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## E. B. White's Environmental Web

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*University of Nebraska - Lincoln*

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E. B. WHITE'S ENVIRONMENTAL WEB

by

Lynn Overholt Wake

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major: English

Under the Supervision of Professor Frances W. Kaye

Lincoln, Nebraska

May, 2007

## E. B. WHITE'S ENVIRONMENTAL WEB

Lynn Overholt Wake, Ph.D.  
University of Nebraska, 2007

Advisor: Frances W. Kaye

E. B. White called *Walden* his favorite book and found in it “an invitation to life’s dance.” To read White ecocritically is to accept a similar invitation to broaden our environmental imagination. Although one or two of his essays are often anthologized as nature writing, critics have not read White environmentally. While emphasizing White’s three books for children, this dissertation reads across genre lines to examine his lifelong work. Drawing on Laurence Buell’s prismatic term, the study explores how White’s engagement with the natural world contributes to the renewal of our collective environmental imagination. Examining White’s affinity for animals, evident across the spectrum of his work, this study concludes that for White the world is fundamentally inhabited both by humans and non-human animals; his work reflects concern for the habitat of both.

White’s three books for children, considered within a framework of Joseph W. Meeker’s literary ecology, form a bridge connecting children’s literature and ecocriticism. This study presents *Stuart Little* as a series of place-based adventures and a comedy of survival. In *Charlotte’s Web*, White’s environmental magnum opus, he presents his biophilic sense of the web of life and invites the animal world to speak for itself, Fern showing the rest of us how to pay attention

to other species. A braided story of human and animal habitat, *The Trumpet of the Swan* continues Stuart's quest underway at the end of the earlier book.

An initial chapter exploring White's literary ecology (his childhood in the age of nature study, his early sense of place, and his affinity for animals) also examines representative essays, poems and other writings.

Closing the study is a chapter connecting White to the wider web of environmental literature through a focus on the nature of story, an emphasis on animal presence, and an expansive sense of ecocriticism that includes children's literature. Finding the root of the environmental imagination to be in childhood experience, the study treats each of White's children's books in separate chapters.

## Acknowledgements

I am deeply grateful for the widespread support I've received from friends, family, and colleagues while I completed this project.

Fran Kaye's insight has been phenomenal. Like Stuart Little, she sees things whole. I appreciate her guidance, her wide-ranging perspective, her generous style of sharing her knowledge, and her genuine interest in my work.

My good fortune in having Ted Kooser as a reader for this dissertation is augmented by knowing he was already interested in E. B. White. I appreciate both his response and his stories, which I hope to hear more frequently now. I'm pleased that Jim Rosowski read my work, not with a professional biologist's microscope, but with a big heart and a generous spirit.

As EBW said, "It is not often that someone comes along who is a true friend and a good writer," so I must be getting more than my share. Besides the three already mentioned, I wish to thank Anne Whitney and Mary K. Stillwell who as writers and as friends have read my work and encouraged me through the years. Their deep interest in this project is an irreplaceable component in my bringing it to completion. Ongoing friendship and valuable support has also come from Cheryl Schmieding, Jane Schaefer, Karen Buck, Linnea Fredrickson, Mickey Williamson, Trish Lindner, Stephanie Rouse, and Denise Banker—I thank each of you for your particular gifts to me.

The English Department at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln has provided a stimulating community for writers and scholars over the years. I'm especially grateful to all who participate in the Environmental Writing and Criticism Community. I am indebted to Robert Brooke for reading an earlier essay on *Charlotte's Web*, and I appreciate Sue Hart's expertise and friendly assistance.

I would also like to thank all who meet at The Bookworm in Omaha to discuss children's books, especially Ellen Scott, who makes AardBaark what it is, and Jean Hartwell, for her interest in reading my work.

Sue Rosowski, who encouraged the beginning of this project, remains often in my thoughts and continues to grace my life in many ways.

My daughter, Elizabeth, her fiancé Gary, my son Max and his wife Melanie have all been wonderfully supportive, understanding, and encouraging. I take delight in the prospect of all the stories we have yet to create together as family.

J. P. Wehrman, my husband, has been steadfast throughout. I deeply appreciate all of his able assistance. His unfailing encouragement, patient listening, and dependable insight have helped me all along this journey.

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## E. B. WHITE'S ENVIRONMENTAL WEB

### Introduction

“One foot in literature and the other on land” is one of Cheryl Glotfelty’s descriptions of ecocriticism. “As a theoretical discourse,” she writes introducing *The Ecocriticism Reader*, “it negotiates between the human and the nonhuman” (xix). I like her two-footed image for this new way of reading—one foot in the book, the other in the backyard, or on the trail. One eye toward the academy—perhaps—and the other on the world outside of school. The human and the non-human negotiating. . . . How do we do that?

I like thinking of readers as two-footed creatures, alive in the world we are reading about, not just heads and noses in books, but living, breathing, fully embodied beings, the reading mind engaging the world, the reading informing the ways in which we human animals inhabit the world. Reading helps us envision the world as inhabited place. It helps us mind the earth.

This dissertation seeks a two-footed stance in several ways. First, I hope to contribute to the bridge of scholarship now under construction that has one foot in ecocriticism and the other foot in children’s literature (or children’s cultural studies). From the beginning, encouraged by Professor Sue Rosowski, I envisioned a project built on the twin recognitions that children’s literature is in fact literature, and environmental criticism offers a

promising, more fully integrated approach to reading and writing. E. B. White still seems the perfect writer for that project.

His three books for children (*Stuart Little*, *Charlotte's Web*, and *The Trumpet of the Swan*) invite readers into a compelling animal presence, their human, non-human negotiation well underway. Although in these books White never strays far from human perspectives and human concerns, the animals whose stories he narrates are fully animals, not symbols or metaphors. I have read these three stories *as animals' stories*, not as fables or fantasy. As Charlotte says, "A rat is a rat." So a second way in which my work seems two-footed to me is that while I focus on animal presence, I cannot escape human perspective. This approach has led me toward a realization that White was profoundly concerned not only with animals, and not only with humans, but with the idea of the earth as habitat for all.

Environmental themes are abundantly present in White's long lifetime of writing. I do not attempt a biographical study, but his childhood in the age of nature study, his early sense of place, and his affinity for animals, are considered in chapter 1 as elements of his environmental imagination. In the first chapter, "The Literary Ecology of E. B. White," I offer environmental readings of several representative essays and poems. Regardless of the genre, White's work reflects his commitment to the earth as dwelling place, as shared habitat.

Chapter 2 discusses the nature of *Stuart Little*, reading White's 1945 debut in children's literature as a comedy of survival and a series of place-



based adventures. That adventure essentially continues and widens in *The Trumpet of the Swan* (1970), which I see as a braided narrative of animal and human habitat, and discuss in chapter 4. In between, and in the center, is chapter 3, a reading of “*Charlotte’s Web*, E. B. White’s Environmental Magnum Opus.” Chapter 3 is the heart of the dissertation.

And finally, chapter 5, “Ecocritical Lines of Attachment,” presents an extended discussion positioning my work within the rapidly expanding field of ecocriticism. First drawing on two foundational ideas: Joseph W. Meeker’s literary ecology and Laurence Buell’s sense of the environmental imagination, I develop five major “lines of attachment”: the fundamental flexibility of ecocriticism, the roots in childhood of the environmental imagination, the current greening of children’s literature, the idea of stories as reflections of shared human/non-human animal inhabitation of the earth, and various calls for new stories and fresh storytelling. I envision these “lines of attachment” as connecting with each other at multiple points. Taken together, these ideas help explain White as a major environmental writer.

Because of the web-like structure of this approach, I feel that my dissertation can be read in various ways. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 may be read separately, or the three together, for my ideas on White’s three children’s books. Since the three books appeared over a twenty-five year span, they also relate to each other as a larger cultural and environmental narrative. The middle three chapters of this study are not dependent on chapters 1 and 5 for their meaning, although those chapters are intended to provide context.

However, if one is especially interested in ecocriticism per se, it may be beneficial to begin with chapter 5. I have positioned the general chapter on White first, because it seemed biologically, and biographically, to come first. In other words, the chapters relate to each other in both linear and non-linear ways.

The two-footed stance is particularly well suited for reading White. During the time I've been working on this project, I've met people who have said to me, "I know he wrote wonderful essays. Did he write anything else?" Others have asked, "Did he write anything besides the children's books?" When I worked as a children's librarian and a school media specialist I gave little thought to the three titles by White, beyond making sure there were plenty of copies on the shelves. Of course it was rewarding to find a child who hadn't read them all, or a discussion group of third-graders or fourth-graders in which we could read *Charlotte's Web* together.

When I taught children's literature in college classes, again I didn't emphasize White's books, because most of my students were planning to be teachers, and teachers have long been familiar with his books for children. In a children's literature class, the challenge was not to promote E. B. White, but to introduce enough other books so that *Charlotte's Web* would have a lot of company in the teacher's mind as he or she selected good books to read aloud or to include in a literature program. Within scholarly criticism on children's literature, I find White's books mentioned quite often, with *Charlotte's Web* widely regarded as a touchstone, invoked as a model.

On the other educational foot, in a college composition or introductory lit class (whether green or not), an experience with White is likely to mean reading “Once More to the Lake,” with the professor introducing White as a celebrated essayist. As I mention in chapter 1 of this dissertation, although anthologists frequently include an essay or two by White in collections of nature writing, the nature *in* his writing overall is seldom explored. A significant exception is Scott Elledge’s biography of White; he doesn’t draw heavily on ecocritical terminology, but Elledge understands White as a major environmental writer.

I’ve mentioned his children’s books and his essays, but White’s writing has so many legs, to do justice to his versatility my two-footed metaphor needs an eight-legged Charlotte for a sidekick. Next to the essays and children’s books, White is probably best known now for his letters, just re-issued in an expanded edition (December 2006) and for *The Elements of Style*, recently illustrated by Maira Kalman (2005).

On April 18, 1925, his work first appeared in *The New Yorker*, nine weeks after the magazine’s first issue. By September he was contributing to the “Notes and Comment” column, writing editorial pieces in a form he called simply “paragraphs.” White has appropriately been called “the editorial voice” of *The New Yorker*. In 1937 he left his full-time position at the magazine, but continued to send “Comment” intermittently, returning to the city and full-time work there in 1943. Then in 1957 he and his wife,

Katharine, resumed living in Maine year round, but he continued to publish “Comment” in *The New Yorker* until 1976.

White called himself a “non-poet,” yet he wrote and published poetry for much of his life. He and Katharine edited an anthology of humor in 1941; he wrote “newsbreaks,” anonymous punch lines for material from other publications, for *The New Yorker* for fifty-six years. In 1942 he served as general editor of *Four Freedoms*, an official government pamphlet intended to elaborate the four freedoms Roosevelt had outlined in his 1941 State of the Union address. *One Man’s Meat*, the book John Updike calls White’s best, comprises essays White wrote on his farm in Maine during the war years. After World War II he collected his pieces advocating world government, publishing *The Wild Flag* in 1946. And particularly relevant here, he wrote a column running in the magazine from May 1959 to April 1960 calling attention to environmental issues, or “Man’s progress in making the planet uninhabitable.” Echoing Charlotte’s speech to Wilbur, it was called “These Precious Days.” An eight-legged writer indeed.

We need all of those legs, because there’s one more sense in which this dissertation is two-footed. It has one foot in academic literary criticism and the other foot in wild reading—reading undomesticated by the classroom. Wild reading is propagated through reading aloud to children or reading with children—anywhere; through friends and family recommending titles; through public lectures and readings; through casual conversations and discussion groups; through newspapers, magazines, and the internet;

through libraries, bookstores and book clubs—and many other places and contexts in which critical theory is put to work, or allowed to play. In wild reading the reader counts, the writer counts, and the world counts; life matters. Biophilic “by nature,” wild reading is symbiotic with Meeker’s idea of literary ecology.

What I like most about E. B. White is that he persisted in writing about himself. He did this with a modest and a graceful perspective, letting his readers know that he didn’t regard himself as the most important person on the planet. In fact his test for the American democracy was “that no one shall be made to feel uncomfortable or unsafe because of nonconformity” (*Essays* 88). No matter how graceful the style of a passage, to read White is to feel the fabric of American culture at its sturdiest.

So when I say I like him for writing about himself, it’s a self embedded in place and in society, a self at home in Maine or walking the streets in New York, riding a train with his son or sitting on a rock in his pasture. Whatever the habitat, and whatever creatures he shares it with, he narrates for us a self clearly located in the world. I think White has a lot to teach us about how to inhabit the world. I hope this dissertation is an invitation to read E. B. White with the natural world in mind.

## Chapter 1

### **The Literary Ecology of E. B. White**

Today, after a good many years of tame life, I find myself in the incredibly rich situation of living in a steam-heated, electrically lit dwelling on a tarred highway with a raccoon dozing in her penthouse while my power lawn mower circles and growls noisily below. At last I am in a position to roll out the green carpet for a little sister to the bear.

E. B. White

#### **Introduction**

April 22, 1970, was the first official Earth Day. I was in Boston that spring, a city harboring as many graduate students as the entire population of my hometown, Omaha, Nebraska. A graduate student myself, I was finishing a master's degree in library science on my way to becoming a children's librarian. I remember the Commons and The Public Garden on April 22 as a sea of hopeful exuberance. I'm sure music was abundant, though I don't remember particular songs. Like visible music, soap bubbles drifted on the spring breezes, catching the sunlight. Words like "mellow" and "far out" and gifts of Oreo cookies spun little webs of connection among strangers. It was a buoyant afternoon.

On a brochure I've long-since thrown away, handed to me there on the edge of the pond where the swan-boats still glide, someone had quoted a sentence by E. B. White, a lyrical sentence that seemed to reflect my new fascination with New England, even while it evoked my old leafy neighborhood in central Omaha. Since then, this sentence has kept me company. It embodies a statement of environmental vision still holding the power to lead me on, holding out hope that like Stuart I'm "headed in the right direction."

In the loveliest town of all, where the houses were white and high and the elm trees were green and higher than the houses, where the front yards were wide and pleasant and the back yards were bushy and worth finding out about, where the streets sloped down to the stream and the stream flowed quietly under the bridge, where the lawns ended in orchards and the orchards ended in fields and the fields ended in pastures and the pastures climbed the hill and disappeared over the top toward the wonderful wide sky, in this loveliest of all towns Stuart stopped to get a drink of sarsaparilla. (100)

This loveliest of sentences reads as a springboard into the literary ecology of E. B. White. Very simply put, ecology is the study of relationships between organisms and their environments. I use Joseph Meeker's term "literary ecology," discussed further in chapter 5, to suggest consideration of the wide web of biological, ecological, environmental, geographical, historical, political, place-based, and personal meanings that work together throughout White's lifetime of writing to express his environmental vision. As a writer, White envisioned not a more perfect world, but "this lovely world," more perceptively inhabited by human beings, and more generously shared as habitat with other species. He is often quoted as saying: "All I hope to say in books, all that I ever meant to say, is that I love the world" (Elledge 300). To hear that statement ecocritically offers more than we might at first imagine.

White's love of the world, as expressed in his writing, finds its true context in the root of the word ecology: *oikos*, the Greek word "referring originally to the family household and its daily operations and maintenance" (Worster 192). By simple extension, the very word "ecology" calls us to consider the world as dwelling, or home, the place in which it is possible to live, the Earth. E. B White's writing is very "(eco)-logical" about how we dwell in the world, weaving pleasure in with the familiar, the daily, the life intimately around us. His writing consistently shows close attention to the natural world, with deep concern for and insight into intimate, local, national, and international "operations and maintenance" of the planet. Often his concerns both personal and societal compatibly inhabit the same essay, or even the same sentence.

Perhaps after experiencing the remarkable cadence of the sentence quoted from *Stuart Little*, some readers taking a second look might find the sentence sounding strangely empty, as though it describes a dream of a place rather than an actual place that human geographers would read as imbued with meaning by its inhabitants. No children play in the back yards or wade in the stream or fish from the bridge. No one is working in the fields and pastures. Although "the back yards were bushy and worth finding out about," there is no mention of any animal life. No gray squirrels chase through the elm trees, no frogs splash in the stream, no foxes hide in the orchards, and no hawks circle the fields. Except for the adventurous Stuart, the sentence is



uninhabited. It could almost be part of a small town's planning document, a visionary but theoretical environmental plan.

When the story of Ames' Crossing begins, White provides a history and inhabitants, but for now, we'll let this lyrical sentence serve as an invitation to an environmental reading of E. B. White. White, of course, was known for his sentences. For some readers, like me, this one can lead to *Stuart Little*, or back to it, imaginatively or experientially, or both, where one finds the sentence close to the end of the book, with Stuart not far from driving out of his famously open-ended story. Because most readers cannot forget their sense of the narrative of *Stuart Little* continuing beyond the book, this sentence suggests a way back in to the larger story of White's place in our shared environmental imagination.

E. B. White is a major environmental writer. Reading his three novels for children along with the rest of his work shows the range and depth of his environmental imagination and widens the scope of literary ecology. Over a seventy-year writing lifetime, White wrote in a wealth of genres, publishing his first story in 1911 in *St. Nicholas Magazine* at age 11, and a new introduction for *One Man's Meat* in 1982. He wrote poetry, essays, fiction, opinion pieces, *New Yorker* "newsbreaks," humorous prose, letters, government documents, and drama. With his wife, Katharine, he edited a collection of humor. His letters, first published in 1976, have now been published again, thirty years later, in a revised and extended edition. They are gems. Although this dissertation will emphasize White's three novels for children, I am reading

across genre lines, and considering his work as a whole. Exploring the range, the depth, the intensity, and the meanings of White's imaginative engagement with the natural world contributes to the on-going renewal of our collective environmental vision.

### **“Testudology” and other nature studies**

Not until 1995 did Lawrence Buell's phrase, “the environmental imagination” become part of our rapidly widening ecocritical conversation regarding (but not limited to) American literature. Yet Americans' imaginative engagement with environmental themes was vigorous, various, and widespread at the time of White's birth. In fact from 1880 to 1920 “a back to nature cult” flourished in the United States (Scheese 28). This was the age of nature study, and Elwyn Brooks White was born right in the middle of it, on July 11, 1899. During his formative years American culture was intrigued with natural history, and the popular press was awash in nature writing. Setting the stage for his illuminating book *The Nature Fakers: Wildlife, Science & Sentiment*, Ralph H. Lutts describes the “major environmental awakening” well underway in 1903 as “perhaps, equaled only by the reawakening marked by Earth Day 1970. The public was alive with interest in wildlife and nature” (3).

White's was a biophilic childhood.<sup>1</sup> In the suburban village of Mount Vernon, New York, where he was born, “the life of children as lucky as Elwyn

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<sup>1</sup> E. O. Wilson defines his term “biophilia” as “the innate tendency to be attracted by other life forms and to affiliate with natural living systems” (*Future* 214). His chapter “For the Love of Life,” 129-48, gives a discussion of biophilia relevant here. His statement: “our place in nature, viewed from an

and his pals was a happy rural one” (Elledge 20). He lived with his parents, Samuel Tilly White and Jessie Hart White, and his five older brothers and sisters in a large Victorian house featuring a stable that at times housed pigeons, ducks, geese, and a turkey, as well as horses. There were rats under the stable and sometimes a wild cat (Elledge 19).

White later wrote of “gloomy guilt” over being required to keep his dog Mac in the cellar; his biographer seems to share the boy’s relief that “the following winter Mac moved to sheepskin-lined quarters that Elwyn built for him in the barn.” The collection of birds’ eggs up in the attic, ranging in size from a hummingbird’s egg to an ostrich’s, typical of middle-class homes in the age of nature study, appears to be White’s first experience of the beauty of birds’ eggs. His lifelong fascination with birds, their eggs, their nests, and the hatching of chicks began early. Once when illness kept him home from school White befriended a mouse, making him “a home, complete with a gymnasium” and teaching him tricks (Elledge 15-19).<sup>2</sup>

Early on, place held particular significance for White. In letters to his biographer, White describes “the Dell,” a place with a stream “and a small pond on which we skated in the beautiful winter twilight.” A slope where children could teach themselves to ski was only a few hundred yards from the house, and a place called Wilson’s Woods was “memorable for its jack-in-the-

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ethical perspective, is to think about the creation and to protect the living planet” (132), is consistent with White’s environmental ethic.

<sup>2</sup> Elledge refers to this particular mouse as “the original Stuart Little.”

pulpits, anemones, and dogwood in spring. In it was Snake Pond, where Elwyn went looking for ‘salamanders, frogs, or trouble.’” The village offered “good streets for bicycling, and sidewalks for rollerskating” (Elledge 20).<sup>3</sup>

In 1905 the family began to spend the month of August in Maine. Elledge writes, “The summer world of the Belgrade Lakes in Maine was Elwyn’s favorite biology laboratory” (26). He and his next-older brother, Stanley, made studies of turtles and tortoises in particular, investigation they called “testudology”—home-grown nature study (29). (Testudinales are turtles and tortoises.) Perhaps it was the advent of this second place, the Belgrade Lakes in Maine, into White’s life, that began to instruct the young boy in his own personal significance of place, the way a second medium instructs an artist in the possibilities of the first, or a second language shows us realities of the nature of language which we miss if we have only one.

From family excursions closer to home, White would also have been familiar with New York City at an early age, bringing the two places he wrote about the most, New York and Maine, into his life early on, and yet neither Maine nor New York were his original home; they were places he “discovered” for himself as he matured, places he consciously chose, observed, returned to, and accepted as vital to his personal world.

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<sup>3</sup> See Nabhan and Trimble, *The Geography of Children: Why Children Need Wild Places*, for an insightful look at the relationship of children to nature. Alternating essays, the two naturalists offer a treatment of this important topic both intimate and profound. A more recent look at the issue is Richard Louv’s *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children From Nature-Deficit Disorder*.

Nature study was a pervasive cultural phenomenon during E. B. White's coming of age, and the Whites' family life was compatible with it in many ways. Historian Peter J. Schmitt contextualizes the age of nature study as part of "the Arcadian myth in urban America." The Arcadian myth valorized a long list of experiences, such as commuting to the city from rural acreages or suburban developments; the rise of country clubs for hunting and playing golf; rural vacationing, hiking and camping; the aesthetics of landscape art and gardening; bird-watching; nature writing; and instruction through nature lessons in schools (Schmitt 3-14, Lutts 4). Ironically, (according to Schmitt) actual farming was not part of the myth, but White did become an effective agricultural producer. With the additional interest of boating, the White family's lifestyle in Mount Vernon and their summer vacations in Maine were remarkably mirrored by Schmitt's description of life in the age of nature study.

Both senses of the ambivalent term "myth," are relevant to the impact of an Arcadian myth at the turn of the previous century: "myth" as that which is not factually true (at least not to the extent hoped for by its promoters) *and* that which is widely believed, and thus influences behavior. At least five behaviors or values closely associated with the nature study movement influenced E. B. White's early life, forming and informing his lifelong environmental writing: the reading and enjoyment of "nature books," the burgeoning national interest in protecting endangered species and preserving natural resources, recreational camping and vacationing out-of-doors, bird watching, and the rising attention to sympathy for animals both wild and domestic. White's fiction for children,

especially *The Trumpet of the Swan*, and much of his other work as well, is imbued with these values.

The writer's ten-page autobiographical introduction for the *Letters of E. B. White* (1976 and 2006), begins, "If an unhappy childhood is indispensable for a writer, I am ill-equipped," and goes on to detail family experiences with music and art. White's father had worked his way up from a job wrapping packages at a piano-making company to being president of the firm, and White describes his early life as rich in both musical instruments and family members to play them, but a bit shorter on talent. His mother's father was the accomplished landscape painter William Hart, described by White as "one of the pillars of the Hudson River school." Although his mother "had no artistic pretensions or gifts . . . it meant something to her to have an artist for a parent—an artist was special" (4). One wonders what effect his maternal grandfather's landscape art and its particular rendering of nature might have had on White's developing environmental imagination.

Although the only specific book he mentions in his introduction to *The Letters* is a family Bible, White tells us that his older brother Stanley taught him to read while he was in kindergarten, that Stan was a good teacher, and that he could read "fairly fluently" before first grade. E. B. White's early reading most likely included quite a number of the widely popular "nature books" as well.

We know that White read William J. Long's, *The Little Brother to the Bear*, because in an essay dated June 14, 1956, called "Coon Tree," White

traces his “introduction to raccoons” to reading that particular book. In fact in that essay he remarks that as a child he read all of Long’s books “with a passionate interest” and that he “must have read the raccoon story twenty times” (*Essays* 35). “All of Long’s books,” if one includes only his animal and nature books for children, would mean about a dozen books: by 1908 Long had published seven books in his Wood Folk Series, plus at least five other volumes of animal stories and nature lore. How intriguing that the one writer from the age of nature study that White specifies having read and reread as a child, Reverend William J. Long, had been the principal target of John Burroughs and Theodore Roosevelt in the much-publicized “nature faker” controversy from 1903 to 1907!<sup>4</sup>

*A Little Brother to the Bear* is an extremely attractive book. The copy I acquired on-line has a sturdy forest-green cover with title and author’s name embossed in a gold oval shape. Recumbent atop the oval is the textured figure of a raccoon, the animal’s distinctive markings clearly visible. Below, and shown in silhouette but with fur-like edges, is a bear standing on his hind legs looking up toward the raccoon, which seems to be regarding the bear. After decades of examining children’s books with considerable interest, I find this a remarkably inviting book.

Opening the book, one enters a forest of illustration. Endpapers are a softer, mossy green, laced with antler-like tree branches printed in the same

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<sup>4</sup> See Ralph H. Lutts, *The Nature Fakers: Wildlife, Science & Sentiment*, for a full account of the nature-faker controversy. Lutts concludes that Long “should not be remembered as a fraud” (xi).

forest green of the cover. Centered on the pastedown pages is the head of a buck, with the head of a doe on the fly sheets, each animal framed in a wreath of leaves, and each staring directly out of its stylized woodland setting, out of itself, into the eyes of the reader who is about to enter the book as though entering the forest itself.

Although he presents primarily a European perspective in his 1990 study *The Frog King*, Boria Sax points out that over the centuries, the human relationship with deer has become characterized by complexity and ambiguity more profound than our relationship with many other species. He writes, “My theory is that the hunt of the stag has usually functioned as a ritualistic taming of the forest. It affirms man’s dominion over nature” (121). One aspect of that relationship stems from the resemblance of the deer’s antlers to the forest itself, a resemblance uncannily evoked in the endpapers for *A Little Brother to the Bear*. So the suggestion is made early on that the reader, more specifically young En White, is invited into a particular version—or vision—of the experience humans have in the forest, and by extension with nature.

The reader finds Charles Copeland’s pen and ink drawings of animals in one corner of most of the double-spreads. In other words, this book is visually populated with the animals Long has observed “in the wild” and discussed in his text. The arrangement of the text around these drawings varies, but with the constant effect of inserting the seen animal into the writing about it. Additionally, the animals are rendered in place: a lynx crouches on a tree limb in winter, a woodcock flies low over a wooded scene at twilight, a fat



toad is shown half-way into a hole between two flagstones. With thirteen full-page paintings by Copeland as well, this book succeeds in visually involving the reader with animals shown fully present and participative in their native habitat.

Long's book speaks eloquently to a child's imaginative experience of the actual lives of animals. As an illustrated book for children, *A Little Brother to the Bear* integrates story and text in a seamless way; the result is a beautifully designed book that compares favorably with the contemporaneous books written and illustrated by Beatrix Potter, which unlike Long's books are well known today. Animal habitats in Potter's books combine natural and domestic features, while Long primarily shows animals in the wild. White's writing over his lifetime shows an abiding interest in the living arrangements of animals, an interest nurtured by books he encountered as a young reader.

**“An amazing note of friendliness . . . an almost virulent sympathy”**

From his first published stories and youthful letters (My chameleon [sic] thrives and grows tamer day by day, that is, providing I don't go near him), to his first piece in *The New Yorker* (spring of 1925), and throughout his essays and poems, his three books for children, and a compendium published in 1990 (*Writings from The New Yorker*), White's writings are full of animals. When he was eight he won a prize for a poem about a mouse. At age eleven he won the silver badge, and at fourteen, the gold, from *St. Nicholas: A Magazine for Young Folks*.

*St. Nicholas* magazine was founded in 1873, with Mary Mapes Dodge as editor. It was “the leading children’s periodical of its day” (Carpenter 155) and would have been at its peak during White’s childhood. Dodge wanted it to be “stronger, truer, bolder, more uncompromising” than magazines for adults; “its cheer must be the cheer of the bird-song; it must mean freshness and heartiness, life and joy” (Carpenter 466). Known especially for the high quality of its fiction, *St. Nicholas* published new work by Louisa May Alcott, Frances Hodgson Burnett, Rudyard Kipling, and Mark Twain. The popular magazine emphasized knowledge and appreciation of nature, ethical treatment of birds and animals, conservation, and preservation. As Kaye Adkins points out, for decades *St. Nicholas* provided American children with an important series of “foundation-stones” in natural history lessons.<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps the most beloved feature of the magazine was the St. Nicholas League, established the same year White was born, 1899. Rachel Carson, White, and many other children growing up in the age of nature study literally belonged to the same club: the St. Nicholas League. Carson’s biographer, Linda Lear, speculates that Maria Carson, whom she called “the perfect nature-study teacher” (14) might well have read White’s first prize-winning story, “A Winter Walk,” about a boy and his dog, aloud to her four-year-old daughter, Rachel (19).

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<sup>5</sup> Adkins’s article, “Foundation-Stones: Natural History for Children in *St. Nicholas Magazine*” appears in *Wild Things: Children’s Culture and Ecocriticism*, the first full-length collection of essays bridging children’s literature and culture with ecocriticism, 2004.

First and second prizes were awarded each month for drawings, poems, school compositions, photographs, and puzzles; after winning both gold and silver badges (first and second prize), a young contributor was eligible for cash prizes as well. One stated aim of the League was “to get closer to the heart of nature and acquire a deeper sympathy with her various forms.” The League’s aims recognized that books and magazines were not enough, and encouraged “direct friendship with the woods and fields and healthful play.”

In a 1934 essay, White looks back at his experience in the St. Nicholas League, remembering:

how vital to one’s progress in the League was kindness-to-animals. Without kindness-to-animals, you didn’t get far in the St. Nicholas League. . . . It was a buddy of mine . . . who put me on to kindness-to-animals in its relation to winning a silver or a gold badge. . . . As I look through the back numbers and examine my own published works, I detect running through them an amazing note of friendliness toward dumb creatures, an almost virulent sympathy for dogs, cats, horses, bears, toads, and robins. I was kind to animals in all sorts of weather almost every month for three or four years. The results were satisfactory. (*Essays* 228)

In “The St. Nicholas League” essay, White distances himself from the “freshness and heartiness, life and joy” values of the magazine he valued as a

youth, but it's not "kindness to animals" per se that he is questioning; it is his career as a writer. He's writing as a thirty-five year old professional who wonders if his work at *The New Yorker* with its weekly deadlines will accommodate the success he yearns for as a serious writer, and if, in fact, he will live up to his early promise. In 1934 *One Man's Meat*, the watershed book in his recognition as a writer, was still eight years in the future. Additionally he had aspirations as a poet; his second book of poems would come out in 1938.

By the mid-thirties, the original *St. Nicholas* philosophy ("its cheer must be the cheer of the bird-song") was out of sync with modern American culture. The influence of the nature study movement was definitely waning; the dire economic picture was not improving. Although the timbre of American life had substantially changed from the time of White's membership in the St. Nicholas League, the reality of his affection for animals was actually as strong as ever.<sup>6</sup> And at that time in his life, around his thirty-fourth birthday, something happened in White's life that profoundly affected his relationship with the world.

**"And there was the barn itself, egging me on."**

Sailing out of Blue Hill, Maine, one summer day in 1933, Katharine and E. B. White saw a very appealing barn. The next day they drove south from town and found the house "connected, Maine-fashion, to the beautiful barn they had spotted from the boat. The Whites bought the twelve-room house . . .

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<sup>6</sup> Scott Elledge, Lucien L. Agosta, and other critics suggest that White may have suffered from depression in his mid-thirties.

. the barn and other outbuildings, and forty acres of land that ran down to the cove” (Elledge 183). Not until the fall of 1938 would they settle in to live in Maine full time (but not permanently).

By December 1939, White wrote a piece he called simply “Report,” which includes an account of the year’s agricultural success:

Flocks and Herds. I have fifteen grade sheep; also own one-half of a full-blooded Oxford Down ram with another fellow. Two of the sheep are dungy tails, two are snotty noses, one is black. In general their health is good, no ticks. The ram is gentle. I have 112 New Hampshire Red pullets in the henhouse and 36 White Plymouth Rock pullets in the barn, a total of 148 layers. I have three Toulouse geese, the remnants of a flock of four, one having been taken by a fox. I have six roosters, celibates, living to themselves. There is also a dog, a tomcat, a pig, and a captive mouse. (*One Man’s Meat* 102)

As always, White demonstrates interest in where and how animals live. In his thinking he distinguishes wild animals from domestic ones, but he doesn’t seem to discriminate between them in his interest and affection. In the same 1938 piece, “Report,” White lists as “denizens of woods and fields living with us here on the place, or in the waters adjacent”:

skunks, woodchucks, weasels, foxes, deer, mink, rabbits, owls, crows, hair seals, coot, whistlers, loons, black ducks, squirrels (gray and red), chipmunks, porcupines, coons, hummingbirds,

moles, spiders, snakes, barn swallows, tree swallows, toads, snails, and frogs. (103)

In November 1942, White wrote of production goals including wool, lambs, eggs, spring pigs, broilers and roasters, milk, and vegetables, as his contribution to the war effort (*One Man's Meat* 265). He identified himself on a Selective Service form as “farmer, other,” [as opposed to] “farmer, dairy,” (234). John W. Griffith has noted White’s range of attitudes toward animals, pointing out that his “feeling about animals seems to have been an unusual mixture of the naturalist’s love of pure observation, the farmer’s businesslike concern for care, feeding, and harvesting, and the pet-lover’s pleasure in animals’ companionship’ (55). “Mixture” is a good term here. The mix is even more complicated than Griffith suggests, since White also gives evidence of pleasure in the observation and company of farm animals, a sense of companionship provided by wild animals, and of course concern for the care and feeding of family pets.

White published a poem in *The New Yorker* December 15, 1945, called “Song of the Queen Bee,” that shows his “farmer-other” side, along with the humorist, the poet, the romantic, the naturalist, and the nuclear-age environmentalist. It appeared with this epigraph:

“The breeding of the bee,” says a United States Department of Agriculture bulletin on artificial insemination, “has always been handicapped by the fact that the queen mates in the air with whatever drone she encounters.”

When the air is wine and the wind is free

And the morning sits on the lovely lea

And sunlight ripples on every tree,

Then love-in-air is the thing for me—

I'm a bee,

I'm a ravishing, rollicking, young queen bee,

That's me.

\* \* \* \* \*

Man is a meddler, man's a boob,

He looks for love in the depths of a tube,

His restless mind is forever ranging,

He thinks he's advancing as long as he's changing,

He cracks the atom, he racks his skull,

Man is meddlesome, man is dull,

Man is busy instead of idle,

Man is alarmingly suicidal,

Me, I'm a bee.

I am a bee and I simply love it

I am a bee and I'm darned glad of it,

I am a bee, I know about love:

You go upstairs, you go above,

You do not pause to dine or sup,

The sky won't wait—it's a long trip up;

you rise, you soar, you take the blue,  
 It's you and me, kid, me and you.  
 It's everything, it's the nearest drone,  
 It's never a thing that you find alone.  
  
 I'm a bee,  
 I'm free.<sup>7</sup>

White wrote a monthly column for *Harper's Magazine* from October 1938 through May 1943. His work on the farm, observations about his daily life, thoughts about the approach of World War II, and his sense of his own relationship to those events are woven together throughout those columns, collected in *One Man's Meat*, which he published in 1942 and expanded in 1944 (Hall 362). As Kent C. Ryden points out, "White's favorite device for commenting on the war is to unobtrusively contrast a particularly sobering piece of war news with a scene of himself performing some unremarkable task on the farm, elaborating through that contrast a sense of the war's evil and horror as compared to the stability and reassurance provided by place (272).

Ryden includes in his discussion a passage White wrote in "Spring" (April 1941): "I sometimes think I am crazy—everybody else fighting and dying or working for a cause or writing to his senator, and me looking after some

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<sup>7</sup> "Song of the Queen Bee" is republished in *Poems and Sketches of E. B. White*, a book he introduced by claiming, "This is a fraudulent book. Here I am presented as a poet, when it is common knowledge that I have never received my accreditation papers admitting me to the ranks of American poets" (xiii). The poem has eight stanzas; shown here are the first stanza, part of the sixth, and all of the seventh.



Barred Rock chickens. But the land, and the creatures that go with it, are what is left that is good, and they are the authors of the book that I find worth reading” (*One Man’s Meat* 190). Ryden is right to call White an essayist of place, and to discuss the writer’s love of New York along with his appreciation for life in Maine, but even a critic reading expressly for environmental meanings may miss the emphasis White places on animals. For White, “the land,” with all of its possible meanings, embraces “the creatures that go with it.”

Years later, in a piece he wrote to explain the genesis of *Charlotte’s Web*, White said “Well, I like animals, and it would be odd if I failed to write about them. Animals are a weakness with me, and when I got a place in the country I was quite sure animals would appear, and they did (“Pigs and Spiders” qtd. in Elledge 289). That statement opens a window onto White’s general attitude toward animals; along with his innate affection for them, his interest in their care, his love of observing animals, the pleasure he found in their companionship, and the business of farming, he also had throughout his life a distinct interest in where they lived, in their physical circumstances, in the specifics of how they inhabited the world. In purchasing “the beautiful barn” he enjoyed so much, he provided a place that would be superb habitat for the animals he was quite sure “would appear.”

One hears in that sentence his sense of animals as subjects, not just objects; as fellow creatures of fundamental importance, having significance unto themselves, as “denizens of the woods and fields, living with us here on

the place.” At the same time one hears his sense of relationship to the world. His personal sense of place involved valuing habitat suitable for human beings along with other creatures—or other creatures, along with human beings. The world for White is fundamentally an inhabited place, with variations on that theme. His writing reflects a deeply felt lifelong commitment to “inhabitation,” his sense of the world as a place to live. He experienced a grounded, real world, biophilic involvement with how and where non-human animals live. The basic definition of ecology, implying a vision of earth as household, with implications for its good management, has therefore always been a strong presence in the nature of E. B. White.

“Mr. White is our finest essayist, perhaps our only one,” wrote Irwin Edman, reviewing the first edition of *One Man’s Meat* in 1942 (qtd. in Root 5). Looking closely at the animal life in just three of his essays shows a writer who freely and habitually invited the animals he observed and knew into his thoughts and into his writing. Animals cohabited with White in a planetary sense, in a domestic sense, in a cognitive sense, and in a writerly sense. These animals are not understudies for human beings or vehicles for metaphorical or symbolic concepts. They are creatures in whom White was interested—creatures with whom he was intrigued to share the planet as fellow inhabitants. Three essays, “Death of a Pig,” “Bedfellows,” and “Coon Tree,” shall have to stand here for the many times White included animals in the essays of his literary ecology.

### **The Ailing Pig and Fred, “the Notorious Ghoul”**

“Death of a Pig,” appearing in the *Atlantic Monthly* January 1948, displays White’s unique mix of feelings about animals. This is the work of a writer at the top of his game, sure of his strokes, placing the ball exactly where he wants it. Ostensibly and literally about a pig, for this reader the success of the essay is due to another character, Fred, the writer’s dachshund.

The essay begins with a matter-of-fact, *Farm Journal*-like tone, a businesslike approach to raising a pig: “I spent several days and nights in mid-September with an ailing pig,” but by the next clause White has already shifted into his second attitude toward his subject, this one personal and reflective: “and I feel driven to account for this stretch of time.” That’s an unusual switch in tone for one sentence, but there’s more to come, “since the pig died at last.”

Many writers would stop the sentence there, having expressed a “complete thought,” but White adds three small words with a huge impact: “and I lived.” With rare humility, he brings together on the same plane his concern for his own mortality with his concern for the fate of his pig. Now comes the full-fledged philosophy: “and things might easily have gone the other way round.” With the final phrase of the sentence, “and none left to do the accounting,” we follow his narrative, almost unaware of how far he has pivoted on the single word “account,” from agribusiness to personal concerns, from matter-of-fact efficiency to eschatology.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> See Elledge for a discussion of the portrayal in “Death of a Pig” of White’s concerns about his own health.

The death of a pig has immediately become a very serious matter, and the narrator/speaker/farmer/author/persona is rapidly affected “with a sense of personal deterioration.” In the second paragraph White uses the words “scheme,” “tragedy,” and “murder,” offering his reader choices about how the meaning of this event is to be constructed, or perhaps suggesting that no one interpretation or explanation, no single way to tell the story could literally do it justice. The idea of doing justice to the event, literally as well as figuratively, connects the story within the essay to the plot of *Charlotte’s Web*.<sup>9</sup>

White soon takes the idea of tragedy further in “Death of a Pig”: “One of the actors goes up in his lines and the whole performance stumbles and halts.” And then, “the classic outline of the tragedy was lost. I found myself cast suddenly in the role of pig’s friend and physician—a farcical character with an enema bag for a prop” (17). As though searching for an imaginative vehicle strong enough to convey the complexities, along with the perceived absurdities, of his personal situation and feelings, White brings in comedy, slapstick, and farce, along with tragedy and melodrama. Writing a quarter-century before Joseph W. Meeker’s classic study in literary ecology, White relates both “the comedy of survival” and the personal tragedy (to him and to the pig) of an individual pig’s suffering and untimely death. White calls the death a disruption in an ancient pattern; neither the pig nor the writer’s sense of well-being survive.

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<sup>9</sup> “Death of a Pig” is widely read as a precursor to *Charlotte’s Web*. In a 1953 letter White said he “needed a way to save a pig’s life” (qtd. in Neumeyer 218).

One might think that the story of a pig's treatment for erysipelas, and the animal's decline over three or four days and nights, with his demise foretold by the title, would not make a pleasant reading experience. Is it White's style alone that makes it so surprisingly a pleasure? Helene Solheim notes White's ability to sustain a tone both serious and lighthearted: "The reader is compelled to share White's perspective, and his dualism. Paying attention to the untimely death of a pig is absurd, a colonic carnival, but we come to see that it is the untimely death itself, rather than its victim, which occasions a greater loss—a disruption in the community of things" (146). White has bound together his concern for his own mortality with his concern for a pig's, with admirable humility.

I would add that the loss of life to the pig is made even more lamentable because this pig had things so good. White describes the animal's living quarters:

My pigpen is at the bottom of an old orchard below the house. The pigs I have raised have lived in a faded building that once was an icehouse. There is a pleasant yard to move about in, shaded by an apple tree that overhangs the low rail fence. A pig couldn't ask for anything better—or none has, at any rate. The sawdust in the icehouse makes a comfortable bottom in which to root, and a warm bed. (*Essays* 18)

This description prefigures Wilbur's arrangement when he's two weeks old and moved outdoors: "It was apple-blossom time, and the days were getting

warmer. Mr. Arable fixed a small yard specially for Wilbur under an apple tree, and gave him a large wooden box full of straw, with a doorway cut in it so he could walk in and out as he pleased” (*Charlotte’s Web* 8-9).

White’s essay goes beyond Solheim’s sense of dualism and finds a way to restore that disruption in the community of things, or as White might say, in the scheme of things. The essayist moves so easily among various tones, or attitudes toward his subject, it’s difficult to tell if he’s taking the animal’s demise seriously and the art of writing lightly, or the other way around. E. B. White is like a first-rate ballet dancer—his ability to make good writing look easy only gives evidence that it is not. In “Death of a Pig” he moves gracefully from compelling narrative and palpable detail to laugh-out-loud humor to reflection, sympathy, and compassion.

Within all of this, Fred the dachshund steals the show. Making his entrance early in the piece, as soon as White mentions “slapstick,” Fred soon becomes an assistant, “a tower of strength and inconvenience.”

As my own spirits declined, along with the pig’s, the spirits of my vile old dachshund rose. The frequency of our trips down the footpath through the orchard to the pigyard delighted him, although he suffers greatly from arthritis, moves with difficulty, and would be bedridden if he could find anyone willing to serve him meals on a tray. (*Essays* 20)

The pig, as foreknown, dies, and White’s sympathy for the pig is genuine:

“Once, near the last,” he narrates, “I saw him try to make a bed for himself but

he lacked the strength, and when he set his snout into the dust he was unable to plow even the little furrow he needed to lie down in.” Fred, in sharp contrast, is intrigued with the “colonic carnival” of treatments; he “supervises” the digging of the grave, joins the funeral procession, “staggering along in the rear,” and because “he is a notorious ghoul,” after the burial has to be restrained with a rope tied to his collar.

In closing, White invites the reader, if paying him a visit, to meet the living dog. “The grave in the woods is unmarked, but Fred can direct the mourner to it unerringly and with immense good will” (24). Reading of Fred’s antics confers such pleasure, we can infer that White, grieving over the death of the pig, takes comfort in the ongoing life of his dog.<sup>10</sup> In “Death of a Pig,” White honors one animal’s death and celebrates the survival of another.

When White summons Fred into an essay written in February 1956 called “Bedfellows,” Fred has been dead for seven years, and yet he is as compelling as ever. Fred died January 1, 1949, not long after White wrote “Death of a Pig.” In “Bedfellows,” Fred’s determined vigilance to rid the premises of “all porcupines, all cats, all skunks, all squirrels, all houseflies, all footballs, [and] all evil birds in the sky” now represents a vehicle for discussing White’s concerns about a number of contemporary issues. These include criticism of the press, vigilantism in national security, the relationship between religious faith and the presidency, and freedom of speech.

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<sup>10</sup> Elledge (277-78) speculates that White’s understanding of Fred may have encouraged him to write more of animals. Yes, I agree, but I think the pleasure of the writing itself, and satisfaction with the result, inspired him.

The premise of “Bedfellows” is that White, sick in bed, is reading work by Truman, Adlai Stevenson, and Dean Acheson (bringing in Eisenhower as well). White mulls over the various ideas, revealing his own position, which covers all of the issues, in saying “democracy is itself a religious faith,” and must be supported and defended as an ideal to protect rights for even the smallest minority. Displaying his penchant for splicing subjects together, White writes:

I take Democrats to bed with me for lack of a dachshund, although as a matter of fact on occasions like this I am almost certain to be visited by the ghost of Fred, my dash-hound everlasting, dead these many years. In life, Fred always attended the sick, climbing right into bed with the patient like some lecherous old physician, and making a bad situation worse. . . .

The only thing I used to find agreeable about him in bed was his smell, . . . in the way that a sudden whiff of the cow barn or of bone meal on a lawn in springtime carries sensations of the richness of earth and of experience. (*Essays* 80)

Even though the political issues of the McCarthy era unfortunately remain relevant today, the pleasure of reading the essay now primarily derives from White’s portrayal of Fred with all his foibles. Fred is the composite vigilante here, but in writing about him with such affectionate intimacy, White uses Fred’s quirks of personality to underscore the value of a tolerant nature,



a tolerance he saw as fundamental to democracy. White is clearly interested in the dog as well as in the politics:

I find it difficult to convey the peculiar character of this ignoble old vigilante, my late and sometimes lamented companion. . . .

The only time he was ever discovered in an attitude that suggested affection was when I was in the driver's seat of our car and he would lay his heavy head on my right knee. This, I soon perceived, was not affection, it was nausea. Drooling always followed, and the whole thing was extremely inconvenient, because the weight of his head made me press too hard on the accelerator. (*Essays* 82-83)

In 1962 White wrote an epilogue to Fred's story, a postscript to "Bedfellows," bringing the story he told in 1948 with "Death of a Pig" full circle. In the older essay, readers will recall, the dachshund "supervised" the digging of the pig's grave, which was in a spot of the farm beyond the dump under a wild apple tree (23). In the 1962 postscript White describes a visit "one day last fall" to Fred's grave, located in the same part of his farm as the grave of the pig. He "wandered down through the orchard and into the woods," thinking of the dog but also of his own mortality.

This is the only grave I visit with any regularity—in fact, it is the only grave I visit at all, going not out of grief, nor do I pay tribute to the dead. I feel a sort of over-all sadness that has nothing to do with the grave or its occupant . . . probably a purely selfish, or

turned-in, emotion—sorrow not at my dog’s death but at my own, which hasn’t even occurred yet but which saddens me just to think about in such pleasant surroundings. (*Essays* 89)

White’s affection for this familiar place, the pleasant surroundings where both the pig of the 1948 essay and Fred, a dog White loved to write about, are buried, is indicative of White’s love for the natural world in general. Love of the world is, then, for White, inextricably involved in his approach to life and to its inevitable end. White’s pleasure and emotional satisfaction in creating Fred’s part in “Death of a Pig” may have helped inspire him to give more animals larger roles in his work.

#### **“Sunset and Coonset”**

“Bedfellows” was written from the Whites’ apartment in New York. He called it “a letter from the east,” since his home in Turtle Bay was east of his desk at *The New Yorker*. Four months later, he wrote “Coon Tree,” (written from his place in Maine, though also called “a letter from the east” when it was republished in *The Points of My Compass*).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> In the foreword to *The Points of My Compass*, White tells of wishing to be a correspondent to the magazine. “One obstacle stood in my way, and it was a stubborn one: unlike other correspondents, I seldom went anywhere or did anything. My activities smelled of the hearth. Instead of being in London, I was home. Instead of being in Karachi, I was in the barn, or in the bathtub.” So he decides to “rearrange geography” to give himself “a wider range.” He designates his office at *The New Yorker* as the center of things, enabling him to write a Letter from the West” by walking half a block over to Sixth Avenue.

He also describes selecting “Allen Cove, a small arm of the sea that cradles my pasture” to use as a dateline for letters from his home in Maine.

“Coon Tree” is another essay composed of multiple subjects. White begins by giving a weather report, as though taking the temperature of the planet. It’s mid-June as he writes and apple blossoms are showing, though behind schedule. “The goldfinch is on the dandelion, the goose is on the pond, the black fly is on the trout brook . . . [and] the raccoon is nursing one of her hangovers (*Essays* 34), an image White returns to later in the essay. White gives us an ecological snapshot of the place where we will find his coon tree. He includes a paragraph on his own health, suggesting that to tell the story of the raccoon and her tree, he must include his own physical story and something about other “denizens of the woods and fields, living with us here on the place.” All of that enters into his literary ecology for “Coon Tree.” Then in the third paragraph we come to the essay’s subject—White’s observations of the comings and goings of a female raccoon raising her litter of kittens in a large tree in the Whites’ front yard, the den clearly visible from Whites’ bedroom.

Written in the spring of 1956, almost eleven years after the American use of atomic weapons at the end of World War II, the political side of the essay comprises anxiety about the nuclear age and alarm about futuristic science. White is alarmed at the notion of atomic energy as “man’s best hope for a better life . . . . I would feel more optimistic about a bright future for man if he spent less time proving that he can outwit Nature and more time tasting her sweetness and respecting her seniority” (*Essays* 39).

The third leg of the essay extolls the wood-burning stove in the kitchen and the Whites' old kitchen itself. "The American kitchen has come a long way, and it has a long way to return before it gets to be a good room again" (40). Having heard a speaker at a design show predict we would "push a button and peas would appear on a paper plate," White responds, "I get a certain amount of nourishment out of a seed catalogue on a winter's evening." He objects to the designers' proclamation that the kitchen of the fifties was "a dead dodo." White says their old-fashioned kitchen "teems with life of all sorts—cooking, husbandry, horticulture, canning, planning. It is an arsenal, a greenhouse, a surgical-dressing station, a doghouse, a bathhouse, a lounge, a library, a bakery, a cold-storage plant, a factory, and a bar" (41). In other words, it's a highly functional place; it serves life. Essentially White has invited us into the kitchen; we can taste and smell the homegrown peas, and he is about to provide fresh sweet corn next. Tasting the sweetness of nature and respecting her seniority are not empty words for White.

White does not begrudge the raccoon the corn she takes from the garden, though he acknowledges she spoils five ears for every one she eats. He says he likes the taste of corn, but likes "the nearness of coon even better, and I cannot recall ever getting the satisfaction from eating an ear of corn that I get from watching a raccoon come down a tree just at the edge of dark" (37). He writes that he must have observed her coming down the tree a hundred times, descending headfirst but then reversing herself and landing with her hind feet on the ground. He describes the light, and how the animal's descent

begins in the last light of day, but when “groundborne, she is almost indecipherable and is a part of the shadows and the night.” He remarks, “a man is lucky indeed who lives where sunset and coonset are visible from the same window” (36). In White’s integrated writing it all adds up together; the two habitats, human and raccoon, are both of great interest to the writer; and the details of how that inhabitation takes place are the heart and soul of the essay.

Memory of his boyhood reading, *A Little Brother to the Bear*, informs the essay “Coon Tree.” He mentions the book’s effect: “In those days, my imagination was immensely stirred by the thought of wildlife, of which I knew absolutely nothing but for which I felt a kind of awe.” Almost fifty-eight when he wrote “Coon Tree,” the awe has evolved into a fond familiarity. The details of the coon’s life seem as compelling to White as the details of his own. White’s overarching concern by the late fifties is how shall we inhabit the earth, currently, and in the years to come.

White wrote a postscript for “Coon Tree” similar to the one he wrote about Fred and added to the essay “Bedfellows.”<sup>12</sup> In the postscript for “Coon Tree” he updates both the natural history and the domestic history. The tree is still in fact a coon tree, he tells us, but with a different raccoon in residence. The new resident of the tree does not reverse herself upon reaching the ground, and White concedes that one should not draw conclusions about the

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<sup>12</sup> Both postscripts were written as he prepared *The Points of My Compass* for publication in 1962. The two essays with their postscripts both appear in *Essays of E. B. White*, 1977, as well as in *The Points of My Compass*.

behavior of a species from observing one individual. That point was contested in the “nature faker” controversy early in the century, William J. Long arguing for the same point White concludes in his postscript, that we should consider animals as individual creatures, not simply as representatives of their species. White’s attention to the lives, habits and habitats of animals is not separate from his attention to his own domestic matters, and his concerns about the world. His is a fully integrated literary ecology.

### **“Natural History”**

Twenty years before the essay “Death of a Pig,” White was writing about a much more romantic subject, the love he felt for the woman who had just married him, fiction editor at *The New Yorker* Katharine Sergeant Angell, now Katharine S. White. He uses a spider image to portray his feelings of connection and attachment, sending “Natural History” to Katharine from the King Edward Hotel in Toronto on November 30, 1929, weeks after their marriage:

The spider, dropping down from twig,

Unwinds a thread of his devising:

A thin, premeditated rig

To use in rising.

And all the journey down through space,

In cool descent, and loyal-hearted,

He builds a ladder to the place

From which he started.

Thus I, gone forth, as spiders do,  
 In spider's web a truth discerning,  
 Attach one silken strand to you  
 For my returning.

As love letter and as poem, "Natural History" (*Letters* 90-91) both celebrates and exemplifies White's personal phenomenology, his unique way of being in the world that marries observation of, and affection for, the natural world with any subject he might encounter throughout a long productive life as a professional writer. He was indeed a "loyal-hearted" writer. The poem prefigures all three of White's books for children: *Stuart Little's* enigmatic presentation of two species represented in one character; the star of *Charlotte's Web*, perhaps the most famous spider in American literature; and the journey and return home so central to *The Trumpet of the Swan*, a love story he wrote in his late sixties. As in the larger world he so compellingly celebrates, in White's work everything is connected to everything else.

Early in this chapter I quoted White's remark he made to a reader of *Charlotte's Web*: "All that I hope to say in books, all that I ever hope to say, is that I love the world" (qtd. in Elledge 300). It's a revelatory statement about White, taking on various meanings depending on the light one reads it by. His strong affinity for the natural world compelled him to do what he could as a writer to protect it.

In a tribute to Rachel Carson after her death in April 1964, White wrote of a poisoned pond in Maine, previously “a pleasant place” for campers and fishermen, now “a sad reminder of what is taking place, in some degree, all over the land, from man’s carelessness, shortsightedness, and arrogance. It is our pool of shame in this our ‘particular instant of time’” (May 2, 1964). In a host of genres, his writing has played a part in the long-term renewal of our environmental imagination.

A celebrated essayist, an anthologist of humor, a lifelong poet, a consummate letter writer, as well as the author of children’s books of obdurate appeal, and a lifelong poet, White’s accomplishment is more holistic than it is fragmented. While it might at first seem surprising that a man who found *The New Yorker* magazine a congenial place to work and publish is a nature-oriented writer as well—in fact, a major American environmental writer—a closer look at White invites general readers and scholars alike to expand our understanding of the nature of nature writing.



## Chapter 2

### ***Stuart Little: Adventures in Place***

As he peered ahead into the great land that stretched before him, the way seemed long. But the sky was bright, and he somehow felt he was headed in the right direction.

#### **Introduction**

The first sentence of *Stuart Little* announces an unusual arrival: “When Mrs. Frederick C. Little’s second son arrived, everybody noticed that he was not much bigger than a mouse.” Reading from an environmental perspective, Stuart’s nature becomes an important component in E. B. White’s first book for children. What is the nature of Stuart Little, the character? What sort of story does he inhabit? Is he a mouse or is he human? If he’s both, is he some sort of hybrid, or is some other explanation possible? What is the nature of his enduring appeal? Where did he come from, and where is he going?

In the 1993 movie *Mrs. Doubtfire*, Robin Williams plays a playful father whose irresponsible exuberance results in estrangement from his children. When he is forced to leave the family all three children exclaim, “but who will read us *Charlotte’s Web*?” When he returns, disguised as the British-sounding Mrs. Doubtfire, the resourceful dad applies to be his children’s nanny, greeting his youngest daughter by saying, “and you look just like Stuart Little.” Of course he already knows that *Stuart Little* is her favorite book. But if one tries substituting the line, “and you look just like a mouse,” the disguised father’s term of endearment is substantially altered. Are we to think of Stuart Little as a mouse?

### **A Strange Emergency**

White does not introduce Stuart as a mouse, nor does he announce Stuart's birth; he announces Stuart's *arrival*: White himself seems ambiguous about Stuart's nature. We might not trust the "everybody" who "*noticed* that he was not much bigger than a mouse," but the hearsay is immediately followed by the narrator's information: "The truth of the matter was, the baby looked very much like a mouse in every way" (1). The term "arrived" is perfect because it includes many possibilities, thus leaving room for the reader's sense of imaginative mystery. For the first page and a half the new arrival is referred to as a second son, an unusual baby, and most frequently, "Stuart." I read and reread this book for years believing that White never tells us that Stuart is, in fact, a mouse. Does he? Even E. B. White himself was apparently not sure whether or not he had identified Stuart clearly and irrevocably as a mouse.

Instead of telling us what Stuart is, White presents us with Stuart's specifics, leaving us to wonder, or not, about his species. Very early in the novel we read that he's two inches tall with "a mouse's sharp nose, a mouse's tail, a mouse's whiskers, and the pleasant, shy manner of a mouse" (1-2). Perhaps reading that Stuart is very much like a mouse might invite us as readers to wonder how much we actually know about mice, or to re-examine our feelings about these creatures whose lives have been so involved with ours.

White's life was certainly involved with mice. His biographer includes an account of the young E. B. White, encountered sitting at a roll-top desk in

his room at college, regarding a mouse in one of the desk's cubbyholes, and the mouse, apparently, in turn regarding young White (263). So to White, a mouse was an interesting creature worthy of attention. I like the reciprocity of regard in that little vignette. Any ambiguity over Stuart's nature serves to call our attention to the non-human life we encounter moment by moment, encouraging and underscoring our capacity for biophilia. But wait a minute. Most of us do *not* love mice, not in the real world. . . .

*Stuart Little* arrived at bookstores in October 1945, but even before that White received complaints about the nature of the eponymous Stuart. Anne Carroll Moore, by then children's librarian emerita from the New York Public Library, read the manuscript and urged White to withdraw it from publication, lest it "become an embarrassment" (Clark 71). Harold Ross, founder of *The New Yorker*, where White had worked for almost twenty years, told White he made "one serious mistake" in saying the mouse was "born," and that White should have had Stuart adopted (Elledge 263). Of course the word White used was not in fact "born," but "arrived."

The issue of Stuart's nature has continued to interest some readers and critics, while for others the ambiguities inherent in his identity may simply go unnoticed. U. C. Knoepfelmacher and Mitzi Myers call Stuart "a cross between different species" and "the mouse-boy." I much prefer another term they use for Stuart: "strange pilgrim-navigator" (viii). I've always felt White may have intended to encourage a little negative capability in his readers, a suspension of disbelief regarding Stuart's species. Children may be the perfect audience

for a story that doesn't quite distinguish (at least not in the same ways that science does, or in other ways that some religions do) between non-human animals and themselves.

Approximately 255 words into the story we learn indirectly, via a good-natured physician who comes to call when Stuart is one month old and has "gained only a third of an ounce" that "it was very unusual for an American family to have a mouse (3). Even more to the point, the doctor is "delighted" with Stuart. He proclaims his temperature to be normal and examines his chest and heart and ears. Mrs. Little is "pleased to get such a good report." Though a science-based professional, the doctor seems to have no problem with his patient's fundamental nature, nor does he raise any question regarding Stuart's origin. His only instructions are a cheerful "Feed him up!" Thus Stuart is officially welcomed to the world and the reader begins his story with high expectations. Like the doctor, we are prepared to take delight in Stuart.

In November of 1945 White wrote to Ursula Nordstrom, the children's book editor at Harper & Row, that the company's ads for *Stuart Little* "referred to Stuart as a 'mouse.'" White continues: "This is inaccurate and probably better be abandoned. Nowhere in the book (I think I am right about this) is Stuart described as a mouse. He is a small guy who *looks* very much like a mouse, but he obviously is not a mouse. He is a second son" (*Letters* 270).

In the same brief letter White tells Nordstrom, "There are a great many words that your advertising department can summon for this strange

emergency: being, creature, party, customer, fellow, person.” But most interestingly, he corrects himself in that very letter, admitting, in parentheses, “(I am wrong, Stuart *is* called a mouse on Page 36—I just found it. He should not have been.)”

The episode White refers to in his letter to Nordstrom will become one of Stuart’s best-known adventures, the sailboat race. “When the people in Central Park learned that one of the toy sailboats was being steered by a mouse in a sailor suit, they all came running.” White uses the same description of Stuart a bit earlier, when the boat’s owner had been “surprised to be addressed by a mouse in a sailor suit” (32). These passages do not exactly call Stuart a mouse; rather they present Stuart as a mouse, he is seen as a mouse. A mouse in Central Park would not be especially noteworthy, but a mouse dressed in a sailor suit and able to sail a boat gets our attention. All we can conclude about Stuart’s nature is that he has the appearance of a mouse, but his true nature is more than simply a visual matter.

As White himself points out in the first sentence of the book, Stuart is a second son, and that ‘s how Stuart identifies himself to his new employer, the owner of the Wasp. “Name is Stuart Little,’ called Stuart at the top of his lungs. ‘I’m the second son of Frederick C. Little, of this city’”(34-35).” The important fact that Stuart is a second son, a fact White clearly emphasizes, precludes the possibility that Stuart might physically be some sort of hybrid. A hybrid is a cross, a genetic combination of two species, the reproductive result of breeding animals or propagating plants of two different species. For Stuart

to be a hybrid he'd have to be "the offspring of genetically dissimilar parents or stock" (*American Heritage Dictionary*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed.), in this case, presumably the offspring of a human and a mouse.

But that is not the case at all. White pays some attention to Stuart's parents as well as to their first son, George, allowing us as readers to feel that we've met the family even if we don't know them well. White gives us sufficient background to support his position that Stuart is the second son in a human family. If we choose to explain Stuart as hybrid, as somehow representing the embodiment of two species at once, or even alternately, then perhaps we limit too much the sense in which we can imagine him in other more elusive ways, in White's words as "being, creature, party, customer, fellow, person." To White's list I would add inhabitant, earth-dweller, traveler, adventurer, seeker, or wanderer, all implying Stuart's relationship to the physical world.

And as his creator understood, Stuart's relationship to others is absolutely central to his nature. Being a second son places Stuart in a significantly different position in the family than his elder brother, George, no matter what his size. In some family systems, second sons might feel a kind of diminishment, or a tenuous status regarding whatever their family is focused on, say, a family business, a standard of achievement, a profession, a trade, or a talent. Of course each family is unique. In this one, not much seems to be expected of George, who early in the book offers to build a special washbasin only one inch high for Stuart to use in the morning, but makes a big

mess getting out the materials to build the device, becomes interested in something else, and abandons the project. “George was always saying that he was going to build something and then forgetting about it” (14).

Ever resourceful, Stuart figures out how to solve his own problem and begins a morning ritual of swinging at the faucet with a small hammer. The short chapter called “Washing Up” ends on a lyrical note.

So every morning, after climbing to the basin, he would seize his hammer and pound the faucet, and the other members of the family, dozing in their beds, would hear the bright sharp *plink plink plink* of Stuart’s hammer, like a faraway blacksmith, telling them that day had come and that Stuart was trying to brush his teeth. (16).

Stuart has rapidly become the hero of the everyday task, no small accomplishment, a second son forging his own version of success.

Stuart has a history well before his remarkable arrival at the Little household. He appeared to E. B. White in a dream as early as 1926. White had taken a train to the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia to see a young woman with whom he had fallen in love. On the train returning to New York, he “dreamed of a small character who had the features of a mouse, was nicely dressed, courageous, and questing.” In the same account (from a piece White published in *The New York Times* in 1966), White explains that he had eighteen nieces and nephews who would ask him for stories, “and for this I went straight to my dream-mouse. I named him Stuart and wrote a couple of

episodes about his life. I kept these stories in a desk drawer and would pull them out and read them on demand. As the years went by, I added to the tale. . . .” (qtd. in Elledge 253-54). So the natural history of Stuart Little includes a vivid dream born of travel and romance, developed through an imaginative uncle’s desire to entertain his nieces and nephews with stories. It’s helpful to think of him as White’s “dream-mouse.” Perhaps without the motivating factor of actual children—known children—requesting stories, Stuart might never have arrived in our common world at all.

Stuart embodies two mouse-like characteristics that drive his story—his diminutive size and his propensity for motion. Appealing in both his human and his mouse-like qualities, Stuart invites his reader to imagine a creature who is in the end simply his own unique being—essentially himself, Stuart Little, “the second son of Frederick C. Little, of this city.” White’s style of storytelling gives the reader permission to emphasize what he or she likes best in Stuart’s nature--the human side or the mouse side or both, alternately or simultaneously or both. One may begin with a sense of duality if one thinks about Stuart analytically (whether the bifurcation be human/mouse, child/young adult, fantastical/realistic, or some other set), but as a character in a story, his story, one feels he enjoys a high level of personal integrity. Though changeable, he appears to be clearly, consistently, reliably himself. White’s own phrase, “dream-mouse,” is good nomenclature for this being who so cordially invites more than one interpretation.



### **What sort of story does Stuart Inhabit?**

The nature of the story *Stuart Little*, like the question of Stuart's nature, invites an array of responses. One way to approach the story more closely is to consider it as a story for children. Of course the book is for children; it is indeed children's literature. "Everyone knows what children's literature is until asked to define it" (Sale 1). *Stuart Little* speaks to the imaginative experience of many children, and yet (generally speaking) it is adults who write, edit, illustrate, publish, review, market, and sell children's books. Adults select books to buy for schools, libraries, and private homes, for children they know well and for others they don't know at all (though increasingly young readers buy books for themselves as well). Adults bestow the vast majority of awards, allude to children's books in their writing and public speaking, and study children's books to use pedagogically at all levels.<sup>13</sup> Whether accompanied by children, or not, whether out of professional interest, or not, adults do read children's books for pleasure, for insight and for information.<sup>14</sup>

Critics have increasingly turned their attention to the dual nature of the audience for children's literature, and the implied presence of both children

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<sup>13</sup> Clark addresses this phenomenon in *Kiddie Lit: The Cultural Construction of Children's Literature in America*, pointing out that because the ostensible audience is not represented in the writing, editing and marketing, children's literature presents rich possibilities for the study of reader response theory, canonicity, censorship, and other critical questions.

<sup>14</sup> For example, an independent bookstore in Omaha, Nebraska, The Bookworm, has sponsored a monthly discussion group since February 2002, called Amiable Adults Reading and Discussing Books Almost Always Read by Kids (AARDBAARK).

and adult readers. Introducing a special issue of *Children's Literature*<sup>15</sup> on “cross-writing,” Knoepfmacher and Myers define the term as “any text that activates a traffic between phases of life we persist in regarding as opposites” (viii). They point out that “a dialogic mix of older and younger voices occurs in texts too often read as univocal. Authors who write for children inevitably create a colloquy between past and present selves” (vii). Drawing parallels between the under-recognized field of children’s literature and “formerly marginalized fields” such as women’s literature or ethnic literatures, the editors submit that the study of cross-writing can help “to relocate children’s literature at the center of the curricula at our schools and universities” (xiv). White’s skill as a “cross-writer” is mentioned with regard to both *Stuart Little* and *Charlotte’s Web*, suggesting interesting links between environmental criticism and the study of crosswriting in children’s literature.

Approaching the idea of dual audience invites us to question the construction of the dichotomy in the first place. In one sense, even the terms “children’s books” and “literature for children” are logically misnomers, although useful for marketing and selection. Children’s books are, more accurately, books created and designed to appeal to children *and* adults—I see this as literature meant to include children, but not by overtly excluding adults. The most imaginative fiction, almost by definition, defies definition.

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<sup>15</sup> The annual volume of criticism published under joint auspices of The Modern Language Association and The Children’s Literature Association.

White mentioned Pamela Travers's review of *Charlotte's Web* in a December 1952 letter. Paraphrasing the author of *Mary Poppins*, White agreed with her idea "that anyone who writes for children successfully is probably writing for one child—namely, 'the child that is himself'" (*Letters* 368). And as Elledge points out, White had never stopped communicating with the child that was himself (300). White went on to say that "if any 'barrier' operates it is the internal barrier that separates the child from the man." Whatever the complexities of White's relationship with "the child that is himself," the phrase itself seems to suggest the value he placed on a strong connection between past and present aspects of the self.

Like *Charlotte's Web*, *Stuart Little* is one of those books often remembered by people who read it or heard it read to them as children. Consequently, in the minds of many adults, this particular book's power to evoke the memory of its story, characters, style, setting, and overall impact—along with its accompanying environmental vision—remains vibrant. It is a critical commonplace that children may enjoy a book on one level, while adult readers find different rewards and meanings, but when a book has been as popular as *Stuart Little* for over sixty years, the experience in society becomes cumulative, with readers of all ages retaining its effect on their imaginations—although at various levels of consciousness. So perhaps children's literature has the potential for even more long-term influence on our collective experience than some adult literature may have.

The issue of audience expands even more when one approaches children's literature from an environmental or ecological critical basis. Conceived ecocritically, the audience for children's literature opens up very wide indeed. One begins to see children's books, already a very inclusive category of books, as having an impact on readers across their life span—young readers and grandparents, web designers and storytellers, artists and astronomers, farmers and financiers, writers and readers of every stripe and from every culture—that is, inhabitants of the planet Earth. A children's book can speak to our collective and individual environmental imaginations, and influence our environmental ethics.

Identifying *Stuart Little*, then, as a book for children broadens our sense of the impact of the book, but may not answer questions about the nature of the story. Within the broad spectrum called children's literature, *Stuart Little* is frequently described as "animal fantasy," another problematic term, and an anthropocentric one as well. Critics and educators sometimes claim that the function of animal characters in children's literature is to span gender and ethnic issues, the idea being that an animal can serve as the ideal human prototype, because a wide array of children will be likely to identify with the character.

I think this argument carries with several unfortunate implications; it minimizes the significance of the diversity of human culture, it minimizes the extent to which concepts of animals are culturally constructed, and it ignores the biological reality of non-human animal existence—all problems that

motivate me to seek other functions and other explanations for the wide range of animal characters in literature for children.

Margaret Blount has written one of the few full-length studies of animal characters across the range of children's literature, a highly valuable text (although she names White's famous pig "Wilbur" in some places, and "Wilburforce" in others). Her title announces her attitude toward her subject: *Animal Land: The Creatures of Children's Fiction*. In this treatment the animals remain enclosed by the fictions in which they are created; they reside in "animal land," a literary nowhere. Published in 1974, her book anticipates current ecocriticism's attention to non-human animals. Blount maintains, "The great gulf between human and animal can never, in this world, be crossed" (17). And yet she speculates . . . "the inwardness of dog, cat, or horse, the desire to describe what its life is really made of from the inside, seems to have occurred to no one" (245), a tantalizing remark.

*Animal Land* includes a chapter called "Lilliputian Life: the Mouse Story," based on the premise that "mice are small, secret, numerous and usually hidden," and therefore mouse stories in children's fiction tend to portray mouse societies, or Lilliputian worlds. Stuart Little, seen in this context, "is notable for being a social misfit" (160). But the fact is he simply does not have his own small-scale world in which to live, nor does he have a society of other small beings available to him. He has only this world, the same one all of us, large or small, inhabit. From Stuart's point of view it's a

Brodingnagian story, not a Lilliputian one, with no Glumdalclitch to offer assistance.<sup>16</sup>

As new currents from ecocriticism mingle with existing criticism of children's literature, I sense that ecocritics and children's literature specialists are together heading into "a fair breeze." I hope we are headed toward an ever-widening audience for books that are environmentally minded classics, such as E. B. White's three books for children. Keeping the natural world in mind as the vital and indispensable context within which we can tell stories, or hear them, or write them or read them in children's books means we are "headed in the right direction" toward a restoration of the environmental imagination.

### **The Comedy of Stuart's Survival**

Stuart's story is constantly changing. In the beginning, Stuart, like many children, is interested in being helpful. White intuitively understands this. "Stuart was a great help to his parents, and to his older brother George, because of his small size and because he could do things that a mouse can do and was agreeable about doing them" (4), a fortuitous inversion of the notion in some families that the youngest and therefore smallest child is not expected to accomplish difficult tasks. (Elwyn White, called "En" as a boy and "Andy" after attending Cornell, was the youngest of six children.)

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<sup>16</sup> Blount writes, "This sad, moving fantasy [SL] about the human-animal gulf is melancholy in a way that *The Jungle Books* are not; wherever Mowgli goes, he manages to conquer his surroundings with some degree of success, whereas Stuart's story is one of inevitable failure" (240).

Writing in *The Lion and the Unicorn*, Marah Gubar sees Stuart's first adventure, retrieving his mother's ring from the bathtub drain, as one in a series of the family's efforts to encourage "dirty and dangerous adventures that basically constitute attempts to expel this disturbingly animalistic presence out of the family body" (100). Gubar argues that Stuart's doubled nature as both mouse and human serves to parallel the troubles of adolescents caught between childhood and adulthood.

Although I appreciate the insights in her essay, and she has added to my own understanding of the novel, Gubar's argument leaves me thinking that it's not only adolescence that White captures in his episodic story; it's actually much more of the human life span. The story's broad narrative sweep ranges from birth (or arrival) to first love and leaving home as a young man, literally, a young adult. As Elledge points out, "In some episodes he [Stuart] seems to be a boy, in others a young adolescent. At the end he is a very young man. But this is not a story about growing up." I agree; the focus does not seem to be on growing up, or on human development at any particular stage. The sense of movement and changeability one experiences reading *Stuart Little* does not derive from watching a character grapple with an important developmental phase; *Stuart Little* is not adolescent or young adult fiction mistakenly marketed to a younger audience.

As readers, we travel along with this story not primarily through the course of a life, or a part of a life, but through the course of a *story*. This is an episodic story, a series of adventures. *Stuart Little*'s episodic nature of course

can be traced to its origin and history, referred to earlier. After dreaming of Stuart, White immediately “made a few notes about this mouse-child—the only fictional figure ever to have honored and disturbed” his sleep (Elledge 253). And we know in the years following the 1926 journey to Virginia, the occasion of Stuart’s appearance, White wrote down some of Stuart’s adventures, and in his avuncular role of storyteller, kept them handy. “As the years went by, I added to the tale,” he recalled (qtd. in Elledge 254). The story of *Stuart Little*’s arrival in the world as E. B. White’s first novel and first book for children is a tale as episodic as the story itself.

From a letter White wrote to Anne Carroll Moore, we know he was thinking about putting the Stuart stories together into a book as early as 1937 (*Letters* 192).<sup>17</sup> After Viking and Oxford University Press both rejected early manuscripts, White’s editor at Harper was asking about the book by early 1939 (Elledge 254). Elledge tells of Katharine and Andy White moving to Greenwich Village in November 1944 to an apartment only a block away from White’s first apartment in New York, one he had moved into the summer of 1925. “In returning to the Village, White, like Antaeus, had touched his invigorating earth or, like Proust, had made contact with charged memories. He saw himself again in the terrible beautiful days of youth, devoted to his ‘interminable quest for the holy and unnameable grail . . .’” (253). It was only eight weeks after moving back to the Village that he completed his draft of

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<sup>17</sup> Dorothy Lobrano Guth, the editor of White’s *Letters*, notes that the first chapters were written in the early thirties.



*Stuart Little*. White's biographer thus associates the process of writing the book with White's reinvigorated sense of his youthful self, a process involving not only a quest, but also a journey and connection with place.

The long gestation of White's first book for children resulted fortuitously in a structure elegantly suitable for a young audience or a young readership. Individual chapters in *Stuart Little* have a high level of artistic integrity, and their capacity to stand alone works well for readers and listeners who experience the story chapter by chapter. The fact that young readers now widely call their novels "chapter books" speaks to the value they find in self-contained chapters in which the story is satisfying and complete.

Following the trip down the slimy bathtub drain to retrieve his mother's ring and Stuart's clever solutions to his own "home problems," Stuart's next problem comes "one fine morning in the month of May when Stuart was three years old" (17). Trying to show off his firm stomach muscles to Snowbell the family cat, Stuart grabs the ring on the window shade and gets rolled up inside, to be released only when George pulls the shade down later that day as the family mourns the apparent loss of their little son. Like Stuart's other adventures, the window shade story does not follow a pattern or contribute to plot development. Stuart's personal nature seems to get things "rolling," but this story, like several others, relates only peripherally to other stories in the book.

Several episodes later, Stuart has his first adventure away from home. White begins chapter 6 with one of his trademark sentences:

One morning when the wind was from the west, Stuart put on his sailor suit and his sailor hat, took his spyglass down from the shelf, and set out for a walk, full of the joy of life and the fear of dogs. With a rolling gait he sauntered along toward Fifth Avenue, keeping a sharp lookout. Whenever he spied a dog through his glass, Stuart would hurry to the nearest doorman, climb his trouser-leg, and hide in the tails of his uniform. 26

He then took a bus up Fifth Avenue to Central Park. Stuart's New York is New York as White knew it, and loved it, rendered in *Stuart Little* precisely as a mouse-sized sailor might experience the city. When he gets to Seventy-second Street he jumps off the bus and runs to the sailboat pond, where he hopes to "sail away to the far corners of the pond. (He was an adventurous little fellow and loved the feel of the breeze in his face and the cry of the gulls overhead and the heave of the great swell under him)" (31).

Stuart's desire to be a sailor reminds us of the fact that New York is a seaport, and of the city's geography and its commercial origins. The model boat pond in Central Park in New York is particularly and attentively rendered in White's description; he convinces us that the adventure of the sailboat race could only take place in New York City. For readers of *Stuart Little*, that adventure helps create the city they visit when they go to New York; for many New Yorkers, it adds to their subjective experience of Central Park.

Is there a master plan in the arrangement of these stories? Not really. If there were, one might expect the big sailboat adventure in Central Park to

occupy a special structural position in the novel, but following Stuart's nautical triumph, it's back to business as usual, with Stuart getting into ordinary, everyday predicaments due to his diminutive size. "Because he was so small, Stuart was often hard to find around the house" (47). That's the first sentence after his triumphant race, beginning a new story of Stuart getting stuck in the refrigerator, getting a cold that turns into bronchitis and keeps him in bed for two weeks.

In other words, the story doesn't go anywhere in the conventional sense of the progressive development of a dynamic character, particularly the growth of a character in a coming-of-age novel. There is no upward arch, no Freytag Pyramid of rising action, climax, falling action. *Stuart Little* is truly episodic; it's one thing after another, one story after another.

Stuart has a great deal in common with the picaresque hero, as described by Joseph Meeker in *The Comedy of Survival*. "He objects to the society into which he is born no more than wolves or ants or whales object to theirs, and like these animals, he tries merely to adapt himself to his circumstances in the interest of his own survival" (58-59). Meeker's sense of the picaresque world as "an ecosystem and he [the picaresque hero] but one small organism within it" applies also to Stuart's inhabitation of the world.

For Meeker, to describe a character in terms of his similarities to non-human animals is neither to lessen nor to augment the value or the status of that character. He explains, "The comparison of the hero to animals, an almost universal feature of picaresque fiction, emphasizes the picaresque hero's

acceptance of biological limitations that define the nature of life and suggest the proper purposes that should govern the human use of intellect” (68). As a human ecologist, a park ranger, field ecologist and student of comparative literature, Meeker would rather find compelling connections among species than make hierarchical distinctions.

### **In Through the Open Window**

In the serial adventures of Stuart Little, many stories are tales of rescue. Stuart rescues the ring from the drain, he needs to be rescued from the window shade, and he rescues himself from a fall overboard in the sailboat race in Central Park. White’s lifelong love of sailing infuses the sailing episode with pertinent sailing terminology, tension, and trouble, beautifully rendered to scale. Stuart’s capable handling of the Wasp prevails over the near disaster of encountering an enormous paper bag blown along on the water’s surface just as the rival boat approaches and collides with the Wasp.

Yet in the next chapter, as soon as Stuart is rescued from his entrapment in the refrigerator, the exciting rescue stories pause for the introduction of a small brown bird with a streak of yellow on her breast. One might think that the plot line of *Stuart Little*, like the Lillian B. Womrath at the end of the sailboat race, “had gone off in a wild direction and was yawing all over the pond” (45).

But Margalo fits in perfectly. In fact, her first role is to be rescued herself; Mrs. Little has found her on the windowsill, apparently dead. She brings the bird inside, finding her a place near the radiator. As with Stuart,

Margalo's nature resists classification; her species identification is intentionally left undefined. Mr. Little and George debate about what kind of bird she is.

"She's a wall-eyed vireo,' said George, scientifically." But Mr. Little responds, "I think she's more like a young wren." More helpfully, "they fixed a place for her in the living room, and fed her, and gave her a cup of water" (50).

Stuart does not join the debate. Scientific nomenclature would not tell him what he wants to know about the bird. After she has hopped upstairs where Stuart lies in bed with bronchitis, he greets her: "Hello . . . Who are you? Where did you come from?" (51). For Stuart she is not an object to be identified but a fellow creature, a potential friend or companion, an interesting being in her own right. Stuart seeks to connect with her, not to classify her. He has waited for her to approach him, and then he asks about the place she comes from, a natural way to strike up a friendship.

The bird's answer is birdlike; that is, melodic and lyrical. She answers with a song White has instantaneously translated for us into English. (The narrator in *Charlotte's Web* will use a somewhat different technique to transcribe the calls of four different summer birds.) Presented as lines of poetry, her song would be a ballad. "My name is Margalo,' said the bird, softly, in a musical voice."

'I come from fields once tall with wheat,  
from pastures deep in fern and thistle;  
I come from vales of meadowsweet,  
and I love to whistle' (51).

Stuart is immediately fascinated, and he asks her to “say that again.” But the ensuing conversation is a bit less lyrical; it deals with her sore throat, his bronchitis, gargle, nose drops, Kleenex, and the taking of temperatures. (This may not seem romantic for a first meeting, although E. B. and Katharine White’s long and happy marriage often involved the pair taking solicitous care of each other’s health.)<sup>18</sup> Stuart is smitten with Margalo. When she says her temperature is normal “Stuart felt his heart leap for gladness. It seemed to him that he had never seen any creature so beautiful as this tiny bird, and he already loved her” (52).

Margalo’s swift entrance into the story strikes a deep chord within Stuart. She brings the fragrance of a wider world with her when she flies in through the Littles’ apartment window. Until now the story has been set within the city; the first episodes take place entirely within the family’s apartment, “a pleasant place near a park in New York City. In the mornings the sun streamed in through the east windows, and all the Littles were up early as a general rule” (3-4). Though, like the city itself, the Littles’ home (as we have seen) can be a dangerous place, for Stuart it’s home, and as home, it serves as his introduction to being in the world.

So even before Margalo’s appearance on the windowsill, *Stuart Little* was a story dependent on place, as well as a story with the power to help define place. It was also clearly a city story. With the entrance of Margalo,

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<sup>18</sup> I am purposely avoiding many of the myriad autobiographical connections between *Stuart Little* and White’s life; Elledge provides detail on this subject in *E. B. White: A Biography*.

White offers us additional possibilities of place. She is not a city bird; she has, apparently inexplicably, arrived from the country. She seems likely to be a migratory bird, yet White offers little information about her habits outside the interlude of her sojourn with the Littles. After Margalo's entrance, Stuart's story shifts from being the adventures of a "city mouse" to those of a creature less limited to one sort of habitat. He luxuriates in what Margalo is and what she represents.

To Stuart, she is wild nature and what she represents is open country (field, pasture, vale). White loved both types of habitat. He loved New York and he loved the more rural life he found in Maine. His life, like Stuart's life by the end of the book, happily involved him in both types of places. When Margalo arrives she is sick, and with solicitous care she recovers her health, only to soon disappear. She is certainly under threat from cats. If we, like Stuart, take her to represent wild nature, she can only remind us of the natural world's need for our intelligent care and concern.

Even as I suggest that Margalo's ambiguity of species invites us to avoid definition, I realize that I need to provide a context (if not definitions) for my use of terms like "wild nature," or even "the natural world." Since I have E. B. White's writing in mind, my "wild nature" may be idiosyncratic or particular in that regard. Because White loved wild birds, they are good ambassadors for "wild nature" in the context of his work. Gary Snyder's observation, "the word *wild* is like a gray fox trotting off through the forest, ducking behind bushes, going in and out of sight" is helpful, even as it morphs from English into Old

Norse, into Old Teutonic, and into his definition of the Chinese term *Dao*, “the way of Great Nature: eluding analysis, beyond categories, self-organizing, [etc.]” (*Practice of the Wild* 9-10).

Henry Beston was describing the synchronous and mysterious movements of flocks of shorebirds, or schools of fish when he wrote: “We need another and a wiser and perhaps a more mystical concept of animals. . . . They are not brethren, they are not underlings; they are other nations, caught with ourselves in the net of life and time, fellow prisoners of the splendour and travail of the earth.” I think White might have appreciated Beston’s choice of language, along with the idea that we “greatly err” if we “patronize them for their incompleteness, for their tragic fate of having taken form so far below ourselves” (25).

As for “nature,” a phrase from William Cronon comes to mind: “the nature we inhabit.” After explaining in his preface to *Nature’s Metropolis* that he would draw on the Marxist distinction between first nature and second nature, he writes, “the nature we inhabit is never just first or second nature, but rather a complex mingling of the two” (xvii).

Thus Margalo is from wild nature, whether she is in her original home fields and pastures (which we never see) or flying in through the open window of a New York apartment. There is something elusive about her, as elusive as Synder’s gray fox trotting off through the forest, and as we let the story she briefly inhabits replace our need for logical definition, we might come closer to imagining that “the nature we inhabit” must be as well the nature inhabited by



a pretty brown bird—beloved, and worth knowing. Margalo of course remains elusive, appropriately asking us to extend and expand our notions of nature, of wildness, of the world we have at hand or even the world we imagine. She serves as harbinger to wild nature, and invites us into an expanding environmental imagination.

Soon after Margalo flies onto the scene, another dangerous episode takes both characters to a wilder place than any we as readers have seen yet. When Stuart meets Margalo he is recovering from bronchitis, the result of his unfortunate refrigeration experience following the great sailboat race. Mr. Little makes him a pair of ice skates out of paper clips, just one of the ways the family is “extremely kind” to Stuart during his illness (49). By the time he has fully recovered and is able to try out the new skates, he and Margalo are “fast friends.” Setting out to find a place to skate, “He didn’t get far. The minute he stepped out into the street he saw an Irish terrier, so he had to shinny up an iron gate and jump into a garbage can, where he hid in a grove of celery” (57). What follows is Stuart’s most harrowing adventure.

Waiting for the dog to go away, he feels himself “being hoisted high in the air. He peered over the side [ . . . ] ‘If I jump now I’ll kill myself,’ thought Stuart.” When the garbage can is thrown into the truck:

Stuart landed on his head, buried two feet deep in wet slippery garbage. All around him was garbage, smelling strong. Under him, over him, on all four sides of him—garbage. Just an enormous world of garbage and trash and smell. It was a messy

spot to be in. He had egg on his trousers, butter on his cap, gravy on his shirt, orange pulp in his ear, and banana peel wrapped around his waist. (58-59)

His predicament goes from bad to worse. He has to climb up a pile of coffee grounds, but slips and lands in a pool of rice pudding. Just as readers could earlier refresh themselves with the fresh sea breeze that played such a vital role during the great sailboat race, White's writing gives us garbage we can see, smell, and feel.

Once again the geography of New York comes into the story. The garbage truck arrives at the East River, which White describes as "a rather dirty but useful river." Soon Stuart is being towed out to sea on a barge, contemplating his own death.

But Margalo had been watching when Stuart left that morning. She saw him get into the garbage can to hide and get dumped into the truck; she followed the truck, she tells Stuart, "thinking you might need help." Because Stuart weighs only three and a half ounces (clothed) after he sheds the ice skates he has tucked under his shirt, Margalo is able to fly him safely home.

What is consistent about all of Stuart's episodes and rescue stories is that White's writing invariably conveys a sense of the adventure of it all. In this case Mr. Little asks about the experience of being out in the Atlantic ocean, and Stuart and Margalo tell him "all about the ocean, and the gray waves curling with white crests, and the gulls in the sky, and the channel buoys and the ships and the tugs and the wind making a sound in your ears" (66).

Stuart's new experiences, new abilities and accomplishments, new sights, and trips to new places are all narrated as admirable and interesting events. By placing Stuart on the garbage scow, White suggests to us that even with the worst the city has to offer, even if we consider garbage as the ecological problem it is, New York is still a place of wonder and adventure.

### **I See Things Whole**

E. B. White described the story of *Stuart Little* as a journey, a quest, and a search (Letters 406, 652), words particularly apt for the second half of the book. *Stuart Little* is a story about finding our way in the world, and finding the world along the way. The type of adventures Stuart has keep changing, the type of place in which they occur changes, and Stuart's relationship to the world he inhabits widens and deepens. The consistency that White achieves in *Stuart Little*, giving the novel its true shape, is the consistency of small-sized Stuart, ("about two inches high" the day he arrives, and "two inches nothing and a quarter" as he answers the shopkeeper's question "How tall are you?" in Ames' Crossing) seeking experience and experiencing the world.

*Stuart Little* doesn't fit well in the children's literature category called "small worlds close up," or "Lilliputian worlds," because his world is the same size as anyone else's world. It *is* the same world. His New York, his Ames' Crossing, his open road, are all full-sized. Stuart remains small wherever he is, and his diminutive size draws our mind's eye to the world in which he performs his intriguing deeds—the sailboat pond in Central Park, the Atlantic Ocean as seen from a garbage scow, the street in front of his house, Ames

Crossing (“the loveliest town of all”), and finally but not conclusively, the lyrical country in the “North,” where Margalo has presumably gone for the summer. He engages fully with the world; we as readers take delight not only in his triumphs, but more lastingly, in the world he so intrepidly inhabits.

One more dangerous episode takes place before Stuart takes off, this time dangerous for Margalo. White remarks, “Snowbell, the cat, enjoyed nighttime more than daytime. Perhaps it was because his eyes liked the dark.” Then quietly entering the “fine spring evening” with the first-person pronoun he so famously did not use at *The New Yorker*, White adds, “But I think it was because there are always so many worth-while things going on in New York at night” (67). Snowbell’s latest female friend, a beautiful young angora, has offered to walk him home from the park. With this miniature tale of romantic nights in the city, White wants us to understand that Stuart’s New York, and Snowbell’s as well, is the same place on the same planet that he, E. B. White, loves.<sup>19</sup>

The unpredictable and treacherous family cat tips off his friend about Margalo’s presence in the Little household. Luckily an alert and right-minded pigeon overhears the plot and leaves a warning note for Margalo. She worries all day, too frightened even to show the note to Stuart:

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<sup>19</sup> This sounds like White’s own voice, and it reminds me of his description in *Here Is New York* of a band concert one summer evening in Central Park. When “the cornetist steps forward for a solo,” the Queen Mary answers. “The trumpeter in the bandstand never flinches. The horns quarrel savagely, but no one minds . . .” White finds a strange kind of love story in the dueling horns, and describes the scene. “It’s a magical occasion, and it’s all free” (35-37).

Finally, just before dark, she hopped up to an open window and without saying anything to anybody she flew away. It was springtime, and she flew north, just as fast as she could fly, because something inside her told her that north was the way for a bird to go when spring comes to the land. (71)

After three days of desperate searching, Margalo cannot be found, and Stuart sets off to look for her. “While I am about it, I might as well seek my fortune, too,’ he thought” (73). Neither Margalo nor Stuart has told anyone goodbye. Stuart’s departure is a poignant moment.

With his gray felt hat cocked jauntily on one side of his head and his pack slung across his shoulder, Stuart stole softly out of the house.

“Good-by, beautiful home,” he whispered. “I wonder if I will ever see you again.”

Stuart stood uncertainly for a moment in the street in front of the house. The world was a big place in which to go looking for a lost bird. North, south, east, or west—which way should he go? (75)

Although Stuart is a compelling protagonist, the real hero in the story bearing his name is the world itself, the natural world, the world of human culture at its most various, including our awful garbage, as well as the world of “fields once tall with wheat [and] pastures deep in fern and thistle,” or the world

of “spruce woods on winter nights where the snow lay deep and soft, a perfect place for a carnival of rabbits” (131). Margalo flies out of the human-centered setting of New York, out of the “animal story for children” in which two cats plot her demise and a pigeon saves her life by writing a note, and back into the world of wild nature, in which she instinctively reacts to save her life and instinctively migrates north. She is immediately gone from our view. As though traveling on equally strong wings, White’s story comes into the full power of its integrative ecological vision.

Thanks to his friend, the owner of the Wasp, Stuart has been equipped with a small car. He learns the hard way not to push the button that makes the car invisible and decides to head north.

When he takes a job as substitute teacher for a day in a one-room school, Stuart dismisses the usual lessons in arithmetic, spelling, writing, and social studies in favor of a free wheeling discussion about “the King of the World.” One student objects, saying there’s no such thing, and Stuart replies “There *ought* to be one;” or as a more modern alternative, a “Chairman of the World. The world gets into a lot of trouble because it has no chairman” (92).

Rules for the world are suggested, with Stuart approving “Nix on swiping anything,” but vetoing “Never poison anything but rats,” because “A Chairman has to see all sides to a problem.” The students think he looks a little like a rat and ask him if he has a rat’s point of view. “No,” replied Stuart, “I have more the point of view of a mouse, which is very different. I see things whole” (94).

Stuart definitely does see things whole. Having been led out of the city, out of his home territory by Margalo, he is about to encounter the wonders of the small town and the rural countryside. “Seeing things whole” can be understood in the widest possible context. Stuart’s classroom exercise in world government is not just a whim, but reflects White’s very serious interest in the subject.

He had been writing about world government for years. *One Man’s Meat*, published in 1942, which Katharine called “his best book so far,” reflects his propensity to “see things whole,” and traces his desire to integrate his personal life with international issues in the early years of World War II. In 1945 he published a twenty-page pamphlet called “World Government and Peace,” which White stated later was compiled by *The New Yorker* and “distributed to advertisers as a promotional gimmick” (Hall 94). In April of 1945, White was “delighted at the prospect” of attending the San Francisco conference establishing the United Nations as the magazine’s correspondent (Elledge 243).

In the midst of this attention to war, peace, and international politics, *Stuart Little* came out August 30, 1945. Then in 1946 almost all of the editorials from “World Government and Peace” were included in White’s new book, *The Wild Flag: Editorials from The New Yorker on Federal World Government and Other Matters*. The editorials originally ran in *The New Yorker* from April 19, 1943 to June 1, 1946. The world government lesson in “The Schoolroom” chapter shows that White’s ecological vision is global; he

was thinking internationally, expressing his ideas in *Stuart Little* unconventionally, but the “Schoolroom” exercise matches up with the most serious writing of his career.

Stuart has a lot of the world left to see, and the interlude at Ames’ Crossing is just that, an interlude. He dallies with the diminutive Harriet, but is disappointed, not in her (she’s perfect), but in himself. *Of course* he is disappointed in himself; the disastrous date with Harriet is a human story, and Stuart’s story is larger than that. His story requires following his heart toward the wide world, just the opposite of settling down in (almost) the first town he drives through.

What Margalo has come to mean, at least to us as readers, is nothing less than the beautiful, lovely world that we might approach, that we might explore in our own lives. Stuart may be in love with Margalo, but we who are reading about him are falling in love with the world through which he journeys. White does not mean to play favorites; he would not have us exclude the city, or the small town, or anything else from the world he teaches us to love.

Ames’ Crossing, though “the loveliest town of all,” is not meant to be a home for Stuart, but it may resemble a part of the world in which we as readers decide to make our home. Stuart escorts us into his narrator’s (White’s) sense of this lovely world. The car could become invisible at any time, and we would be left with the story, the story taking us into the world. Here we are.



For Stuart, of course, the road is still open. When he comes to a fork in the road he finds the telephone repairman who shows enough interest in Stuart's search for Margalo to listen and take notes when Stuart describes her. Knowing something about how to live in the natural world, the repairman asks where she comes from. "She comes from fields once tall with wheat, from pastures deep in fern and thistle; she comes from vales of meadowsweet, and she loves to whistle" (128). Stuart has learned the song perfectly. He has paid attention. Yes, he wants to find Margalo, but he also wants to seek his fortune. His fortune will be to find what the earth has to offer.

As many readers have noticed, the repairman's account of what he has found traveling north, like Margalo's song, bears repeating. He tells Stuart, "There's something about north:"

"Swamps where cedars grow and turtles wait on logs but not for anything in particular; fields bordered by crooked fences broken by years of standing still; orchards so old they have forgotten where the farmhouse is. In the north I have eaten my lunch in pastures rank with ferns and junipers, all under fair skies with a wind blowing. My business has taken me into spruce woods on winter nights where the snow lay deep and soft, a perfect place for a carnival of rabbits. I have sat at peace on the freight platforms of railroad junctions in the north, in the warm hours and with the warm smells. I know fresh lakes in the north,

undisturbed except by fish and hawk . . . and a person who is  
looking for something doesn't travel very fast." (129-131)

Driving off into this lyrical world goes Stuart, "headed in the right direction."

## Chapter 3

### ***Charlotte's Web: E. B. White's Environmental Magnum Opus***

“You will live to enjoy the beauty of the frozen world, for you mean a great deal to Zuckerman and he will not harm you, ever. Winter will pass, the days will lengthen, the ice will melt in the pasture pond. The song sparrow will return and sing, the frogs will awake, the warm wind will blow again. All these sights and sounds and smells will be yours to enjoy, Wilbur—this lovely world, these precious days . . . “

#### **Introduction**

As the lights come up and the curtain rises in *Charlotte's Web*, before you and I as reader, as audience, have arranged our coats and settled into our chairs, before anyone in the story has had even a bite of breakfast, Fern Arable asks her mother, “Where's Papa going with that ax?”

Where, indeed, is Mr. White going with that ax?

In the first sentence of *Charlotte's Web*, White does get our attention, and in doing so he narrates the only part of his story I find myself wanting to resist: that Mr. Arable was really going down to the barn to bash a new pig with an ax. I want that action to be incompatible with the rest of Arable's character, as quickly revealed in the next few pages of the book. When Fern catches up with her father and sobs, “Please don't kill it,” he stops walking. He speaks to his daughter “gently,” he listens to her attentively. When she argues (effectively) with him, he smiles at her, “looking down at his daughter with love.” And when she closes her argument saying, “This is the most terrible case of injustice I ever heard of,” her father reacts. “A queer look came over John Arable's face. He seemed almost ready to cry himself.” He

is a kind, understanding man, easily moved to empathy, at least for his daughter. It's hard to imagine this man smashing a newborn pig with an ax.

Empathy aside, the second incredible factor in his willingness to dispatch his newly farrowed pig is economic; by doing so he incurs an unnecessary loss. My husband is a retired farmer whose family raised pigs when he was growing up, and he had some of his own as a young man. I asked him about this. "I never heard of killing a runt pig," he said. "You'd take him out and keep him up around the house and feed him, just like they did with Wilbur. The pig would become a pet."

"Well, what about the ax?" I asked J. P.

"I never heard of anyone going off to kill their pig," he replied, "just to have them dead. If there was some reason you needed to kill a pig, you might shoot them in the head, or something like that," the wince of his shoulders telling me how unimaginably difficult even that would be for him.<sup>20</sup> E. B. White, of course, raised pigs, and he shows later in the novel that he's familiar with the method by which pigs would have been killed on farms like Zuckerman's or Arable's.

So why such a stark beginning? I think White was doing several things with the opening lines to *Charlotte's Web*, besides getting the reader's

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<sup>20</sup> J. P. Wehrman. Personal interview. October 22, 2006.

I am not arguing that no hog producer has ever destroyed a runt. But for John Arable, as White portrays him in this context, the potential violence seems to me unnecessary and out of character. For me it raises larger questions. For example: do we tend to see our customary treatment of animals as being ethical simply because we are accustomed to it?

attention with an exquisite sentence.<sup>21</sup> By telling a short, short story of a dramatic rescue he prepares us for more rescue stories to come. And with his opening scene White does establish that this will clearly be a human/non-human animal story with sharp life-and-death themes. As it did for Fern, Arable's ax breaks into our everyday, ordinary routine, even asking us to question why we in our comfortable lives have not resisted Arable's exhortation to "control ourselves." Such a startling beginning, especially for a children's book, jolts us wide awake, and if one reads *Charlotte's Web* ecocritically (keeping the natural world in mind), the beginning clause of the story reverberates and resonates in the environmental imagination, during the reading experience and long afterwards. Fern's question asks all of us to ask what we as humans have been doing with regards to other species, where we, indeed, are going; and thus her question imbues the anticipated life-saving story with multi-layered life-saving meaning.

White has begun with a human story that includes animals; he will quickly proceed to an animal story that includes humans. If the note of brutality in his first sentence seems inconsistent with the rest of his story, it's certainly not an overstatement of humanity's history of violence toward other creatures, both wild and domestic.

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<sup>21</sup> I agree with Anita Silvey's comment in *One Hundred Best Books for Children*: "*Charlotte's Web* features one of the best opening sentences in all of children's literature." White wrote poetry all of his life, and he got this line exactly right.

To cite only one example, Linda Hogan tells the following story in a widely anthologized essay, "What Holds the Water, What Holds the Light:"

Last year I was at the Colorado River with a friend when two men from the Department of Fish and Wildlife came to stock the water with rainbow trout. We wanted to watch the silver-sided fish find their way to freedom in the water, so we stood quietly by as the men climbed into the truck bed and opened the tank that held fish. To our dismay, the men did not use the nets they carried with them to unload the fish. Instead they poured the fish into the bed of their truck, kicked them out and down the hill, and then into water. The fish that survived were motionless, shocked, gill slits barely moving, skin hanging off the wounds. At most, it would have taken only a few minutes longer for the men to have removed the fish carefully with their nets, to have treated the lives they handled with dignity and respect, with caretakers' hands. (*Dwellings* 44-45)

Later in the essay, Hogan speaks of "the kind of care we need to offer back every day to the world as we begin to learn the land and its creatures, to know the world is the container for our lives, sometimes wild and untouched, sometimes moved by a caretaker's hands" (46). The world as the container for our lives is the world in which White has placed his famous story about a famous pig. We are meant to recognize this world.

Despite the ax at the beginning, I want to go where White is going with *Charlotte's Web*. Every rereading brings a new angle on a shimmering web of ideas, new and old, about how we humans might experience life on this earth—the one ponderable context for our lives. White's magnum opus holds at least as many possibilities for the renewal of our environmental imagination as Charlotte's "magnum opus" (her egg sac) holds future spiders.<sup>22</sup> The story White weaves in *Charlotte's Web* offers ecocritical ideas about new stories and new ways of hearing old stories that are essential for us to hear. It dramatizes the life-saving nature of the world's web of stories.

*Charlotte's Web* is itself a web of various types of stories, a web woven by a writer versatile enough to incorporate realism, pastoral, fable, drama, comedy, music, adventure, farce, humor, irony and an inter-species love story into one hundred eighty four small-sized pages, including the Garth Williams illustrations. Readers might experience *Charlotte's Web* as a prose poem, or hear it as a "hymn to the barn" (White's phrase) or ponder the short novel as though it were a succinct environmental essay. For this discussion, I have chosen to visualize the work as though it were a drama, a play in which the first two chapters function as prologue to a three-act performance designed to renew and re-invigorate our environmental imaginations.

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<sup>22</sup> Others have called *Charlotte's Web* White's "magnum opus." In calling CW his environmental magnum opus, I am keeping in mind his own use of the phrase in having Charlotte describe her egg sac as her magnum opus. Building on White's use of the phrase then, my chapter title, "CW: E. B. White's Environmental Magnum Opus" is meant to call attention to the world's fertility, and to place the fertility of the writer in relationship to the natural world.

## Prologue

The life-and-death struggle in the opening lines is resolved peacefully, with Mr. Arable bringing the new runt pig into the kitchen, where the “table was set for breakfast, and the room smelled of coffee, bacon, damp plaster, and wood smoke from the stove” (3). If one takes the long view of the chapter title, “Before Breakfast,” one becomes aware of the reality that at some point in time before this particular breakfast, one of Wilbur’s close relatives was butchered. We know that White himself raised pigs.<sup>23</sup> And when Fern’s brother, Avery, appears, he is “heavily armed—an air rifle in one hand, a wooden dagger in the other” (4). Chapter 1 is not all sweetness and light; it presents a realistic vignette of a family one spring morning on a working farm.

Or we might take an even longer view. To a reader familiar with White, his chapter title, “Before Breakfast,” might evoke a piece White published in June 1940 in which he describes an overnight journey with his son, traveling by Pullman car, White taking the upper berth and Joel White the lower:

Early in the morning I awoke and from my vantage point looked down. My boy had raised the shade a few inches and was ingesting the moving world. In that instant I encountered my unforgettable former self: it seemed as though it were I who was down there in the lower berth looking out of the train window just

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<sup>23</sup> Please see chapter 1 of this dissertation for a discussion of the connection between White’s 1948 essay, “The Death of a Pig,” drawn from his own experience raising pigs, and *Charlotte’s Web*.



as the sky was growing light, absorbing the incredible wonder of fields, houses, bakery trucks, the before-breakfast world, tasting the sweetness and scariness of things seen and only half understood—the train penetrating the morning, the child penetrating the meaning of the morning and of the future. (“A Boy I Knew” 33-34)

For readers of *Charlotte’s Web*, White raises a window shade on the before-breakfast world. He invites us to renew our capacity for astonishment at what we see, and accompanies us as we experience the world as a place of “incredible wonder.”

With both contrast and continuity after the drama of the first chapter, chapter 2 is a beautiful, idyllic dream in which “every day was a happy day, and every night was peaceful.” Fern loves Wilbur “more than anything”; he gazes at her “with adoring eyes.” These early days of the story are a triple-dip ice cream cone built of springtime, childhood, and the sense of well-being that springs from a new mother’s enchantment with her infant. When Wilbur was two weeks old Mr. Arable fixed a house and a pen for him under the apple tree. “It was apple-blossom time, and the days were getting warmer” (8).

Aware of the blooming apple tree making a fragrant canopy over Fern and Wilbur, the reader experiences a common, ordinary, backyard variety of heaven on earth. In fact, readers inclined toward conventional Christian religious imagery might read the swim in the brook as a baptism, but with White, one would rather have his story be what it is—and a swim on a warm

afternoon for Fern and Avery, with Wilbur amusing himself nearby in the mud is good enough. Wonderfully, a conventional heaven has nothing to do with it. This is life on earth. It's perfect. It's unmitigated good. It's fresh and innocent and pleasurable, but it's short lived. For White, spring is less a metaphor than it is a season for celebrating actual life, especially new life, on earth.

After only four pages of idyllic chapter 2, Mr. Arable announces it's time to sell Wilbur. The familiar feel of the kitchen and the backyard quickly fades; the reader feels a significant shift underway. This shift signifies the end of the story's "prologue," and the beginning of "Act One."

And yet the end of the early spring will be no fall from grace, because the barn to which the story adjourns is a place redolent of benignity. The barn belonging to Homer Zuckerman, Fern's uncle, has "a sort of peaceful smell—as though nothing bad could happen ever again in the world" (13). A master of listmaking, White provides a full paragraph listing the origins of the inviting smells of the barn. I like Elledge's acknowledgement that although the "plenitude" of the barn may be read as "a kind of paradise regained," the world of the barn (like the Arables' backyard) is a real world, "better than any ideal world" (301). What interests White is how we inhabit the earth, not how we might reinvent eden (Merchant). For White, any attention to "paradise" or "heaven" would be a problematic distraction from what matters, life on earth with its attendant pleasures and responsibilities.

Seven or eight different beginnings for *Charlotte's Web* are included in the box of notes, false starts, and drafts now housed at Cornell's Division of

Rare & Manuscript Collections (Neumeyer 204). Apparently, White began with the barn in his second attempt to write a beginning for his novel: “A barn can have a horse in it and a barn can have a cow in it, and a barn can have hens scratching in the chaff and swallows flying in and out through the door—but if a barn hasn’t got a pig in it, it is hardly worth talking about” (Neumeyer 196, 207). Quite a contrast, and a much less compelling sentence than “Where’s Papa going with that ax?” Only after setting the completed manuscript aside for almost a year did White write the beginning as we read it, adding five chapters to the book and giving Fern a more prominent role (Neumeyer 207). Fern’s changing role in the story, as well as the fact that two new beginning chapters were added to the manuscript White had finished and laid aside, help explain the shift we feel from the second chapter to the third.<sup>24</sup>

Another possible explanation for the change one senses between the first two chapters and the third is that if we interpret the move into the barn symbolically, perhaps we are moving more deeply into a pastoral mode of storytelling. In *The Machine in the Garden*, Leo Marx develops his idea that the “new world” provided an apparent opportunity for the enactment of pastoral myths, especially the “dream of a retreat to an oasis of harmony and joy” (3).

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<sup>24</sup> Other readers, of course, have noticed the shift in the story between chapters 2 and 3. Cornell University, White’s alma mater, holds an extensive collection of E. B. White’s papers in the Cornell University Library, Division of Rare & Manuscript Collections. Peter Neumeyer points out the existence there of at least eight different drafts of the beginning of CW. “All of the early drafts begin with a description either of the barn, of Charlotte, or of Wilbur, or—in one instance—of Mr. Arable going out to the barn to find the eleven pigs,” Neumeyer writes in his useful *Annotated Charlotte’s Web*, p. 204.

The pastoral literary convention, with its classical origins, is an import from Europe,<sup>25</sup> and White's barn is attached to the house in typical Maine fashion, echoing how American pastoral myths are connected to their Old World roots. But *Charlotte's Web* does not feel like a retreat; White called it "a paean to life, a hymn to the barn, an acceptance of dung" (*Letters* 614) and he patterns Zuckerman's barn very closely after his own.<sup>26</sup>

Yet a third phenomena is present in this shift we sense between chapters two and three. A realistic story on a family farm has apparently mutated to a different genre, to something variously called a talking animal story, animal fantasy, or animal fable. Indeed, certain animals have begun to speak, which was not happening in the first two chapters. Why not? And why don't all the animals speak? The Zuckermans have a cocker spaniel, and the upper level of the barn houses, at times, horses and cows; but except for the

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<sup>25</sup> Leo Marx, Annette Kolodney, Don Scheese, Lawrence Buell, Randall Roorda, and others have contributed to current discussions connecting American ecocriticism with the pastoral tradition. To the extent that pastoral tradition presents or assumes a separation of art from life, inappropriate emphasis on pastoral aspects of literature seems to work against one of the basic purposes of ecocriticism, which is to address the world's environmental crisis. But to the extent that pastoral considerations help illuminate disjuncture between representation and world, pastoral criticism seems a helpful branch of ecocriticism. Peter F. Neumeyer connects CW with the pastoral several times in his explanatory notes In *The Annotated Charlotte's Web*.

<sup>26</sup> Similarities between White's barn on his "saltwater farm," as he calls it, and the barn he creates in CW are much discussed in the literature on White. Neumeyer offers good information on this point, observing "The barn that was eventually drawn for this page [83] is, in fact, White's North Brooklin barn" (83). If Garth Williams' drawing comes that close to the real barn, one can assume that White's words are an even closer representation of his own beloved barn. I see Zuckerman's, and White's, barn as a human-built environment where life is nurtured. And so I regard it as a sacred place.

cows urging Wilber to “run downhill” during his brief escape from his pen, these other animals are not given speaking parts in White’s pastoral pageant. Why not? The animals who do speak have a common connection with Fern. Her role as audience, her attitude of patient unobtrusive listening, her love of quiet observation of the life of the barn is vital to these speaking animals. Her listening is an active part of their communication.

Precedents for “talking animal stories” abound, including Beatrix Potter’s well-known books from the turn of the century, Kenneth Grahame’s classic *The Wind in the Willows*, the prolific Thornton W. Burgess *Old Mother West Wind* series, and Robert Lawson’s *Rabbit Hill*, published in 1944, to name a very few of the many animal stories popular at mid-century. While those books do much to engage the environmental imaginations of their readers, *Charlotte’s Web* does so using (or inventing) a different approach to the story in which animals speak.

White’s technique is to build bridges for us from the familiar to the imaginative. He does not ask us to believe six impossible things before breakfast (to link the title of his first chapter, “Before Breakfast,” to *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*); instead he simply allows us to enter a barn on a working farm. After the idyllic yet familiar feel of the first two chapters, we are led to go a little further, into a structure we recognize—at least imaginatively-- and into a story offering a profound biocentric, biophilic experience. This incrementally biocentric, biophilic narrative makes use of storytelling that conventional literary description calls “realism,” as well as storytelling that

convention dubs “fantasy.” Conventional descriptions of children’s literature usually define these two categories using oppositional language,<sup>27</sup> but in White’s story, genre does not rule the roost; in *Charlotte’s Web*, earth-based meaning involves, requires, and celebrates both realism and fantasy, blending them into one web, where they work together.

### **Act One**

Chapter 3 is the perfect spot for White’s effectively revised barn, complete with the smells of hay, manure, “the perspiration of tired horses and the wonderful sweet breath of patient cows.” Zuckerman’s barn, like White’s own barn, “was pleasantly warm in winter when the animals spent most of their time indoors, and it was pleasantly cool in summer when the big doors stood wide open to the breeze.” It provides White with another occasion for one of his descriptive lists; it has “ladders, grindstones, pitchforks, monkey wrenches, scythes, lawn mowers, snow shovels, ax handles, and rusty rat traps.” White the life-long poet is everywhere audible in *Charlotte’s Web*. “It was the kind of barn that swallows like to build their nests in. It was the kind of barn that children like to play in” (13-14). Zuckerman’s barn is a human-built structure well suited for nurturing the lives of animals both wild and domestic, native as well as introduced, and seems designed to encourage our careful observation of its residents. It is precisely the kind of barn that will serve

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<sup>27</sup> Bernice Cullinan understands that fantasy and realism are not, in fact oppositional. She writes, “No definition of realism is *simple*, and to say that realism is fiction that could happen in the real world—as opposed to fantasy, which could not—is *simplistic*” (222).

beautifully to host a vital tableau, a noisy pageant, which, instead of silently pointing to pictures from life, speaks effectively and eloquently to our environmental imaginations.

With Wilbur moved in to the barn cellar, which opened out to the south, the barn is definitely worth talking about:

Fern came almost every day to visit him. She found an old milking stool that had been discarded, and she placed the stool in the sheepfold next to Wilbur's pen. Here she sat quietly during the long afternoons, thinking and listening and watching Wilbur. The sheep soon got to know her and trust her. So did the geese, who lived with the sheep. All the animals trusted her, she was so quiet and friendly. (14-15)

I first noticed the passage quoted above while reading *Charlotte's Web* in a seminar on literature and the environment, taught by Susan J. Rosowski in the fall of 1998. Below I describe my experience while writing out that bit of text. The fact that Fern came repeatedly to the barn to visit Wilbur, and the way she behaved there, still feels, almost palpably, to be the very heart of the environmental invitation presented in this famous book.<sup>28</sup>

Holding my copy of *Charlotte's Web* in my left hand as I copy the lines above ("Fern came almost every day to visit him" . . . ), I find that White's book

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<sup>28</sup> I included this passage in an essay called "E. B. White's Paeon to Life: The Environmental Imagination of '*Charlotte's Web*,'" which appears in *Wild Things: Children's Culture and Ecocriticism*, eds. Sid Dobrin and Kenneth Kidd, 2004.

creates a cornered space, and I sit here in the opening it makes. On the left is a young pig, head down, his rounded back and ears echoing the curves of his wooden trough. On my right sit Fern and the sheep and the goose, all three of them composed of the same curving lines. And here am I, in the middle, included in the warmth of White's cellar, the south side of his own barn, as Garth Williams drew it.

Fern sits on a three-legged milking stool, leaning on a low fence, watching Wilbur and listening quietly, with a pleased and dreamy expression on her face. She is flanked by creatures not of her species. No one is talking now, but Fern's patient waiting, her presence as she sits thinking and listening and watching Wilbur, whom she loves, is transmitted somehow not just into my mind but more deeply into my being. The animals and Fern are keeping me company; we are all in this together.

In a letter to filmmaker Gene Deitch, White wrote about Fern's reunion with Wilbur in the barn in some detail:

An aura of magic is essential, because this is a magical happening. Much can be done by music of the right kind, as when the moment arrives when communication takes place between the little girl and the animals in the barn cellar. This is truly a magical moment and should be so marked by the music. (I hear it as a sort of thrumming, brooding sound, like the sound of crickets in the fall, or katydids, or cicadas. It should be a



haunting, quiet, steady sound—subdued and repetitive).” (*Letters* 613-14)

White’s own terms, words like “magical,” or even “miracle,” seem more helpful to me than more overtly literary terms such as “edenic,” or the omnibus concept “pastoral,” as I think about this book with “minding the earth” in mind, (Joseph Meeker’s term). It’s difficult to say why this young girl’s quiet, waiting, patient presence is so necessary a part of the human/non-human animal relationship, except something of her benignity must be felt by the animals. White sensed that music could express the moment better than words. The connection feels sacred, and this passage, in which Fern leads the reader into a special experience in the barn, is key to the book’s environmental magic.

Questions of which words to use, and why, or when, are in themselves important ecocritical cruces; in fact White will build the plot of *Charlotte’s Web* around a search for words. From its beginning as an approach to literature, ecocriticism has entertained a vibrant discussion searching for language to tell environmental stories, indeed questioning the very nature of language.<sup>29</sup>

White is writing with a light and dexterous touch; he moves things along rapidly. Almost as soon as Fern gets settled, without even a swish of a curtain, his audience is treated to an amusing comic sketch, a play within a play. One day, lonely and bored, taking the goose’s advice, Wilbur pushes

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<sup>29</sup> For my consideration of CW’s contribution to this important ecocritical conversation regarding the nature of language, please see chapter 5 of this dissertation.

past a loose board and escapes to the freedom outside his pen, where he is overwhelmed, both by too many choices and by too much advice. We know from White's (then) twenty-five years of writing editorial comment for *The New Yorker*, his monthly columns "One Man's Meat" for *Harpers*, and more specifically, from his work editing the government pamphlet, "Four Freedoms," commissioned by President Roosevelt in 1942,<sup>30</sup> that White took the concept of freedom very seriously indeed. And yet freedom here becomes the topic of a funny interlude in a children's story taking place in a barn where animals talk. Or does White have something more at stake?

Some readers find the brief taste of freedom analogous to existential human dilemmas. Serious readers with an acquired taste for symbol and metaphor—who may have a propensity to automatically anthropomorphize the

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<sup>30</sup> Of all the unfortunately obscure work of E. B. White's, his work on the *Four Freedoms* government pamphlet of 1942 may be the least deserving of its obscurity. Katherine Romans Hall includes the following account of the project, identified as "A Note by EBW" in her 1979 bibliography based on the White collection housed at Cornell University Library:

Early in 1942, when I was living in Maine, I was asked to come to Washington to help in preparing a pamphlet on the Four Freedoms for the Office of Facts and Figures. I went, as a matter of duty . . .

President Roosevelt had enunciated the Four Freedoms; the pamphlet was to be an interpretation and an amplification. The scheme was that Max Lerner was to write "Freedom of Speech" and Freedom from Fear," Malcolm Cowley was to write "Want," and Reinhold Niebuhr "Religion." Then I was to put them together and come up with the pamphlet (Hall 186).

Elledge's account is a bit different; he says that White was to write on freedom of speech as well as serve as editor of the document. He concludes: "The document reads like the work of White, or at least has some of the virtues of White's writing. It does not say more than it should, and its simple eloquence makes its argument persuasive" (232-34).

animals they encounter in literature—might see Wilbur’s story as *really* being about human development. But what if we consider the animals to be portraying themselves, to be representing their own particular, real, animal lives?<sup>31</sup> Is the ability to imagine Wilbur as actual pig, Charlotte as grey spider, unique to children? Perhaps White wishes to suggest that the pen on the south side of Zuckerman’s barn really is the best habitat for Wilbur; after his escape, we can imagine that this particular pig, especially at this young age, might not fare well in the wild. By the end of the story a mature Wilbur fully appreciates his situation:

Life in the barn was very good—night and day, winter and summer, spring and fall, dull days and bright days. It was the best place to be, thought Wilbur, this warm delicious cellar, with the garrulous geese, the changing seasons, the heat of the sun, the passage of swallows, the nearness of rats, the sameness of sheep, the love of spiders, the smell of manure, and the glory of everything. (183)

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<sup>31</sup> White speaks of his intent to represent real animals’ lives in two different letters to Gene Deitch, whose film on CW was never made, apparently because Deitch did not conceptualize the story in a way White could support. In a letter of January 12, 1971, White wrote: “I discovered, quite by accident, that reality and fantasy make good bedfellows. I discovered that there was no need to tamper in any way with the habits and characteristics of spiders, pigs, geese, and rats. No “motivation” is needed if you remain true to life and true to the spirit of fantasy.

And on February 3, 1971 . . . As you say, spiders do not talk to pigs, except in the world of the fable. But when conversation does finally take place, in that fabulous and pure world, it is indeed a spider who talks, indeed a pig. . . . Be true to animals, O Good Gene, and you will live forever. When you enter the barn cellar, remove your hat . . . (*Letters* 613, 615).

When we finish the book, that benediction, a biophilic incantation, will escort us gracefully out of Wilbur's story with our sense of the world he inhabits—the only one there is—enriched and expanded, our idea of the sacred enhanced and yet grounded, even by manure. In *Charlotte's Web*, as in much of his writing, E. B. White has a lot to say about how to inhabit the world.

White takes his readers and young listeners on an emotional roller-coaster ride: first the drama of the ax, the jolt of an abrupt end to the five idyllic weeks with Fern, the profoundly satisfying moment when Fern finds Wilbur again, the silly instructions called to the freed but feckless pig . . . what next? Loneliness. Chapter 4 brings rain, relentless, repetitive rain, wresting control of the day away from Wilbur, who has done his immature best to try to plan a schedule and to organize himself. His overtures of friendship to the goose, to one of the lambs, and to Templeton are all rebuffed.

Wilbur's loneliness in chapter 4 brings a big change in the novel's emotional tone; his loneliness is more than poignant; it's palpable. And of course it sets the stage for Charlotte. After the worst day in Wilbur's young life, the spotlight on him dims, and

Darkness settled over everything. Soon there were only shadows and the noises of the sheep chewing their cuds, and occasionally the rattle of a cow-chain up overhead. You can imagine Wilbur's surprise when, out of the darkness, came a small voice he had never heard before. It sounded thin but

pleasant. "Do you want a friend, Wilbur?" it said. "I'll be a friend to you. I've watched you all day and I like you." (31)

Charlotte's entrance into the story is sudden, unexpected, and extremely dramatic. The stage goes completely black and with Wilbur we wait through the night and into the next morning to catch a glimpse of the drama's leading lady. Again White quickly switches keys on us with Wilbur's pre-emptive summons to his as yet unseen friend. He's very funny, although I can't recall children ever laughing at this part; I think instead they commiserate with Wilbur in his embarrassment, knowing how painful social situations can be.

Charlotte's self-introduction serves as an informative lesson on spiders, real spiders, ending with Wilbur watching his new friend eat a fly, thinking she is "fierce, brutal, scheming, bloodthirsty," her life rather Hobbesean—nasty, brutish and short. But as the camera pulls away from the story's new star, the narrator points out to us: "Underneath her rather bold and cruel exterior, she had a kind heart, and she was to prove loyal and true to the very end" (41). Thus is Charlotte both spider and friend—friend in the human sense. Her foil in the story, Templeton, though he makes a perfect anti-hero, and in fact plays a major part in the plot, seems to be denied that bilateral nature—at least according to Charlotte. Charlotte says, "A rat is a rat." True, of course, except when a human is a rat; in Templeton's self-serving nature, we humans see ourselves, as well as others of our kind.

Along with Charlotte comes her web, and it is immediately made known to us as a web of death. After Wilbur's poignant anticipation of his new friend,

it's especially dramatic to have the introductory conversation between the two stars of the story interrupted by Charlotte taking time out to wrap and anesthetize a fly that happens to entangle itself in her web just then. Charlotte explains her method of feeding herself in some detail, and when she adds the fact that she doesn't really eat the insects she traps—she drinks their blood—"her pleasant, thin voice" growing "even thinner and more pleasant," Wilbur is horrified. But Charlotte explains it's only natural for spiders to trap insects. She says, "My mother was a trapper before me. Her mother was a trapper before her. All our family have been trappers. Way back for thousands and thousands of years we spiders have been laying for flies and bugs" (39). Here is one creature's long evolutionary past presented simply but accurately, anchoring White's story firmly, delicately, to the biosphere's ecosystems, just as Charlotte's web is anchored to the doorway of Zuckerman's barn.

The story we're reading is a web of death—the raising of pigs, which precipitates the action, is all about death, and Charlotte's intimate relationship with the death of her insect prey is emblematic of the biological fact that all of life rides on the back of death. The story's close connection with death is acknowledged in remarks White published in 1953, responding to questions about why he wrote *Charlotte's Web*. "A farm is a particular problem for a man who likes animals, because the fate of most livestock is that they are murdered by their benefactors. The creatures may live serenely but they end violently, and the odor of doom hangs about them always," he explained.

“Anyway the theme of *Charlotte’s Web* is that a pig shall be saved” (White, “Pigs and Spiders.” reprinted in Neumeyer 237).

Chapter 6 displays White’s dexterity in shifting quickly from one mode of writing to another. First comes the lyrical tribute to “early summer days on a farm,” with the air sweetened first with lilacs, then apple blossoms. “Now that school was over, Fern visited the barn almost every day, to sit quietly on her stool. The animals treated her as an equal. The sheep lay calmly at her feet” (42). She is at the center of a peaceful tableau. White reminds his human readers that we are not at the apex of some hypothetical hierarchy of all the species on earth. The *animals* treat *Fern* as an equal.

Then White describes the quintessential summer experience on a working farm, cutting and putting up hay.

Around the first of July, the work horses were hitched to the mowing machine, and Mr. Zuckerman climbed into the seat and drove into the field. All morning you could hear the rattle of the machine as it went round and round, while the tall grass fell down behind the cutter bar in long green swathes. Next day the hay would be hauled to the barn in the high hay wagon, with Fern and Avery riding at the top of the load. Then the hay would be hoisted, sweet and warm, into the big loft, until the whole barn seemed like a wonderful bed of timothy and clover. It was fine to jump in, and perfect to hide in. And sometimes Avery would find

a little grass snake in the hay, and would add it to the other things in his pocket. (42-43)

White appeals to all the senses, including taste. The first paragraph of “Summer Days” ends with fresh trout for supper, and there’s a whole paragraph with “plenty of things for a child to eat and drink and suck and chew,” ranging from dandelion stems to cold drinks in the Frigidaire (43).

As if to underscore the fullness of his sensory vision, he presents a paragraph on the early summer as “a jubilee time for birds,” complete with renditions of four of their songs (white-throated sparrow, phoebe, song sparrow, and barn swallow). And to conclusively call our attention to the book’s biophilic themes, White closes his tribute to early summer on the farm with this: “Everywhere you look is life; even the little ball of spit on the weed stalk, if you poke it apart, has a green worm inside it. And on the under side of the leaf of the potato vine are the bright orange eggs of the potato bug” (43-44). Writing from the perspective of a child’s sensory experience of summer, White intends to invite us all to look under the leaf.

With White a single chapter can sing in several keys, reaching the high notes and the low. Immediately a secondary plot is hatched (or more accurately, not hatched); White is creating a highly interconnected novel, and the hatching of the seven baby goslings (although the goose had laid eight eggs) is more than background information. Chapter 6 moves quickly from a paean to the high holy days of early summer to a happy celebration of new life to a rat hiding a rotten goose egg. Templeton has “no milk of rodent kindness”



(46), and this barn has no milkmaids, but the stories told in Zuckerman's barn in chapters 3 through 7 form a pastoral performance that could have been directed only by E. B. White, a summer theater in both subject and setting, Act One of *Charlotte's Web*.

Chapter 7 is chillingly brief. The old sheep lets it slip that when cold weather comes Wilbur will be "murdered." "There's a regular conspiracy around here to kill you at Christmastime. Everybody is in the plot—Lurvy, Zuckerman, even John Arable," states the sheep balefully. Charlotte (whose life span is under a year) acknowledges that the old sheep is in a position to know such things, that it's "the dirtiest trick" she ever heard of; she "briskly assures Wilbur that he will not die, and she will save him. Just as briskly, the curtain closes on Act One.

But wait, in telling the story I seem to have left out one important fact. Wilbur does not want to die. He sobs, he screams, he calls out, to no one in particular, "Save me, somebody! Save me!" The text tells us that Fern was sitting on her customary stool, listening to these events.

When Wilbur calls for someone to save him, "Fern was just about to jump up when a voice was heard." The voice is Charlotte's, of course, who tells Wilbur to be quiet. But Wilbur is panicky and bursts into tears. Charlotte "briskly," prophetically, reassures Wilbur, "you shall not die." Before she does we hear Wilbur speaking. He speaks as one of the barnyard's inhabitants, as a resident of place, as a creature enjoying his home on the planet Earth.

“‘I don’t want to die,’ he moaned. ‘I want to stay alive, right here in my comfortable manure pile with all my friends. I want to breathe the beautiful air and lie in the beautiful sun’” (51). To me this speech makes perfect sense. David Abram speaks of “making sense” in *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World*, where he writes “to make sense is *to enliven the senses*” (265). Abram seeks to renew our understanding that awareness itself comes from the animate world (261); his radiant book helps me see the actual “sense” of E. B. White’s place, and Wilbur’s, in my own environmental imagination.

### **Entr’acte**

Then in a reversal of the tradition in which minor characters, like Shakespeare’s gravediggers, or clowns at a rodeo, provide apparently light entertainment between the acts of a serious play, White treats us to an entr’acte of human parents worrying about their daughter. The brief skit humorously reveals how much we don’t understand about our fellow inhabitants on the planet. We look sillier than geese, dumber than—well, dumber than we might have imagined.

John Arable, however, speculates to his worried wife that maybe the animals do talk; he says he has sometimes wondered. But Mrs. Arable wants to consult the family doctor, telling her husband, “‘You know perfectly well animals don’t talk.’

Mr. Arable grinned. ‘Maybe our ears aren’t as sharp as Fern’s,’ he said” (54).

Leaving the humans to talk about whether animals can talk, back at the barn the animals talk about arachnid anatomy, and Wilbur tries to spin a web. As exaggerated, improbable horseplay, and a neat spin-off on Charlotte's ability, this scene is a farce. It's very funny, but poignant (we anticipate how important the spinning of webs will soon become), and Wilbur seems increasingly precious as we see him through Charlotte's affectionate eyes.

To console Wilbur about his failure at spinning, Charlotte asks Wilbur if he's ever heard of the Queensborough Bridge. Wilbur asks if it's a web. Charlotte replies "sort of" and points out that it took men eight years to build. Wilbur wants to know what humans catch in the Queensborough Bridge, "bugs?" Charlotte answers "no."

"They just keep trotting back and forth across the bridge thinking there is something better on the other side. If they'd hang head-down at the top of the thing and wait quietly, maybe something good would come along. But no—with men it's rush, rush, rush, every minute." (60)

Katharine and E. B. White had edited *A Subtreasury of American Humor in 1941*; it might take expertise at their level to catalogue and describe the varieties of humor in *Charlotte's Web*. Just as I am enjoying Charlotte and Wilbur's conversation about webs and bridges and the little joke about people catching bugs, Charlotte swings into a thoughtful commentary about the meaningless activity of humans. She's glad she's "sedentary," and soon she and Wilbur are conversationally celebrating the joy of staying in place. A bit

later, this clear note sounds the novel's environmental theme: "Wilbur heard the trill of the tree toad and the occasional slamming of the kitchen door. All these sounds made him feel comfortable and happy, for he loved life and loved to be a part of the world on a summer evening" (62).

The entertaining perspective of seeing a major urban bridge from the perspective of a gray spider and a pig has been shifted for me, first to the uncomfortable position that I don't know what I'm doing on earth any more than the people Charlotte describes as driving relentlessly between Queens and Manhattan in pursuit of something vaguely "better," and then shifted again, as White's poetry brings me to ponder how creatures of another species want to be part of the world on a lovely summer evening just as I do. Charlotte is famously unselfish, yet she seems to be suggesting to me that to think only of myself and of my own kind is the very definition of selfishness. That's why I am not especially interested in whether *Charlotte's Web* is an anthropomorphic story or not, though I expect other readers might find the question intriguing; given the nature of the story, that concern itself seems inappropriately anthropocentric.

## **Act Two**

Act Two is of course the big plot to save Wilbur's life, the need to do so pre-figured in the novel's beginning question: "Where's Papa going with that ax?" and again as Wilbur reacts to the news that he will probably be killed at Christmastime. So, with apologies for reducing this plot to almost *less than nothing* (a subject of chapter 4): Act One sets out the problem and Act Two

presents the solution. For many readers the heart of *Charlotte's Web*, the most familiar part of the story, might be the grey spider spinning words in her web out of her friendship and love for this pig.

But before “a pig shall be saved,” Charlotte must herself be saved. White has several layers of lifesaving stories woven together in his magnum opus. With imperturbable patience, the spider has been waiting for an idea since solemnly announcing to Wilbur, “You shall not die.” (51). (As readers we have been waiting for twenty pages.) But just when an idea comes to her, the “heavily armed” Avery, Fern’s brother, tries to knock her down with a stick. He seeks not to kill her, but to capture her, although the threat from him is certainly lethal. Climbing into the pigpen (something the respectful Fern has never tried), he loses his balance and topples onto Wilbur’s trough.

The lifeless goose egg Templeton has hidden beneath the trough explodes. Garth Williams’s illustration of Avery with his legs waving wildly in the air (rather spider-like) shows, at first glance, an amusing misadventure; to Wilbur the incident makes a compelling story to tell to the others when “the animals came up from the pasture—the sheep, the lambs, the gander, the goose, and the seven goslings.” But for the spider herself a crisis of the first order has been averted; her own life and her life-saving plan have been spared.

To build a plot in which a useless goose egg carried away by a rat decays and becomes rotten, only to be utilized as a pivotal life-saving device, suggests an ecological point of view compatible with John Muir’s famous

remark: “When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe.” Considering White’s lifelong fascination with birds and their eggs—a subject he wrote about often and will return to in *The Trumpet of the Swan*--and remembering especially his own experience with raising geese and his affection for them, I see this small twist in the plot as emblematic of White’s personal biocentric, biophilic, vision.

White’s readers now find themselves in the very center of this complex web of stories and storytelling. Similarly to the dramatic structure of the first act, the second act has begun with two preliminary chapters (9 and 10), which are, in turns, informative, amusing, affectionate, philosophical, appreciative, celebratory, maternal, reassuring, and farcical, with narration and description binding all of these threads together.

Finally ready in chapter 11 to show us his story’s “miracle,” White pays special attention to lighting. He gives us a foggy day. “Everything on the farm was dripping wet. The grass looked like a magic carpet. The asparagus patch looked like a silver forest” (77). White has subtly rendered the spectacular mundanities of a foggy morning—on a farm or anywhere else—his similes expressing something rare and special, his syntax suggesting usually no one—especially no human—really appreciated the ordinary beauties of any particular day. But on this day, things are different.

On foggy mornings, Charlotte’s web was truly a thing of beauty.

This morning each thin strand was decorated with dozens of tiny beads of water. The web glistened in the light and made a

pattern of loveliness and mystery, like a delicate veil. Even Lurvy, who wasn't particularly interested in beauty, noticed the web when he came with the pig's breakfast. He noted how clearly it showed up and he noted how big and carefully built it was. (77)

Even Lurvy is learning to see a spider's web. A lesser writer might sound saccharine or sentimental showing us the beauties of the natural world in such a simple setting, but White does it brilliantly. In White's hands, human perception of the "simple" beauty of the web comes with an appropriate complexity. Just as, according to the old sheep, the plot to kill Wilbur had been a conspiracy with everybody in on the plot, the idea that the web of a gray spider (with or without writing) is miraculous is another widely kept secret, this one significantly more benign. Mrs. Zimmerman knows it, Dr. Dorian knows it, Fern and all of us who are reading, watching and listening to the drama, and most especially, Charlotte, all know that the web itself is a wonder, and the words the spider weaves into the web, taken literally, are a trick.

White's personal interest in spiders and their webs, his experience with them, and his deliberate study of them have been well documented.<sup>32</sup> Peter Neumeyer reprints part of a letter White wrote to Ursula Nordstrom, his editor at Harper & Brothers, about "one of Charlotte's daughters" building a web in

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<sup>32</sup> See, especially, Elledge 293-5 and Neumeyer 210-17.

his barn. White observes that he repeatedly broke the web when he opened the trapdoor to push manure to the barn's cellar:

After several days of this, during which she had to rebuild the entire web each evening, she solved the matter neatly by changing the angle of the web so that the foundation line no longer crossed my path. Her ingenuity has impressed me, and I am now teaching her to write SOME BOOK, and will let Brentano have her for their window. . . . (Neumeyer 215-16).

Perhaps White saw in spiders and spider webs imagery appropriate for linking his life-long affection for the natural world with his life-long sense of himself as a writer, his sense of self, which includes both humor and modesty.<sup>33</sup> I think he would say, along with Dr. Dorian, that the web itself is a miracle, and consequently a writer's "tricks" with words are to be considered a much lesser accomplishment.

He could not have found a more environmentally rich central image; his "*appreciative* story," as he points out almost twenty years after its publication, "celebrates life, the seasons, the goodness of the barn, the beauty of the

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<sup>33</sup> White's reply to Elledge's request for permission to look at his papers at Cornell is one of my favorite of the many examples of White's gentle self-deprecation. He writes, "As a man who has frittered away the best years of his life writing about E. B. White, sometimes with affection, sometimes with distaste, always with charity aforethought, I can sympathize with your project without envying your labors." I believe that what White says about himself—in many places—is in sync with healthy ecological thinking. He knows he's part of a wider, deeper, natural world, and is happy to acknowledge the connection. At the same time, his statements about himself show he's aware of, and interested in, a writer's relationship with the world.



world, the glory of everything” (*Letters* 613). How can we as readers imagine “the glory of everything?” How can a writer evoke that for us? Perhaps the image of a spider’s web helps us visualize that White’s story extends to the seasons, the experiences, the places, the histories, and the encounters of our own lives as well—and that our own stories are part of the web of life.

Just as Charlotte describes herself as versatile, so is her creation, her web. A spider’s web evokes connection, relationship, and ecological balance. Leslie Marmon Silko, whose heritage includes Laguna Pueblo, German, Cherokee, and Mexican, invokes the image of a spider’s web to describe her book of essays, *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit*. She writes: “It begins with the land; think of the land, the earth, as the center of a spider’s web. Human identity, imagination and storytelling were inextricably linked to the land, to Mother Earth, just as the strands of the spider’s web radiate from the center of the web” (21). I write those words imagining that their author has long been aware of something I have learned just today from browsing the World Wide Web—that some spiders use strands of silk stronger than steel of the same thickness.<sup>34</sup> And yet Charlotte, a common barn spider (gray spider), *Araneus cavaticus*, was the type who might have rebuilt her web every day. Isn’t that what we must do with our stories?

The appearance of writing in the web within this story for children highlights a central discussion in ecocriticism: how can writers represent

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<sup>34</sup> [http://wikipedia.org/wiki/Spider\\_web](http://wikipedia.org/wiki/Spider_web) 1/26/2007

nature? In its complexity, and in its indispensableness to our human lives, from a conceptual point of view nature is beyond our understanding. How can human language, which is part of human culture, ever hope to reflect, to render, or to represent the natural world? For the last quarter century ecocritics have grappled with these issues anew.<sup>35</sup> White's story calls attention to this conundrum without trying to solve the unsolvable. He answers these questions only indirectly, by telling a good story allowing a spider's web to speak for itself—letting the web shimmer in the spotlight, while acknowledging that some of his human audience might well remain in the dark.

Charlotte comes up with "Some Pig!" on her own, although after the brief escape in chapter 3, Lurvy had remarked that Wilbur was "quite a pig," and Mr. Zuckerman responded, "Yes, he'll make a good pig." Charlotte may have heard and remembered Lurvy's comment; she does seem to allude to the same sense of appreciation for Wilbur that the hired man had in mind. She adds an important detail, however, an exclamation point, thus expressing a fine distinction between her praise of Wilbur and the praise the men had voiced earlier. White would have respected and enjoyed the men's laconic, understated speech, so typical of country people. But Charlotte's message is quite different from theirs. Where Zuckerman sees only the usual ham and

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<sup>35</sup> Several of the essays in *The Ecocriticism Reader*, especially those by Harold Fromm, Joseph Meeker, and William Rueckert, all of which are now more than twenty-five years old, suggest that ecocriticism is more than a passing critical fancy.

bacon, she wants her words to effect a change in the way people see Wilbur; she wants to change behavior, especially Zuckerman's. She wants people to see Wilbur in an entirely new light, but her first message may not have been entirely successful. After viewing "the miracle" Zuckerman says "in an important voice, 'I've thought all along that that pig of ours was an extra good one. He's a solid pig. That pig is as solid as they come.'" He points out to Lurvy that the pig is "solid around the shoulders. . . . He's long, and he's smooth." (80-81). He's been thinking of bacon all along—and still is.

Charlotte's trick, of course, is not a dishonest one. Literally, colloquially, rhetorically, phenomenologically, or agriculturally, (any way you slice it), there's no doubt that Wilbur is "some pig." Edith Zuckerman's intuition that it's the spider that's out of the ordinary is lost in the hubbub and is not part of the consultation with the minister. His advice is to keep the words in the web a secret until he can figure out what they mean--until he can explain the miracle in his sermon. Unfortunately, this cleric seems to subscribe to the idea of a conventional separation between the natural and the super-natural.

We presume the minister has several days to ponder the strange event, and on the following Sunday he "explained the miracle. He said that the words on the spider's web proved that human beings must always be on the watch for the coming of wonders" (84-85), which is a meaningless message, a pretentious prophecy about nothing, and a tautology. If White's editorial advice, "omit needless words," were to be applied to the minister's sermon,

one wonders what would be left. (The sermon itself is, in fact, omitted.)<sup>36</sup> So why did White include even the gist of the minister's sermon? The dull conclusion that human beings should expect wonders, or miracles, at all times, points to what it omits, and it omits any understanding that is not human-centered and human-based. It implies that the wonders of life exist for our benefit and for our education, a completely anthropocentric theology, one that the environmentally-minded White would certainly eschew. The minister's pronouncement drains the wonder right out of wonderful, and White intends for his readers to recognize the irony.

Because if "wonders" are understood to include natural phenomena, "the coming of wonders" is relevant to the meaning inherent in *Charlotte's Web*. In White's philosophy, the point would not be that we should watch for the coming of wonders, but that the world as it exists now is already wonderful. And White would hardly quarrel with the idea that we need to be alert to natural "miracles" and "wonders," but he asks us to trust the story, not the sermon. He asks us to trust our own eyes, our own senses, not some phony pronouncement. Maybe the problem is our human propensity to turn to those to whom we have ascribed authority, to ministers, for example, for answers and explanations—our predilection for trusting the sermon over the story. The alternative White proposes is simply to pay attention, placing ourselves, as Fern does, in an attitude of quiet, receptive listening, thus experiencing our

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<sup>36</sup>*The Elements of Style*, first published in 1959, and always modestly on White's part attributed first to Willam Strunk, Jr., one of his professors at Cornell, advised, "omit needless words."

own lives as connected to the lives of other beings and of other species, and finding ourselves inside the experience of the story going on around us. In Linda Hogan's words, "to know the world is the container for our lives" (46).

Fern of course is one character who understands Charlotte's words to be a trick, she is certainly in on the plot, and at the end of "The Miracle" chapter she is pleased that the trick is working. Although her presence is not mentioned in the following chapter, it does not seem wrong to assume she observes it; she likes the barn best "when she could be alone with her friends the animals" (85).

The profound pleasure that Fern takes in the company of her friends the animals is at the very core of my eco-centric reading of *Charlotte's Web*. But Wilbur's fame has now begun to draw crowds.

The Zuckermans' driveway was full of cars and trucks from morning till night—Fords and Chevies and Buick roadmasters and GMC pickups and Plymouths and Studebakers and Packards and De Sotos with gyromatic transmissions and Oldsmobiles with rocket engines and Jeep station wagons and Pontiacs. (83-4)

With White, the natural world and the cultural world, sunsets and Studebakers, are never far apart, and writing as the broad-ranging poet he remained throughout his life, he arranges for Zuckerman's barn to be the center of the

show.<sup>37</sup> And so the automotive aspect of human culture pays tribute to a spider's web, beginning the process of salvation for a now-thriving runt pig. Does Fern stay away from the barn for a few days? We don't know for sure, but White constructs a sharp contrast between the miraculous, though widely misunderstood events in chapter 11 and the very different business of chapter 12—the pattern of which is, literally, a business meeting.

“The Meeting” offers a window on the real work of a writer, thus presenting a welcome contrast after the hype of “The Miracle” in chapter 11. Chapter 12 takes us behind-the-scenes of the celebrity and the show—the result in the real world of Charlotte's successful rhetoric, her debut as a writer. Now we are privy to see up close the work behind “the miracle,” our attention shifting to a writer's earnest search for the right word. Having worked in advertising as a young man, White patterns the meeting Charlotte convenes to gather more words for the web after an advertising meeting, and her word “slogan” makes that clear.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> White liked cars and was mechanically inclined. On his road trip to Seattle in 1922 with his friend Howard Cushman, White did all the driving and took responsibility for the Model T Ford roadster he had purchased the previous October (Elledge 70). Roger Angell, White's stepson tells of driving with White in his new book, *Let Me Finish*.

<sup>38</sup> The idea of White patterning the animals' meeting after an advertising meeting is not original with me. However, in this meeting, as well as in CW generally, I imagine that Charlotte might have sounded very much like Katharine White, leading a discussion at *The New Yorker*, which is an original notion.

The work of finding words, Charlotte's consideration of their nuances, and her care to spell them correctly (along with the gander's triplicate approach to spelling "terrific") provide amusing lexical hi-jinks, a new kind of humor for White's versatile story. Words are great fun in this chapter, as they are with much of White's writing; at the same time they are more than tricks, and the truth of their meaning is a serious matter. Wilbur demurs that he is not, in fact, terrific. "That doesn't make a particle of difference,' Charlotte replies, 'Not a particle. People believe almost anything they see in print.'" But Wilbur returns to his belief that he is not really terrific, and this time Charlotte assures him that to her, he is indeed terrific, "'and that's what counts. You're my best friend, and I think you're sensational.'" Charlotte intends to make her ensuing writing not only rhetorically successful, spelled correctly, and vitally effective, it will be emotionally honest as well. She is a model nature writer.

In Chapter 12 the animals incorporate some overt psychology into their strategy. The oldest sheep figures out how to enlist Templeton's help and asks the rat to bring back a magazine clipping from the nearby dump. Words from the Land!<sup>39</sup> Soon Templeton offers "crunchy" and "pre-shrunk," and finally, "with new radiant action." When Wilbur's energetic test-drive of the word "radiant" tires him out, he asks Charlotte to tell him a story. Chapter 13 is called "Good Progress," and it is. We wish it could go on forever: Charlotte

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<sup>39</sup> *Words from the Land: Encounters with Natural History Writing*, edited by Stephen Trimble, now in a second edition (1995), is a first-rate anthology in which the work of twenty important nature writers is enhanced with brief personal sketches.

spinning, both webs and stories, Templeton being Templeton, but helping with plots on various levels, Wilbur being famous, acting radiant, and deciding that he does, indeed, feel radiant.

Though both Charlotte and her protégé are tired, the indulgent spider complies with the still immature pig's request for a bedtime story, then another one, and then a song, a lullaby, a very loving one. Wilbur asleep, Fern quietly gets up and goes home. "Good Progress," indeed. In this short chapter Charlotte has woven a second word into the web, this time the narrator treating us to a close-up, detailed account of exactly how she did it. She "got so interested in her work, she began to talk to herself, as though to cheer herself on" (93-94). Through Charlotte, White offers valuable insight about the nature of the writing process.

Taken together, the action in Chapter 13 shows Charlotte's mastery of quite an array of language behaviors: her talking to herself while she focuses on her work, the meaning within the physical coordination of the act of writing, her ability to manage Templeton as he brings additional possibilities for words, her insightful consideration of a word's connotative meaning, the strange stories she tells Wilbur about her "very remarkable cousins," suggesting that good writing and able storytelling go together, and finally, and even more intriguing, the lullaby she sings to Wilbur:

Sleep, sleep, my love, my only,  
Deep, deep, in the dung and the dark;  
Be not afraid and be not lonely!



This is the hour when frogs and thrushes  
 Praise the world from the woods and the rushes.  
 Rest from care, my one and only,  
 Deep in the dung and the dark!

Thus the curtain glides gently down on Act Two.

### **Entr'acte**

Coming from a master of parallel construction, it's no surprise that the second entr'acte echoes the first. In chapter 14, as in chapter 8, Mrs. Arable is again worried that Fern is spending too much time in the barn. Washing dishes together, Fern tells her mother that Charlotte is the best storyteller she ever heard. The resulting debate proves interesting, with Mrs. Arable taking a narrow, literalist, and unimaginative position that "spiders don't tell stories [because] spiders can't talk."

"Charlotte can," replied Fern. "She doesn't talk very loud, but she talks." Fern's statement is relevant to ecocritical conversations about nature as a speaking subject. Scott Russell Sanders's 1991 essay, "Speaking a Word for Nature," and David Abram's luminous book *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* give evidence from their titles alone of ecocritical interest in this topic. Chapter five of this dissertation examines how *Charlotte's Web* (indeed much of White's writing) is germane to these emerging conversations.

Fern does not explain to her mother how Charlotte can talk; she cannot give that explanation, because it would be based not in words but in

phenomenological experience. Charlotte can talk *because* Fern has been listening. The stories speak for themselves. Indeed Fern has already told her mother *her* (Fern's) stories about Charlotte; now she will tell her the stories Charlotte herself tells. Environmentally-aware writers, whether science writers, natural historians, fiction writers, memoirists or poets, invite us to be present, if indirectly, to the lives of animals.

Canadian writers Charles G. D. Roberts and Ernest Thompson Seton, along with William J. Long (discussed in chapter 1) give evidence that we can indeed “get” the stories animals tell. John Elder points out that Roberts and Seton “excelled in conveying a deeply felt sense of kinship with other creatures.” As with *Charlotte's Web*, in their stories “the human no longer resides at the center” (1033). That the spider Fern has been listening to can indeed talk is not only acceptable; it's environmentally instructional. Fern's remark that Charlotte “doesn't talk very loud” says as much about our willingness to listen as it does about nature's propensity to speak. White's book dramatically narrates a speaking world.

After becoming intrigued with Fern's retelling of Charlotte's stories, as though to underscore the power of narrative, and the place of story in our relationship with the natural world, and of course making herself look a little silly at the same time, Mrs. Arable gives the family physician, Dr. Dorian, a surprisingly accurate picture of Fern's activities (or lack of activities) in her uncle's barn. “It doesn't seem normal. She sits on a milk stool in a corner of the barn cellar, near the pigpen, and watches animals, hour after hour. She

just sits and listens.” Mrs. Arable’s implication that there is something to listen to argues against her position that animals can’t talk, thus complicating the novel’s presentation of story and talking and language. When she complains that it doesn’t seem normal for a child to sit and watch animals and listen to them she unwittingly identifies a problem which, fifty years after *Charlotte’s Web*, has only gotten worse, and is now beginning to get our attention.<sup>40</sup>

As readers of this unfolding drama, we have no reason to doubt Fern. When we hear her repeat what she has seen and heard in the barn to her mother, the version she gives of events matches exactly what we have heard and seen for ourselves, via White’s unobtrusive but omniscient narrator. From the book’s first scene we know Fern to be seriously interested in what’s going on around her. She is aware and observant. Her intimate attention to the animals in the barn gives her real knowledge of them; she can “read” animals well. She is not self-conscious or pre-occupied with herself. She’s open-minded and big-hearted, and despite any irony in her father’s comment about being up early to rid the world of injustice, she’s logical, compassionate, and concerned about the rights of others. She is a worthy and reliable narrator, and serves as a witness we can trust implicitly.

Dorian assures Mrs. Arable she has nothing to worry about. When she pointedly asks him if he believes that animals talk, he emphasizes the

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<sup>40</sup> The premise of Richard Louv’s 2005 book, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder* is that in our society a significant divide has increasingly developed between young people and the natural world.

importance of paying attention while contextualizing her question as a matter of good manners:

It is quite possible that an animal has spoken civilly to me and that I didn't catch the remark because I wasn't paying attention. Children pay better attention than grownups. If Fern says that the animals in Zuckerman's barn talk, I'm quite ready to believe her. Perhaps if people talked less, animals would talk more. People are incessant talkers—I can give you my word on that (110).

In shifting the question from whether animals talk to whether we humans are behaving well, and what impact our behavior is having on other species, Dorian widens the conversation. He becomes an affable spokesperson for listening to other creatures, subtly linking etiquette and environmental ethics. He and Fern are on essentially the same page, ecologically speaking, he directly and she indirectly advocating that we pay better attention to our fellow inhabitants of the planet Earth.

As a physician Dorian is interested in the whole person, and he makes one statement that I find especially helpful regarding Fern's relationship with Henry Fussy. Dorian states, "I would say, offhand, that spiders and pigs were fully as interesting as Henry Fussy" (111). This does not mean he finds the spiders and pigs which have so engrossed Fern either more or less valuable or important than the boy whom she becomes interested in toward the end of the story; he means exactly what he says: they are "fully as interesting." Thirty

years later Joseph Meeker begins his Preface to *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology* with this now widely-quoted remark: “If the world is interesting only because of the things humans do, then it is not as interesting as it might be” (xix). White, like his spokesman Dr. Dorian, was determined to find the world as interesting as it might be.

### **Act Three**

As Helene Solheim points out, *Charlotte’s Web* has a seasonal structure. It’s a circular story beginning in the spring, taking us through summer, fall, and winter, and on to the next spring and another season of new life. Spring births begin with Wilbur’s just before the story begins, followed by the hatching of seven goose eggs in early summer, and a new lamb born “almost every morning” the following spring. The story’s pace is perfect, especially in its variation. Like early spring, the first chapter moves fast. Fern must save the runt pig immediately, but the second chapter slows enough to present a lovely picture of young Fern nurturing her infant. Fern, with her verdant name evoking life’s first appearance on the planet, might be life itself fiercely loving life—that is, Wilbur’s life.<sup>41</sup>

Act One, with all the promise of spring, shows Charlotte hatching the plan that will save Wilbur. In Act Two, summertime, we see the versatile spider implement her plan, and we see her plan’s success. Then by Act

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<sup>41</sup> E. O. Wilson’s concept of biophilia is (simply put) our “innate tendency to focus on life and lifelike processes.” I quote from the prologue to his 1984 title, *Biophilia*. See *The Future of Life* for a good overview of Wilson’s integrative environmental vision, including his ideas on biophilia.

Three, scene one, summer is over, and the drama briefly takes the form of a musical, with the crickets singing their poignant song of summer's end (113).

Some readers seem to trip over Fern's part in this last third of the book, objecting to her absence at the moment Wilbur is finally awarded the special prize that cinches his survival. Some read Fern's new interest in Henry Fussy as a betrayal of Wilbur and the animals. Fern is only eight when the story starts; the story sweeps one calendar year, so she can be no older than nine. Personally, I think it is a miscalculation (especially for a 1952 story in a rural setting) to conclude that a nine-year-old girl is not quite on track developmentally (which is Mrs. Arable's thinking) unless the girl is interested in boys. White may simply have this detail wrong. He may have been a bit distracted by his own fondness for county fairs. At any rate, it's life's development in all of its forms that fascinates E. B. White, not human development isolated from the rest. As Helen Solheim points out, the springtime of the book is Fern's moment, the summer belongs to Wilbur, and in the autumn it is Charlotte who holds our attention.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Solheim's sense of CW helps inform my environmental reading of the book. She writes: The spring is Fern's season: the book opens with her story, in that time. The summer, radiantly, belongs to Wilbur, though his growth and development are a motif, if not more, throughout the whole. In the fall and the harvest fair, our attention, though not the crowd's, turns to Charlotte: autumn is, to borrow a metaphor from another part of the kingdom, Charlotte's swan song. In winter Fern has outgrown her interest in the barnyard, and so we lose interest in her. Wilbur is mature now and is taking on the uninteresting manners of parents. Charlotte is gone. And so, as the year comes full circle, we see here, too, that time is not circular at all. It is the time for new heroes, and for a new story." (Quoted in Neumeyer p. 254.)

The only animal whose entire life span is represented in White's magnum opus is the grey spider. Peter Neumeier has reproduced some of White's personal notes from his study of spiders, showing the special attention White gave to the fact that most spiders die in the fall (213). Charlotte's children born in the spring give us a sense of life's continuity, and they give Wilbur comfort and companionship.

Charlotte is also the only animal in the story representing a native North American species. Templeton is probably a Norway rat, an introduced species; the farm animals would have been developed from European stock. So White pays homage to the native ecosystem with his strong focus on Charlotte. Subsequent generations of spiders are integral to Wilbur's and to the reader's ongoing sense of wellbeing. Indeed, as White states when he introduces Charlotte, generations of spiders are integral to the wellbeing of the biosphere.

But why does Charlotte die alone at the fair?

White could have begun the final episodes of his story with the end of summer and the crickets singing, "Summer is dying, dying." If he had chosen to omit the county fair completely, almost all of his entire final chapter—"A Warm Wind"—would still work beautifully. The appearance of Charlotte's children cheers Wilbur the following spring, so the story would still end on the same note of hope. By this point in the story, the end of summer, the Zuckermans have received the message that Wilbur is "Some Pig!" They are the ones who hold his fate in their hands. Additionally, Charlotte has

produced a backup miracle, pronouncing Wilbur to be “Terrific.” Crowds have twice come to admire the pig, and Homer Zuckerman enjoys the attention.

White could have decided that two sets of words in the web were miracle enough, or he could have added a third word in the web without leaving the farm. He could easily have skipped the fair and kept all the animals at home, with Charlotte languishing and dying in her usual spot, up in the rafters above Wilbur. The fact of her death, the survival of her egg sac, and the appearance of the 514 baby spiders in the spring would be unaffected. If the entire point of the story is to save Wilbur through the heroic efforts of a selfless friend, a grey spider who is able to weave words into her web, all could be happily resolved soon after the end of summer in Chapter 15, and in Act Three no trek to the county fair would be required.

Returning to White’s description of the book as “a paeon to life, a hymn to the barn, an acceptance of dung,” one can hear in that comment and throughout the novel itself White’s own love of place, especially his fond regard for his own barn—and put more simply, a love of simply staying put. White’s paeon to life consistently celebrates life in place. In the paragraph just before the last one in the book, we hear Wilbur’s thought that the barn was “the best place to be.” We remember Charlotte telling Wilbur about the Brooklyn Bridge, and people aimlessly “trotting back and forth across the bridge thinking there is something better on the other side. . . with men it’s rush, rush, rush, every minute. I’m glad I’m a sedentary spider” (60). More than anyone, the sedentary Charlotte would have been happy to stay home.



So why does White take us “off to the fair?”

Because the fair, or something like it, is actually part of the “place” of the story all along. A working farm relates to agricultural economics. This brings us back to the scene in the Arable’s kitchen before breakfast, back to the bacon cooking in the pan. Some pigs are killed on the farm, and traditionally much of the meat they produce is consumed on the farm. I live in a part of Nebraska that is still rural, yet increasingly close to the state’s urban centers. I have neighbors who butcher animals and fly to visit family in California or Arizona taking with them their own meat to share within extended family networks. Nice folks from Newfoundland came to visit me recently bringing frozen cod, moose sausage, and homemade blueberry jam as gifts and as food to be immediately enjoyed.

A county fair is another means of distributing agricultural products on a relatively small scale—this time more locally and possibly a bit less intimately, but not nearly the impersonal, “dis-placed” distribution system described so intricately by William Cronon in *Nature’s Metropolis*, his important study of how Chicago became a mega-market for “the Great West.” Though an easterner, White would have been appalled to read, “The tallgrass prairie was one habitat that people sacrificed to human progress; the north woods was another” (151). Cronon’s book details the process by which ecosystems were transformed into sources of commercial products and commodities, making the salient point that this process was largely obscured from the public eye.

The county fair we visit in *Charlotte's Web* also works to market and distribute commodities, but on a local and more intimate level. White does not stress this function of the fair, but neither was he unaware of it. Becoming ham and bacon for some other family's Christmas dinner would likely be the future of Uncle, the other prize-winning pig in the story; or a local restaurant might purchase and use the animal. In describing the county fair, White places the Zuckerman and Arable farms in a wider context, a context without which they might not be able to exist. Indeed, the presence of the county fair in this story in which "a pig shall be saved" suggests an environment-friendly economic approach to agriculture, the concept of sustainability: locally grown food marketed locally.

However vital farm economics may be, for most readers our experience at this fair is emotional. The county fair is a bustling, noisy, colorful stage set for some very dramatic action. Wilbur, Templeton, and Charlotte, as principle animals, each play their part with a heightened intensity. Templeton was never more himself than at the fair, with even more grumbling and complaining than usual, and much more gorging. At the moment when Charlotte tells Wilbur she's languishing, Templeton appears after his night of "feasting and carousing." "I must have eaten the remains of thirty lunches," he tells Wilbur and Charlotte, "Never have I seen such leavings, and everything well-ripened and seasoned with the passage of time and the heat of the day" (148).

The passage of time drives all the action now. That night Charlotte spins a final word in her web, "Humble," but the huge pig in the next stall wins

first prize, and all seems lost. Then, like a *deus ex machina*, a voice over the loudspeaker announces a special award for Zuckerman's famous pig. "Up overhead, in the shadows of the ceiling, Charlotte crouched unseen, her front legs encircling her egg sac. Her heart was not beating as strongly as usual and she felt weary and old, but she was sure at last that she had saved Wilbur's life, and she felt peaceful and contented" (151-53).

Charlotte's triumph in saving Wilbur, her achievement of producing her magnum opus, and the last ebbing of her mortal power have come all in a single breath, her death now very close. Charlotte simply cannot live longer than a spider lives, one year. In a box with the White papers at Cornell there is folder labeled "'Film Version,' dated 1970." White has written in all caps, "Story Teller's Voice." And under that, the words: "This is a story of miracles—the miracle of birth, the miracle of friendship, the miracle of death" (Neumeyer 209).

On her "last day" Charlotte says, "A spider's life can't help being something of a mess, with all this trapping and eating flies. By helping you, perhaps I was trying to lift up my life a trifle. Heaven knows anyone's life can stand a little of that" (164). At the end of the book the animal story and the human story have merged; the friendship theme is a human theme. White underscores the centrality of the friendship between Charlotte and Wilbur with the last two sentences of the book: "It is not often that someone comes along who is a true friend and a good writer. Charlotte was both." Even so, White

does not for a moment deviate from presenting her true nature as a common gray spider.

Once I was reading *Blueberries for Sal* with a three-year-old girl named Evie. We sat close together on a window seat in my family room. As we read we talked about various things, but after a while she fell silent. I kept reading, and Evie remained quiet for a page or two. I don't remember what I finally asked her, but she pointed to one of McCloskey's drawings of the Maine countryside where the two mother-daughter pairs of bears and humans were picking and eating blueberries in parallel fashion, and she answered, "I'm in there." She was so mentally engaged with the story, that she had imaginatively entered the place or the action or the relationships—or something about the story. I believe that this invitational nature of a story, this propensity a good story has to draw us inside of something, is the very essence of story.

Within that sort of engagement with story, Charlotte is both alone and not alone when she dies. Just as Fern escorts us into the sacred place of the lower level of Zuckerman's barn, and shows us how to behave there—how to watch and listen and pay attention, now Charlotte, in removing herself from that barn and finding another place to die, has opened the doors of this story and released us all into the world, into the natural world, the only one we have.

Of course Wilbur is overjoyed to see the little spiders appear the following spring. And a few days go by, but:

Then came a quiet morning when Mr. Zuckerman opened a door on the north side. A warm draft of rising air blew softly through the barn cellar. The air smelled of the damp earth, of the spruce woods, of the sweet springtime. The baby spiders felt the warm updraft.

Like the cousin Charlotte has told Wilbur about, her children are “aeronauts,” “balloonists,” and as they disappear, at an alarming rate, one takes time to explain to poor Wilbur,

“This is our moment for setting forth. We are aeronauts and we are going out into the world to make webs for ourselves.”

“But *where?*” asked Wilbur.

“Wherever the wind takes us. High, low. Near far. East, west. North, south. We take to the breeze, we go as we please.”

As readers of *Charlotte’s Web*, readers of any age, we too are aeronauts. Finishing the story, we sail out into the world in similar fashion to Charlotte’s five hundred and eleven children flying off on silken threads. Joy and Aranea, who with Wilbur’s help, name themselves, and Nellie, who lets Wilbur chose “a nice sensible name” for her, remain in the doorway where their mother lived.

E. B. White’s paean to life, his environmental magnum opus, has renewed our imaginations, a renewal full of promise and possibility. We take to the breeze, we go as we please, and we take with us a sense of the

intimate affection for the natural world eloquently expressed by one of the best American writers of the twentieth century.

### **Postscript**

The baby spider's jaunty speech reminds me of the ending of *Stuart Little*—of Stuart's similar taste for adventuring, a setting forth to see the world, a young-minded attitude toward life based intuitively on something we humans do well to remember—that a lovely world is indeed waiting, expecting us.

When we enter White's third story for children, *The Trumpet of the Swan*, we will land in one of those lovely places.

## Chapter 4

### **The Trumpet of the Swan: “Oh, Ever in the Greening Spring”**

Life is always a rich and steady time  
when you are waiting for something to happen or to hatch.

#### **A Quest Continued**

E. B. White called *Stuart Little* a “story of a quest—the quest for beauty” (*Letters* 645). The beauty Stuart seeks is embodied in the wild bird Margalo, whom he loves. At the fair, the dying Charlotte promises Wilbur he will find beauty when he returns to his familiar barn: “You will live to enjoy the beauty of the frozen world,” she tells him. Though drawing on different aesthetics, both quest and promise call for ecologically “sensible” inhabitation of the earth.

Stuart’s quest continues a quarter century later in White’s last novel, *The Trumpet of the Swan*, published in 1970, the year of the first Earth Day. So we, too, come back imaginatively to that day in Boston, late April, 1970, described at the beginning of this dissertation, even as Louis the Swan will come to the swan boats in the Public Garden; our own stories mingling with the stories we read, or write, of environmentally imaginative ways to re-inhabit, re-story, and restore “this lovely earth.” The latter book, *The Trumpet of the Swan*, continues and completes the environmental odyssey left open when Stuart “peered ahead into the great land that stretched before him” and drove on, feeling “he was headed in the right direction.”

With Stuart, we followed the compelling adventures of a small-sized character that “looked very much like a mouse,” and Stuart himself seemed to

be the center of the story; but following him onto a garbage barge we experienced Manhattan geographically, as an island. When he begins his journey north, we mentally, though temporarily, inhabit Amesville, “the loveliest of towns.” Along the way, the reader incrementally experiences Stuart’s story as a story about place, one place followed by another. The final place in the story is the open road, with Stuart headed north, and our perception of the story in motion as well.

But *Stuart Little* is not, finally, about the open road, or a direction, or even a journey toward something unknown; it’s about place itself—first particular places, then the idea of place, and finally the promise of place. The lineman’s lyrical description of all that he has seen in the north: “I have come upon some wonderful places, . . . swamps where cedars grow and turtles wait on logs, . . . spruce woods on winter nights where the snow lay deep and soft, . . . fresh lakes in the north, undisturbed except by fish and hawk . . . . I know all these places well” is, in fact, the lineman’s account of what *he* has seen. In the lineman’s words Stuart hears a promise of what he himself might find, and the book ends with this promise ringing in the reader’s environmental imagination.

The *Trumpet of the Swan* offers us the imaginative fulfillment of that promise. A particular place has just been found—moments before the story begins. Actual, identifiable places abound in this geographically based narrative. As we read White, our experience of place, of real places, widens and expands. Stuart’s sense that he was “headed in the right direction” finds



in *The Trumpet of the Swan*, location in the here and now. For the reader habituated to keeping the natural world in mind, beginning White's third novel soon after reading his first is to continue the journey of the earlier book. One picks up where the other leaves off. "Fresh lakes in the north, undisturbed except by fish and hawk" (*Stuart Little* 131) now become a real place, beginning with a particular, though unnamed, pond in the woods of southern Alberta.

In addition to the concept of place, a second thread connects White's three novels: a strong emphasis on the advent and nurturing of new life. *Stuart Little*, *Charlotte's Web*, and *The Trumpet of the Swan* all begin with vital events (vital biologically as well as poetically) happening off-stage. The arrival of Stuart Little has just occurred when the book bearing his name begins; a litter of pigs including Wilbur is born the night before the story starts in *Charlotte's Web*; and *The Trumpet of the Swan* opens with Sam Beaver walking back to camp after seeing the nest of a pair of trumpeter swans, the hen sitting on her eggs, the male gliding slowly back and forth, guarding her (*The Trumpet of the Swan* 2).

It is not simply coincidental that "arrival" or birth or nesting precipitate the action in all three of E. B. White's novels for children. These three novels are all life-centered, and although the life they portray accommodates, includes, and enriches human life, the center of attention in each case is non-human life. White invites readers of these three books to witness something sacred about life—to learn about life from life forms other than our own and to

celebrate life on a biodiverse earth. All three bio-centric narratives offer readers fresh ways to refurbish our environmental imaginations

And although the center of attention is non-human life, White's three books for children are all braided narratives of animal stories and human stories interwoven. Each book has a unique structure for its human/animal components. In *The Trumpet of the Swan*, the richness of the plot stems directly and fully from the parallelism of the animal and human stories. In fact, they are so closely twined together in such literally incredible ways, that to experience the book as successful fiction, we need to read it as environmental fiction. Its success as a story depends on our recognition of the braided human/non-human animal narrative. White naturally returns to stories in which he can demonstrate his sense that life on earth is indeed dependent on more than one species, stories taking place in all kinds of places where human lives and the lives of animals are inextricably woven together.

Like the lifesaving stories Fern hears in Zuckerman's barn, this third story from E. B. White also presents sacred dimensions of life. Readers will remember how (initially assisted by Templeton) Wilbur carefully transports Charlotte's egg sac home from the county fair to the barn, and he watches over it devotedly all winter. Having "scooped out a special place in the manure for the sac," he spends the coldest nights keeping it warm with his breath:

For Wilbur, nothing in life was so important as this small round object—nothing else mattered. Patiently he awaited the end of winter and the coming of the little spiders. Life is always a rich

and steady time when you are waiting for something to happen or to hatch. (176)

**“Welcome to the Pond and the Swamp Adjacent”**

Waiting for something to happen or to hatch is precisely where we, along with Sam Beaver, find ourselves at the beginning of *The Trumpet of the Swan*. Sam has just seen the nest of a rare trumpeter swan with three eggs in it, and adds a fourth when he draws a picture of the bird on her nest that night. “Good noticers”<sup>43</sup> may observe how different the sketch of the nesting swan on page 5 is from the Edward Frascino illustrations throughout the book. It’s a sketch taken from White’s boyhood journal, as are some of the questions Sam asks himself in his journal before going to bed (Elledge 32).

The rich and steady time waiting for something to happen or to hatch is well underway for Sam Beaver. Walking through the swamp back to camp, the boy’s thoughts are of what he has seen, what it means to have seen what he’s seen, and how he will avoid telling his father. Thus White begins by dropping Sam into a spiritual *medias res*, the midst of things, which, environmentally speaking, are ongoing and problematic. He knows his father

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<sup>43</sup> In *The Voyages of Doctor Dolittle*, Tommy Stubbins asks Polynesia the parrot if he would be able to learn the language of the animals, to help the Doctor. Polynesia asks if he is a good noticer. “Noticing the small things about birds and animals: the way they walk and move their heads and flip their wings, the way they sniff the air and twitch their whiskers and wiggle their tails” helps more than lessons learned at school. “You have to notice all those little things if you want to learn animal language,” she tells Tommy. “For, you see, lots of the animals hardly talk at all with their tongues; they use their breath or their tails or their feet instead . . . . Being a good noticer is terribly important in learning animal language” (41-43).

will question him about what he has seen, and he knows he doesn't want to tell him.

“Sam always felt happy when he was in a wild place among wild creatures. Sitting on his log, watching the swans, he had the same good feeling some people get when they are sitting in church” (17-8). White does not use overtly religious language; that's not in his nature as a writer. Instead he delicately suggests that there is indeed something sacred about this moment; Thoreau also preferred his church bells at a distance. The narrative pattern of all three (births, “arrival,” and laying-of-eggs) occurring off-stage contributes to our sense that mysterious happenings, events of a sacred nature, have just taken place.

Mr. Beaver (a name reminiscent of a character out of Thornton W. Burgess' *Old Mother West Wind* series) has a fishing camp on a lake somewhere in southern Alberta, and he and his son Sam come up frequently to fish. In contrast, Sam's mother is hardly present in the story at all. “Mrs. Beaver didn't care for the woods, so she seldom went along” (3), an arrangement leaving the north woods in this particular story devoid of human female presence. Beaver owns a ranch in Montana, but somehow seems able to get away whenever he chooses.<sup>44</sup> Apparently, land ownership thus confers

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<sup>44</sup> In the summer of 1922 White and Howard Cushman spent several days on a ranch near Hardin, Montana, then drove through Yellowstone, and headed north to the Dot S Dot ranch near Melville, Montana, which Elledge reports was “much like the ranch of Sam Beaver's father.” They stayed there for ten days. White had broken his arm earlier on the trip (still driving the Model T, since Cushman didn't know how). Elledge quotes Nan Hart, one of the

recreational privilege without appearing to burden Beaver with unrelenting work, even in the busy spring and summer months, a privilege especially interesting in a book that takes as its primary human theme the young Sam Beaver's quest for his life's work. White too, as a boy, thought a great deal about what work he should do in the world. Yet strangely, Sam apparently gives no thought to becoming a rancher.

Mr. Beaver is an attentive father; he and Sam seem to have a good relationship, and yet when Mr. Beaver questions Sam about what he has seen, the boy is reluctant to say that he has found the nest of a pair of trumpeter swans. The father asks more than once if Sam has "seen anything" on his walk to the pond. White does not provide us with an explanation of the boy's reluctance to tell his father about the nest. "He felt relieved that he had not told his father about seeing the swans, but he felt queer about it, too. Sam was not a sly boy, but he was odd in one respect: he liked to keep things to himself" (3). The discovery of the endangered birds' nest, as well as the boy's strong sense that he should keep that information to himself, has for me a dramatic weight, a feeling of significance, as one begins reading this book. The fact that Sam does indeed not tell his father about the nest adds to the reader's own sense of vicariously encountering the bird in its remote habitat.

For E. B. White, to approach a nest with eggs is to come close to the miracle of life itself. Like Zuckerman's barn (or White's near North Brooklin,

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owners of the Dot S Dot, writing in a letter that even "with the smashed up arm and an infernal go of hay fever [White] could charm us all, and amuse the whole ranch with his poems" (78).

Maine), but on a larger scale, a nest is a sacred place where life itself begins. As the barn houses the nesting geese on the farm, the wilderness houses the nesting trumpeter swans. White presents his readers with both natural and cultural habitat beneficial for new life. From the first few pages of *The Trumpet of the Swan* one senses that to approach the actual lives of trumpeter swans (or even the lives of pigs or spiders) requires something from us as readers, as observers, as co-inhabitants of the earth. White wants us to realize (though not necessarily in any religious sense) that we are on sacred ground.

*The Trumpet of the Swan* has a doubled beginning. The first is narrated from Sam's point of view, but in chapter 2, the second beginning addresses readers directly and gives us a flashback experience of the same "lonely little pond" earlier that spring. This time we are told that the pond "was seldom visited by any human being" (7). As readers we see the pond on the early spring day when the pair of swans arrives and the female selects a site and builds a nest. White's description of the scene includes existing inhabitants of the area:

There was a good, new smell in the air, a smell of earth waking after its long sleep. The frog, buried in the mud at the bottom of the pond, knew that spring was here. The chickadee knew and was delighted (almost everything delights a chickadee). The vixen, dozing in her den, knew she would soon have kits. Every creature knew that a better, easier time was at hand—warmer days, pleasanter nights. (7-8)

Then White includes his human readers by addressing us directly: “if you had been sitting by the pond on that first warm day of spring . . . “ and proceeds to describe the arrival of the great white birds, “their legs stretched out straight behind, their long white necks stretched out ahead, . . . a thrilling noise in the sky, the trumpeting of swans” (8). White is escorting us into a wilderness scene, a time and a place without a human presence; we are there but we are in a sense invisible, almost as though we had silently arrived in the wilderness in Stuart Little’s invisible car.

As Carolyn Merchant observes, “The concept of wilderness is one of the most complex ideas in environmental and human history” (*Columbia* 34). Merchant describes how ideas of wilderness have undergone continual revision. With American forests progressively disappearing through the nineteenth century, appreciation for wilderness grew (34-37). This growing appreciation, which sometimes approached reverence, would have influenced White, born just as the century ended.

In her thumbnail sketch of the continent’s early environmental history, Merchant points out connections between ideas of wilderness and racism against Indians. “Indians had lived on the North American continent for at least 10,000 years. They had managed the land, made their presence known, and transformed it through hunting, gathering, and fire” (35-36), but dominant cultural mainstream ideas of wilderness (reflecting European settlers and their descendents) increasingly involved a removal of human presence. When the Wilderness Act was passed in 1964, language overtly stated that “in a

wilderness the earth and its life are untrammelled by 'man,' and that 'man' himself 'is a visitor who does not remain.' Wilderness was thus defined as devoid of human presence" (*Columbia* 36). So in another kind of doubling, the native presence was doubly excluded from the 1960's sense of wilderness, excluded as human presence, and also excluded out of deeply rooted racial bias.

White is clearly working from this contemporary concept of wilderness in the beginning of *The Trumpet of the Swan*, and he makes an awkward effort to "restore" a native presence to the wilderness. Very early in the story we learn that the human protagonist's last name is Beaver. "He was strong for his age and had black hair and dark eyes like an Indian. Sam walked like an Indian, too, putting one foot straight in front of the other and making very little noise" (1). This presents readers immediately with some serious problems to consider. Is White conflating Indians and animals? Is he associating Indians with animals *and* with nature? How loudly should the reader's internal alarm bells be ringing at this point? Or is White, albeit very awkwardly, trying to pay homage to First Nations?

Later in the story White sends both Sam Beaver and Louis the Swan to a summer camp modeled on Camp Otter in Dorset, Ontario. White had been a counselor there during his years at Cornell, and later as part owner of the camp, worked with an employee named Sam Beaver, who was a Chippewa Indian (*Letters* 88). I assume in using the man's name, White intended to show respect. I doubt he would have known that southern Alberta is Blackfoot



country, and that the beaver and the beaver bundle are crucial to the Blackfoot people; it is probably by coincidence that he chose a name significant to the place of his story. It's regrettable that White didn't do better in acknowledging the native people who over hundreds of years did nothing to disturb the nesting grounds of trumpeter swans, but it's up to us who read the story now to find wider perspectives.

By 1970 Children's literature critics were addressing issues of multiculturalism and racial bias,<sup>45</sup> but most of their early attention was directed toward African-American representation and issues. The need to examine Native themes and issues was serious, but the work had hardly begun when *The Trumpet of the Swan* appeared in 1970. Today White's book does not even appear on the periphery of critical consideration of contemporary fiction for young adults with Native American themes.

Paulette F. Molin appraises contemporary authors such as Will Hobbs and Ben Mikaelson, both non-native writers who extensively use Indian themes without adequately representing Native culture or presenting history and contemporary events accurately (7-10), an example of criticism sorely needed in this field. But on a multi-cultural basis, how shall we evaluate White's book, which could hardly be called "Indian themed?" For White to

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<sup>45</sup> Nancy Larrick's article, "The All-White World of Children's Books," (*Saturday Review*, Sept. 11, 1965) is a good milestone marking the beginning of critical attention to racial bias in children's books. See Rudman for a basic look at heritage issues in children's literature. Sources on multicultural approaches are now widely available. Molin's *American Indian Themes in Young Adult Literature* (Scarecrow, 2005) is especially helpful.

refer to Native presence so slightly, so generally, and so stereotypically is disturbing; it's an acceptance of non-presence, an erasure of thousands of years of human culture.

Because *The Trumpet of the Swan* begins with a doubled attempt to show the reader an "untrammelled wilderness," White suggests that even in a children's book from 1970, wilderness is a complicated idea meriting more than one perspective; and the story quickly moves on to a wide-ranging itinerary of possibilities for human-culture/natural world configurations. Does Sam Beaver's presence, or even the reader's presence, alter the "wild" nature of things in the Canadian woods? Humans have indeed left a footprint in the north woods; later the male swan will warn his cygnets: "Beware of lead pellets that lie on the bottom of all ponds, left there by the guns of hunters. Don't eat them—they'll poison you!"

That the cob's warning to his offspring makes so much sense to us, and seems likely to have validity, tells us that this "lonely pond" does not in fact represent "untrammelled wilderness." "Man" may be "a visitor who does not remain," but he has left behind objects toxic to the wildlife. White intends for us to hear that. By making a mute trumpeter swan his protagonist, but giving the vociferous father swan an excess of language, White suggests we humans, like the old cob, should be vocally protective of wilderness and wild creatures. The presence of lead pellets in the water is an ethical issue that would have deeply concerned White.

In chapter 2, I called on Gary Snyder's image of "a gray fox trotting off through the forest, ducking behind bushes, going in and out of sight" (9) to evoke the elusiveness of human concepts regarding the natural world, as well as the world's resistance to being confined by words such as *nature*, *wild*, and *wilderness*. Elusive, migratory, and threatened, the wild bird Margalo silently speaks of wildness in *Stuart Little*.

As a mutable image of the wild's resistance to language, Snyder's gray fox belongs in *The Trumpet of the Swan* as well, here suggestive of the need for ethical human behavior regarding wilderness. Snyder's title, "The Etiquette of Freedom," speaks volumes, the essay calling for both personal and cultural environmental ethics. I think White would feel at home with Snyder's idea, "an ethical life is one that is mindful, mannerly, and has style" (21). Like Snyder, White believes "nature is not a place to visit, it is home—" (7). With a story about a mute swan, White adds a new voice to the ongoing conversation about the human relationship with wilderness. White's environmental concerns habitually return to the ways in which humans and non-human animals inhabit the earth.

### **"A Queer Adventure . . . Yet It Is a Noble Quest"**

To quote the old cob, the plot White concocts is "a queer adventure," and "yet it is a noble quest" (76). It is indeed a strange plot, eventually saddling a trumpeter swan with a slate and a piece of chalk, a trumpet, a lifesaving medal, and a pouch containing almost five thousand dollars, none of which impedes Louis the Swan from flying across much of North America. To

readers distracted by the cumbersome nature of so many accoutrements hanging around the neck of a wild bird, I would say this imperfect plot of *The Trumpet of the Swan* suggests how complex it is to integrate human culture and wild nature. Reading the book ecocritically offers a rich opportunity to consider story as narrative art braiding culture and nature together, human story and animal story bound together.

When Sam Beaver returns to the “lonely little pond” for the third time, five cygnets have hatched. Now the human/avian perspectives are more closely intermingled, and when the cob, makes a speech welcoming his five progeny to the world, Sam is sitting on the same log he found on his first visit, but unlike the scenes in Zuckerman’s barn, we have no indication that he is privy to the old cob’s grandiloquence. We, as readers, however, get to hear every word of the remarkable address:

“Welcome to the pond and the swamp adjacent!” he said.

“Welcome to the world that contains this lonely pond, this splendid marsh, unspoiled and wild! Welcome to sunlight and shadow, wind and weather; welcome to water! The water is a swan’s particular element, as you will soon discover. Swimming is no problem for a swan. Welcome to danger, which you must guard against—the vile fox with his stealthy tread and sharp teeth, the offensive otter who swims up under you and tries to grab you by the leg, the stinking skunk who hunts by night and blends with the shadows, the coyote who hunts and howls and is

bigger than a fox. Beware of lead pellets that lie on the bottom of all ponds, left there by the guns of hunters. Don't eat them—they'll poison you! Be vigilant, be strong, be brave, be graceful, and *a/ways* follow me! I will go first, then you will come along in single file, and your devoted mother will bring up the rear. Enter the water quietly and confidently!" (30-31)

Like the female swan, usually (but not by White) called a "pen," readers may be glad when the oration is over.

The cob's grand Edwardian rhetoric reminds me of a similar tone in the boisterously optimistic letter Samuel White wrote to his son Elwyn on his twelfth birthday. That letter begins "All hail! with joy and gladness we salute you on your natal day" (Elledge 4). White's biographer finds the strength of *The Trumpet of the Swan* in its treatment of the book's two father-son relationships, (Sam and his father; Louis and the cob), interpreting both father-son pairs as representing human issues (348). Indeed, this book pairs up well with White's most famous essay, "Once More to the Lake," in the attention paid to father-son relationships. However, if we read with environmental expectations in mind, *The Trumpet of the Swan* is much more than a doubled human-centered story; White weaves an unusual narrative by fusing human and avian issues into one wide-flying story.

The cob's speech welcoming his offspring to the world effectively welcomes readers to a North American airborne odyssey, the first stop being Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge, established in 1935 to protect

trumpeter swans. Trumpeters had been widespread over much of North America, but by 1900 they were nearly extinct. The Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, which includes Red Rock Lakes, harbored only sixty-nine trumpeter swans in 1932 (U. S. Fish & Wildlife Service).

At the end of summer the swan family is about to leave its wilderness pond, and the cob makes a series of verbose speeches to his family, one of which describes their destination in Montana:

And there, in a lovely valley surrounded by high mountains, are the Red Rock Lakes, which nature has designed especially for swans. In these lakes you will enjoy warm water, arising from hidden springs. Here ice never forms, no matter how cold the nights. In the Red Rock Lakes, you will find other Trumpeter Swans, as well as the lesser waterfowl—the geese and the ducks. There are few enemies. No gunners. Plenty of muskrat houses. Free grain. Games every day. What more can a swan ask, in the long, long cold of winter? (45-46)

White, who loved birds of all kinds throughout his life, would have been intensely interested in the swans as living creatures, and as an endangered species. With wingspans up to eight feet, trumpeters are the largest of all North American waterfowl. White describes their call as “a stirring sound high above you in the air—a sound like the sound of trumpets” (8). The “single clear note” of trumpeter swans is frequently compared to a note from a French horn (U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service). By all accounts, the trumpeter swan is

an impressive bird. Both egotistical and sympathetic, the old cob's imposing personality gives a nod toward the real elegance of the species.

Neither of White's earlier books for children featured an animal whose survival as a species was threatened. Those stories involved common creatures, both domestic and wild: mice, cats, pigs, geese, sheep, a spider, a rat, and an unidentified bird, although both as a songbird, and as an individual, Margalo's future was always precarious. His first two books show animals intricately involved in and experiencing the world, but in this third book White widens the lens of his animal portraiture. By focusing on a wild creature, and an endangered one, he now emphasizes the importance of native habitat.

No matter what type of animal White presents, the reader of these three books experiences empathy for the actual life of the creature(s) in White's stories. When White has the parent swans learn that one of their five cygnets is mute, the problem is not a metaphor for a human problem; rather, the fundamental issue is: how will the young swan attract a mate if he cannot "trumpet?" It's a biological issue involving mating, nesting, and reproduction—biologically relevant themes for a story about an endangered bird. The fact that the plot is entertainingly spun out of human activities and concerns does not obscure the basically biological heart of the story.

Driven by the plight of the mute cygnet Louis, the plot pauses only briefly at Red Rock Lakes. "If I'm defective in one respect,' he said to himself, 'I should try and develop myself along other lines.'" He decides to learn to read and write, planning to carry a slate and chalk in order to communicate.

To readers of the other two novels, the swan's solution to his problem might sound familiar. White creates animal characters that are literate as well as intelligent in multiple ways. In *Stuart Little*, the pigeon who chances to overhear Snowbell the cat plotting against Margalo "quickly" finds paper and pencil and writes a note of warning. One pictures White enjoying the double entendre (stool pigeon as informer). In *Charlotte's Web*, Charlotte is not the only literate animal; Templeton and the barnyard animals are able to read, but only Charlotte can write. But *The Trumpet of the Swan*, true to its doubled nature, features two writers—Louis and Sam Beaver. Sam writes in his diary every night, making notes on what he has observed during the day, asking himself a question, and sometimes drawing a sketch.

Louis handily locates the Beaver ranch in Montana's Sweet Grass country. Sam, who is a "good noticer," realizes that the swan's problem is serious, and takes him to school. He convinces his teacher that Louis needs to learn to read and write because "all birds and animals talk to one another—they have to, in order to get along. Mothers have to talk to their young. Males have to talk to females, particularly in the spring of the year when they are in love" (58). The teacher perks up at this, and Sam blushes, but the inability of Louis to trumpet, or as White puts it, to call "ko-hoh, ko-hoh," would interfere with attracting a mate, so the disability is not only important to Louis on an individual level, but also relates to the survival of the species.



A doubled set of schoolroom scenes follows, with Louis in first grade and Sam in fifth. Louis shows he can write the word “catastrophe” on his first day at school, thinking to himself, “My life is a catastrophe. It’s a catastrophe to be without a voice” (62). In the fifth grade Miss Snug asks if a baby takes eight ounces of milk in one feeding, how much would he drink in two? A girl named Linda Staples answers “about fifteen,” accounting for some of the milk being spilled and dribbled away, which has the class “howling so loudly the arithmetic lesson had to be abandoned.” This is a scene White originally wrote for *Fern Arable*, but decided not to include in the earlier novel (Neumeyer 8). The nurturing of young creatures is an ongoing interest for White; this vignette bridges the two books written decades apart.

As though taking a page from David Abram’s *The Spell of the Sensuous*, alphabetic literacy is not the answer. Back at Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge after he’s learned how to read and write, Louis can communicate only with the man who brings in grain. Serena, “the swan of his desiring,” ignores the message of love Louis prints on his chalkboard, “although she rather liked the looks of a young cob who had something hanging around his neck, she couldn’t really get interested in a bird that was unable to say anything” (72-73).

Now comes the “queer adventure,” as the old cob, Louis’s father, sets off to Billings to find a trumpet—indeed, “a noble quest,” and one introducing a new dimension to the plot. The cob breaks the large front window of a music store and steals a trumpet. Louis appreciates his father’s effort, and learns to

replicate the Trumpeter's "Ko!" with the new instrument, but he's deeply troubled that the horn has not been paid for. He resolves to pay back the money. Again, Sam Beaver helps him out, "You've got a money problem. But that's not unusual. Almost everybody has a money problem. What you need is a job" (88).

And after that pronouncement, a little more than half of the book concerns itself with a trumpeter swan getting jobs and earning money—which seems a very far cry from wilderness, endangered species, avian habitat needs, and trumpeter swan reproduction issues—the ecological setting of the story's initial chapters. White spun those first chapters out of his memories of his trip west with Howard Cushman in 1922-23, forty-five years before he wrote *The Trumpet of the Swan*. "Summer Memories" indeed! For the second half of the book, White is in more familiar territory.

#### **"The Great Land that Stretched Before Him,"**

Louis again crosses the Canadian/U. S. border, this time as an undocumented worker. He earns one hundred dollars as a musician, playing reveille, taps, and calling the campers to meals. As Lucien Agosta points out, this chapter, titled "A Rescue," actually features two rescues (140). The skunk that wanders into camp with a tin can stuck on his head, "blundering around, blindly bumping into things," is treated sympathetically and rescued from its plight by Sam Beaver. Molting and unable to fly, Louis swimmingly rescues Applegate Skinner, who has taken a canoe out alone and almost drowns; so when the swan leaves Camp Kookooskoos in western Ontario he has a

waterproof bag for his money, a lifesaving medal, a trumpet, slate, and chalk pencil all hung around his neck.<sup>46</sup>

When camp is ending Sam advises Louis to go to Boston for a job with the swan boats in the Public Garden. He does. Playing his trumpet for the swan boat customers, Louis is a big success. The first night he's in town the boatman convinces the desk clerk of the swan's celebrity status, so Louis spends a night at the Ritz Carlton across the street from the Public Gardens. Katharine White was from Boston, and the Whites frequented the landmark hotel from time to time. Louis orders twelve watercress sandwiches from room service, figures out he needs to tip the waiter, scoops out the watercress and makes a nice supper of it, piling the bread neatly in two piles, and sleeps in the bathtub. Although he pines for Serena, Louis discovers that it gives one "a cozy feeling" to be alone in a hotel room. In White's hands, the Ritz Carlton seems to be suitable habitat for a trumpeter swan.

By the time we follow Louis to Philadelphia for his next job, a nightclub gig arranged by Abe ("Lucky") Lucas, some readers might wish White's editors had included a map. Instead we get a detailed itinerary of the route Louis takes at an altitude of a thousand feet. He flies over White's birthplace, Mount Vernon, New York, veers to the right at the Empire State Building, crosses the Hudson and follows the railroad tracks south. "Louis had no trouble finding

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<sup>46</sup> The name of the camp is the word for the great horned owl in the Milicete, or Malicete, Indian language, as glossed by William J. Long in *A Little Brother to the Bear*.

Philadelphia,” White comments, “Almost anybody can find Philadelphia who tries” (142).

When Louis arrives at the Philadelphia Zoo three captive trumpeter swans are already residents of Bird Lake. These three swans never do anything except swim along in the background of the story. They are not involved in the action and they are not distinguished in any way from each other, yet White tells us their names half-a-dozen times: Curiosity, Felicity, and Apathy. They are always a silent trio, and although they are trumpeters, we never hear a peep out of any of the three. In one sense the three swans do serve as background; they are useful, perhaps necessary, as a visual (though silent) statement that captive birds do exist in zoos, that according to procedures commonly done at zoos when this book was being written in the late sixties, swans like Louis and Serena may indeed have been “pinioned,” (the removal of a flight feather, which renders the bird incapable of flight).

Are the names symbolic? “Apathy” seems to suit a captive bird, but what about the other two? Are they meant to suggest a spectrum of the possibilities from freedom to captivity? Perhaps White is naming the sequence of sensations a captive bird would experience. He must have liked the name “Apathy” for a goose; he published “The Geese” in *The New Yorker* July 24, 1971, featuring a pair of his own geese named “Apathy” and “Liz” (Hall 177, *Essays* 62-68).

Or perhaps “Curiosity, Felicity, and Apathy,” suggests a progression of states which taken together form one possible outcome of the story of a

human life, if the human is unfortunate in his choice of a vocation. The question of Sam's future vocation is raised very early in the book: "the problem of what to be when he grew up. Every boy has that problem" (4). Sam has written about it in his notebook the day he first sees the cygnets, and Louis, unable to "beep" like his siblings, unties Sam's shoelace (32). When Sam comes to the Philadelphia Zoo and meets the "Head Man" in charge of birds, Sam decides he has found his life's work; he'll be a zookeeper.

But the Head Man seems to have lost his own empathy for wild birds. He still remembers his youthful dreams of "little lakes deep in the woods," but now seems more businessman than biologist. Can Felicity turn to Apathy? Even in choosing these three graceful names for swans who simply swim in the background of his story, White suggests that human and avian stories are laced together.

In contrast with the Head Man at the zoo, Sam is young and idealistic. Chapter 19 begins, "In almost everyone's life there is one event that changes the whole course of his existence. The day Sam Beaver visited the Philadelphia Zoo was the turning point in his life" (174). White has prepared his character well for this epiphany. In chapter three we saw Sam, "a visitor" to the remote pond, save the life of the pen by tossing a stick that drove off a red fox. At home on the ranch, the game warden trusted Sam enough to let him keep a trumpeter swan, though it was not legal to do so (57). At camp, only Sam was clever enough to get the tin can off the head of the skunk. And when the "Head Man" is surprised that Sam would come "all the way to

Philadelphia to help a bird,” Sam replies, “I would go anywhere to help a bird.”

Again, White depicts Sam as resembling, generically, a Native American. He has entered the man’s office walking “tall and straight, as though he were on a forest trail. The Head Man liked Sam’s appearance and noticed that he looked a little like an Indian” (175). This is clearly meant as a factor in Sam’s favor—to look “a little like an Indian.” But no matter how fond White may have been of the Native man named Sam Beaver, whom he knew at Camp Otter in the 1920’s, White’s attempts to link Sam with Indians through the way he looks and the way he walks is problematic.

The protagonist in *The Trumpet of the Swan* is a large bird, a member of an endangered species, but in this story Louis requires human assistance a number of times. The mix of human story/animal story is really quite strange. Louis acts so human—going to school to learn to read and write, needing to work to get money to pay off a debt, and taking unusual measures to try to win the love of a mate. So much of the book being devoted to Louis earning money fits in with “Economy” being the first chapter in *Walden*—showing how our human relationship with the natural world is intricately related with the work we do in the world. In contrast, Sam and even his father seem to live in a carefree world, although White assigns to Sam his own early worries about finding a vocation. In fact, the long trip that White made across North America as a young man coincided and even overlapped with his efforts to find himself as a writer. He sold writing along the way to help finance the trip.

White's 1922 trip was a source of inspiration for the book he wrote almost half a century later. To write of the West and the wilderness after a lifetime lived on the east coast must have been an imaginative return for him to that very youthful adventure. In one sense, *Trumpet* is western lit in the same way that *The Virginian* is—an easterner's account of western adventure and romance. And if it is a love story, as White says it is, it's an avian one, so that's part of the peculiarity. But he does succeed in braiding the stories together, neither human nor animal aspects overpowering the other.

White has a gift for intertwining human stories and animal stories without losing his balance. He treats both human and animal perspectives with concern, and both kinds of perspectives emerge from his writing to engage the thoughts and the sympathies of his readers. *The Trumpet of the Swan* exemplifies this gift. Like his other two novels, the third one invites readers to experience and to reflect on their own participation in life's diversity; they celebrate our human inclusion in life's dance.

Like *Charlotte's Web*, *The Trumpet of the Swan* is a circular story, but the pattern is not so strongly seasonal. This time the pattern is the migration, mating, nesting, breeding, and raising of the young trumpeter swans, with no attempt to complete the life cycle by including any swan's death. Additionally, and more dramatically, the little pond that Sam has found just before the narrative begins, the pond where Louis is hatched, is the same pond Louis, Serena, Sam and the reader all return to several springtimes later. In true comedic fashion, the lovers are happily mated at the end of the show. Louis

and Serena return to the lonely pond in the north each spring. He even shows her the log Sam Beaver sat on when he, Louis, was a new cygnet who couldn't make a sound, and pulled the boy's shoelace as a greeting.

In the final chapter, "The Greening Spring," Sam is twenty and presumably on track to become a professional zookeeper. Sam and his father, back at their fishing place in Canada, hear Louis play taps on his trumpet. But Sam never did answer his father's questions whether he had "seen anything" that first day he found the nest of the trumpeter swan. Sam kept the existence and the location of that nesting site a sacred secret, and of course he continues to keep the secret. "That's the way he liked it. And that's the way the swans liked it" (209).

The place-based circularity of this narrative, the pattern by which story brings us back to the geographical place in which it began, affirms the reader's sense that wild places can have permanence, and that they matter. The same pond and "the swamp adjacent" are still there, underscoring a sense of continuity. We have to be able to imagine something if we're going to be able to care for it. This story speaks to the environmental imagination in a way that encourages the reader to help preserve and protect wild places and their inhabitants.

If we read *Stuart Little*, *Charlotte's Web*, and *The Trumpet of the Swan* as an environmental trilogy, we follow a narrative progression. *Stuart* emphasizes place: how adventure interacts with place, and the promise of place. *Charlotte* exemplifies the importance and the sacred nature of the lives



of other creatures; the book teaches us to watch and observe, to listen and pay attention to other species. *Trumpet* combines these vital concerns and weaves them into one story, albeit an awkward one. And yet it does a superb job of presenting White's vision of the world as a place to be inhabited, the place in which it is possible to live, the Earth as *oikos*, dwelling, home. Mary Ann Hoberman closes her 1979 picture book, *A House is a House for Me*, with a line that expresses the same point: "Each creature that's known has a house of its own / And the earth is a house for us all."

In this third book we see place as an array of habitats: wilderness as necessary for the breeding grounds of an endangered species—a wilderness constructed here as infrequently and minimally visited by humans, yet contaminated by their lead pellets; protected areas set aside and managed as a wildlife refuge; summer camps where young people can experience the out-of-doors and whatever wildlife might be available—including skunks; urban parks providing space for large numbers of humans to be out-of-doors, and finally the Philadelphia Zoo, before the story circles back again to the west.

In the context of all the travel and all the destinations in this book, travel taking swan and boy to so many types of places—wild, urban, ranch, small town, refuge, camp, and zoo—it's interesting toward the close of the story to find the pair of trumpeters finally flying together, and on their honeymoon no less, the animal story never escaping its human-conceived framework, the human story never abandoning its abiding interest in the animals. Birds and boy leave Philadelphia together, Sam on a plane, and Louis and Serena flying

alongside for a while, Sam waving from the window, Louis's lifesaving medal gleaming in the morning sun (183), a small scene emblematic of the whole book.

Louis and Serena decide, "We'll go home by the southern route and take our time about it."

And that's what they did. They flew south across Maryland and Virginia. They flew south across the Carolinas. They spent a night in Yemassee and saw huge oak trees with moss hanging from their branches. They visited the great swamps of Georgia and saw the alligator and listened to the mockingbird. They flew across Florida and spent a few days in a bayou where doves moaned in the cedars and little lizards crawled in the sun. They turned west into Louisiana. Then they turned north toward their home on Upper Red Rock Lake.

I like thinking of the two young trumpeter swans, together in the greening spring, seeing the world as true eco-tourists. With our environmental imaginations informed and refreshed by White's environmental trilogy, we wish them well.

When the air is wine and the wind is free  
 And the morning sits on the lovely lea  
 And sunlight ripples on every tree,  
 Then love-in-air is the thing for me—

## Chapter 5

### Ecocritical Lines of Attachment

We are all indigenous to this planet, this mosaic of wild gardens  
we are being called by nature and history  
to reinhabit in good spirit.

Gary Snyder, *A Place in Space*

#### Introduction

When Stuart Little tells the scholars in School Number Seven: “I see things whole,” he could be speaking as an ecocritic—as one determined to explore the verdant crossroads where literature and environment intersect. Fundamentally an open-minded endeavor, ecocriticism expands our capacity to engage in reading and writing as minding the Earth; it invites us to keep the natural world in mind and to be place-conscious as we approach a story, a poem, an essay, a newspaper article, or a novel. It invites an earth-based, life-minded approach to engagement with any text and to the discovery of connections among texts. Paying attention to new stories, ecocriticism brings with it the potential to help restore (and to re-story), refurbish, and renew our environmental imagination.<sup>47</sup>

Noting how rapidly ecocritical conversations have expanded and multiplied, in a third book on the subject, *The Future of Ecocriticism*, Lawrence Buell points out, “participants must become increasingly aware of speaking from some position within or around the movement rather than ‘for’ it, like a

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<sup>47</sup> This definition is my personal sense of ecocriticism. Coincidentally, Joseph W. Meeker does have a book titled *Minding the Earth*; the phrase “environmental imagination” is of course from Lawrence Buell.

Rousseauvian lawgiver” (*Future* vii-viii). Because I have two areas of interest, children’s literature in general, as well as the body of E. B. White’s work, and I want to address both ecocritically, the potential of the new approach to address a wide range of literatures is especially relevant. Children’s literature is already a meta-universe; when approached ecocritically it expands even wider. The strong emphasis on story and a broad and varied presence of non-human animals combine provocatively in children’s literature to make the field ecocritically intriguing—attractive enough to lure the environmentally-minded scholar into its woods and wonders. Exploration of the potential within children’s literature to enrich and renew the environmental imagination is just beginning.

In this chapter I present several “lines of attachment” linking my environmental reading of E. B. White, especially of his three books for children, to ecocritical theory. I include and intermingle children’s literature in the discussion, though I do not focus exclusively on it. My inclusion of children’s literatures within the larger framework of literature reflects reality; children’s literature is literature. Joseph Meeker’s concept of literary ecology provides a compelling framework for making that inclusion.

After looking at what Patrick Murphy (as quoted below) calls the “sustainable and rejuvenative” nature of ecocriticism, as well as the relevancy of Meeker’s literary ecology, this chapter offers new perspectives on the environmental imagination. It presents an emerging context for the greening of children’s literature to date, and examines the nature of story and the

presence of animals within story—all lines of attachment that anchor E. B. White's work within the growing web of environmental writing. Read ecocritically, White's work takes a connective position in American literatures, linking fiction for children securely within the wider web of environmentally imaginative story. Our ability to take a new perspective on story expands and strengthens the collective environmental imagination, which is fundamental in maintaining and restoring the web of life; indeed our very inhabitation of the earth requires environmental imagination thus refurbished and renewed.

### **An Expanding Conversation**

Introducing *The Ecocriticism Reader* in 1996, Cheryl Glotfelty defines the new field broadly as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (xviii). Additionally, she invites her readers to consider all twenty-six essays in that 1996 landmark collection, taken together, as an answer to the question, “What is ecocriticism?” (xxxvi). Glotfelty presciently states she sees *The Reader* as a “port of entry” to the new field. With essays ranging from Scott Russell Sanders's “Speaking a Word for Nature,” in which he concludes “how we inhabit the planet is intimately connected to how we imagine the land and its creatures” (194), to Paula Gunn Allen's discussion of basic assumptions underlying traditional American Indian literature in her essay “The Sacred Hoop,” Glotfelty and Fromm's collection stands as an invitation to see things whole by giving voice to a wide range of ideas, approaches, and positions.

Glotfelty selects 1993 as a date by which “ecological literary study had emerged as a recognizable critical school” (xviii). 1993 was also the first year of publication of a professional journal, *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* (ISLE), displaying the multiflorous nature of the new approach with its inclusion at various times of theory and criticism, fiction, non-fiction essays, poetry, pedagogy, reviews, and interviews. Ten years later *The ISLE Reader: Ecocriticism, 1993-2003*, collected representative essays selected from that journal. Patrick Murphy writes in the foreword:

We remain very much at the beginning. Not being a fad, but a fundamental orientation toward the world and the literature produced by beings in that world, ecocriticism has to be perceived and practiced as a sustainable and rejuvenative method of criticism that always includes recognition that many questions remain unasked, much less unanswered, and that the answers given so far . . . must remain in our own minds provisional and open to correction. Part of an ongoing dialogue, which many of us believe must contribute to different ways of living in the world, ecocriticism requires humility on the part of its practitioners. (viii-ix)

In other words, ecocriticism has always favored a fluid and flexible approach to reading the earth’s literature. An attitude of inclusiveness toward the types of literatures to be studied and the sorts of questions to be asked has been present all along. Along with many of ecocriticism’s early

practitioners, I too am hopeful that the openness inherent in the new field will be sustained.

Ecocriticism has its roots in efforts to bring attention to American non-fiction nature writing; but those paying the closest attention to nature writing have long held their own sensibilities of open-mindedness regarding that genre. As Thomas J. Lyon points out, there is little “practical benefit in any attempt to promote an academically rigorous classification. Nature writing itself, in any case, would not rest easily in any static system, prizing as it does vitality and variety, the virtues of its subject” (25). Lyon outlines a spectrum from field guides and professional scientific papers at one end; with rambles, natural history essays, essays on solitude or travel and adventure, or farm life in the middle; and philosophical essays at the other end of the range. Whatever the form the writing might take, “the goal of the genre is to turn our attention outward to the activity of nature” (25). He gives an appropriate nod to Rachel Carson and her book featuring children (a book indirectly for children, but addressed to adults) by closing his classification of nature writing with the idea that across the spectrum, nature writing conveys a sense of wonder.

John Elder points out in 1996 that the term “nature writing” has been a reference to “a particular form of prose that is closely associated in American literature with the work of Henry David Thoreau. One basic definition of the genre might be as follows: personal, reflective essays grounded in appreciation of the natural world and of science, but also open to the spiritual

meaning and value of the physical creation” (*American* xiii).<sup>48</sup> By 2001, in the foreword to *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism*, Elder would observe “the kind of personal, reflective essay that we call nature writing points to the power of literature rooted in the earth, but it comes nowhere near to exhausting it. Rather, it invites our attention to literature’s much more diverse, and never ending, conversation with the living earth” (vii-viii).

The new field of ecocriticism seems to have been born with a congenital ambivalence. While organized from the beginning to promote American nature writing, however variously defined (sometimes but not always defined as non-fiction essays), it has also consistently questioned the foregrounding of that nature writing, gradually but steadily becoming international in scope. As an invitation to focus our attention on “conversation with the living earth,” ecocriticism asks us to stay open-minded, to be receptive to whatever our conversational partner “the living earth” may be trying to tell us. But do we speak the same language as the earth? How does the earth speak? To whom does the earth speak, and how does that earth-listener get ready to hear?

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<sup>48</sup> It seems ironic that among essayists, White’s reputation is unsurpassed, and one or two of his essays are frequently anthologized as nature writing, yet he is not often discussed as a nature writer. Kent C. Ryden’s *Mapping the Invisible Landscape: Folklore, Writing, and the Sense of Place* does treat White as an essayist of place. See *E. B. White: The Emergence of an Essayist* by Robert L. Root, Jr. for a well-researched account of how White’s lifetime of writing in various forms resulted in his acclaimed essays.



Two collections of critical voices calling for expansive focus are Patrick Murphy's *Further Afield in the Study of Nature-Oriented Literature*, and *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism*. In the latter, editors Karla Armbruster and Kathleen R. Wallace recognize the centrality of questions about genre with their section title, "Expanding Ecocriticism across Genres and Disciplines." One essay in particular speaks to the assumption that because language plays such a major role in our construction of reality, language therefore constructs nature. In "Heading Off the Trail," Rebecca Raglon and Marian Scholtmeijer argue that nature itself resists that premise. "The idea that language constructs reality, when pushed to its logical conclusions, reveals a disturbing human arrogance and one-sidedness. Looking at three stories by Nadine Gordimer, Russell Hoban, and Franz Kafka, Raglon and Scholtmeijer find that these three writers "place nature in the domain of the imponderable. By opening up the narrative form they "allow" nature to remain ambiguous and enigmatic, acknowledging nature's resistance to the imposition of human meaning-making exercises (260).

### **Meeker's Literary Ecology**

My own position in ecocriticism draws first of all from Joseph W. Meeker's twice-revised work, *The Comedy of Survival*. His subtitles tell an evolving story. In the first edition (1972, 1974) he describes his book as *Studies in Literary Ecology*, coining an evocative but now infrequently used phrase. *The Comedy of Survival's* second edition, coming in 1980, carried the

subtitle *In Search of an Environmental Ethic*. And in 1997, sporting a pink cover with whimsical lettering in blue and orange, the title of Meeker's best-known book morphed again, becoming *The Comedy of Survival: Literary Ecology and a Play Ethic*. His ideas have become so integral to my own work that I bring him into this chapter later in discussing my interest in story, and once more toward the end of the chapter for an explanation of the concept of "New Story."

For readers like me, interested in environmental literature but lacking a strong background in biological sciences, Meeker's approach to literature opens connecting passageways into both biology and ecology.<sup>49</sup> Drawing from his varied background, he has creatively constructed his own personally imaginative conceptual "ecology"; and his approach broadens and deepens my understanding of literature's insight into the nature of relationship. Like Stuart, he sees things whole. Wildlife ecology and experience as a park ranger inform his work in ethnology. His understanding of animal behavior interfaces with his knowledge of human behavior, and his background in comparative literature means (I imagine) that when he reads he naturally conceptualizes analogies between the human animal and the non-human animal.

Literary ecology thus invites readers into a greater awareness of the presence of non-human animals in literature. It invites us to see more than

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<sup>49</sup> See Dana Phillips, *The Truth of Ecology: Nature, Culture, and Literature in America* (2003), especially pages 144-52, for a critical assessment of Meeker's theories.

ourselves, strutting and fretting our hour upon the stage. At the same time, it is a way of thinking about reading that reminds us of our own biological nature as animals and thus of our kinship with other species.

Meeker's ideas help me understand that when I read I am not a disembodied mind; I am, rather, a mind/body/animal inhabiting a culture, a biosphere, and a planet. As reading human, and as living animal, I can read only within a larger, life-sustaining ecology. His term reminds me of the presence on this planet of non-human animals, whether they are literally present in the story I read or not. So the theory of literary ecology helps me to envision readers as part of a sustainable ecological system—to see readers as more picaresque in general, and not so likely to be trapped in the mode of a tragic hero. This orientation applies to E. B. White's work as a whole and it applies to children's literature in general. The appearance of *The Comedy of Survival* with its new subtitle connecting literary ecology with the ethics of play invites scholars to invent and to explore new approaches to literature, to culture, to ecology, and to playful participation in life. Literary ecology clearly and cordially invites children's literature into the game.

Meeker sees the development of ecology as a reaction to the increasing specialization of academic disciplines. "Already, late in the last [the 19<sup>th</sup>] century, the new science of ecology was investigating relationships among the many parts of biological systems, and asserting that the study of process and relationships was as important as the study of entities in isolation" (8). The study of relationships among biological systems is a good working

definition of ecology for my purposes, but even with an indeterminate definition, to invoke ecology and couple it with literature is helpful as a framework that can open up the corridors between reading and lived life.

The appeal of literary ecology is evident in *The Comedy of Survival's* fourth chapter, "Hamlet and the Animals." For Meeker, Hamlet is a character at the crossroads of comedy and tragedy—comedy seen as "a way of life that seeks congruence with whatever dynamics are at work in a given time or place," promoting "healthy relations among people, and between people and the Earth's natural processes. It connects us to other species" and contributes to survival (10-11). Meeker postulates that certain animals with the capacity to kill members of their own species, and whose social life includes intraspecific combat, have behaviors that make actual killing within the species unlikely. "One combatant will frequently turn aside and ferociously attack some nearby harmless object, like a tree or shrub" (40). Hamlet's verbal attacks on Claudius, on Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, on Ophelia, on Gertrude, and others are similar to these animals' non-lethal attacks; and Hamlet would hope that the swordplay at the end of the drama will in fact be play, not the lethal combat for which his enemies have secretly arranged.

Meeker's Hamlet is a would-be comedic hero who finds himself caught in a tragic hero's role. The comic mode, one of accommodation, adaptation, and survival ("a strategy for living that contains ecological wisdom") contrasts sharply with tragic art, which "describes a world in which the processes of nature are relatively unimportant and always subservient to human interests.

. . . The tragic view of life is proud to be unnatural” (21, 30). Hamlet’s prolonged efforts at redirecting aggression fail because they are “unintelligible and unacceptable to his fellow humans” although, Meeker says, “his evasive behavior would seem perfectly normal if it were observed in a wolf” (47, 42). The cultural trap of violence and aggression from which Hamlet cannot escape is still, in the twenty-first century, all too familiar, and seems more deadly than ever, making this fresh approach to reading, this willingness to think about animals as we read about humans—part of the approach Meeker calls literary ecology—even more promising.

The outcome of conceptualizing the work of environmental criticism as literary ecology is that the reader, sensing his or her life to be part of the scheme of things, finds encouragement at a basic level (personal, biological, and cultural) to approach literature within a broadly natural context. This fits well with the idea of reading as invitation, and evokes White’s analysis of *Walden* as an invitation to life’s dance. Meeker offers a phalanx of definitions of literary ecology<sup>50</sup> and that, too is invitational. Meeker’s term, literary ecology is, then, in itself a bridge between literary study and the life sciences, a bridge which the reader is invited to help construct.

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<sup>50</sup> In addition to “the study of biological themes and relationships that appear in literary works,” Meeker’s literary ecology includes consideration of “roles literature has played in the ecology of the human species”—looking especially at whether or not literature contributes to survival; comparison to literary form with natural forms and structure; an ethological approach to character; and eco-philosophy broadly, as apparent in literature, including “the relationship between humanity and nature (Comedy 7).

### **Seeking the Environmental Imagination**

A second important concept in my personal ecocritical conceptual pantheon is the idea of the environmental imagination. Laurence Buell's celebrated 1995 book, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*, brought the term to the forefront of ecocritical discussion. With Henry Thoreau in mind as a reference point throughout, Buell describes his book's three purposes: "a broad study of environmental perception, the place of nature in the history of western thought, and the consequences for literary scholarship and indeed for humanistic thought in general of attempting to imagine a more 'ecocentric' way of being." He goes on to say that he "could not discuss green writing without relating it to green thinking and green reading" (1).

Taken as a whole, Buell's book, *The Environmental Imagination*, suggests that the bulk of American literature is a vast and varied project in the environmental imagination. Does this mean that American literature produces or somehow results in an environmental imagination that in turn influences, or could influence, American culture? Or does it mean that imaginative literature in America reflects our environmental perceptions? Buell claims interest "in the American environmental imagination generally, meaning especially literary nonfiction from St. John de Crevecoeur and William Bartram to the present, but beyond this environmentally directed texts in other genres also" (2). He goes on to say the environmental crisis of today "involves a crisis of the

imagination the amelioration of which depends on finding better ways of imaging nature and humanity's relation to it" (2).

Precisely what Buell means to signify with his term "environmental imagination," now widely used, remains somewhat elusive to me; and complicated by ambiguity, the term is even more useful. It's a question of the chicken or the egg: does green writing inform our imaginative construction of the environment (or the natural world), or does a writer's environmental imagination result in green writing? Or does he mean both? How can we assist in a project to refurbish the environmental imagination without understanding something about its origin and development? And most importantly, is the environmental imagination primarily something to be identified with texts?

I assume that environmental imagination includes the reader's enhanced ability to experience a sense of connection with the environment, or an increased understanding of some aspect of environmentality, or a deeper appreciation of the natural world, . . . but those phrases of mine seem as dry as old toast. Buell hopes that if we "look searchingly at the most searching works of environmental reflection that the world's biggest technological power has produced [we may find] both the pathologies that bedevil society at large and some of the alternative paths that it might consider. That is this book's most ambitious goal" (2).

Books like *Charlotte's Web*, or Jean Craighead George's *My Side of the Mountain*, or her later book, *Julie of the Wolves*, or Gary Paulsen's *Hatchet*,<sup>51</sup> or Louise Erdrich's *Birchbark House* (especially as read along with Laura Ingalls Wilder), make good catalysts for environmental reflection. If Buell's term implies that through reading we refurbish our environmental imagination, then books like these help connect theory and personal experience. As children's books, they sometimes offer even more capacity for reflection than "non-children's" books.

Joseph Meeker comments on the phrase "environmental imagination," finding it to be a cluster of attitudes and ideas located within certain writers and their works:

Environmental imagination is not a term that lends itself to precise definition, but most of us recognize it when we encounter its symptoms. It is there in Gary Snyder's lifelong exploration of connections between the human soul and natural systems. If we were discussing Faulkner, we would consider his deep rootedness in the mountains of the rural South. We would find environmental imagination hard at work in the writings of John Muir or Henry David Thoreau, and in the rich naturalism of Loren Eiseley. What such writers share is a profound love of the

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<sup>51</sup> Paulsen's *Hatchet* is the book a 12-year old boy scout in the news recently mentions as having helped him survive three nights (March 17-20, 2007) lost in the North Carolina wilderness near the Virginia state line.



natural world and an active curiosity about its complex processes. (*Willa Cather 77*)

He goes on to include the idea that we cannot know who we are if we do not know where we are “and what dynamics govern the natural world” around us. And finally, points out, “Clearly, there are many kinds of environmental imagination.” As a prominent voice for comparative literary approaches, consideration of environmental ethics, and most of all, permission to enter into literary ecology with a playful spirit, Meeker also paves the way for ecological readings of literatures for children. And yet he, too, seems to locate the environmental imagination within texts produced by environmental writers.

One concept of the environmental imagination has been studied sequentially by two women researchers, Edith Cobb, and building later on Cobb’s work, Louise Chawla. In 1977 Cobb, a philanthropist and social worker, published a book called *The Ecology of Imagination in Childhood*, which, according to Margaret Mead’s introduction, “marks the end of a quest” that had occupied Cobb for thirty years. “This quest originated with the idea that in the imaginative experiences of childhood could be found the essential kernel of the highest forms of human thought” (1).

Over the years Cobb amassed a collection of several hundred volumes of autobiography— writers’ and creative thinkers’ accounts of their own childhood experience. She found that writers describe a source of creative power to which they can return in memory:

a source which they describe as the experience of emerging not only into the light of consciousness but into a living sense of a dynamic relationship with the outer world. In these memories the child appears to experience both a sense of discontinuity, an awareness of his own unique separateness and identity, and also a continuity, a renewal of relationship with nature as process. (qtd. in Chawla viii-ix)

As Louise Chawla worked to extend the project, she interviewed a personal friend of Edith Cobb named Elizabeth Sewell. Sewell told Chawla that Cobb had been so influenced by Wordsworth, that whenever she (Cobb) “used the word ‘nature,’ she had the English landscape in mind” (3). Cobb’s studies concluded that childhood memory had drawn on experience in nature, especially from the sort of pastoral scenes composing the world of Romantic writers.

Chawla speculated that because of increased urbanization, poets who grew up after the First World War might not report “the same resonant memories of relationship with nature.” She addresses that question, the fate of environmental memory, and the memory of nature in particular, under changing environmental conditions in the twentieth century (Chawla 2). Chawla found the universality with which Edith Cobb had framed her conclusions to be a problem; consequently in her own work she sought less emphasis on a sense of memory relating to a “universalized” romantic sense

of nature, and instead looked more closely at the experience of particular individuals.

Louise Chawla published her study of environmental memory, *In the First Country of Places: Nature, Poetry, and Childhood Memory*, in 1994. A developmental and environmental psychologist, Chawla writes, “The language of contemporary psychology is based upon presuppositions that exclude the full-bodied memory of places of personal significance. Poetry, in contrast, appeals to these memories” (7). She studied and interviewed five poets: William Bronk, David Ignatow, Audre Lorde, Marie Ponsot, and Henry Weinfield, in order to understand the personal significance of their childhood memories of the natural world. Chawla found that connecting creativity and childhood experience “has intriguing implications. . . . The nature of the places that creative thinkers encounter as children, and the nature of their encounter, profoundly affect the course of their thought as adults” (ix).

Chawla’s work gives evidence that the environmental imagination does not begin in literature classes in secondary school or universities; by that point in the development of a person’s imagination, one would expect an environmental imagination to be well underway. If we wish “the educated imagination” (Northrop Frye’s term) to also be an environmental imagination, we should acknowledge its roots. According to the work of Edith Cobb and Louise Chawla, the environmental imagination takes root in childhood.

Coming from a different perspective, yet exploring similar territory in another remarkable book from 1994 are Gary Paul Nabhan and Stephen

Trimble. Like Cobb and Chawla, they too believe that the environmental imagination takes root in childhood. The two friends, who are also fathers as well as natural history writers, alternate personal essays in *The Geography of Childhood: Why Children Need Wild Places*. Their theme is clear: “Children do need wildness, and in this book we spiral around that premise like moths coming to an open, nectar-laden flower” (xiii). Their “spiral dance” of stories, personal histories, observations, well-documented research, and natural history covers a lot of cultural ground.

In my favorite piece, “Children in Touch, Creatures in Story,” older cousins in an extended Mayo Indian family in the northern Mexican desert pass along the stories they know about the land and family history to their younger cousins as they all gather firewood for a celebratory bonfire. Nabhan also includes a story about a more formal tribal initiation told in inner-city Chicago by a young man from the Ivory Coast, representing another way children might be connected with “the ground of nature” through an archetypal rite of passage, evidencing again that hearing each other’s human stories can be part of a larger environmental education.

By closely observing children in nature, Nabhan and Trimble contribute specific insights to our understanding of what the environmental imagination is and how it develops. On a family trip to northern Arizona and southern Utah, Nabhan expected to show his children, then seven and almost five, panoramic vistas and sweeping, Kodak-moment scenes. In the book’s lead essay, “A Child’s Sense of Wilderness,” he describes that what intrigued his children

was, instead, the “Lilliputian landscapes” they found beneath their feet, where they searched the ground “for bones, pine cones, sparkly sandstone, feathers, or wildflowers” (6). “Over time,” he continues, “I’ve come to realize that a few intimate places mean more to my children, and to others, than all the glorious panoramas I could ever show them.” Pondering the small hideouts his children fashion or find in wild places, Nabhan sees evidence of “a more ancient animal notion encoded within us: the simple comfort of the nest” (7), and finds the behavior of young humans closely linked with that of other creatures.

The two writers maintain a personal and inviting tone throughout, alternating their essays, which adds to the effect of a conversation. They’ve also included a number of engaging black and white photographs of children (and one of a desert spiny lizard). Trimble and Nabhan are advocating for children’s direct experience in nature, and for the validation of that experience. They make their case so well that in my view their book becomes pivotal to a general discussion of our understanding of the human connection to non-human nature. Attractive and compelling, *The Geography of Childhood* could itself go a long way to refurbish the environmental imagination. *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children From Nature-Deficit Disorder* by Richard Louv offers a recent treatment of this subject as well.

### **Children’s Literature Seen Green**

A flurry of scholarship in the mid-nineties connected children’s literature with ecocriticism, opening up a plethora of ways to read children’s books from

a green perspective. Within one calendar year, three publications devoted special issues to the greening of children's literature, one with strong ties to the emerging eco-critical community of writers and scholars, and two that are long-established journals in the field of children's literature.<sup>52</sup>

A brief look at the content of all three together shows several auspicious approaches. Eco-critical readings of books that are already (or soon could be) recognized as classic environmental texts in children's literature are most abundant. Representative titles include *The Water Babies* by Charles Kingsley, *The Wind in the Willows* by Kenneth Grahame, *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett, *The Children at Green Knowe* series by Lucy Boston and Theodore Geisel's *The Lorax*; read not simply to identify natural themes, but to extend and develop ecocritical theory.<sup>53</sup>

Historical perspectives frame several of the essays. Hilary Thompson looks at changing interpretations of *Orbis Pictus* (celebrated as the first western picture book) in 1672, 1727 and 1777, as compared to a later edition

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<sup>52</sup> The three journals are *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, spec. issue "Ecology and the Child," Ed. Betty Greenway (winter 1994-95); *American Nature Writing Newsletter*, spec. issue "Children's Literature and the Environment," Eds. Anne K. Phillips, Carolyn Sigler, and Naomi J. Woods, (1995); and *The Lion and the Unicorn*, spec. issue "Green Worlds: Nature and Ecology," Ed. Suzanne Rahn, 1995.

<sup>53</sup> Mary Buckalew, "Global Time in Lucy Boston's Green Knowe Novellas," *ChLA Quarterly*, 182-187. Jane Darcy, "The Representation of Nature in *The Wind in the Willows* and *The Secret Garden*," *The Lion and the Unicorn*, 211-22. Lisa Lebduska, "Rethinking Human Need: Seus's *The Lorax*," *ChLA Quarterly*, 170-76. Naomi Wood, "A (Sea) Green Victorian: Charles Kingsley and *The Water-Babies*," *The Lion and the Unicorn*, and "Gaia in the Nineteenth Century: Mothers and Teachers in *The Water-Babies*," *ANWN* 6-9.

from 1791, tracing a sense of place that changes from depictions of a child enclosed by a circular creation to images showing “the book and the child as leading an onward progression toward a perfect place in God’s world” (181). Suzanne Rahn argues that “children were informed and involved from the outset” of the modern environmentalist movement beginning toward the end of the nineteenth century. She finds support in *St. Nicholas Magazine* for her argument that since Victorian times, children’s literature has had close ties with environmental thinking, and at times was even “greener” than literature for adults.

Drawing on Glen Love’s idea of an increasingly radicalized, more biocentric, pastoral, Carolyn Siegler distinguishes between anthropocentric pastoral fiction, such as Rousseau’s *Emile* (trans. 1793), in which nature is a metaphor for human concerns, and biocentric pastoral works for children, such as Sewall’s *Black Beauty* (1877). Extending her analysis up to contemporary writing, she cites Jean Craighead George’s ecological mysteries for their ability to challenge readers to become involved in environmental activity. Millicent Lenz uses Joseph Meeker’s ecological interpretation of Dante’s “*Divine*” *Comedy* as a template to analyze three levels of response to the environment in children’s books.

About the same time that the three special issue journals appeared, (1996), the young ASLE journal, *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment* (ISLE) published “*The Lorax and the Ecopolice*” by Ian S. Marshall, who argues that “the pleasures of the text and not the moral of the

story” (91) be the goal of literature professors as well as parents reading to their children, a point well demonstrated in White’s three books for children.

The first important collection of ecocritical essays published in Great Britain,<sup>54</sup> includes Karin Lesnik-Oberstein’s historical overview, “Children’s Literature and the Environment.” She traces how “connections between the ‘child’ and ‘nature’ go back to, and are densely intertwined with, the very origins and developments of the concept of ‘children’s books’” (209). Lesnik-Oberstein argues convincingly that children’s literature offers a rich field of study for scholars looking at ideas of nature as well as the human relationship with the environment. All of the essays I’ve mentioned address western culture, particularly Anglo-American literature, although children’s literature scholars have long been aware of the international scope of their field, a fact pointing to the wealth of work that lies ahead. The three special issues and the inclusion of essays on children’s literature in ISLE and in ecocritical collections beckon toward promising scholarship yet to come.

Most recently, *Wild Things: Children’s Culture and Ecocriticism* (2004) gathers sixteen essays ranging from natural history in *St. Nicholas* magazine to ecological literacy in the Muppets. The back jacket of the book quotes Glotfelty: “This inaugural collection of ecocritical essays on children’s literature and media fruitfully enlarges the purview of ecocriticism and, in places, challenges its very norms.” For example, Maude Hines’s essay looks at

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<sup>54</sup> *Writing the Environment: Ecocriticism and Literature*, edited by Richard Kerridge and Neil Sammels, London: Zed Books, 1998.



nineteenth century British texts using botanical tropes, drawing on bell hooks and Christopher Manes for theory on giving voice to silenced speakers. Analyzing a plethora of texts comparing children to flowers, she finds the botanical metaphor often to be “shorthand for assumptions about class and character.” Hines concludes that collectively, the texts “show a real ambivalence about the nature/nurture relationship as well as of the nature/human relationship” (28).

Naomi Wood explores the construction of the North as represented by “icy mothers” like H. C. Anderson’s snow queen, and Kamala Platt examines environmental texts for children that promote social justice. Other essays contribute to on-going ecocritical interest in writers like Beatrix Potter, Gene Stratton-Porter and C. S. Lewis. My own essay, like this dissertation, places *Charlotte’s Web* at the center of White’s environmental imagination, and sees the story as an invitation to a biocentric comedy of survival.

### **The Story Line**

Construction of the bridge of scholarship linking children’s literature and ecocriticism is well underway. From any position on, or under, or even near that bridge, whether one looks toward ecocriticism’s role as host to a growing and expanding conversation about the earth’s literature, or looks toward the centuries-old traditions of study and practice in the earth’s literatures for young readers and listeners, on either bank, Story, well-watered and adaptable, is growing in abundance.

Jane Yolen, introducing a collection I've used for twenty years now, *Favorite Folktales from Around the World*, tells of attending a conference on fairy tales at a major American University:

The participants were so busy being academic about the motifs and morphology of a tale, about the sociological implications of the endings of Grimm stories, about the bourgeois subsumption of the female tale teller, about the psychological embellishments and the validation of emotion, that the words "Once upon a time . . ." were never spoken. (9)

Her anthology begins with an Irish tale of "The Man Who Had No Story to Tell," who, in the course of the story is provided forevermore with a rousing story he can tell whenever he needs one.

Children's literature has never lacked for stories to tell, but the academic attitude toward stories and storytelling is more nuanced and less obvious. To the extent that ecocriticism represents academia, one might expect similarly ambiguous attitudes toward story and storytelling within the new field. My own serious fascination with children's literature began when I was a fourth-year student at the University of Nebraska, and since then I've been intrigued by stories both as an adult and as a former child, personally and professionally. Although I have done a little storytelling myself, working as a children's librarian, and also as a volunteer, I find the particular scholarly distractions to the telling of tales Yolen cites above are actually intriguing and

important to me. And yet I want *the story* too, requiring the same two-footed approach I describe in my introduction to this dissertation.

As suggested in his subtitle, “literary ecology and a play ethic,” Joseph Meeker’s approach to literature pulls together the pleasure of story and the scholar’s effort to understand some of the complexities behind and within story—complexities that are part of the compelling nature of story. Drawing on his basic definition of literary ecology, “the study of biological themes and relationships that appear in literary works” (*Comedy* 7), I understand story as an ecosystem of themes and relationships. Because stories are dramatic representations of relationship, a sense of story is indispensable to literary ecology, and literary ecology helps explain the function of story.

While hearing a story the experience of both listener and teller expands, and the listener (or an imaginatively engaged reader) as well as the teller participate in a larger ecology affirmed or made known within the experience of story. One of the most powerful things about hearing a story told orally is the connection created between teller and listener. (We attest to this power when we find a writer’s “voice” available through a written text.) The telling of the tale invites the listener into a deeper sense of self, and at the same time into a deeper connection with the world, making the experience at once intimate and profound. As Story gives breath to the concept of relationship, “story” and world” become coextensive.

Introducing his chapter on Dante's *The [Divine] Comedy*<sup>55</sup> in *The Comedy of Survival*, Meeker makes an intriguing point:

The last time Western culture was sufficiently oriented to tell an integrated story of humanity and the cosmos was before the rise of industry and technology, before the rise of science, before modern cities and economies were founded, and before the Renaissance with its humanistic divisions of knowledge into compartments. That takes us back about seven hundred years.

(87)

But Meeker looks forward as well. As he re-introduces his theory of literary ecology in 1997, he cites other (then) groundbreaking works from Karl Kroeber<sup>56</sup> and Lawrence Buell, as well as *The Ecocriticism Reader*, predicting that “we can expect some fresh storytelling on themes of literary ecology,” with the humanities and the biological sciences speaking and listening to one another (8). I find that fresh storytelling with its renewed relationship to the environmental imagination available in E. B. White's children's books, in much of the rest of White's writing, and in other environmentally minded books for children.

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<sup>55</sup> According to Meeker, theologians misread Dante and mistakenly added the adjective “Divine” to his title (88). Meeker gives the poem an ecological reading, seeing Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise as reflective of environments that humans have helped to create (89).

<sup>56</sup> He mentions Karl Kroeber's *Ecological Literary Criticism: Romantic Imagining and the Biology of Mind*, Columbia University Press, 1994. Buell's book referenced here is *The Environmental Imagination*, 1995.

Another innovative outlook on stories and storytelling comes in Ursula K. Le Guin's 1986 essay, "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction." Like Meeker, Le Guin takes a long look backward, back to Neolithic times in fact. She suggests that a new conception of story requires a different emphasis, also drawn from pre-history, that instead of continuing to tell narratives of the hunt and the fight, "the story the mammoth hunters told about bashing, thrusting, raping, killing," we would do well to turn our attention to "the other story, the untold one, the life story" (*Dancing* 168). She edits herself immediately, pointing out that this other story has indeed been told, especially in creation myths and trickster stories.

Le Guin urges us to re-design our conception of the shape of fiction, to turn away from the notion "that the proper shape of the narrative is that of the arrow or spear starting *here* and going straight *there* and THOK! hitting its mark (which drops dead)" (169). Instead she asks us to consider a sack or a bag as the prototype for a story. "A book holds words. Words hold things. They bear meanings. A novel is a medicine bundle, holding things in a particular, powerful relationship to one another and to us," she explains.

In this essay Le Guin mentions science fiction specifically, but her argument fits many types of literature. Ecocriticism invites us to think about story in new ways and to approach story with new critical tools. I suspect that one reason children's literature is too often excluded from college and university classes is that the stories are perceived to be simple and direct. Le Guin's idea is to see story not as narrative line but as container, and if we think

of story as carrier, as container, the capacity of a piece of literature to yield meaning depends less on what we call the type of literature represented, or even on the form of the story, and more on the nature of the reader, and the willingness of the reader to engage with whatever literary ecology the story reflects and animates.

Le Guin's story, "Buffalo Gals, Won't You Come Out Tonight" is a working model of her carrier bag theory of fiction. The story appeared in 1987 in her collection of stories and poems called *Buffalo Gals and Other Animal Presences*. In the initial sentence of her introduction to the book, Le Guin positions herself as a canine presence (perhaps Coyote herself)<sup>57</sup> alive and well within a writer's being: "Although I whined and tried to hide under the rug, my inexorable publisher demanded an introduction for this book of my stories and poems about animals."

To the question of why animals talk in myths and children's stories, she answers (rhetorically) that everybody knows animals don't talk, but we keep putting words in their mouths anyway. The real question then is, "We who?" Immediately comes the answer: "We the dumb: the others" (11). She is essentially making the same point that Christopher Manes argues in his 1992 essay, "Nature and Silence," that for Westerners (in Europeanized cultures), "Man" has been the only speaking subject since the Renaissance, and that

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<sup>57</sup> See Katrina Schimmoeller Peiffer's *Coyote at Large: Humor in American Nature Writing*, University of Utah Press, 2000, for an ecocritical look at Coyote mythology.

nature is thus experienced (according to that worn-out story) as being silent (26).

Le Guin's words "we the dumb: the others" are themselves part of the backstory she tells in her introduction, and she plays on their meaning as the story proceeds. She sets up a half-formed expectation that "we the dumb: the others" means everyone other than "Civilized Man," that is children, women, men who tell stories, animals, and traditional peoples. But no, she has already turned the table: the animals aren't really "dumb" they just "have nothing to say" to "Civilized Man," who in "dreadful isolation" has gone deaf "by climbing up into his head and shutting out every voice but his own" (11). Her point: how dumb it is to "other" others, and how impossible to do that without othering oneself.

Because it can be the nature of story to invite, to include, and to extend its sense of presence to all who will listen, the ones who are truly othered are those who have cut themselves off from story by climbing up into their heads. It's easy to imagine these Others, academic robes fluttering in the breeze as they climb, pulling up after themselves their elaborate vocabularies, obfuscating theories, trailing arguments and rebuttals of arguments, climbing too high to hear the living earth's attempt to carry on a conversation. Down here on Earth, as Le Guin knows so well, the stories continue:

And for the people Civilization calls "primitive," "savage," or "undeveloped," including young children, the continuity, interdependence, and community of all life, all forms of being on

earth, is a lived fact, made conscious in narrative (myth, ritual, fiction”). This continuity of existence, neither benevolent nor cruel itself, is fundamental to whatever morality may be built upon it. Only Civilization builds its morality by denying its foundation. (11)

Her title story picks up the idea of a porous boundary between animals and humans, that is, if the humans are young children. A little girl has been injured when she “fell from the sky.” Coyote finds her, talks to her, and cares for her. Coyote is physically and socially still very much Coyote, female in this story—sexually active, addressing her turds as “little shits”—as well as telling the little girl “with dignity” that she, Coyote, was the one who had made all the country they’ve been walking through (22).

The child apparently lost an eye when she fell from the sky; Coyote licks her wound and leads her to town, a town where Chipmunk, Owl, Jay and others live in houses—“board houses, shacks, all unpainted.” Other animals live outside of town—Doe, Horse, and Chickadee. Jay organizes a dance for the little girl, and gives her a new eye to replace the eye she lost.

Because the animals wear clothes and “look like people” to the little girl, one day she asks Coyote about this. “I don’t understand why you all look like people.” Coyote’s answer is “We are people,” but the child explains that she means “people like me, humans.” Coyote points out that resemblance is in the eye, that it depends on how you look at things. And then she tells the joke that there are only two kinds of people. “Humans and animals?” asks the girl.



“No. The kind of people who say, ‘There are two kinds of people’ and the kind of people who don’t.” Coyote explains, “There’s the first people, and then the others. That’s the two kinds.””

The first people are “Us, the animals . . . and things. All the old ones. You know. And you pups, kids, fledglings. All first people.” The others are “the new people. The ones who came.” Coyote says, “We were always here. We are always here. Where we are is here. But it’s their country now. They’re running it . . . Shit, even I did better!” (32).

In telling her version of a trickster story, Le Guin shows how animal stories can carry within them a sense of the sacred, rooted in the natural world. Her story helps me to realign my sense of what these animals are doing in stories, how non-human animals are both created and creating; and she makes me wonder how I fit in. Since I’m not a child, not a chipmunk, and not native, I must be one of the new people, the ones who came, who live in their town where everything is too fast, or on huge ranches, where poison is put out for coyotes. These are burned places, holes in the world.

After the little girl has asked Horse to take her to see the human town, she has a talk with Chickadee:

“When we lived together it was all one place,” Chickadee said in her slow, soft home-voice. “But now the others, the new people, they live apart. And their places are so heavy. They weigh down on our place, they press on it, draw it, suck it, eat it, eat

holes in it, crowd it out . . . Maybe after a while longer there'll only be one place again, their place. And none of us here." (43)

The conversation continues, and the child asks Chickadee about Grandmother, who has been mentioned in the story, but not identified.

"Things are woven together. So we call the weaver the Grandmother," is Chickadee's response. Again the idea of looking and seeing comes into the story as Chickadee says, "Maybe all this place, the other places too, maybe they're all only one side of the weaving. I don't know. I can only look with one eye at a time, how can I tell how deep it goes?"

Later Chickadee takes the little girl to Grandmother, who greets her as New Person, but the child protests, "I'm not one of them," and Spider changes her greeting. "Old Person, then." And Grandmother Spider tells her she should go back to her own people, assuring her that she can live well there. "I'll be there too, you know. In your dreams, in your ideas, in dark corners in the basement." Chickadee says she will come around too; "Make gardens for me." The child asks if she can keep her eye, and the Grandmother says "Yes. You can keep your eye."

True to her "carrier bag theory of fiction," Le Guin's story holds meaning about how carefully the earth is inhabited by some cultures, and it bears hope, through the story of the child, of how it might be inhabited more intelligently by the rest of us. The role of culture in story cannot be underestimated. As Le Guin's carrier bag theory suggests, the story contains the culture that tells the story. Both carrier and carried, story works in a cyclical pattern reminiscent of

rain clouds yielding precipitation, runoff, evaporation, condensation, and more rain—the hydrological cycle of story and culture almost as basic as water in sustaining and nurturing life on earth.

With her new pine-pitch eye from *Blue Jay*, the child in the story sees the sharp contrast between the life of the First People, which includes animals, and her own New Comer culture more clearly. Emphasizing vision and the ability to see things outside of one's narrow perspective, especially outside of a ponderous settler culture bent on overwhelming and poisoning the world around it, "Buffalo Gals, Won't You Come Out Tonight" puts mythic bones and flesh on Stuart Little's announcement "I see things whole."

How to see nature, or how to represent the natural world, are important questions in ecocritical circles—questions which I think call for indirect answers through narrative, answers contained in the carrier bag of story. The continuum of nature and culture has been evident all along to many ecocritics; questions of how to see nature require us to understand how culture affects our vision. The challenge of literary ecology is to look with a new eye. Story can make that new eye available. Le Guin has said "The story is one of the basic tools invented by the human mind for the purpose of gaining understanding. There have been great societies that did not use the wheel, but there have been no societies that did not tell stories."

Story is vital to ecocriticism, not only as texts to be read, but also as personal narratives to be created. Scott Slovic speaks to the value of stories in a short statement posted on ASLE's website, urging ecocritics to tell stories

as a strategy for literary analysis, a technique called narrative scholarship.

“The purpose is not to compete with the literature itself, but simply to illuminate and appreciate the context of reading—that is, to embrace the literary text as language that somehow contributes to our lives ‘out in the world.’” He urges teachers of environmental literature to “analyze and explain literature through storytelling—or tell your own stories and then, subsequently, show how contact with the world shapes your responses to texts” (1994).

Calling narrative scholarship “field-based reading,” John Tallmadge offers natural history “as a model for the disciplined integration of field work—that is, experience of the referential world—into interpretation and criticism” (284). These are good suggestions, and the narrative scholarship Slovic, Tallmadge and others recommend has indeed become an appropriate and respected approach to ecocriticism. Through its invitational nature, story helps us “see things whole.”

And yet it’s surprising that in a piece titled “Ecocriticism: Storytelling, Values, Communication, Contact,” or in an essay on the “Natural History of Reading,” there is no reference to the world’s vast reservoir of storytelling, to the existence of traditional stories already known and told in cultures everywhere, especially in indigenous cultures with long histories of inhabitation and intimate knowledge of place. Is it simply assumed that the nature of story as it has existed in the world for centuries undergirds narrative scholarship?

“The waking have one common world, but the sleeping turn aside each into a world of his own,” points out Glen Love, quoting Heraclitus. For Love,

the reason an ecocritic should enfold his or her personal stories into teaching and writing about environmental literature is that “nature writing . . . invites us, as does realism, to address the common world” (1995). If ecocritics, as individuals, and as professionals, should write and tell and publish their own stories about their personal engagement with place and with nature’s literature, shouldn’t we also be encouraged to consider the world’s traditional stories as one way (or untold thousands of ways) to represent the natural world? It seems only polite. As literary ecologists, we need to present the intersections of story and culture.

Environmental criticism also brings an invitation to read familiar stories in a new light. That White understood the promise of fresh interpretations of familiar environmental literature is evidenced in his statement about *Walden*, which he called his favorite book:

Many think it a sermon; many set it down as an attempt to rearrange society; some think it an exercise in nature-loving; some find it a rather irritating collection of inspirational puffballs by an eccentric show-off. I think it none of these. It still seems to me the best youth’s companion yet written by an American.

(*Points* 16)

White’s idea of companionship thus includes books and stories, as well as non-human animals; for him all are intimately involved with how we maintain the world as *oikos* or dwelling place.

### **Those Who Dwell Beside Us**

If Story grows wild all around the bridge of scholarship, which is now under construction, linking children's literature and ecocriticism, the stories flourishing there have long proved hospitable habitat for non-human animals. In making her argument that for many reasons "children's literature offers one of the most extensive sources for the study of ideas about nature, the environment, ecology and the role of humans in relation to all of these, in contemporary society," Lesnik-Oberstein points out "there has always been, and still is, an extensive and explicit presence of animals and the natural world in the books called 'children's books'" (216). Her reference to an extensive and explicit presence of animals in children's literature identifies a phenomenon, like story itself, which has long intrigued me. But intriguing as it is, the widespread presence of animals in literatures for children has largely gone unexamined by ecocritics.

From Aesop's Fables, to Reynard the Fox, to Peter Rabbit; from B'r'er Rabbit, Baloo the Bear, Black Beauty, Beautiful Joe, and Bambi; to Jason the questing mole of Margaret Laurence's *Molanium*, to all the creatures who defend Redwall Abbey, to Ferdinand the bull who wanted only to sit under the cork tree and smell the flowers and Leo Lionni's eponymous poetic Frederick whose gathering of sunshine and colors and words was so fortuitously supported by his community—or to take the story line at a different angle—from Seton's *Wild Animals I have known* to the writings of Jean

Craighead George; from White's boyhood reading, *A Little Brother to the Bear*, to *Valley of the Smallest: the Life Story of a Shrew*, an ecological story of the Rocky Mountain foothills—what are all of those animals, and myriad others, doing in the literature we designate for children?

To what extent should we look past the generic divide between “animal fantasy” and “realistic animal stories” in an attempt to get a better look at these animals so prevalent in literatures for children? What is going on? How is the presence of animals in literatures for children different from the presence of animals in literature that is not designated as being for children? Having studied White's work as a whole in this dissertation, I have found a vital presence of animals throughout his life's writing, as well as in his three books for children.

My subheading for this section on literary ecology's interest in the presence of animals comes from Hogan, Metzger, and Peterson's brief introduction to a section on domestic animals, “Borderlines: The Domesticated Wild,” in their anthology *Intimate Nature: The Bond Between Women and Animals*. “The edge between the known and the unknown is the place where the human and animal meet. This borderline does not necessarily open to the wilderness,” they write. Presenting stories and essays with dogs and cats, horses and llamas, “the animals we think we know best, who live among us, whose lives are threaded through our own,” the editors point out “being accustomed to their presences, relying upon them for food, security, or

companionship, does not mean we know or honor them. It is a brave and difficult task to attempt to know those who dwell beside us” (168).

I would like to borrow these editors’ concept of borderlines and extend it to include other animals as well, so that White’s trumpeter swans, the raccoon he observes from his bedroom window, and the grey spider he watches in his barn may be considered along with numerous dogs, pigs, mice, and geese that he did indeed both know and honor.

In an essay called “The Language of Animals,” Barry Lopez looks the other direction across the “borderlines,” paying attention to the wild animals inhabiting the valley where he lives on the west slope of the Cascade Mountains in order to study place. “When I walk in the woods or along the creeks,” he writes, “I’m looking for integration, not conversation. I want to be bound more deeply into the place, to be included, even if only as a witness, in events that animate the landscape.” And wild creatures, he says, are “the most animated part of the landscape.” Using “the language of animals” to learn place, Lopez defines language in ways appropriate to the animals he seeks to encounter. “The eloquence of animals is in their behavior, not their speech.” Paying attention to the various “statements” they make, he also describes “a more profound communication” (162-63).

I have another kind of borderline in mind as well—borderlines between types of writing. One would expect nature and environmental writing to hold a vast presence of animals, and it does. What about all the rest of the world’s writing; is the population by animals sparse, or dense, or somewhere in the



middle? Do animals appropriately inhabit particular types of writing, while other kinds of writing are properly devoid of creatures other than humans? I have come to think terms like “animal literature” or “animal stories” do not serve us well.”<sup>58</sup>

Keeping an idea of literary ecology in mind, why must we first extract the animals from their narrative context, then name the literature “animal” and only then (as it seems to me) somehow “put” the animals back into their stories so we can label them “animal stories”? Do we assume that serious literature will be free of non-human animals, unless otherwise specified? So therefore their “presence” is a strange experience for us? That seems to be the case. And is an animal story likely to be assumed to be a children’s story? I am concerned that we have become so proficient at the simultaneous othering of non-human animals and of “stories for children.”

I anticipated some of these questions, and others, to be addressed in a new collection of essays published in 2007 by an organization called Nature in Legend and Story (NILAS). Officially founded in 1995, NILAS is “a group of interdisciplinary scholars, storytellers, folklorists, teachers, librarians, and others who share a common interest in trying to understand relationships between humans, animals, and plants through the mediation of stories, poems, legends, artworks, and other cultural products” (Aftandilian xviii). The

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<sup>58</sup> Boria Sax suggests the term “totemic literature” for “an approach to culture based primarily on understanding the changing bonds that people have with other forms of life that share our planet” in his introduction to *What Are the Animals to Us?* 1.

book born of these efforts, called *What Are the Animals to Us? Approaches from Science, Religion, Folklore, Literature, and Art*, could be expected to help us to “see things whole,” yet even a group that emphasizes storytelling, anthologized no essays on children’s literature!

“Animals have been at the heart of human art and story ever since humans began making art and telling stories,” Marion W. Copeland observes, introducing the section on history and literature in *What Are the Animals to Us?* Traditionally, she points out, “human artists have slipped the boundaries of human experience to inhabit the worlds of wild and domestic animal neighbors, and the animals themselves—‘real toads’—are the subjects of the ‘imaginary gardens’ of art and story” (89). Copeland then states that literary critics and historians have not taken seriously “the poet/shamans who make journeys into the worlds of other animals possible. Only students of children’s literature have taken them seriously” (89). I can only conclude that scholarship treating children’s literature and other literature together as it examines the presence of animals in art and story must be rare indeed; or perhaps editors did not consider that scholarship on children’s literature could also be serious scholarship regarding animals.

Denise Levertov’s 1961 poem, “Come into Animal Presence” has itself found an ongoing presence in writings about animals. In 1987 Ursula K. Le Guin invokes, and reprints, the poem as the “true introduction” for *Buffalo Gals and Other Animal Presences*. Hogan, Metzger, and Peterson also reprint the poem, taking its title along with the single explanatory word “Testimonies” for a

section of poems and short prose pieces in their anthology. All of these writings hold a sense of the sacred that Denise Levertov clearly alludes to in her poem.

*What Are the Animals to Us?* also invokes Levertov's poem. David Scofield Wilson quotes from the last five lines: "she invites us to learn from the animals 'who were sacred and have remained so' that 'holiness does not dissolve, it is a presence [ / ] of bronze,' and she promises that we may regain the 'old joy' by coming back into that presence" (261). Wilson's use of "Come into Animal Presence" is puzzling; it's part of an introduction to a section of the book focused exclusively on questions asking what the new science of ethology's response should be to revelations about the Nazi past of Konrad Lorenz, whose work was foundational to that field.

Levertov's poetic presence in the rapidly burgeoning conversation about animals warrants close attention. Her father, Paul Levertov, a Jew, was descended from a renowned Russian rabbi; after becoming a priest in the Church of England he dreamed of unity between the two religions (Ellmann 1110). Because Levertov's work has been called "a poetry of secrets," I am assuming sacred intentions beyond what a surface reading of her literal words might reveal. I can't help wondering whether this latest appearance of her poem is appropriate tribute or simply appropriation. I don't know. It does seem to me that within the explosion of interest in animal representation, animal studies, and yes, animal presence, we humans are indeed seeking

something sacred, and we seem to be increasingly aware of our need for new conversations about old stories.

We need new stories as well.

### **To Restore and Re-Story the Web**

Spider webs introduce Joseph Meeker's chapter on "New Stories" in *The Comedy of Survival: Literary Ecology and a Play Ethic*. He describes walking with his wife, Helen, on a five-foot-wide trail through the forested island in Puget Sound where they live. When they return on the same path a few minutes later, the spider webs they have brushed aside, say fifteen minutes earlier, have already been rebuilt. "How does a little spider bridge a gap that is several hundred times its own body length in just a few minutes?" he wonders, reminding me of *Charlotte's Web* and in particular of Dr. Dorian's chat with Mrs. Arable about a spider's amazing ability. Meeker even makes the same point Dorian makes—that nobody teaches the spider how to accomplish that complex task.

"A major discovery of our time is that people are more like spiders than we have suspected." True to the promise of his subtitle, Meeker delivers his literary ecology in a spirit of play. Now that he has our attention, he explains that the human use of language is due to evolutionary heritage, so the spider brain spinning a web is parallel to the human brain using language, in that both behaviors involve instinct (75). Therefore, Meeker continues, what may be the most recent criterion used to assert that human beings should be

considered separate from all other creatures, our ability with language, is no more valid than its predecessors.

Thus the path is made clear, the old arguments about humanity as the crown of creation are now without foundation, and we are ready for a fundamental change in the nature of story—or a return to a more fundamental understanding of story. Meeker gives a brief history of a concept he and others call “New Stories,” tracing his personal vision of a new basis for story to Thomas Berry’s version of “seeing things whole” in *The Dream of the Earth*: “It’s all a question of story. We are in trouble just now because we do not have a good story. We are in between stories. The old story, the account of how the world came to be and how we fit into it, is no longer effective. Yet we have not learned the new story” (Berry 123).

As Meeker describes his understanding of this “fresh storytelling,” his emphasis on connections across species lines evokes White’s three books for children (emphasizing animals as well as humans), as well as his essays, poems, and work in other genres:

The New Stories that are now emerging are stories that connect humans in evolutionary time, in ecological and cosmic space, and across cultural and species boundaries. The features that we share with other times, places, and forms of life have become more significant than the differences separating us from them. . . . The most promising stories for our time are those that connect

us in complex and systemic ways to the basic principles of life.

(*Comedy 75*)

Carolyn Merchant approaches the idea of a new story from a different direction. As environmental historian and ethicist, in *Reinventing Eden: the Fate of Nature in Western Culture*, she organizes the stories of western culture into four versions of one master narrative, finding a Christian, a modern, an environmentalist, and a feminist version of the overarching story of the fall from Eden and the recovery of the garden. For Merchant, all four versions of the old story are faulty. She, too, calls for “A New Story,” one based on “a partnership ethic”:

The new story would not accept the patriarchal sequence of creation, but might instead emphasize simultaneous creation, cooperative male/female evolution, or an emergence out of chaos or the earth. It would not accept the idea of subduing the earth, or even dressing and keeping the garden, since both entail total domestication and control by human beings. Instead each earthly place would be a home, a community, to be shared with other living and nonliving things. The needs of both humans and nonhumans would be dynamically balanced. (242)

“New Stories” are certainly not all of recent creation; what they do have in common is a basic affirmation of the genetic unity of life. E. O. Wilson puts it this way: “If Homo sapiens as a whole must have a creation myth—and emotionally in the age of globalization it seems we must—none is more solid

and unifying for the species than evolutionary history. . . . A sense of genetic unity, kinship, and deep history are among the values that bond us to the living environment” (133). And yet we need a confirmed flexibility as we approach creation stories. Just as Fern was prepared to hear the stories of the animals in Zuckerman’s barn, we, too need to be prepared to hear the sacred tone (however various) within the stories we may be privileged to hear.

Similar calls for new stories about nature and other fundamental relationships are remarkably prolific among writers of diverse backgrounds who address ecocritical issues. Familiar voices, such as Rachel Carson and Ursula K. Le Guin, represent writers of particular relevance who have long issued a call for new stories. A host of other writers have responded as well: Louise Erdrich, Margaret Laurence, N. Scott Momaday, Jean Craighead George, and Gary Paulsen, for example, come to mind, as does the latest Newbery winner, Susan Patron and her luminous (if already controversial) book, *The Higher Power of Lucky*, with its plucky 10-year old protagonist whose dog (not a beagle) is named HMS Beagle, after the famous ship of Charles Darwin, her favorite scientist.

Though coming from various perspectives, a variety of environmentally minded thinkers all conclude that we need new stories. Linda Hogan, Chickasaw poet, novelist, anthologist, and memoirist writes of Maya creation myths as she travels through the Yucatan early one spring; she tells of the creation of the mud people, the wood people, and finally the corn people, stories that are cyclical in nature. The Western traditions, she observes, carry

endings within them and are stories of extinctions. Here is Hogan's appeal: "We need new stories, new terms and conditions that are relevant to the love of land, a new narrative that would imagine another way, to learn the infinite mystery and movement at work in the world. It would mean we, like the corn people of the Maya, give praise and nurture creation" (*Dwellings* 94).

In the widening web of ecological voices all spinning useful, remarkable, and often shimmering lines of attachment between story and world, David Abrams stands out. Ecologist, and philosopher as well as magician, his book, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World*, seems magical in its vision. He re-envisioned the fundamental relationship between language and the sensuous world. His work invites a greater awareness of the present moment, an idea that for me echoes the experience of listening to story, of dwelling for a moment inside a story. For Abram:

A genuinely ecological approach does not work to attain a mentally envisioned future, but strives to enter, ever more deeply, into the sensorial present. It strives to become ever more awake to the other lives, the other forms of sentience and sensibility that surround us in the open field of the present moment. For the other animals and the gathering clouds do not exist in linear time. We meet them only when the thrust of historical time begins to open itself outward, when we walk out of our heads into the cycling life of the land around us. (272)



Abram and Rebecca Raglon and Marian Scholtmeijer (mentioned earlier in this chapter) all emphasize the primacy of the physical world, as does E. B. White, suggesting that story becomes fully available to us only as we are able to experience that world, the world informing and shaping the story, the story giving breath to the world. Raglon and Scholtmeijer's essay, "Heading Off the Trail," looks at stories featuring life forms as various as termites, turtles and chimpanzees. They conclude with this observation:

It is at this point that we recognize nature's resistance to our stories, and this recognition calls into question all the constructs we have built in our attempts to cement over the living earth. That fiction might be better situated to accomplish this than other genres is also something we have tentatively proposed. Our sense is that the environmental crisis is a crisis of meaning, and to recover what we have lost we need new stories about nature.

(261)

If they are even partially right that environmental problems reflect a crisis of meaning, then fresh storytelling and new stories can help provide real-world solutions to those problems, because as Le Guin points out, stories are carriers of meaning. Ecocriticism is an invitation to find and to celebrate these new stories.

Literary ecology has become the web re-minding me to seek the connections these stories convey—connections among human characters, connections between and among species, connections in culture and place,

and connections reflecting the biosphere-based life we share, as we inhabit this planet together. Increasingly aware that we have only one earth to inhabit, we humans have new opportunities to hear each other's stories, to honor storytelling across cultural lines, and to embrace animals and their habitats as integral to our stories. Children's literature has long been familiar with these possibilities. Fresh perspectives toward stories and storytelling hold potential to restore (to re-story) and to refurbish our environmental imagination.

## Final Postscript

Remembering the first official Earth Day, April 22, 1970, as a buoyant afternoon, I invited readers into the literary ecology of E. B. White. Today as I bring my study of White's environmental web to a close on April 15, 2007, I read in our local newspaper about events organized to fight global warming. "Step It Up 2007" seeks to influence Congress to require 80 percent reduction in carbon dioxide emissions by the year 2050. Yesterday, across the United States, people marched, heard speeches, and climbed mountains, including Cadillac Mountain near White's home in Maine ("first spot in the United States to be lit by the rising sun").

If White had been born fifty years later than he was, he might have written about the event in Battery Park, where people dressed in blue formed a human line demarking a possible future coastline of New York. Global warming (climate change) currently dominates the environmental news, and to me personally it seems like the most alarming ecological problem identified in my lifetime.

The story in the *Lincoln Journal Star* today (Dobnik) includes the information that Bill McKibben along with six students at Middlebury College in Vermont organized the campaign, citing McKibben as "among the first to write about global warming in his 1989 book 'The End of Nature.'" I do not disagree with that point, but in writing this dissertation I wish to add E. B. White's name to

the growing community of writers valued for their concern with environmental issues.

White included global warming in a column in *The New Yorker* May 16, 1959, the first of a series called “These Precious Days.” To introduce the series he wrote: “Because the slaughter of the innocents continues, here and abroad, and the contamination of air, sea, and soil proceeds apace, *The New Yorker* will undertake to assemble bulletins tracing Man’s progress in making the planet uninhabitable.” Gathering environmental news from various unnamed sources, the column consists of short paragraphs compiled and written by White.

The inaugural column has fifteen different news items; one deals with the disposal of atomic waste, thirteen others present various angles on atomic radiation. I quote here the paragraph from that 1959 column relating to our current deep concern about global warming:

Dr. Bert Bolin, of the University of Stockholm, thinks that within the next forty years the amount of carbon dioxide in the air may increase twenty-five or thirty per cent above the level that existed at the time man began using fuels. This, he says, may have a radical effect on climate.

White’s lifetime of writing reveals an imagination steeped in contemporary issues, appreciative of biological life, and intrigued with a web of environmental themes reflecting the inhabitation of the earth. As Jennifer Sahn, editor of *Orion* magazine said recently, the environment represents “the most fundamental relationship in our lives. Every issue is an environmental issue.”

When he created Stuart Little out of the dream-mouse in his memory, White gave us a creature defined by relationships. And when Stuart drives out of his open-ended story, “headed in the right direction,” his connection with the natural world proves to be the most promising of those relationships. In *Charlotte’s Web*, Fern Arable shows us how to watch and listen attentively as the lives of other creatures show us the sacred nature of their stories. And in *The Trumpet of the Swan*, though the plot, like Louis himself, seems encumbered a bit with awkward acquisitions, the perspective of White’s high-flying swan shows us the world that in myriad intersecting ways, we all inhabit.

I’d like to close with another invitation, the same one White wrote on the centenary of the publication of *Walden*, an invitation that applies to the wider web of environmental writing as well:

Received at such a juncture, the book is like an invitation to life’s dance, assuring the troubled recipient that no matter what befalls him in the way of success or failure he will always be welcome at the party—that the music is played for him, too, if he will but listen and move his feet. In effect, that is what the book is—an invitation, unengraved; and it stirs one as a young girl is stirred by her first big party bid. (*Points*16)

Like Thoreau, White uses writing to “account for” physical and biological phenomena, personal experience, societal and political issues, and philosophical concerns, all in close sequence--almost simultaneously. He moves from the natural world to the social scene to a political problem to a philosophical position

within the space of a few words, and he is apt to make these graceful moves regardless of the writing's form or format. In offering an "accounting" of White's literary ecology, with a focus on his three books for children, I hope this dissertation illuminates a small portion of the web of environmental meaning to be found within the entirety of his published work.

Because White's work, especially his three books for children, can help to refurbish the environmental imagination, his writing has an important part to play in our collective efforts to repair the web of life. Like the reader he imagines for *Walden*, we too are gently asked to listen to life's sacred stories; we are invited to hear that the music is played for us, too.

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