

# Biography for E. B. White

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**Elwyn Brooks White** (July 11, 1899, Mount Vernon, New York – October 1, 1985, North Brooklin, Maine) was a leading American essayist, author, humorist, poet and literary stylist.

"No one can write a sentence like White," James Thurber once said of his crisp and graceful writing style. A liberal free-thinker, White often wrote as an ironic onlooker, championing freedom of the individual. His writing ranged from satire to textbooks and children's fiction. His writers' style guide, *The Elements of Style*, remains a well-regarded text; his three children's books, *Charlotte's Web*, *Stuart Little*, and *The Trumpet of the Swan*, are regarded as classics of the field.

## Biography



E. B. White in his senior year at Cornell University

E.B. White was born in Mount Vernon, New York and graduated from Cornell University with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1921. He picked up the nickname "Andy" at Cornell, where tradition confers that monicker on any student surnamed White, after Cornell co-founder Andrew Dickson White. While at Cornell, he worked as editor of *The Cornell Daily Sun* with classmate Allison Danzig who later became a sportswriter for *The New York Times*. White was also a member of the Quill and Dagger society.

He wrote for *The Seattle Times* and *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* and worked as an ad man before returning to New York City in 1924.

He published his first article in *The New Yorker* magazine in 1925, then joined the staff in 1927 and continued to contribute for six decades. Best recognized for his essays and unsigned *Notes and Comment* pieces, he gradually became the most important contributor to *The New Yorker* at a time when it was arguably the most important American literary magazine. He also served as a columnist for *Harper's Magazine* from 1938 to 1943.

In the late 1930s White turned his hand to children's fiction on behalf of a niece, Janice Hart White. His first children's book, *Stuart Little*, was published in 1945, and *Charlotte's Web* appeared in 1952. Both were highly acclaimed, and in 1970 jointly won the Laura Ingalls Wilder Medal, a major prize in the field of children's literature. In the same year, he published his third children's novel, *The Trumpet of the Swan*. In 1973, that book received the Sequoyah Award from Oklahoma and the William Allen White Award from Kansas, both of which were awarded by students voting for their favorite book of the year.

In 1959, White edited and updated *The Elements of Style*. This handbook of grammatical and stylistic dos and don'ts for writers of American English had been written and published in 1918 by William Strunk Jr., one of White's professors at Cornell. White's rework of the book was extremely well received, and further editions of the work followed in 1972, 1979, and 1999; an illustrated edition followed in 2005. That same year, a New York composer named Nico Muhly premiered a short opera based on the book. The volume is a standard tool for students and writers, and remains required reading in many composition classes.

In 1978, White won a special Pulitzer Prize for his work as a whole. Other awards he received included a Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1963, and memberships in a variety of literary societies throughout the United States. White was also a world federalist, and once said:

*"Government is the thing. Law is the thing. Not brotherhood, not international cooperation, not security councils that can stop war only by waging it...Where does security lie, anyway - security against the thief, the murderer? In brotherly love? Not at all. It lies in government."*

White married Katharine Sergeant Angell in 1929, also an editor at *The New Yorker*, and author (as Katharine White) of *Onward and Upward in the Garden*. They had a son, Joel White, a naval architect and boatbuilder, who owned Brooklin Boatyard in Brooklin, Maine. Katharine's son from her first marriage, Roger Angell, has spent decades as a fiction editor for *The New Yorker* and is well-known as the magazine's baseball writer.

White died on October 1, 1985 at his farm home in North Brooklin, Maine, after a long fight with Alzheimer's disease. He was cremated, and his ashes were buried beside his wife at the Brooklin Cemetery.

## Writings

White's style was wry, understated, thoughtful, and informed. He was widely regarded as a master of the English language, noted for clear, well-constructed, and charming prose. Many readers single out his essay "*Here Is New York*," written for Holiday magazine in 1948 and published in book form the next year, for its distillation of the bittersweet pleasures of New York City life. It was widely quoted after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, because of a passage--written at the beginning of the age of nuclear weapons--in which he talks about New York's vulnerability: "*The city, for the first time in its long history, is destructible. A single flight of planes no bigger than a wedge of geese can quickly end this island fantasy, burn the towers, crumble the bridges, turn the underground passages into lethal chambers, cremate the millions. The intimation of mortality is part of New York in the sound of the jets overhead, in the black headlines of the latest edition.*"

Through his writing, he set a way to write in American English by adopting Anglo-Saxon derived terms rather than focusing on finding the Latin origin of the words he used. The Associated Press uses White's words in showing his writing style :

The rules of *The Elements of Style* were as simple to state -- 'Omit needless words' -- as they were difficult to obey.

## **Bibliography**

- **Essays & Collections**

- *The Fox of Peapack*
- *The Lady Is Cold*
- *Every Day Is Saturday*
- *Farewell to Model T*
- *Quo Vadimus? Or, The Case for the Bicycle*
- *One Man's Meat* (see The New York Times interview)
- *Once More to the Lake*
- *The Points of My Compass*
- *The Second Tree from the Corner*
- *The Essays of E.B. White*
- *The Ring of Time*
- *Letters of E.B. White*
- *Poems and Sketches of E.B. White*
- *The Wild Flag*

- **Children's Books**

- *Charlotte's Web*
- *Stuart Little*
- *The Trumpet of the Swan*

- **Other Topics**

- *The Elements of Style* (with William Strunk Jr.)
- *A Subtreasury of American Humor* (1941), edited by E.B. White and Katharine S. White
- *Is Sex Necessary?* (with James Thurber)
- *Here Is New York*