E.B. WHITE, ESSAYIST AND STYLIST, DIES

By Herbert Mitgang

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E. B. White, the essayist and stylist who was one of the nation's most precious literary resources, died yesterday at his home in North Brooklin, Me., where he had lived for half a century. He had Alzheimer's disease and was 86 years old.

Mr. White's writing was appreciated by generations of readers of every age.

His classic children's books, ''Stuart Little,'' ''Charlotte's Web'' and ''The Trumpet of the Swan,'' continue to sell in the hundreds of thousands every year.

His importance to students is immeasurable because of ''The Elements of Style,'' the slim work on English usage he revised and expanded, based on Prof. William Strunk Jr.'s textbook. The book is used today in high schools and colleges across the country.

His comments, pieces and poems in The New Yorker helped to set the tone of sophisticated wit, irreverence and necessary candor almost since the magazine's beginnings in the 1920's.

And his independent stands in the ''Talk of the Town'' column of The New Yorker and elsewhere brooked no nonsense about excesses in American corporate and political life.

'His Writing Was Timeless'

William Shawn, editor of The New Yorker, said yesterday:

''E. B. White was a great essayist, a supreme stylist. His literary style was as pure as any in our language. It was singular, colloquial, clear, unforced, thoroughly American and utterly beautiful. Because of his quiet influence, several generations of this country's writers write better than they might have done. He never wrote a mean or careless sentence. He was impervious to literary, intellectual and political fashion. He was ageless, and his writing was timeless.

''Watched over and inspirited by The New Yorker's founding editor, Harold Ross, he and James Thurber were the writers who did most to determine the magazine's shape, tone and direction. Even though White lived much of his life on a farm in Maine, remote from the clatter of publicity and celebrity, fame overtook him, fortunately leaving him untouched. His connections with nature were intimate and ardent. He loved his farm, his farm animals, his neighbors, his family and words.''

Mr. White's score of books - essays, poems, sketches, letters - include ''The Points of My Compass,'' ''The Second Tree From the Corner,'' ''Here Is New York,'' ''One Man's Meat'' and (with James Thurber) ''Is Sex Necessary?''

He could be outspoken and passionate on subjects that were especially close to his heart - the freedom and integrity of the press, personal privacy and liberty, the intrusion of advertising, market surveys and commercialism into everyday living, the conservation of nature, the need for some form of world government. His opponents often succumbed before the force of his purity, ridicule, regret and common sense.

Respect for Audiences

Mr. White's strength as a writer was rooted in his respect for his audiences - children, adolescents and adults -regardless of what the pollsters and market surveys declared as scientific truth. ''No one can write decently who is distrustful of the reader's intelligence,'' he said. ''Television has taken a big bite out of the written word. But words still count with me.''

His ''Elements of Style,'' which he updated from the privately printed notes made in 1918 by Mr. Strunk, his former professor at Cornell, and revised several times since for new editions, has sold millions of copies. The White-Strunk book was ignored at peril by students ever since it first appeared some three decades ago. It is considered one of the most enduring and most readable books on American English usage.

The wisdom in the book is both analytical and practical. In it he says: ''Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary part. This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that every word tell.''

Clarity and Grace

In the latest edition, more than before, words tell. For example, Mr. White called ''offputting'' and ''ongoing'' newfound adjectives to be avoided because they are inexact and clumsy:

''Ongoing is a mix of continuing and active and is usually superfluous, and offputting might mean objectionable, disconcerting or distasteful. Instead, select a word whose meaning is clear. As a simple test, transform the participles to verbs. It is possible to upset something. But to offput? To ongo?''

Some of the memorable advice in his ''Approach to Style'' section goes:

''Place yourself in the background; write in a way that comes naturally; work from a suitable design; write with nouns and verbs; do not overwrite; do not overstate; avoid the use of qualifiers; do not affect a breezy style; use orthodox spelling; do not explain too much; avoid fancy words; do not take shortcuts at the cost of clarity; prefer the standard to the offbeat; make sure the reader knows who is speaking; do not use dialect; revise and rewrite.''

Talking about the surprising acceptance of ''The Elements of Style,'' he said: ''It's a funny little book, and it keeps going on. Occasionally I get irate letters from people who find a boo-boo in it, but many more from people who find it useful. The book is used not only in institutions of learning, but also in business places. Bosses give it to their secretaries. I guess someone in the office has to know how to write English.''

About the only one who had the ability to uphold that good advice was E(lwyn) B(rooks) White himself.

'She'd Run Out of Names'

Of his name, Mr. White said: ''I never liked Elwyn. My mother just hung it on me because she'd run out of names. I was her sixth child.'' From college on, to his relief, he was called Andy. He acquired the name at Cornell, after its first president, Andrew D. White. The nickname was bestowed there on students named White.

Mr. White was born in Mount Vernon, N.Y., on July 11, 1899. His parents had moved there from Brooklyn, he later surmised, ''because Mount Vernon sounded tonier.'' After serving as editor in chief of The Cornell Sun, he worked for the United Press in New York for a year, became a reporter for The Seattle Times for two years, tried his hand in an advertising agency as a production assistant and copywriter, and then found his niche as a contributor to The New Yorker in 1927.

Recalling his early tenure at the magazine, he said, ''The cast of characters in those days was as shifty as the characters in a floating poker game. Every week the magazine teetered on the edge of financial ruin. It was chaos but it was enjoyable. James Thurber and I shared a sort of elongated closet. Harold Ross fought with Raoul Fleischmann and erected an impenetrable barrier between the advertising department and the editorial department. It was known as the Ross Barrier.''

Disguising North Brooklin

A friend who visited Mr. White at home in Maine several years ago found him in good spirits. He looked like his sentences: straightforward, yet elegant.

''Don't say I live exactly in North Brooklin or buses will show up - a few have already - loaded with schoolchildren and their teachers looking for 'Stuart Little,' 'Charlotte's Web' and 'The Trumpet of the Swan,' '' he said. ''Maybe you can say 'somewhere on the Atlantic Coast.' If you must, make the location the way the property appears on nautical maps - Allen Cove. That way no one will be able to find it except by sailboat and using a chart.''

So many letters from children are addressed to Mr. White (as well as to Stuart Little and Charlotte, his fictional creations) that Harper & Row, his publisher, has a printed reply of thanks and explanation from Mr. White. Part of his form letter goes:

''Are my stories true, you ask? No, they are imaginary tales, containing fantastic characters and events. In real life, a family doesn't have a child who looks like a mouse; in real life, a spider doesn't spin words in her web. In real life, a swan doesn't blow a trumpet. But real life is only one kind of life -there is also the life of the imagination. And although my stories are imaginary, I like to think that there is some truth in them, too - truth about the way people and animals feel and think and act.''

Sought Privacy in Maine

After having lived in Manhattan in the 1920's and 1930's, Mr. White and his wife, Katharine, sought privacy in Maine. They bought the roomy old farmhouse in 1933 and lived in it almost continuously beginning in 1938.

Their lives were linked with The New Yorker, where they first met in 1926. He said that Katharine Sergeant Angell was considered ''the intellectual soul'' of the magazine, serving as fiction editor and encouraging many gifted writers.

They were married in 1929. Mr. White later said, ''I soon realized that I had made no mistake in my choice of a wife. I was helping her pack an overnight bag one afternoon when she said, 'Put in some tooth twine.' I knew then that a girl who called dental floss tooth twine was the girl for me.''

They were married for 48 years, and Mr. White never quite got over her death in 1977. When her book, ''Onward and Upward in the Garden,'' based on her New Yorker pieces, came out in 1978, with an introduction by him, he wrote, ''Life without Katharine is no good for me.''

Until illness slowed him down, Mr. White usually rose at 6 in the morning, started the wood fire in the black four-lidded kitchen stove, checked the action in the birdfeeder dangling outside the living-room window of the 19th-century farmhouse and peered with a Maineman's eyes at the broken clouds.

Prose Produced by Hand

When the sun broke through without advance notice, the pencils, pens and typewriters (the portable one down at the boathouse, the upright Underwood in the workroom) went into action. Mr. White turned out some of the most moral, living prose produced by hand in the country.

Even in speaking, Mr. White seemed to have the right phrase at hand. Fiddling with a thick log in the fireplace, he made it flare up quickly - more a countryman's than an author's fire.

Mr. White liked to sip a vermouth cassis before lunch. ''It's a French taxi-driver's drink,'' he said.

Walking with a visitor over to the general store, he took a bottle of orange juice to the counter. ''Hi, Al,'' he said to the proprietor. ''Hi, Andy,'' the proprietor replied, and at the same time handed him a copy of the local paper, The Ellsworth American, published by his longtime friend J. Russell Wiggins. Now and then, he would contribute a letter or essay to the paper.

Driving on a few miles, he stopped at the boatyard run by his son, Joel, a naval architect from M.I.T., and studied the small boats jiggling on the windy waters. In a cavernous boatshed, he climbed aboard the 19-foot sloop Martha, named after his granddaughter, which his son built for him. He sailed these waters, with friends and family, most of his life.

He pointed to the carved dolphins, four on each side of the bow, that he designed and decorated in gold. Like Louis the trumpeter swan in his book ''who thought how lucky he was to inhabit such a beautiful earth,'' E. B. White was on the side of good luck and the angels.

Fondness for Geese

Back at Allen Cove, he spotted the geese on the pond below the farmhouse and barn. He picked up some apples and waved them aloft, inviting the geese to have a snack before dinner. ''Geese are the greatest clowns in the world,'' he said. ''I wouldn't be without them.''

To followers of Mr. White's work, his Maine home was historic literary territory. The barn inspired many of the characters in his stories for children. In a corner of a cellar window a spider spun a web but, he said, it was a different species from the large gray spider that lived here with Wilbur the pig in ''Charlotte's Web.''

In his small gray boathouse facing the cove, he wrote ''One Man's Meat,'' most of ''Charlotte's Web'' and, he said, ''10,000 newsbreaks.''

These are the satirical and humorous observations that round off the columns in almost every issue of The New Yorker. Although uncredited, they bore the White imprint for many years. Their headings became part of the language: ''Neatest Trick of the Week''; ''Go Climb a Tree Department''; ''Letters We Never Finished Reading''; ''Our Forgetful Authors''; ''Funny Coincidence Department''; ''Wind on Capitol Hill.''

'Holding Down a Job'

Until recently, The New Yorker sent him a package of news items every week. ''I like doing the breaks because it gives me a feeling of holding down a job and affords me a glimpse of newspapers all over the country,'' Mr. White said. ''I turned in my first one 50 years ago. Everybody in the shop used to do them. One day I got a call from Harold Ross asking where I was. I said I was home with the chicken pox. And he said, 'I finally get someone who can do these breaks, and he gets the chicken pox.' ''

For his contribution to American letters, Mr. White was awarded the National Medal for Literature in 1971. In 1963, President Kennedy presented him with a Presidential Medal of Freedom. He was elected to the 50-member American Academy of Arts and Letters and, in 1973, received its gold medal for essays and criticism. In 1978, he received a special Pulitzer Prize for the body of his work.

Two years ago, after he had begun to slow down, he typed, with his usual good humor, a long letter to a friend: ''I have a first degree heart block, have lost the sight in my right eye because of a degenerated retina, can't wind my wrist watch because my fingers have knuckled under to arthritis, can't tie my shoelaces, am dependent on seven different pills to stay alive, can't remember whether I took the pills or didn't.

''On the other hand, I am camped alone, here at Bert Mosher's Camps on the shore of Great Pond which I first visited in 1904; I have my 15-foot green Old Town canoe with me, which I brought over on the top of my car; I sat out a New England boiled dinner this noon by anticipating it with martinis and cheese-and-crackers before walking up to the farmhouse, and after dinner (or lack of same) went fishing for bass in my canoe.

''There is a certain serenity here that heals my spirit, and I can still buy Moxie in a tiny supermarket six miles away. Moxie contains gentian root, which is the path to the good life. This was known in the second century before Christ, and it is a boon to me today.''

In addition to his son, Joel, of Brooklin, Me., Mr. White is survived by two stepchildren, Roger Angell of Manhattan and Nancy Stableford of Easton, Pa.; nine grandchildren, and 12 great-grandchildren.