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# *The Second Tree from the Corner*

*E. B. White*





**THE** 

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**SECOND TREE**  
**FROM THE**  
**CORNER**

by  

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E. B. White



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**Harper & Row, Publishers**  
**New York, Hagerstown, San Francisco, London**

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THE  
SECOND TREE  
FROM THE  
CORNER

## *Other Books by E. B. White*

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**ESSAYS OF E. B. WHITE**

**LETTERS OF E. B. WHITE**

**THE TRUMPET OF THE SWAN**

**THE POINTS OF MY COMPASS**

**CHARLOTTE'S WEB**

**HERE IS NEW YORK**

**THE WILD FLAG**

**STUART LITTLE**

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**QUO VADIMUS?**

**FAREWELL TO MODEL T**

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**William Strunk, Jr. (revised and enlarged by E. B. White)**

**A SUBTREASURY OF AMERICAN HUMOR**

**co-edited with Katharine S. White**

**IS SEX NECESSARY?**

**with James Thurber**

## NOTE

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Most of the pieces in this book were published first in *The New Yorker*. "The Hotel of the Total Stranger" appeared in *Harper's* as one of the essays in the "One Man's Meat" series. "Death of a Pig" appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly*. "Zoo Revisited" is here published for the first time.

The remarks on humor in Chapter III formed part of an introduction to "A Subtreasury of American Humor," published by Coward-McCann. The remarks on Don Marquis in the same chapter are taken from an introduction to "the lives and times of archy and mehitabel," published by Doubleday. "The Hen (An Appreciation)" is the preface to "A Basic Chicken Guide for the Small Flock Owner," published by Morrow. "Farewell, My Lovely!", a collaboration with Richard L. Strout, appeared first in *The New Yorker* under that title, later as a small book called "Farewell to Model T," published by G. P. Putnam's Sons.

## FOREWORD

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A tendency to revisit, to try old places and other times in the hope of tasting again the sweet sorrow of parting, is discernible in these pages. The book, in some of its stretches, is a sentimental journey to the scenes of my crime. I am a goodbye sayer, too, it would appear from the evidence. There is an account of my bidding goodbye to a complete stranger in a barber-shop merely because he is leaving; and as I look over this book that I have assembled from so many spare parts, I can't escape the disturbing realization that the whole thing carries an undertone of indiscriminate farewell. I even knock off the planet Earth at one point, in an attempt to tidy up the empyrean before somebody else does it for me. A man who is over fifty, as am I, is sure that he has only about twenty minutes to live, and it is natural, I suppose, that he should feel disposed to put his affairs in order, such as they are, to harvest what fruit he has not already picked up and stored away against the winter, and to tie his love for the world into a convenient bundle, accessible to all.

Whoever sets pen to paper writes of himself, whether knowingly or not, and this is a book of revelations: essays, poems, stories, opinions, reports, drawn from the past, the present, the future, the city, and the country. I could have called it "Weird Confessions" as well as not, but "The Second Tree from the Corner" sounds more genteel and is, in addition, the title of one of the pieces (the one where the fellow says goodbye to sanity).

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Assembling the book has been a sobering experience, revealing, as it has, a man unable to sit still for more than a few minutes at a time, untouched by the dedication required for sustained literary endeavor, yet unable *not* to write. However, I do not come to this foreword in a spirit of derogation or with any idea of offering alibis. If these collected writings resemble a dog's breakfast, I shall insist that it is because of my unusual understanding of dogs and my sympathy for them in their morning problems.

For the most part I have aimed to select material that is not too dependent on the immediate events or portents that inspired it. In three of the chapters, the reader will encounter a section of notes that were published first in the Notes and Comment page of *The New Yorker*. These are, of course, couched in the first person plural, a device as commonplace in journalism as it is harebrained. I do not know how the editorial "we" originated, but I think it must first have been employed in an effort to express a corporate or institutional opinion and that in no time at all the individual charged with formulating this opinion forgot all about his basic responsibility and got talking about himself and peddling his personal prejudices, retaining the "we" and thus giving the impression that the stuff was written by a set of identical twins or the members of a tumbling act. There is nothing I can do about this, and the reader is advised to dismiss it from his mind.

I have not dated the notes, preferring to depend on the reader's perspicacity and good will. Whenever I came across a note that seemed unintelligible without a date, I simply threw it out, serving it right and teaching myself a lesson. Once in a while the reader will stumble on some antique ghost like Hitler, pottering about as though still alive, and will get a momentary jolt. But I am not one to pamper readers, and don't want them daydreaming their way through this book like drivers on a superhighway. This book twists and turns. Go carefully, and remember: the time you save may be your own.



Incidentally, the publication over my signature of items that formed part of *The New Yorker's* anonymous editorial page is not to be taken as an indication that I am the fellow responsible for that page. The page is the work of many. I am one of the contributors to it. I feel greatly indebted to the magazine for its willingness to let me use these paragraphs, for when something is published first anonymously and then later an author is unveiled, the public draws wrong conclusions about the workings of a magazine and tends to give credit where credit is not due. Theoretically, it is a mistake to break anonymity, and though I am guilty of it, I commit the sin knowingly and for selfish reasons.

Most of the material in the book is presented in exactly the form in which it originally appeared. In a few places I've made slight revisions. Here and there I changed a "which" to a "that," in memory of H. W. Ross, who cared deeply about the matter—so deeply, in fact, that I still wince every time I discover myself violating the rule he loved so well. In a couple of places I have changed proper names, for symmetry, or for variety, or to save real people the possible embarrassment of being associated with me in my off-color enterprises.

Although as an observer I try to keep abreast of events, it is a losing game. Progress, deeds, overtake a man. Somebody (I think it was I) once remarked that today's fantasy is tomorrow's news event. The pages that follow confirm the truth of the remark. The future pales into the present. The space platform is old hat. Calculating machines are suffering nervous breakdowns. I wrote the "Song of the Queen Bee" on the strength of information from the Department of Agriculture that bees had not been inseminated by artificial means; but although I composed the poem during lunch hour, and lost not a moment turning it in, it had hardly been off the press when a *Life* photographer sent me graphic evidence that bees had gone the way of all modern flesh. I think there has never been an age

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more cruel to writers than this one—rendering their stuff obsolete almost before it escapes from the typewriter. On the other hand, human nature is fairly steady and almost changeless: the first piece in the chapter called “Time Present” was written a number of years ago, during the Second World War, but it belongs to the present, and as I reread it I saw that time had stood still.

A book should be the occasion of rejoicing, but it is seldom that, imparting a feeling of completion but not of satisfaction. I suppose a writer, almost by definition, is a person incapable of satisfaction—which is what keeps him at his post. Let us just say that I have tidied up my desk a bit, and flung out a few noisy and ill-timed farewells, like a drunk at a wedding he is enjoying to the hilt and has no real intention of leaving.

—E. B. W.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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E. B. White was born in Mount Vernon, New York, on July 11, 1899. He attended the public schools there and later went to Cornell, from which he graduated in 1921. One of his college years was interrupted by Army service in World War I.

Before settling down to the work for which he is best known—writing for *The New Yorker*—White held a variety of jobs: reporting for the United Press and the *Seattle Times*, serving as a mess boy aboard a ship, working for an advertising agency.

In the mid-twenties he began submitting poems and pieces to a new magazine then struggling for success. Eventually, Harold Ross persuaded him to come to work in *The New Yorker* offices. The connection proved a particularly happy one, and White has continued to write for the magazine ever since.

Many of White's *New Yorker* pieces were unsigned, notably the hundreds of short editorials he wrote under the heading "Notes and Comment," but E. B. White fans used to think they could spot his hand—in "The Talk of the Town," in picture captions, in taglines for the end-of-column fillers known as newsbreaks. A growing audience eagerly awaited his verse, his satirical sketches, and his essays in the humorous weekly, as well as his "One Man's Meat" columns, which he wrote regularly for *Harper's* magazine for four and a half years.

The many books he has written have found wide audiences. Among the titles are *Is Sex Necessary?* written with James Thurber; *A Subtreasury of American Humor*, coed-



ited with Katharine S. White; a short book on New York, which appeared in *Holiday* magazine and was later reprinted in book form as *Here Is New York*; collections of his writings, *Every Day Is Saturday*, *Quo Vadimus?*, *The Fox of Peapack*, *One Man's Meat*, *The Wild Flag*, *The Second Tree from the Corner*, *The Points of My Compass*, *Letters of E. B. White*, and *Essays of E. B. White*. In addition, he edited and amplified for latter-day writers *The Elements of Style*, written by William Strunk, Jr. White is also the author of three juvenile classics, *Charlotte's Web*, *Stuart Little*, and *The Trumpet of the Swan*.

In July, 1963, President John F. Kennedy named E. B. White as one of thirty-one Americans to receive the Presidential Medal of Freedom. His other awards include the Gold Medal for Essays and Criticism given by the Academy of Arts and Letters in 1960 and the 1971 National Medal for Literature, presented by the National Book Committee "for the excellence of his or her total contribution to the world of letters." In 1970 he won the Laura Ingalls Wilder Award, presented by the Children's Services Division of the American Library Association every five years to an author of books that have, over a period of years, "made a substantial and lasting contribution to literature for children." In December, 1973, he was elected to The American Academy of Arts and Letters.

White was married to the late Katharine S. White, a retired editor of *The New Yorker*. They lived on a Maine salt water farm. They have one son and three grandchildren.

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*Time Past,  
Time Future*