has not anticipated. So he writes to Ross to apologize and let him know The New Yorker always has first place in his heart; he also does some fancy footwork as he tries to explain how he proposes to continue writing for both magazines. In October, E.B. writes again to Thurber to congratulate him on a piece he wrote about White in the Saturday Review.

White ascribes his relative anonymity among the New York literati to the fact he has not said anything clever that people can remember, calling himself "a dull man, personally." White thanks Thurber, and recalls the time when he did a book review for the magazine that took him 53 hours and was paid $9, or 17 cents an hour. In March 1939, White submits the unfinished manuscript of a book, "Stuart Little," to his agent and in 1941 he returns the revised manuscript of "A Subtreasury of American Humor" to Katharine, his co-author.

The War Years: 1942-1945

The War Years: 1942-1945 Summary and Analysis

After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, White is one of several writers hired by the Office of Facts and Figures to work on a pamphlet explaining the four freedoms mentioned by President Roosevelt in his 1941 state of the union speech. Originally, White was hired to write the section on freedom of speech but was subsequently given the task of rewriting the entire document fashioned by critic Malcolm Cowley, theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, writer Max Lerner and poet Archibald MacLeish, librarian of Congress. In a January 1942 letter to Katharine, White describes his meeting in Washington with the team, the oppressive almost frighteningly bureaucratic nature of the proceedings. White notes that he encounters other writers apparently hired from other publications to help, including The New Yorker. White tells Katharine he expects this to be a long and cumbersome project, as the group spends most of its time discussing the "methodology" of how to proceed, and admits he is bewildered by the whole prospect.

A month later, in another letter to his wife, White continues to fulminate against the whole project and the idea that writing can be done, as it were, by committee. He describes the involvement in the project of such people as Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter and columnist Westbrook Pegler, in addition to the original team and observes that it seems absurd for all these high-powered people to travel to Washington for a Sunday morning meeting in the Library of Congress when freedom of speech is an old and settled issue. White says it is doubly frustrating because the pamphlet will be read by gas station workers, manicurists and young men about to be recruited to get killed in the war. In a March 2, 1942 letter to John Fleming at The New Yorker, White expresses relief that the four freedoms project is finished, a nearly-impossible task made more difficult by the fact that the assembled experts could not agree on anything with the result that no one wanted to say anything on the subject.

In a September 1942 letter to Harold Ross, White agrees that married men (such as himself) should be considered for military conscription because there is no doubt all would want to serve, but points out that unless the services draft such men it is unlikely they would know what to do with a sudden rush of volunteers. He also points out that it seems incongruous that just about any able-bodied male can have his life turned upside-down by being called into uniform, but members of labor unions who work in defense-related industries can take a day or a week off whenever their union allows. Although his future in the war remains unclear, White writes to his brother Stanley, he and Katharine are taking back a lot of their previous work at The New Yorker because of thinning of the staff caused by the war. In 1943, White resigns his monthly column at Harper's magazine on friendly terms.

In July 1945, White writes a tongue-in-cheek letter of outrage to Harold Ross at The New Yorker for its ignorance of the life of pigeons and the correct use of terms such as

squab, feathered, eggs, chicks, incubation and hatching. He then muses whether the confusion is the result of typos or just lack of understanding of pigeons.

A Party of One, 1946-1949

A Party of One, 1946-1949 Summary and Analysis

E.B. White writes to his book editor in 1946 to express his delight and amazement that "Stuart Little" sales had surpassed 100,000; to his brother Stanley to exult at his never-ending excitement at sitting down to a blank sheet of paper; and to the secretary of the National Institute of Arts and Letters to decline an offer of membership. In a prescient letter of March 10, 1947 he writes to John Wentworth that the American people should worry less about a cozy relationship between business and editorial offices on newspapers, and more about the concentration of ownership in fewer hands. White sends a blistering letter to The New York Herald Tribune for publishing an editorial supporting the right of employers to require employees to sign a "loyalty oath" to the United States, as in the case of the blacklisting of 10 Hollywood screen writers by the movie industry. He asserts that a person's thoughts and beliefs—whether communist, fascist, Buddhist—are a private matter and no concern of the public. White reminds readers that it is not a crime to hold any belief in the United States, and that even belonging to the communist party has not been declared illegal.

The Tribune then rebuts White's letter by saying that as a member of "a committee of one," he is a part of a dangerous element in society. White replies in a second letter that it is astonishing that he should be engaged with a major newspaper in such a debate because of rising fears over the Soviet Union in the United States. The best way to preserve our American freedoms, he says, is to ensure they are extended to everyone —especially those who may hold opposite views.

White also writes to Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter to thank him for an anti-noise opinion; to the director of the Bronx Zoo to remark on the miracle of watching a newborn doe getting on its feet; and to a fellow author to ask about how to ensure that foreign language editions of "Stuart Little" are authentic. On Jan. 2, 1949 White writes to his brother Stanley that he is relieved to have given up responsibility for the editorial pages of The New Yorker in the coming year, and writes that his son Joel likes Cornell University (White's alma mater) better than Exeter and is enjoying both soccer and naval architecture.

Turtle Bay, 1950-1951

Turtle Bay, 1950-1951 Summary and Analysis

Some of the playfulness that mixed with respect for New Yorker Publisher Harold Ross is evident in an interoffice memo from E.B. White to Ross on the subject of New York taxicabs from early 1950. In the memo, White says he has personally measured the height of taxicab doors and found them to be about 38 inches, or half the height of the average man. A person would become "infuriated" if required to enter a bar, a subway or a closet through such a small space. Instead, White suggest to Ross, taxicabs should return to their more vertical, box-like structures of the 20s and early 30s. He includes sketches of taxicabs then (1930s) and now (1950) to illustrate the point, but tells Ross he has declined an invitation to speak at a symposium on automobile design at the Museum of Modern Art. He also writes to James Thurber to offer his comments—mostly positive—about a story called "The Thirteen Clocks." White calls the story delightful in many ways, but cautions Thurber against explaining what the book is and is not because "you are just sticking out your zatch and many a toss pan and strut art will run you through."

In response to a query from an author researching a book on The New Yorker, White explains that founder Harold Ross' goal was to create a magazine altogether different from other magazine of the time, such as Life and Harper's. Ross brought a fresh, enthusiastic perspective to magazines and hired a lot of talented if inexperienced people at the outset, White says, and working on the staff was both hard work and much fun. In a letter to his brother Stanley, White reflects that The New Yorker is a completely different magazine than the one he went to work for in the 1920s, and Harold Ross worries about the changes constantly but always ends a conversation on the issue with a bombastic assertion that The New Yorker is still worth its cover price. White also writes to his literary agent to tell her that he has just finished another children's book ("Charlotte's Web") but has put it aside for a while to allow it to ripen; to a reader (Lewis Reynolds) acknowledging a letter of condolence over the death of his dog, Fred; and to his old chum Howard Cushman to tell of his failed attempt to recreate his 1922 cross-country with Cushman and write about America for Holiday magazine—an assignment that devolved to John Steinbeck and was the basis for his book, "Travels with Charley."

White writes several lengthy, bucolic letters to James Thurber in which he goes into exquisite detail about the pleasures and pitfalls of being a gooseherd, as well as an account of giving himself a large skull gash and a new hairdo by falling onto an awning in New York. The result, he tells Thurber, is that he resembles a belted kingfisher and is afraid to drive because of possible damage to his sight. In December 1951, shortly after the sudden death of Harold Ross during surgery, White takes time to respond to a letter from a depressed undergraduate student seeking advice on her plans to become a writer. He acknowledges that college can seem shallow and frivolous, at times, but

encourages her to learn what she can and to keep writing—and to get a copy of Webster's Collegiate Dictionary.

Charlotte's Web, 1952-1954

Charlotte's Web, 1952-1954 Summary and Analysis

In this productive period of White's life, his correspondence reflects the publication of his second children's book, "Charlotte's Web," his ongoing battle against communist witch-hunters, and his enduring love of the land and his farm in Maine. In a letter to his editor at Harper & Brothers, Ursula Nordstrom, White agrees to an annual limitation of income of $7,500 for tax purposes—a sum that he finds unimaginably large. Later, White finds the earnings of the book far exceed even those expectations. Several letters concern the development of drawings for the book by artist Garth Williams, who did the illustrations for "Stuart Little," White's first children's book. He sends Ms. Nordstrom a field guide to American spiders and points to certain traits of various types that he says characterize Charlotte.

In another letter to his publisher in May 1952, White says he likes the book jacket design but that the goose looks suspiciously serpentine. He tells Ms. Nordstrom that Harper & Brothers should take some of Charlotte's advice to never hurry and never worry.

Writing to his friend Gus Lobrano, White says that Katharine is hospitalized with hepatitis, and the rumor is that she acquired the liver infection from her own physician.

In October 1952, White writes to Ms. Nordstrom that he believes "Charlotte's Web" appeals more to adults with a literary bent than to children, and in December to express his pleasure that the first edition of 50,000 books had sold and a new printing is underway.

In a charming letter to fifth grade students of Mrs. Bard in Larchmont, N.Y., White responds to their questions: yes, he has a farm on the sea with a big, cold barn as well as 10 sheep, 18 hens, a goose and gander, a bull calf, a rat, a chipmunk and lots of spiders as well as squirrels, porcupines, foxes, rabbits and deer in the nearby woods. He confesses that he did not like spiders at first, but watching one of them spin her web fascinated him and he now appreciates how wonderful they are.

In other letters, White answers the reader concerned about The New Yorker's stance on nuclear war; writes a long, detailed letter of instructions to his Maine caretaker; congratulates a relative on news of an engagement; and advises a Republican friend to vote Democratic.

Will Strunk's Little Book, 1955-1959

Will Strunk's Little Book, 1955-1959 Summary and Analysis

In the period of this chapter, White receives a sentimental gift from an old Cornell friend of a copy of Professor William Strunk's small textbook on English usage and style. White then writes a loving remembrance about Professor Strunk for The New Yorker. An editor at Macmillan Co. contacts White to ask if his New Yorker piece could be used as an introduction to a new edition of the Strunk book, but White ends up expanding and revising the entire text, which is published in 1959 as The Elements of Style, by William Strunk, Jr. and E.B. White. Since then, the book has sold more than 10 million copies.

In 1956, both Whites are still at The New Yorker, Katharine because of the death of fiction editor Gus Lobrano and White as much to be near his wife as any other reason. However by 1957, they both are ready to live full-time at the Maine farm in semi-retirement.

In a letter to his brother Stanley, White reveals that he is going into the hospital for a hernia operation, and says he fears that when they open his abdomen the surgeons will find shad roe. ("It's just the season" he says. White exults over the arrival of his granddaughter, a new addition to his son Joel's family and sister to his grandson Steven.

White responds to several letters from students asking about his life and work. To one query, he says the best way to learn about a writer is to read his works, and lists his preferences as inboard over outboard motors, sail over powerboats. To another who identifies himself as a confused senior at Newton High School, White replies that he is a confused writer at 25 West 43rd Street who has never set out to achieve an identifiable style in his writing.

In an amusing letter to his brother Stanley, White includes a sketch with instructions on how to place his head in traction. It shows a human figure seated on a milking stool, head held in a halter rigged through several pulleys to a heavy electric iron. White says he liked to put his head in traction for 10 minutes several times a day, then follow with two or three highballs, "but I follow almost everything with that."

Letters from the East, 1960-1965

Letters from the East, 1960-1965 Summary and Analysis

In the five years covered by this chapter (1960-1965)) Katharine White has a series of illnesses: first, a carotid arterial blockage, requiring surgery; another arterial condition for which she declines surgery; then a rare skin disease that hospitalizes her and requires massive doses of cortisone. Afterwards, she is a semi-invalid but arranges to work just six months of the year at The New Yorker—despite her husband's conviction that she would work 12 months but only be paid for six.

E.B. White continues as a contributor to the magazine, and both Whites become early and ardent fans of young fiction writer John Updike. He also exchanges letters with nuclear physicist Edward Teller on the futility of nuclear disarmament; writes to his brother Stanley describing Katherine's latest ailment and a visit by their grandchildren with Joel and his wife, Allene; and tries to answer the beginnings of a floodtide of letters from children asking about "Stuart Little" and "Charlotte's Web."

In March 1961 White answers a letter from a young girl named Cathy Durham, in which she asks why he has not yet written any more books for children. White replies that one reason is the fact that so much of his time is taken up with responding to letters from readers. His note offends Cathy Durham's librarian, who writes to White to scold him for his cruelty. With that, White's publisher puts together a "letter from the author" that is sent to every child who writes. In that letter, among other things, White says that his love of literature started very early but that he never dreamed of writing to an author.

White entertains several proposals to turn "Charlotte's Web" into a movie, including one suggestion that it be made into an animated version. He writes to a French filmmaker that he can picture many ways in which the book could be successfully animated.

When White learns of the death of James Thurber in November 1961, he writes shortly thereafter to the Washington Post to correct an editorial that suggests White is responsible for Thurber's rocketry to fame. Thurber succeeded on his own talents, White insists, and disavows that he did much to anything to help the cartoonist/writer.

In January 1963, the Whites go to Sarasota, Florida for a vacation. E.B. White has an ulcer and Katherine a blocked artery. In a letter to fellow writer Robert Coates, White divulges that as a result of multiple health ailments within one week, he suffered a nervous breakdown that included tightening of the throat muscles, which made it difficult to swallow. However, White writes, he was able to sip whiskey that facilitated his recovery.

In April 1965, White writes to the publisher of the New York Herald Tribune in protest of a profile on New Yorker editor William Shawn by journalist Tom Wolfe. Its attacks on

Shawn reflect the defects in Wolfe's character as well as his approach to writing rather than any shortcomings in his subject, White states.

The Trumpet of the Swan, 1966-1970

The Trumpet of the Swan, 1966-1970 Summary and Analysis

E.B. White completes another children's book, "The Trumpet of the Swan," negotiates with would-be film makers for the rights to produce "Charlotte's Web," and maintains a rich correspondence with family and friends in the 1966-1970 period. Katharine's health improves somewhat, after undergoing seven major surgeries and four minor surgeries.

White writes to Maine Sen. Margaret Chase Smith urging her to defeat the Dirksen amendment on voluntary prayer in school. He points out that the Constitution forbids any activity that involves establishment of religion. In practice, such an amendment would tend toward the endorsement of Christianity, since that is the predominant religion in the United States, White says. The practice would make students of other faiths uncomfortable or embarrassed.

In a 1968 letter to his stepson, Roger Angell, and his wife Carol, White thanks them for their gifts and mentions recurring bouts of dizziness that keep him from writing, but he ends on a bucolic note by describing a muskrat that appeared in his new pond and stayed for several days until chased away by his dog, Fred. He also writes to his old friend Howard Cushman and asks his assistance in sending him photos and information on trumpeter swans.

To a group of fourth-graders in Columbus, Ohio White sends a note answering their question on how to write a book. One has to want to write a book and have a subject, then begin, he says. Once started, the writer has to keep going to the end. That is all he knows, White tells the students.

In July 1969, White writes to President Richard Nixon to thank him for his greetings on White's 70th birthday, and to warn him that the presidential letter probably crossed his wife's telegram to Nixon asking him to cancel the Apollo moon shot.

In the Lee of the Barn, 1971-1976

In the Lee of the Barn, 1971-1976 Summary and Analysis

After successful publication of "The Trumpet of the Swan," E.B. White adapts the story for a children's concert performed by the Philadelphia Orchestra May 13, 1972. Benjamin Lees writes the score, and the work includes a poem by White's friend Sam Beaver about the zoo.

In an April 1971 letter to his literary agent, J.G. Gude, White expresses reservations about the film treatment proposed for "Charlotte's Web" by a Czech producer who plans to make it a film for adults with a morality aspect and inserted music. Soon after White's letter, his publisher turns the project over to Hanna-Barbera Productions in Hollywood.

After spending two weeks carefully studying the screenplay for "Charlotte's Web," White makes extensive annotations and returns them to his agent. The animation studio, however, pays little heed to the author's suggestions. In another letter to his agent, White says some of the songs have an Irish sound to his ear, when what is needed is the lively sound of a New England country fair. He even suggests insertion of a part of Mozart's Quartet in F Major for the death of Charlotte and the hatching of young spiders.

In October 1975, White writes to his granddaughter, Martha White who is a student at Mount Holyoke College, to commend her on her article in the student newspaper on jogging. He encourages her interest in journalism and says it is the best training for writers who want to write novels, short stories, or essays. Journalism, White says, has played a big part in his life and is where he still feels most comfortable.

Goodbye to Katharine, 1977-1981

Goodbye to Katharine, 1977-1981 Summary and Analysis

In July 1977, Katherine White dies of congestive heart failure after 48 years of marriage to E.B. White. His letters from this time reflect his great loss and the darkness that descends on his life, lifted occasionally by visits from relatives and his own wry outlook on life. Faced with more than 500 letters of condolence, White is forced to have printed a short acknowledgement card; faced with the mountain of literary effects left by his wife, he is impelled to accept help from a young friend named Kathy Hall who once helped him organize his papers from Cornell. Portions of Katherine's books and papers are donated to several colleges including Bryn Mawr, Cornell, Yale and Bowdoin.

In a January 1978 letter to CBS News correspondent Andy Rooney, White politely declines to be interviewed on television, telling him he has always refused TV interviews. "So far, nobody has managed to entice me in front of a television camera with my mouth open and my foot in it. And that's the way I plan to keep it," he tells Rooney.

White writes to Maine Senator Edmund Muskie in May 1978 to thank him for his congratulatory note on his Pulitzer Prize, and for arranging a private ceremony in 1964 to award him the Presidential Medal of Freedom. To writer Nathaniel Benchley, White sends a letter of thanks for bringing to his attention the existence of a massage parlor named after his book, "Charlotte's Web." To avoid legal entanglements, White muses, all the owner of the business needs to do is hire someone named Charlotte. He also notifies Benchley that a posthumous book by Katherine, "Onward and Upward in the Garden," is to be published in the summer.

E.B. White, a Biography, 1982-1985

E.B. White, a Biography, 1982-1985 Summary and Analysis

By 1982, White's vision deteriorates because of retinal degeneration, to the point that he gives up doing newsbreaks for The New Yorker after 56 years. In letters to friends and relatives, White mentions that his eyesight only permits him to see half of the keyboard, and says proofreading is a real chore. Nevertheless, he begins putting his papers in order for eventual donation to the Cornell archives.

In an April 1982 letter to a woman who had been a secretary at The New Yorker when White first joined, White expresses his pleasure at hearing from her and confesses that he has never fully understood "The Elements of Style" even though he is one of its co-authors. White advises Scott Elledge, who is writing a biography of E.B., that they should try to work fast before his eyesight fails completely. White then sends him a lengthy list of 53 corrections to the first part of the book.

In another letter to Elledge, White says the book is too long and should be severely cut because "the horrid truth is, my life is not all that interesting." However, when he gets a copy of the book in early 1984, White tells the author he has done an outstanding job of digging as well as constructing the narrative.

By October 1984, White is diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, Nurses and housekeepers are hired to help, and his son Joel begins answering White's letters. E.B. White dies Oct. 1, 1985 at his home in North Brooklin, Maine.

Characters

Katherine White

White himself acknowledges, in one of his letters, his wife as the best thing that ever happened to him. The divorced mother of two who works as fiction editor of The New Yorker when White is hired, Katherine Sergeant Angell is the product of an old New England family and a graduate of Bryn Mawr—probably one of the early wave of divorced women with careers and children. White's correspondence with Katherine takes the form of letters, long and short, telegrams, and inter-office memos while they are at The New Yorker. The reader is struck by Kate's steadfastness in her devotion to The New Yorker, her husband and their children. Understanding that E.B. is a high-strrung personality happiest in a rural setting, Kate continues to commute by train to New York City from Maine after they buy a farm in Brooklin. Both Whites continue to produce copy for the magazine and submit by mail. Later generations of women might call Kate's behavior toward her husband deference based on old sexual stereotypes; but it is also clear from reading this collection that it is more likely her motivation is a deep and abiding love, reciprocated by E.B. White. The reader also gets a sense of the relative ease with which an educated person of literary interests could secure a position on a startup magazine in New York. Perhaps there were just fewer people to compete for such jobs, or journalism did not then have the post-Watergate cachet it earned, or possibly founder Harold Ross knew an exceptionally talented and hard-working editor when he saw one. In any event, Kate edited the work of numerous early New Yorker fiction writers, and was instrumental—with her husband—in giving John Updike a healthy boost in the early days of his career. The extent to which she nurtured and supported E.B. White in his literary ambitions, which produced a series of highly-successful fictional books for children, may never be known. What is known is that she suffered from poor health throughout most of their marriage, in the form of a series of ailments both rare and ordinary, that frequently hospitalized her. However, it is clear from this correspondence theirs was a strong, supportive and loving marriage that endured many twists and turns.

Stanley Hart White

Stanley is E.B. White's older brother, a hero in youth and a close friend throughout life. White writes copious and lengthy letters to his brother about everything in his life from career to marriage to children to aging and family concerns. Addressing his brother with the affectionate nickname of "Bun," White keeps close tabs on him although they live separate lives thousands of miles apart with Stanely in Chicago and E.B. In New York and Maine. Stanley seems to be the one member of White's nuclear family with whom he kept in closest touch throughout his life. When Stanley is stricken with a malignant tumor near his heart, his brother writes and offers to come to Chicago to "manage [his] doctors" at the Illinois Researchand Educatrional Hospital. The reader may feel a bit at a loss in understanding Stanley's side of the relationship since none of his

correspondence is included in the book. However, it is evident that the relationship between the two White brothers was intimate and deeply-intertwined throughout their lives.

Howard Cushman

Howard ("Cush") Cushman is one of E.B. White's closest pals from Cornell University. Like White, Cush nurtures vague literary ambitions and they sense in each other kindred spirits. After graduation in 1922, White goes to New York in search of work. He has a series of disappointing, dead-end jobs while living with a group of former Cornell students. One day, Cush shows up with the news he has flunked out of school. The two decide to hop into White's Model T roadster, named "Hotspur," and take off for unspecified western destinations, stopping in college towns where there are chapters of their fraternity, scrounging beds and meals at each stop. They plan to take work only when necessary, and E.B. packs up the roadster with a good supply of canned foods, camping gear and other survival rations. Their journey eventually takes them south then across the country and to Seattle, where they stop for a while as White takes a job as a reporter with The Seattle Times. White and Cush write ahead of their stops to let friends and relatives know they are coming and to ask for lodging. Throughout his life, White maintains correspondence with Cush and they offer each other job referrals, humorous anecdotes and little pearls of wisdom from their separate experiences.

James Thurber

E.B. White encounters James Thurber for the first time when they share a small office at The New Yorker, and they quickly realize that both are dry wits who look slightly askance at the absurdities of the world. They collaborate on "Is Sex Necessary?", which pokes fun at the sex-obsessed world in which they find themselves. Thurber, almost completely blind, produces hilarious, elongated drawings to accompany his humorous writings. White on one occasion feels compelled to write to a major newspaper disavowing that he has anything to do with Thurber's seeming overnight success. Thurber, he asserts, is his own man with his own gift who has made his own success.

Harold Ross

As much friend as boss to his staff at The New Yorker—especially writers—Harold Ross is a man of great enthusiasms and occasionally great tirades. Although not as steeped in literary traditions as some of his staff, Ross has a clear vision to produce the best, most unusual and most interesting magazine in the country. To that end, he hires the best talent he can find—including people like White and Thurber. One day Ross takes the elevator down to meet a friend for lunch, and spots Thurber and White on the street corner. "There go my two best writers," Ross tells his friend. "One can't see to cross the street and the other is afraid to." Ross is as much benevolent father figure as tyrant; he

overlooks such oddities as White's tendency to disappear with explanation from the office for days or weeks.

Gus Lobrano

A college chum and fellow campus literati, Gus Lobrano remains a part of E.B. White's life forever. They share an apartment with some other Cornell graduates in New York while looking for work. Lobrano later becomes a fiction editor at the magazine, and White submits poetry and stories for his consideration. Lobrano visits the Whites at their farm in Maine and they exchange frequent letters.

E.B. White

E.B. White is first, last and always a writer. His personality lives in words and worlds created on the printed page. However charming or perceptive those words may be, White himself admits that he is just a man of slightly shorter than average stature who is rather dull company. Throughout his career, some individuals and groups on occasion seek to recruit him to their team or their struggles, and he wisely declines. Anything but a public man, an "action figure," White is a somewhat reclusive person who spends most of his middle and later years alone on a farm in Maine. His wit and words help to shape The New Yorker and give it some of its sophistication and polish. His 56 years of contributions to newsbreaks in the magazine helped as much as any fiction or nonfiction articles to give the magazine a personality. His children's books derive from his love and compassion for animals, as well as for his own children, continue to be best sellers around the world. His "Elements of Style" remains an essential tool in the kit of any writer—casual or professional. White's influence is felt everywhere, although he was a shy man who never sought fame or honors for himself.

Jessie Hart White

Jessie White, E.B. White's mother, nurtures and encourages his interest in literature perhaps more than anyone else in his family. During his college days and afterwards until her death, White writes frequent and lengthy letters to his mother sharing many details of his life.

William Strunk

William Strunk is an English faculty member at Cornell University who becomes good friends with E.B. White. Strunk carries a little book of his pet peeves for good, clear writing that he shares with students. Years later, White revises and adds material to Strunk's book and it is published under both names as "The Elements of Style," a perennial bestseller.

John Updike

A young fiction writer who emerges at The New Yorker, John Updike is encouraged and praised by both Katharine White, fiction editor, and E.B. White. A friendship develops and White continues to exchange letters with Updike until his death in 1984. Updike continues as a frequent contributor to The New Yorker.

Alice Burchfield

Seemingly a conventional middle class girl, Alice Burchfield is the focus of E.B. White's romantic interest as an undergraduate and in the year afterwards. During his motor trip around the country with Howard Cushman, White writes long, agonizing letters to Alice and decides to stop at Cornell in Ithaca, N.Y. where she is still a student to surprise her one day. He waits for hours at a spot where he expects her to show up, and then leaves in disappointment. He then writes her a long, apologetic, self-lacerating letter. Confused by White's advance/retreat approach, Alice becomes engaged to someone else.

William Shawn

As the second editor of The New Yorker and successor to founder Harold Ross after his untimely death, Shawn has big shoes to fill and a talented staff to win over. Using the same kind of supportive and friendly style while maintaining high journalistic standards, Shawn succeeds and White develops a close relationship with him that involves the exchange of many letters—even after White leaves the magazine.

Corona Machemer

A 30-something woman who had been White's editor at Harper's and who became a companion and de facto nurse to White in his 80s, after the death of Katherine. Corona helped fill in the gaps caused by his near-complete blindness, and traveled to Sarasota, Florida with him to help organize some of his work for publication. White made it clear in other letters that theirs was strictly a friendly—not romantic—relationship.

Objects/Places

Mount Vernon, N.,Y.

A quiet, green suburb when White grows up, Mount Vernon is his childhood home where his parents remain until their deaths. The White house is a large Victorian structure complete with turrets and towers, a capacious fortress from which White "emerged to do battle, and into [which] I retreated when frightened or in trouble," White writes in the introduction. Both his parents were from Brooklyn, and his father Samuel Tilly White was a successful businessman who ran a piano manufacturing and repair business. "Well to do," is how White describes his family of origin, but not wealthy or touched in any way with aristocratic heirs or airs.

Cornell University

Propelled by two scholarships of $1,000 each at a time when tuition at Cornell University is $100 a year, White first encounters the world beyond Mount Vernon at Cornell. While at Cornell, White forms friendships with other students—like Gus Lobrano and Howard Cushman—that last a lifetime. He also develops a warm relationship with instructor William Strunk, Jr. whose book on grammatical style White later revises and publishes as "Elements of Style." The book becomes a long and steady source of income for White.

Seattle

On their road trip, White and Cushman stop in Seattle where White lands a job as a reporter with The Seattle Times. Although he is not too crazy about the assignments, White is able to chalk up his first months of professional newspaper experience.

Hotspur

Hotspur is the Model A Ford roadster that White purchases for $400, and which carries him and Howard Cushman around the country in their "wanderjahr" after graduation from Cornell.

Presidential Medal of Freedom

For a lifetime of achievement as a writer and editor, White was chosen by President Lyndon Johnson as a recipient of a Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1964. However, because of White's reticence to make public appearances, the honor was bestowed on him by Maine Sen. Edmund Muskie at the home of a mutual friend not far from Brooklin, Maine.

The Cornell Sun

The Sun is the student newspaper at Cornell where E.B. White cuts his teeth as a reporter and where he first gets printer's ink into his veins. White also makes several friendships through the newspaper that will endure throughout his life.

New York City

After completion of his road trip, White shares an apartment in New York City where he searches for work. He tries freelancing, working for a news service and public relations before securing a position with The New Yorker. There he meets fiction editor Katherine Angell, whom he marries, and both continue their careers at the magazine even though they eventually live in rural Maine. Although much more comfortable in rural Maine, White also has a deep and abiding connection to New York City because of his magazine work.

Camp Otter

A summer camp in Dorset, Ontario where White works several summers during his early days at The New Yorker and in which he buys an interest in 1929.

East Blue Hill, Maine

A summer cabin on the coast of Maine where the Whites, including Katherine's two children from her first marriage, spend the summer of 1930. This exposure to Maine convinces them they want to live there as much as possible.

Brooklin, Maine

A rural area not far from Blue Hill, Maine, where the Whites purchase a farm which they own until their deaths. It is White's deep involvement with the farm animals—including interlopers such as rats, spiders, mice and porcupines—that stir his imagination to produce his children's books such as "Stuart Little" and "Charlotte's Web."

Themes

Connection to Nature

In letters to his wife, brother, son and friends, White develops and repeats a certain pattern. At the top of the letter is usually the business of the day, or the ostensible reason for writing. About half-way through the letter, White typically changes subjects abruptly and delivers a long, detailed description of what is going on at the farm—the chickens that are producing eggs, strange behavior of his geese, or a puzzling disease that has stricken the local raspberry crop. It soon becomes apparent that living in close connection to nature is not a literary conceit with White, but rather an authentic expression of his personality and spirituality. It seems at times that White prefers the company of animals to other humans; his powers of empathy and compassion for all living creatures are quite striking. In one of the photos in the book, E.B. White is shown carrying a can of worms on his farm, a friendly robin perched happily on his shoulder.

At one point, after the birth of their son Joel, White proposes to Katharine that he take a year off from everything, free of any obligations to anyone or anything. Perhaps he will appear for dinner, perhaps not. He announces his intention to roam freely in nature reacquainting himself with the plants and animals of his youth. He will not really be gone, yet he will not exactly be there either. Instead of calling a psychiatrist, Katherine agrees to his plan. After a few weeks of this "sabbatical" in the quiet reaches of nature, White returns and resumes his life without questioning and without explanation. The strangeness of this episode is that the reader is not given to believe White is hiding an affair with another woman, but rather that he truly believes he can somehow disappear as he was wont to do for days or weeks while working at The New Yorker. However, the sense that nature represents healing persists throughout White's life.

Once the Whites purchase the farm in Maine, White seems to become truly connected to the land and its creatures and it becomes more difficult for him to go anywhere. His discomfort with human society continues to appear. For instance, White ends one letter with the statement that he has figured out a way to deal with the global overpopulation problem but must keep it a secret until he can put it in the right person's hands. His two most popular children's books, "Stuart Little" and "Charlotte's Web," have, respectively, a mouse and a spider as protagonists. White once explained that he never liked spiders until he noticed a spider in his barn that kept rebuilding a web that was repeatedly torn down. He said he came to admire the spider's determination and the beauty of its web.

Authenticity

For E.B. White, clear thinking and clear writing make possible an authenticity as an artist that is not available through artifice or literary conceit. His personal and artistic authenticity—the courage to be himself—is one of the qualities that make him a great artist. An example of the importance of authenticity to White appears in his letters. White

is hired by the Depression-era Roosevelt Administration to help with the creation of a pamphlet on "the four freedoms" enumerated in a speech by the president. When he arrives in Washington, D.C., White is surrounded by bureaucrats and endless meetings to discuss how to frame the text. Frustrated by the situation, White asks if it would be possible to just speak with Roosevelt briefly and ask him what he most wants in the pamphlet. No, he is told, that would not be possible. That is when White realizes the project is doomed, because he can not have access to the president's authentic message.

Value of Privacy

Always uncomfortable with crowds or any kind of public display, White's need for privacy seems to grow in direct proportion to his fame. After publication of "Stuart Little" and "Charlotte's Web," he is inundated with letters from teachers and especially students from all over the country. He grumbles in one letter that his success seems to have made him a target for every librarian in the United States. In a few of his letters of reply, White betrays an irritability that he really has neither the time nor the inclination to answer such questions as, what is important in your writing? With the help of his publisher, he drafts a form response letter that is sent to young fans. In another instance related in his letters, White describes his shock at finding a woman from a tour bus sticking her head into his kitchen window. For him, one of the most important freedoms —next to freedom of speech—is the freedom to be left alone.

In several instances revealed in his letters, E.B. White refuses memberships in various groups offered to him, and some prestigious jobs, because he values his privacy on the farm as an essential ingredient to his creative work as a writer. Even when chosen for the Presidential Medal of Honor, White does not appear at the White House ceremonies but instead arranges for a small ceremony in the home of a neighbor to receive the honor. In many respects a progressive New Dealer, White is in solidarity with the masses in their struggles—primarily from an idealistic standpoint. Surrendering his privacy and individuality to join various social movements is intolerable to White.

Style

Perspective

In most of his letters, E.B. White maintains a tone of ironic observer of life. It is from that perspective that much of his wry humor derives. It is as if he wants to share his latest discovery of just how nutty humans can be, how inexplicable, and how hilariously illogical life can get. In this attitude, there is a gentleness without rancor or bitterness which makes his observations more palatable. "A door is something a dog is always on the wrong side of," he once observed. Taken as a whole, E.B. White's letters trace his evolution from innocent country boy to urban legend to country farmer/writer. They capture the madness of young love, the high spirits of driving around the country with a college chum, the joy and weight of starting a new family, the exhilaration of becoming a successful author, and his growing aversion to fame and to the trap of becoming an author/public personality instead of a writer with an authentic voice.

Tone

The tone of most of the letters is casual, conversational and friendly. In letters to friends, family and loved ones, White's tone is very warm and affectionate. Whatever difficulties he may have had in expressing his feelings in person are not in evidence in his letters. Many of them are beautifully descriptive of the environment—especially those written from Maine—and demonstrate a keen awareness of others' feelings as well as his abiding love of nature and animals. In just a few, his tone is brusque and assertive, as when he writes to the editor of The Washington Post to correct the impression that he is somehow behind Thurber's fame as a humorist. "I did not 'help him become an international celebrity'—he became one because he had what it takes," White asserts. Some of his letters and memos are frankly humorous, as in the case of the (illustrated) memo White sends to New Yorker publisher Harold Ross explaining why New York taxicabs are so uncomfortable and lamenting the passage of cabs with adequate passenger door space. In letters to his wife Katharine, working in New York, White's tone seems one of gentle longing and constant reminder of how important she is to him.

Structure

The letters do not have a single unifying structure. They are written in a style appropriate to the reader, the circumstances, and the content. The only consistent pattern that emerges from a lifetime of letters is a recurring format in which White writes about the usual, topical matters of the day—whether family or world events—then launches into a lengthy, bucolic description of everything happening at his farm whether it is goose behavior, sheep shearing or ice fishing for smelt. These Thoreau-like descriptive passages could be well lifted from their context in individual letters and collected under a title such as "E.B. White on Nature."

Quotes

"If an unhappy childhood is indispensible for a writer, I am ill-equipped: I missed out on all that and was neither deprived nor unloved," (Chapter 1, p. 1).

"The month of August was four solid weeks of heaven. Father took exactly one month's vacation, always the month of August. July was a waiting time at 101 Summit Avenue—sultry summer nights in a hammock on the screened porch, games in the street just before dark, the smell of honeysuckle and of the dust laid by the sprinkling cart. Families stayed together in that innocent era—the young were less apt than they are now to go off on their own or to take a summer job. Resort places always had a liberal supply of young bucks in ice cream pants and young girls in pretty frocks. America's nomadic life had not begun—the campers and the trailers and the outboard boats and the minicycles lashed to the top," (Chapter 1, p. 8).

"I suppose you wonder why I don't act like a normal person. I wonder, too. Instead, I wait on bridges for people and when they don't come, I pack up and go on to Geneva. I hope I get over it some day. And now when I look back at the last few days, what I marvel at most is the conceit I must have nourished in supposing that you could like me after the way I had kicked you around. Only a very conceited person could have thought that. I must have thought you were like the Mutt. But actually, Alice, I was so completely absorbed in you that it never occurred to me that you might have other ideas. I guess I had always sort of thought that when anybody felt the way I did, it was bound to be mutual and when I found out otherwise by what you said, it took a few minutes to sink in. For that I apologize," (Chapter 2, p. 35).

"The Blue Grass is hard to describe. The region must be very like parts of England. There are rolling downs where sheep, duroc pigs and horses and cows graze. The grass is a luxurious blueish-green, and the heavy oaks and beeches give the landscape a park-like effect. At first we couldn't figure out what made the region so different from anything we had ever seen, and finally we realized that it was because of the complete absence of weeds, underbrush and indiscriminate foliage. It is as if there were a great gardener stalking through with a magic trowel, pruning and hoeing," (Chapter 2, p. 41).

"There is a magic to this state of Montana. Of course we have not yet come to the mountains nor to the 'scenery.' But there is someting about Montana ranch country so wildly enchanting as to be almost fearsome. Stand on the plains in the valley of the Yellowstone; watch great herds advancing grimly, like the ranks of an army, into the sun. The leaves of the aspens quiver down by the banks of the Yellowstone. And you don't know anything of what they whisper," (Chapter 2, p. 50).

"Every week the magazine [The New Yorker] teetered on the edge of financial ruin. Katherine Angell arrived in 1925. Fillmore Hyde, from the peacock hunting set, arrived. James Kevin McGuiness, Charles Baskerville, Herman J. Mankiewicz, Joseph Moncure March. Then Ralph McAllister Ingersoll arrived, right out of the social register. Lois Long, Peter Arno, Rogers Whittaker arrived, right out of the subway. Ross fumed,

fussed, broke down partititions, changed the format every issue, strove and strove, cursed and raged. It was chaos, but it was enjoyable," (Chapter 3, p. 71).

"I discovered a long time ago that writing of the small things of the day, the trivial matters of the heart, the inconsequential but near things of this living, was the only kind of creative work which I could accomplish with any sincerity or grace. As a reporter, I was a flop because I always came back laden not with facts about the case but with a mind full of the little difficulties and amusements I had encountered in my travels," (Chapter 4, p. 82).

"This marriage is a terrible challenge: everyone wishing us well, and all with their tongues in their cheeks. What other people think, or wish, or prophesy, is not particularly important except as it tends to work on our minds. I think you have the same intuitive hesitancy that I have—about pushing anything too hard, and the immediate problem surely is that we recognize & respect each other's identity. That I could assimilate Nancy [Angell] overnight is obviously out of the question—or that she could me. In things like that we gain ground slowly," (Chapter 4, p. 88).

"Have just driven in town, carrying our cook and our cook's dog. Gave the one $300 in currency and placed the other in the infirmary, with eczema. What an odd pair they are, wandering happily together on the brink of sanity!" (Chapter 5, p. 104).

"I have a theory that a great deal of advertising is attributable not to a merchant's ambition for his product but to a copywriter's dream of participation in the world of letters. Self-expression is at the bottom of lots of stuff which masquerades as industrial promotion," (Chapter 5, p. 115).

"I have the greatest difficulty making myself do any work here [North Brooklin, Maine]. Even writing a letter seems an imposition. I get out my weekly stint in a sort of lonely rage—shutting myself in a room and lashing out at people who make the slightest noise about the house. I foolishly agreed to do several articles and also a short book about New York for the Oxford Press. I doubt if any of these things get done, or even started. They simply serve to annoy me, and prevent peace settling down over me," (Chapter 5, p. 118).

"We are having splendid weather and I am building a stone wall. I understand that all literary people, at one time or another, build a stone wall. It's because it is easier than writing," (Chapter 5, p. 131).

"Writing is a secret vice, like self abuse. A person afflicted with poetic longings of one sort or another searches for a kind of intellectual and spiritual privacy in which to indulge his strange excesses. To achieve this sort of privacy—this aerial suspension of the lyrical spirit—he does not necessarily have to wrench himself away, physically, from everybody and everything in his life (this, I suspect, often defeats him at his own game), but he does have to forswear certain easy rituals, such as earning a living and running the world's errands," (Chapter 6, p. 146).

"This is what I intend to 'do' in my year. I am quitting my job. In a sense, I am also quitting my family—which is a much more serious matter and which is why I am taking the trouble to write this letter. For a long time I have been taking notes—sometimes on bits of paper, sometimes on the mind's disordered pad—on a theme which engorsses me. I intend to devote my year to assembling these notes, if I can, and possibly putting them on paper of the standard typewriter size. In short, a simple literary project. I am not particularly hopeful of it, but I am willing to meet it half way. If at the end of the year, I have nothing but a bowlful of cigarette stubs to show for my time, I shall not begrudge a moment of it and I hope you won't. They say a dirigible, after it has been in the air for a while, becomes charged with static electricity, which is not discharged till the landing ropes touch the field and ground it. I have been storing up an inner turbulence, during my lone apprenticeship in the weekly gaiety field, and it is time I came down to earth," (Chapter 6, p. 147).

"Maybe I should warn you what a madhouse you are stepping into here. I have 10 turkeys, three dogs, three children, three or four in help at last count (including the postmaster who grows wonderful salpiglossis and scabiosa), two water systems, a cesspool, a chimney swift, a moosehead covered with swallow crap, a frogpond, a family of bantams, a Sears Roebuck catalogue and 165 chairs. There is also a fine view of Mount Desert," (Chapter 6, p. 149).

"Even when an artist has the ability and strength to assemble something of the beauty and the consternation which he feels, he is usually so jealous of other artists that he has no time for pure expression. Today with the radio yammering at you and the movies turning all human emotions into cup custard, the going is tough. Or I find it tough," (Chapter 6, p. 155).

"One thing I like about the country is the way everything moves indoors with you, come fall. Spiders, flies, hornets, dogs, crickets, bantams, lice, mice, everything. I don't see how we can be lonely with this company. And to top it all, the Portland Press Herald printed a list of Who's Who in Maine. There were only nine of us," (Chapter 6, p. 172).

"This set-to with the soil, or "earth," which Katharine and I are engaged in, is a manifestation well worth exploring: whole carloads of creative, impractical people are sprinkling the land of their forbears—or at any rate the land of somebody's forbears. We examine, with the simple wonderment of a child, the elementary processes of nature, overemphasizing (I dare say) the ignoble properties of the city and the town, emulating the competence of genuine countrymen, and acting often in a thoroughly comical manner. There is something quite funny about the rediscovery of America, if I could just get it down. I suppose it was going on 100 years ago, in transcendental days, and was just as amusing then as now; but today we have the added absurdities which arise from the attempt to live simple lives with General Electric appliances," (Chapter 6, p. 174).

"I had a nose operation in Boston last fall, which didn't amount to a damn, and which really turned out to be a godsend because I wrote a piece for The New Yorker about being in a hospital and got paid more than the doctor charged me for the operation,

which I considered a very unusual feat, as well as a clearcut victory over the medical fraternity," (Chapter 7, p. 237).

"It always amazes me that the idea of weddings has persisted the way it has. Considering the amount of disturbance and trouble a wedding causes, as well as the expense and the danger of everybody getting poisoned on chicken salad that has been eked out by adding five pounds of bad veal, you wonder anybody has the guts to stage it. I think weddings would die in no time at all if it weren't for women, who seem to get some inner (and probably shabby) excitement out of the occasion," (Chapter 8, p. 259).

"The highest respect we can pay the colored race is to hold it up to exactly the same type of spoofing to which we subject the white race and all other races, since this is evidence that we regard people as individuals and all men as equals in the sights of artists as well as of God," (Chapter 9, p. 302).

"A writer's life and his production are so haphazard, so unpredictable, and so divided between periods of pregnancy and deliverance, that there can never be any sharp means of reckoning his time and his fruits," (Chapter 9, p. 304).

"The next grammar book I bring out I want to tell how to end a sentence with five prepositions. A father of a little boy goes upstairs after supper to read to his son, but he brings the wrong book. The boy says, 'What did you bring that book that I don't want to be read to out of up for?'" (Chapter 12, p. 447).

"It is the fixed purpose of television and motion pictures to scrap the author, sink him without a trace, on the theory that he is incompetent, has never read his own stuff, is not responsible for anything he ever wrote, and wouldn't know what to do about it even if he were. I believe this has something to do with the urge to create, and the only way a TV person or a movie person can become a creator is to sink the guy who did it to begin with," (Chapter 13, p. 490).

"Dear Sixth Graders: Your essays spoke of beauty, of love, of light and darkness, of joy and sorrow, and of the goodness of life. They were wonderful compositions. I have seldom read any that have touched me more. Thank you for sending me your essays about being somebody. I was pleased that so many of you felt the beauty and goodness of the world. If we feel that when we are younger, then there is great hope for us when we grow older," [1973] (Chapter 14, p. 597).

"She [Katherine White] was the one great award of my life and I am in awe of having received it," (Chapter 15, p. 621).

"Dear Honey: Nothing has become of me. I sometimes wish something would become of me, but I can't think what it would be. Obviously nothing has become of you or you wouldn't even raise the question. I am reclusive, stubborn, crumbling, far gone in the general depression that belongs to hay fever. The man who is writing my biography is in worse shape than I am. He has pulmonary trouble and is worried because he picked the wrong person to write a biography about," [1983] (Chapter 16, p. 665).

Topics for Discussion

To what extent does E.B. White's nuclear family support and encourage him as a writer?

In view of White's checkered career in journalism, advertising and literature before coming to The New Yorker, what are some factors that account for his 56-year stint on the magazine's staff?

What explains for E.B. White's peculiar—almost bizarre—relationship to women, such as Alice Burchfield, throughout his youth and college days, before he meets Katherine?

How was E.B. White able to keep his position at The New Yorker despite his occasional unexplained absences and his period of separation?

Why did E.B. White say that he failed as a reporter? What personal traits—other than his obvious ability to write—caused him to feel that way?

Does E.B. White's reluctance to appear in public suggest a misanthropic personality, or just extreme shyness?

Why does E.B. White seem more at home around animals than in social settings with other people?

What are some personality traits that White and James Thurber have in common that enable them to collaborate on a book of humor and to remain lifelong friends?

Once celebrated for his wit and humor, White remarks in one of his letters that in old age he has long since ceased to find anything printed on paper funny. Why do you think he wrote that?

On balance, was it a satisfying experience for White to have a movie made of "Charlotte's Web" and a symphonic treatment of "The Trumpet of the Swan" produced?