

Some Writer!

The Story of E. B. White

by Melissa Sweet



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About the Book

In a tour de force, the award-winning author-illustrator Melissa Sweet presents a well-crafted, imaginatively illustrated, and creatively designed chapter book biography of Elwyn Brooks “E. B.” White, one of the great stylists and most beloved children’s book authors of the twentieth century. Writing with clarity and lyricism, Sweet lets White’s economical words do the talking as she seamlessly integrates his oft-witty remarks into the well-organized narrative. She also incorporates excerpts from White’s children’s books, manuscripts, essays, letters, and other works of poetry and prose into the engagingly whimsical mixed-media illustrations composed of such seemingly disparate yet cohesive elements as watercolors, clothespins, dried flowers, bird nests, and black-and-white photographs.

Moving from cradle to grave and into White’s substantial literary legacy, the engaging nonfiction narrative begins with White’s birth as the youngest child in a well-to-do New York family. From a childhood of idyllic waterside summers in New England to a seminal relationship at Cornell University with the English composition professor William Strunk Jr., as well as a post-college summer highlighted by vagabond journalism, Sweet hits the high points of White’s adult

life. In addition to writing three children’s literature gems, White was an essayist at the nascent *New Yorker*, and his enduring marriage to his editorial colleague Katharine Angell and their subsequent life with their son, Joel, on a Maine farm served as the inspiration for *Charlotte’s Web*.

This model informational book includes such supportive back matter as an illustrated timeline, detailed chapter notes, a selective yet extensive bibliography, artist’s note, acknowledgements, index, and dedication. With writing tips culled from Strunk and White’s classic primer, *The Elements of Style*, this is required reading for aspiring young writers.

About the Author

Melissa Sweet is the Caldecott Honor-winning illustrator of many fine children’s books including *Balloons Over Broadway*, a Sibert winner, and *The Right Word* and *A River of Words*, both Caldecott Honors. Reviewers have described her unique artwork as “exuberant,” “outstanding,” and “a creative delight.” Melissa lives on the beautiful coast of Maine, not far from E. B. White’s famous barn and farm. In addition to writing and painting, she enjoys gardening, hiking, biking, and cross-country skiing.

Pre-Reading Activities

After organizing them into small groups, assign students *Stuart Little*, *Charlotte’s Web*, or *The Trumpet of the Swan*. After identifying setting, characters, and themes, ask young people to discuss the similarities and differences between these three masterful animal fantasies. Next, show the class the concise video about the creation of the groundbreaking informational book, *Some Writer!* : www.youtube.com/watch?v=viS-83Re9Hjk. CCSS-ELA-RL.4.2-4.3; 5.2-5.3

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) are included with the discussions and activities. You can locate the standards at www.corestandards.org/the-standards.

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Discussion Questions

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL4.1, 5.1 also applies to each one.

- In chapter one, Melissa Sweet starts with the following quotation from E. B. White: “I fell in love with the sound of an early typewriter and I have been stuck with it ever since.” What might be the double meaning of the word “stuck”? Re-read the section on how a manual typewriter works to help answer this question. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L4.4-4.6; 5.4-5.6; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI4.4, 5.4
- How does Sweet foreshadow White’s adult life of raising chickens and other animals while contentedly living on a farm? What specific clues does she provide to let readers know this biography of White’s life will culminate in his death? CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI4.1-4.3, 4.5-4.6, 4.8; 5.1-5.3, 5.5-5.6, 5.8
- Ask students to identify elements of figurative language such as similes and metaphors in the excerpts from White’s exemplary writing, making sure to discuss their nonliteral meanings. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L4.4-4.6; 5.4-5.6; CCSS-ELA-RL.4.2-4.3; 5.2-5.3
- As a student at Cornell University, White learned about freedom of expression. How was his freedom later challenged as the author of *Stuart Little*? CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI4.3; 5.3
- White sometimes described his dog Fred as “vile.” Ask students to look up the meaning of that word and discuss how it can coexist with the obvious love he had for his oft-mentioned pet. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L4.4-4.6; 5.2, 5.4-5.6; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI4.1-4.4, 4.6; 5.1-5.4, 5.6
- How did White’s writings reflect the concerns he had regarding animal welfare, arguably an even more prominent social issue today than in his

time? CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI4.1-4.3, 4.5-4.6; 5.1-5.3, 5.5-5.6

- In *The Elements of Style*, White writes: “Exclamations. Do not attempt to emphasize simple statements by using a mark of exclamation.” In our era of email and text messages, how do students use exclamation marks? Do they agree or disagree with White’s assertion? CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.4.3-4.4; 5.4
- As Sweet states, “E. B. White never believed authors were celebrities.” How does Sweet use direct quotations from the author to support her conclusion? CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.4.5-4.6, 4.8-9; 5.5, 5.7-8.

Reading Activities

- Like the young E. B. White during his first summer spent in Maine (and for the next twenty years) Sam Beaver in *The Trumpet of the Swan* kept a journal “about things he had done, things he had seen, and thoughts he had had.” Ask students to also keep a daily diary to record their own observations and experiences. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W4.1, 4.10; 5.1, 5.10
- After discussing the winsome hand-drawn map of significant sites in E. B. White’s life, ask students to list the locations that mean the most to them. Using an atlas to determine relative location, have them create large, colorful maps, which emphasize their favorite spots. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.4.1-3, 4.7, 4.9; 5.1, 5.3, 5.7, 5.9; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.4.10; 5.10
- Have students look through both print and online magazines, newspapers, and other popular publications for “mistakes, typos and blunders” like those Andy found for a column in *The New Yorker*. Citing source material, have pupils publish an online class book that brings these gaffes together. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L4.1-4.6, 5.1-5.6; RI4.1-4.2, 4.4, 4.6-7; 5.1-5.2, 5.4, 5.6-7; W4.4, 4.6-4.8, 4.10; W5.4, 5.6-5.8; 5.10

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- Just as E. B. White wrote a letter from the point of view of his dog Daisy to express his excitement over Katherine's pregnancy, have students write letters from the perspective of their pets, toys, or games to express their feelings regarding a highly anticipated event. CCSS-ELA-LITERACYW.4.3-4.4; 5.3-5.4
- "Welcome to the pond . . . Welcome to danger . . . Beware of lead pellets . . . Don't eat them . . . Be vigilant." CCSS-ELA-LITERACYW.4.2-10; 5.2-10
 - In the manner of the above excerpt from *The Trumpet of the Swan* (see page 117 in *Some Writer!* for the full quotation), request that students draft a paragraph or brief essay about a compelling natural place and its inhabitants.
 - Ask students to research an animal and its environment using print and online resources.
 - Keeping in mind White's advice to writers "*Be clear, bold, brief,*" have students edit one another's draft papers.
 - After reviewing excerpts from White's manuscripts for the beginning of *Charlotte's Web*, have students carefully revise their papers.
 - Sweet incorporates "bits and pieces" of wood to represent White's farm life, vintage office supplies for his professional life, and typical artistic media such as watercolor and pencil into energetic mixed-media compositions. In a similar manner, have students create collages that complement or enhance their written paragraphs and essays.

Guide written by Julie Corsaro