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10. THE STORY OF CHARLOTTE'S WEB

Fern Arable (Dakota Fanning) and Wilbur (a piglet, voiced by Dominic Scott Kay) are pals in E.B. White's story *Charlotte's Web*. This promotional work, for the live-action movie "Charlotte's Web," depicts the two friends together. Image, copyright Paramount, all rights reserved; provided here as fair use for educational purposes and to acquaint new viewers with the film.

Andy White always believed that a farm is a place where there are strong smells and life is hard but rewarding. He didn't shy away from talking about manure. He took it as a part of the life cycle that animals, like people, are born and die.

Although he wrote for a living, he struggled with getting his words just right. (This link allows us to hear E.B. White reading an excerpt from *Charlotte's Web*.) According to his stepson, Roger Angell, he rewrote the first page of *Charlotte's Web* eight times.

After he finished the manuscript, White set it aside for awhile. When he went back to the story, he created a much bigger role for Fern.

In about 1970, he agreed to make an audio recording. He wanted to be sure *Charlotte's Web* was read just right. Today, that rare recording still survives.

White wrote about what he knew of his farm and his animals. He studied spiders for a year before he wrote his book. He filled pages of notes with thoughts and ideas.

Thanks to Peter Neumeyer, and his not-to-be-missed *The Annotated Charlotte's Web*, we can see many of White's notes and thoughts. And thanks to an interview with E.B. White, we can learn about the process of creating the beloved book.

Andy White lived a long life. His stepson tells us what he was like at the end:

...He was the same, still lithe and only a bit slower, and one evening in August, 1984, when he came for dinner he complained that he'd knocked his head the day before while unloading a canoe from the roof rack of his car, over at Walker Pond; now he was having trouble knowing exactly where he was or what was happening around him. Carol and I smiled at him. "Yes, that happens sometimes, doesn't it?" we assured him.

But he knew better. A couple of months later, after we'd left, he took to his bed and never again knew exactly where he was. It looked like a rapid onset of Alzheimer's, but more likely, the doctors thought, was a senile dementia brought on by the blow to his head that day. He was eighty-five now. Nurses and practical nurses and other local ladies were hired, round the clock, who took extraordinary care of him. My brother managed it all, and somehow managed his own life as well. When I came up for a visit, early in the winter, Joe said that Andy would know me but that our conversation would be interesting. "How do you mean?" I said. "You'll see," he said.

I walked in and found him restless in his bed and amazingly frail. His eyes lit up and he said my name in the old way: "Rog!" He wanted to know how I'd come from New York and I said that Henry Allen had picked me up at the Bangor airport. "Did you fly over Seattle on the way?" he asked. He didn't seem troubled when I said no, and after a moment murmured, "Lost in the clouds."

He died the next October, still at home and able to recognize the people around him. Joe told me that in that long year he'd read aloud to his father often, and discovered that he enjoyed listening to his own writings, though he wasn't always clear about who the author was. Sometimes he'd raise a hand and impatiently wave a passage away: not good enough. Other evenings, he'd listen to the end, almost at rest, and then ask again who'd written these words.

"You did, Dad," Joe said.

There was a pause, and Andy said, "Well, not bad." (See *Let Me Finish*, by Roger Angell, pages 136-7.)

Charlotte left a legacy: Her spiderlings—and generations more—who continue to live in the North Brooklin barn.

Andy White left a legacy, too: His books which continue to inspire generations of children and adults.

The end of White's life brings to mind the words he wrote about the *Death of a Pig*:

> *At intervals during the last day I took cool fresh water down to him and at such times as he found the strength to get to his feet he would stand with head in the pail and snuffle his snout around. He drank a few sips but no more; yet it seemed to comfort him to dip his nose in water and bobble it about, sucking in and blowing out through his teeth. Much of the time, now, he lay indoors half buried in sawdust. Once, near the last, while I was attending him 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.* (E.B. White, *Death of a Pig*.)

Who can say whether losing his real pig caused White to write a story about a spider who helps a fictional pig to live? He always denied the two events were related. But perhaps, after all, Charlotte's Web was a way for White to give his lost pig a different ending.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/THE-STORY-OF-CHARLOTTE-S-WEB-Charlotte-s-Web

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/THE-STORY-OF-CHARLOTTE-S-WEB-Charlotte-s-Web

Questions 2 Ponder

How Do We Keep It Real While Making Things Up?

When we visit a farm, we usually encounter strong smells. It's a place where manure lends its odor to whatever else is going on at the farm.

When E.B. White wrote his story about "Charlotte's Web," he kept it real. There's plenty of manure, for example, at the Zuckerman farm. Those manure piles serve a purpose for pigs like Wilbur (who love to roll around in them, especially on hot summer days).

While writing his story, White kept it real at the same time as he made things up. He studied spiders for a whole year before he began to tell Charlotte's tale. Throughout Charlotte's story White mixes reality with fantasy. This gives his work credibility as he seamlessly weaves facts with fiction.

The parts of Charlotte's story that are based in reality are the non-fictional parts. The parts of Charlotte's story that are made-up, and based on fantasy, are the fictional parts.

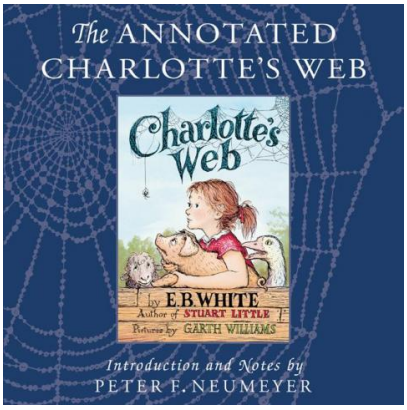
What are some of the non-fictional parts of Charlotte’s story?

What are some of the fictional parts of Charlotte’s story?

Is there another story you can think of where the author mixes reality with fantasy? What is that story? What are some of the non-fictional parts? What are some of the fictional parts?

Write a short story where you combine “keeping it real” (non-fiction) while “making things up” (fiction).

Media Stream



The Annotated Charlotte's Web

Image online, courtesy Amazon.

View this asset at:

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Charlotte's Web - Trailer

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Charlotte's Web - 2006 Live-Action Film

Directed by:
Gary Winick

Produced by:
Jordan Kerner

Written by:
Book - E. B. White
Screenplay - Susannah Grant and Karey Kirkpatrick

Narrated by:
Sam Shepard

Starring:
Dakota Fanning
Julia Roberts
Steve Buscemi
Cedric the Entertainer
John Cleese
Oprah Winfrey
Thomas Haden Church
Andre Benjamin
Reba McEntire
Kathy Bates
Robert Redford

Music by:
Danny Elfman

Cinematography:
Seamus McGarvey

Distributed by:
Paramount Pictures/Nickelodeon Movies (U.S.)
United International Pictures (Worldwide)

Release dates:
December 7, 2006 - Australia
December 15, 2006 - U.S.
February 9, 2007 - UK

Running time:
97 minutes
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