



Charlotte's Web

E. B. White / Illustrated by Garth Williams

Classic books motivate and influence other stories for many years. *Charlotte's Web* continues to inspire us.

Literature: What Is It?



The Value of Literature

“Literature,” as the term is used here, does not include just any printed matter.

Literature for children shares the qualities of literature in general; it’s a matter of degree.

Readers may click through Guysread.com on the Internet, pick up *Time Magazine* in the supermarket, or look at the photographs in *National Geographic* at the doctor’s office. Each of these provides information and vicarious experience, but they are not literature. Literature *may* give us information and vicarious experience, but it also offers much more. What sets a chapter of *Charlotte’s Web* apart from a *Small Farm Today* article about animal life on a New England farm? What sets a page in *Christmas in the Big House*, *Christmas in the Quarters* apart from a list of dates about life on a Tidewater plantation just before the beginning of the Civil War? Many things, and they are at the heart of a definition of literature. Literature is traditionally described as the body of writing that exists because of its inherent imaginative and artistic qualities. The fine line drawn between literature (which is, in Louise Rosenblatt’s terms, writing that we *live through* as we read it) and writing that is primarily scientific, intellectual, or philosophical (which we read in an *effere*nt or information-receiving way) often wavers; we read these different kinds of texts for different purposes, expecting to come away with different kinds of knowledge.

Why do adults pick up and read a novel or a collection of poetry? Why do you? What is it that readers look for from literature that they don’t find in the

many factual accounts they read in newspapers? First, from literature of any kind, we seek *pleasure*—not to find a lesson in ecology, not to be taught about the natural habitat of the Louisiana brown pelican or about the perils of global warming. We choose literature that promises entertainment and, sometimes, escape. If other discoveries come to us, too, we are pleased and doubly rewarded.

However, our first motive for reading a novel, leafing through the pages of a picturebook, or chanting a poem is personal pleasure. We may lay the book aside with mixed feelings, but if there is no enjoyment, we reject it completely or leave it unfinished. For adults who have had a variety of experiences, who have known success and failure, who have had to face their own shaky ethical standards, the nature of pleasure in literature may be different from that for children.

We read for pleasure.

Because we are all different, the pleasures we seek as well as those we encounter may be very personal and, for that matter, may vary on different days or occasions. But what is required of us as critical readers is that we examine the pleasure a work of literature aspires to give. As critical readers we don't just stop with our personal pleasure: "I like it, and that's so personal that it cannot be debated." We go on, instead, to find in the work the sources of that personal enjoyment. Dennis Sumara suggests that reading and interpreting literature brings us the pleasure of transforming "imaginative occasions into productive insights."¹ These "surprising and purposeful insights" we find in reading literature may lie in a painful recognition of ourselves, a satisfying verification of our humanness, or in variations of the great questions of the philosopher Immanuel Kant: What must I know? What should I be? What can I hope? But some kind of pleasure is essential, whether the reader is eight or eighty-five years old.

Literature provides a second reward: *understanding*. This understanding comes from the exploration of the human condition and the revelation of human nature. It is not explicitly the function of literature, either for children or for adults, to try to reform humans, or to set up guidelines for behavior; however, it is the province of literature to observe and to comment, to open individuals and their society for our observation and understanding. Information alone may or may not contribute to understanding. We can know a person's height, weight, hair color, ethnic background, and occupation—this is information. But having information—overwhelming us and abundantly available now with the click of a mouse—does not necessarily create the conditions for deep insight. Until we are aware of temperament, anxieties, joys, and ambitions, we do not *know* that person.

Information is *part* of the story, and when we see it, we expect it to be relevant. The following passage from *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* by Mildred Taylor, for example, contains both summarized and detailed information. Here it is Christmas morning:

In addition to the books there was a sockful of once-a-year store-bought licorice, oranges, and bananas for each of us and from Uncle Hammer a dress and a sweater for me, and a sweater and a pair of pants each for Christopher John and Little Man. But nothing compared to the books. Little Man, who treasured clothes above all else, carefully laid his new pants and sweaters aside and dashed for a clean sheet of brown paper to make a cover for his book, and throughout the day as he lay upon the deerskin rug looking at the bright, shining pictures of faraway places, turning each page as if it were gold, he would suddenly squint down at his hands, glance at the page he had just turned, then dash into the kitchen to wash again—just to make sure.

The effect of the paragraph is not merely to tell about the Christmas presents, but also to reveal something about the characters and their lives. Here is a family devoted to

reading, to education, to learning about the world beyond. Books are precious, so precious that they must be protected, and only clean hands may touch them. The home is furnished simply with a deerskin rug that must have been carefully skinned and cured for use. There may be a hunter in the family. This family values appearance and takes good care of their clothing, not taking it for granted; clothes are important as special Christmas gifts, as are fresh fruit and licorice. In order to be part of literature, information in a text must be carefully crafted and provided for important reasons.

This is not to say that all literature is necessarily fictional. There are texts—like our nonfiction **mentor text**, Coretta Scott King award winner *Christmas in the Big House, Christmas in the Quarters*, by Patricia and Fredrick McKissack—that primarily provide us with information, with facts that are true about history, science, mathematics, music, or art, but in which the writers have shaped and deepened the information to provide us with new insights into the world and ourselves. In the case of the McKissacks' book, for example, we see how within one household two different groups of people—the plantation owners and the plantation slaves—get ready for the Christmas of 1859 and what they think about as they prepare. The contrast between the thoughts and experiences of the whites and the blacks, along with the extensive notes the McKissacks present about that day in history, provide us with the deep insight we expect from literature. Literature can take many forms—memoir, information texts about science and new discoveries, histories of past events, even texts presented in both graphics and words. What makes a work literature is its ability to give significance to an experience described in terms of human lives—significance that helps us, whatever our age, to understand a little more about ourselves and others. In the most general terms, then, fictional or nonfictional literature is reading that, by means of imaginative and artistic qualities, provides pleasure and understanding.

Returning to the comparison of the *Small Farms Today* article and *Charlotte's Web*, we can feel fairly certain that although we may enjoy the process, we read the *Small Farms Today* article primarily for information, and we can also be reasonably sure that we read *Charlotte's Web* primarily for pleasure.

Literature has other more specific appeals for us as readers. Literature *shows human motives* for what they are, inviting the reader to identify with or react to a character. We may see into the mind of the character—or into the subconscious that even the character does not know. Through the writer's careful choice of details we come to see clearly the motivation for action. If in these chosen details we see some similarity to our own lives, we identify with the character, feeling that we understand the motives and can justify the deeds. Or seeing the error in judgment that the character fails to see, we understand. Seeing motives we disapprove of, we distrust, or seeing a reflection of our own mistakes, we forgive.

Our fictional mentor text, E. B. White's *Charlotte's Web*, serves as a critical example here. It shows the complexity and growth of one character, Wilbur the pig, who at one moment cries out in panic, "I don't want to die! Save me, somebody! Save me!" However, months later his motive for action is selfless concern:

"Templeton, I will make you a solemn promise. Get Charlotte's egg sac for me, and from now on I will let you eat first, when Lurvy slops me. I will let you have your choice of everything in the trough and I won't touch a thing until you're through."

The motives of Charlotte the spider, however, are born of pure sympathy and a desire to help Wilbur in his suffering. She says briskly that Wilbur will not die, and she weaves words into her web until late at night. A less-than-powerful child reader may

One goal of the writer is to make sense out of life.

identify with Wilbur, the powerless pig, but the adult who reads the book to the child may identify more readily with the selfless Charlotte. In order to call a book a piece of literature, it must have this ability to resonate for a reader at many different stages of life. Though *Charlotte's Web* is an older piece of literature, having been published in 1952, and though some aspects of the text show the limited perspective of its male, white, time-bound author (family farms are much less in evidence now; a young Fern of today might be more feisty, a state fair less safe and inviting), the book's expression of the importance of friendship, the inevitability of death, and its depiction of a life (Charlotte's) well lived, still provides lasting insights into the human experience. *Charlotte's Web* can be considered literature because it provides new insights into the human experience for a reader, at any age, no matter how many times it is read. *Charlotte's Web* can even be considered great literature, because it continues to attract readers well after the people for whom it was written are gone.

Literature offers many kinds of understanding.

Literature also *provides form for experience*. Aside from birth and death, real life has no beginnings or endings but is instead a series of stories without order, each story merging with other stories. Literature, however, makes order of randomness by organizing events and consequences, cause and effect, beginning and ending. When we look back on our lives, we notice the high spots: "the first time we met" or even "the day we sold the SUV." With the perspective given by distance in time, what once seemed trivial now seems important. When we look back, we may be unaware of sequence, because chronology is merely the random succession of life's disordered events. Literature, however, by placing the relevant episodes—"and the next time we met"—into coherent sequence, gives order and form to experience.

Fiction makes order from disparate events.

In *Charlotte's Web* White selects events that, among other things, demonstrate the purpose in Charlotte's life. When she says, "By helping you, perhaps I was trying to lift up my life a trifle," we see more clearly the pattern of Charlotte's behavior. Although she accepts the inevitability of death, she does not accept the prospect of passive waiting. Charlotte chooses instead to fill her days with order and purpose. As White directs our thoughts and alters our feelings in a chosen course, he gives form to the experience of the ongoing cycle of life.

Literature also may *reveal life's fragmentation*. Not a day goes by without our being pulled in one direction after another by the demands of friendship—"Please help." Of obligation—"I promised I would." Of pressure—"It's due tomorrow." And of money—"I wish I could afford it." Life is fragmented, and our daily experience proves it. However, literature, while it may remind us of our own and society's fragmentation, does not leave us there. It sorts the world into disparate segments we can identify and examine; friendship, greed, family, sacrifice, childhood, love, advice, old age, treasures, snobbery, and compassion are set before us for close observation. We will see in future pages how, in this increasingly fragmented and busy age, writers are expressing that fragmentation in new ways.

Literature helps us to identify and examine fragments of experience.

Although literature may be saying or revealing that life is fragmented, it simultaneously *helps us focus on essentials*. In *Christmas in the Big House, Christmas in the Quarters*, the McKissacks have ordered the chaotic experiences of the months and weeks before Christmas Day on the Virginia plantation so as to permit the reader to experience a part of life with different intensity but with new understanding. The McKissacks chose to write about a Christmas on the eve of the secession of the South, just after John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry, in order to focus the reader's attention on the different perceptions of landowners and slaves at this time. The McKissacks

Literature helps us to see essentials—the meaning and unity of life.

seem to have wanted readers to be aware of the fact that while the white plantation owners celebrate Christmas, the slaves are quietly talking about freedom. In the process of giving order to life, the McKissacks sorted out what they considered the essential details from the nonessential. Undistracted by irrelevant experiences or minor anxieties, readers focus on what the McKissacks want them to see: that which they consider the essentials of action, people, events, and tensions. Because literature ignores the irrelevant and focuses on the essentials, significance becomes clear. As we read, our detachment helps us to see events and their possible influences. Challenged, we make choices, feel the excitement of suspense, and glow with the pride of accomplishment. Literature *says* that life is fragmented. What it *does* is something else: Literature provides a sense of life's unity and meaning.

Literature can *explore and suggest attitudes toward the institutions of society*. A group of people organized for specific purposes may become accepted as an institution, something bigger than separate individuals. This group's judgments can create a form of institutional control that establishes rules about behaviors we might like to determine for ourselves. The institutions of society—like government, family, church, and school, as well as forces that shape our jobs—urge and coerce us into conforming to standards. Literature clarifies our reactions to institutions by showing appropriate circumstances for submitting to or struggling against them.

In the institution called farming, for example, it is unprofitable to keep a runt pig, because fattening him will not pay a good return on the dollar. In *Charlotte's Web*, Wilbur's existence is in conflict with this institutional truth, and we see what a life-and-death struggle does to an immature innocent. We may not literally identify with Wilbur, but his struggle for life nonetheless has similarities to our own. Wilbur soon discovers who his friends are, how resourceful they can be, how hard they will work for another's safety, and even, in Templeton's case, what a person's price may be. Through Wilbur's struggle with the profit imperative in farming we discover in a small way the impersonal nature of society. In other stories we may discover that racism is institutionalized, or that although we individually hate war, it is sometimes ordered by institutions larger than ourselves. The variety of such conflicts seems infinite. *Christmas in the Big House*, *Christmas in the Quarters*, for example, challenges the historical institution of slavery. Readers will find many other children's books that similarly make us think and consider actions we might pursue when a problem needs to be solved in society.

Not only do institutions affect our lives, but nature does, too, and as with institutions, literature often *reveals nature as a force* with profound influence. Our natural environment constantly reminds us of its effects on our lives, whether with windstorms, as described in the classic, *The Storm Book* by Charlotte Zolotow, or the more imaginative *Hurricane* by David Wiesner, or with extreme cold and lack of sun and food, as described in nonfiction survival stories like Jacqueline Briggs Martin's *The Lamp, the Ice, and the Boat Called Fish*. Literature, by presenting humans involved in conflict with such weather, makes us see the power of nature on human life.

Nature sometimes demands that humans exert all their powers against it. The now classic *Stone Fox* by John Reynolds Gardiner rivets readers to their seats as they cheer for Willy and his dog Spotlight to win an Iditarod race to save his grandfather's land. Now at its thirtieth anniversary, this book perfectly demonstrates that, although struggling cannot conquer nature, humans may struggle heroically and yet not be conquered. In such a conflict, the reader can applaud the human will.

Literature helps us explore attitudes toward the institutions of society.

The natural world may influence us in varied ways.

Literature lets us see into other lives.

Literature *provides vicarious experiences*. It is impossible for us to live any life but our own, in any time but our own life span, or in any other place but the present. Yet literature makes it possible for us to experience different times, places, and lives. Reading *Christmas in the Big House*, *Christmas in the Quarters* allows us to experience the Christmastime of a child living in slave quarters on a Virginia plantation, a child for whom winter is “shoe-wearing time,” for whom school is a secret, forbidden “pit school” out in the woods, and for whom Christmastime means more, not less, work. We see how that child’s parents react to the news of John Brown’s raid on Harper’s Ferry and also to the escape of a friend, and we feel a bit of what that child must have felt. Literature can provide us with windows through which we see the lives of people different from ourselves, people who live in different countries, speak different languages, value life in different ways than we do. Reading literature by and about people from places and times different from those we live in helps us ask new questions about our own place and time. Our comprehension becomes wider and deeper when our lives become textured with this new, vicarious experience. The possibilities for us to participate in lives other than our own become infinite, as numerous as the books on the library shelves.

The vicarious experience of literature entices and leads us into *meeting an artist-creator* whose medium, words or brush strokes, we know; whose subject, human nature, we live with; whose vision, life’s meaning, we hope to understand. We are the student-novice before the artist. In the hands of a gifted writer or painter, we turn from being passive followers into passionate advocates calling new followers. The writer’s skill with words, like the artist’s ability with shape, color, and line, gives us a pleasure we want to share—and an understanding we have an urge to spread.



Literature for Children and Young Adults

As children’s literature critic Peter Hunt writes,

The children’s book can be defined in terms of the implied reader. It will be clear, from a careful reading, who a book is designed for: whether the book is on the side of the child totally, whether it is for the developing child, or whether it is aiming somewhere over the child’s head.²

Literature for children can be defined in terms of the implied reader.

Another way of putting this is to say that children’s literature is different from literature written for adults because of its audience. Children’s literature can have all the complexity, resonance, insight, wit, and artistry we find in literature for adults; however, it has a double nature, different from the literature intended to be read only by adults.

Part of the “doubleness” of children’s literature is its *dual* audience. Children’s literature is written for two audiences: the adult who often buys and approves of the literature and the child who reads it. Children’s literature is double also because, differently from adult literature, children’s literature is not written by the kind of person who reads it. Children’s literature is written by adults for children as adults imagine children to be. Children’s literature, then, if it is written for its readers’ pleasure, is also written for the pleasure of children as that pleasure is imagined by adult writers.

Like adults, children seek pleasure from a story, but the sources of their pleasure may be somewhat different. Because their experiences are more limited, children may not understand the same complexity in ideas as adults. To deal with this more limited understanding, the expression of ideas in children's books will perhaps be simpler than they are in many books for adults. Stories for children are often more directly told than are stories for adults, with fewer digressions and more obvious relationships between characters and actions, or between characters themselves—though, as we shall see in subsequent chapters, story lines in children's literature are becoming increasingly sophisticated. Though the best children's literature is not overtly didactic, with a moral at the end telling children how to behave, the persuasive intent of a story written for a child is often more explicit, easier to tease out, than is the intent of a story written for an adult. Because children are both more and less literal than adults, they may accept the fantastic more readily than many adults. Children are frequently more open to experimenting with a greater variety of literary forms than many adults will accept—from poetry to folktales, from adventure to fantasy.

When we speak of literature we most often think of the words on the page and the worlds those words create, but when we speak of children's literature we must include the picturebook format as well, with its ever-growing selection of art. Children's literature *provides visual worlds to enter into*. Texture, color, shape, and line, along with shading, contrast, perspective, and balance—these are some of the elements that accomplished children's artists of our time work and play with as they create wonderful new and familiar worlds for us in photographs or watercolors, pen or ink, acrylic or gouache, collage or cartoon. *Charlotte's Web* is a beautiful story, and the drawings of the great Garth Williams enhance the way we understand Wilbur. Once having read the book it becomes difficult to imagine Wilbur in any way other than as Williams has presented him. Who, having leafed through the book, can imagine a plantation Christmas without thinking of John Thompson's warm colors in *Christmas in the Big House*, *Christmas in the Quarters*? Who can read or hear the story of *The Three Pigs* by David Wiesner without imagining the puzzled and chagrined wolf as the story goes out of control? The great artists of children's literature bring pictures to the words we read, but also, as we will argue in this handbook, bring to the field of children's literature a great deal more.

Literature for children can provide visual worlds to enter into.

As we said earlier, children's literature is always written for children as adult writers imagine them; as society changes, some of the ways adults imagine children and childhood change. We believe that children are imagined somewhat differently now by the adult writers of children's literature than they were in previous decades. Influenced by the arguments of Eliza Dresang, Peter Hunt, Perry Nodelman, and Maria Nikolajeva, we believe that children's literature is still recognizable as a distinct and important body of literature, separate from literature for adults. Unlike literature written for adults, literature written especially for children grapples with questions of innocence at the same time as it seeks to provide knowledge.³ Yet children's literature is becoming more like literature for adults as society changes. We will go into more detail about these changes in the next chapter.

We want briefly here, before we end this chapter, to clarify some of the differences between children's and young adult literature. There are two different kinds of literature that have been labeled "young adult." One kind of literature—*To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Lord of the Flies*, *Catcher in the Rye*, and *A Separate Peace*, for example—was originally written by adults for adults, but because an adolescent was a main character, or because the book captured something true about adolescence, has been

INQUIRY POINT

Make a list of qualities of character you believe are typical of an eight-year-old child. Now make a list of qualities you believe are typical of a sixteen-year-old. Based on these two lists, calculate the differences between the kinds of books you think these typical youngsters would like to read. Which books might be more suspenseful? Which might have more graphic elements? Which might be more didactic? Which might have more complicated plots? Why do you think so? Defend your choices with examples of fiction that you know for both ages. 🌀

incorporated into high school curricula, and taken on as a part of adolescent literature. Most books labeled “young adult literature” have been written expressly with adolescent readers in mind. Most young adult literature is therefore problematic in the same way that children’s literature is: It is written by adults for teenagers, as those adult writers imagine teenagers to be.

In “The Harry Potter Novels as a Test Case for Adolescent Literature,” Roberta Seelinger Trites provides a helpful explanation of the difference between children’s and young adult literature. She writes that *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, the first book of the series, can be considered a children’s book, because, as is essential in a children’s book, it “portrays parents’ love as omnipotent, and it provides a reassuring message about death.”⁴ The rest of the Harry

Literature for children is somewhat different from literature for young adults.

Potter series, Trites writes, can be considered adolescent literature, because in these books Harry, Hermione, and Ron increasingly explore their sexuality, experience deaths that are frightening, and struggle against powerful institutions that structure their lives. The line between children’s and young adult literature is thin and wavering, and there are other explanations for the differences between the two types, but we think this explanation is a provocative and helpful one. In this handbook we will describe both children’s and young adult books that we consider to be literature.



New Books Depend on Old Books

We want to reinforce a message from the introductory chapter: We will continuously focus on children’s and young adult books that are considered **classics** now as well as books that we believe are classics in the making. We plan to group classic books of both kinds—books that have worn well, attracting readers from one generation to the next, as well as books that have broken new ground, influencing other writers and artists of children’s literature—in textsets of related children’s books. Textsets, as Lawrence Sipe tells us, contribute to literary competence because “the more stories we know, the greater number of critical tools we bring to bear on any particular story.”⁵

We believe that in writing a book any writer is being influenced by, communicating with, and answering to particular writers who came before her. Rebecca Stead’s *When You Reach Me* in some ways updates ideas that Madeline L’Engle played with throughout *A Wrinkle in Time*. In *House of Dolls*, a story in four chapters beautifully illustrated by Barbara McClintock, Francesca Lia Block pays homage to Rumer Godden’s 1948 classic, *The Doll’s House*, which Block’s main character Madison Blackberry reads with her mother at the end of the story. We can be fairly certain

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that Mildred Taylor had read *To Kill a Mockingbird* many times when she wrote *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*. Readers of old and new classics develop a “textual intelligence”⁶ that helps them become more literate human beings and better readers and writers. The more quality children’s literature readers know and understand, the greater the chance that brave new stories will be created in times to come.

INQUIRY POINT

Writers use others’ texts as springboards for their own in many ways. This could be considered a kind of intertextuality, but it is not overt. The writer does not necessarily clearly quote or make reference to another writer who has influenced his work. One writer’s novel about the life of a small pig inspires a younger writer to tell a similar story. A reader can only infer this relationship. Similarly, sometimes an adult story of a certain type—the slave narrative, for

example—inspires a children’s writer to try his hand at writing his own version of the same kind of story for younger readers, as Gary Paulson did in his faux slave narrative *Nightjohn*. Sometimes one writer will have learned aspects of his craft from studying another writer; one can surmise Jarret J. Krosoczka learned some of what he expresses in his wonderful graphic novel *Lunch Lady and the Cyborg Substitute* by reading Dav Pilkey’s *Captain Underpants* series. 🌀

SUMMARY

Literature at its best gives both pleasure and understanding. It explores what it is like to be a complicated human being living in a complicated world. If these phrases seem too abstract for children’s and young adult literature, we can rephrase them in young people’s terms:

- What are people like?
- Why are they like that?
- What do they need?
- What makes them do what they do?

Glimpses of answers to these questions are made visible in poetry or fiction by the elements of plot, character, point of view, setting, tone, and style of an imaginative work; they are brought to our awareness through perspective, color, shape, tone, or design of an artistic work. Nonfiction brings us into other worlds as well, providing us with images of real life and real ideas—mathematics, science, history. All of these kinds of well-crafted writing together constitute literature. Words are merely words, pictures merely pictures, but literature for any age is words and pictures chosen with skill and artistry to give readers delight and to help them understand themselves, others, and the world.

... and back to pleasure and understanding.

INQUIRY POINT

Writers of children’s literature borrow from the adult literature written by others or that they themselves have written. Or, to be more exact, they can think through a problem in one genre and then in another, in their adult writing as well as in their children’s writing. As you read E. B. White’s *Charlotte’s Web*, it can be informative to read White’s nonfiction essay, “Death of a Pig,” as well. How do you think one text influenced the other? 🌀



TEXTSET

Pairing Up with Charlotte's Web

The textset for this chapter will invite you to examine issues and themes from the classic *Charlotte's Web*. Here we examine aspects of *Charlotte's Web* and pair them with some children's stories that might update, extend, clarify, or contrast with the original text. The different stories might also encourage new questions about *Charlotte's Web*.



The Book

White, E. B. *Some Pig!* HarperCollins, 2006.

The picturebook *Some Pig!* introduces readers to Wilbur using E. B. White's masterful text from the classic *Charlotte's Web*. The text is combined with artist Maggie Kneen's illustrations. This charming picturebook edition may introduce children to Fern and Wilbur, but does it satisfy the way *Charlotte's Web* can? Explore other picturebooks made up of excerpts from the original novel, such as *Wilbur's Adventure* from HarperCollins (2007).



The Author

**White, E. B. *The Annotated Charlotte's Web*.
Garth Williams, illus. HarperCollins, 2006.**

An exciting exploration of one of the best-loved classics of all times. *The Annotated Charlotte's Web* includes information from E. B. White's original drafts, cross-references, letters, criticism, and literary-cultural commentary. This illustrated book of annotations and notes provides many insights into the making of *Charlotte's Web*. A must for YA readers who might want to revisit *Charlotte's Web* and find out about the thoughts of its author.



The Setting

Fair

Part of *Charlotte's Web* takes place at a fair. Which of these fair books seem to be the closest to the descriptions of E. B. White?

Alter, Judy. *Meet Me at the Fair: County, State, and World's Fairs & Expositions*. Franklin Watts, 1997.

This nonfiction book with photographic art is filled with information about the history of America's fairs.

**Frasier, Debra. *A Fabulous Fair Alphabet*.
Beach Lane Books, 2010.**

The Minnesota State Fair, a favorite site of the author/illustrator, is presented in scrapbook form.

Lewin, Ted. *Fair!* Lothrop, Lee & Shepard Books, 1997.

Lewin's trademark paintings bring to life the sights, sounds, and smells of a county fair, including animal, craft, and food judging, as well as the set up of a typical fair.

Farm

**Bial, Raymond. *Portrait of a Farm Family*.
Houghton Mifflin, 1995.**

This classic of nonfiction is a photo essay story of a fourth-generation farm family and traces the daily routine from dawn to dusk, chores and all. Do you recognize any characters—Fern or Avery—in the children portrayed here?

**Provenson, Alice, and Martin Provenson.
A Year at Maple Hill Farm. Aladdin, 2001.**

This book is a description of life on an old-fashioned farm like the one where Wilbur lives.

The book shows the farm through the seasons and celebrates changes in the lives of all the humans and animals living there.

Provenson, Alice, and Martin Provenson. *Our Animal Friends at Maple Hill Farm*. Aladdin, 1984.

This *New York Times* Outstanding Book of the Year choice creates a nostalgic view of the animals we imagine to be on the family farm, similar to *Charlotte's Web*.



The Characters

Fern

Wolfman, Judy. *Life on a Pig Farm*. Learner Publishing Group, 2001.

The author describes the experiences of a young girl as she raises pigs as part of a 4-H project.

Wilbur

Jones, Carol. *Sausage: From Farm to You Series*. Chelsea House, 2003.

This book tells how fresh, cooked, and dried sausages are made in both small butcher shops and large meatpacking plants. The history of sausage is shared as well.

Masson, Jeffrey Moussaieff. *The Pig Who Sang to the Moon: The Emotional World of Farm Animals*. Ballantine, 2004.

A different view of the animals in *Charlotte's Web* and the lives they lead on modern large-scale farms for adolescent readers. There is nothing to say that middle-level and YA readers will not benefit from rereading a childhood classic and pairing it with a best-selling book that presents another perspective.

Rath, Sara. *Complete Pig. Voyeur*, 2004.

This nonfiction book contains all kinds of interesting and amusing facts, phrases, stories, folklore, and history about pigs, using photographs throughout. This book emphasizes our human

relationship with pigs without delving deeply into modern large-scale swine production or animal welfare and environmental issues.

Charlotte

Bishop, Nic. *Spiders*. Scholastic, 2007.

This Sibert Award and Orbis Pictus Honor book for 2008 features beautiful photography and astonishing facts, showing spiders for the successful predators they are.

Templeton

Wersba, Barbara. *Walter: The Story of a Rat*. Donna Diamond, Illus. Front Street, 2005.

An unlikely friendship develops between Walter, literate rat, and Amanda Pomeroy, elderly writer of children's books. Filled with allusions to classic adult literature and beautifully illustrated, it is told from a rat's perspective, one who is resentful about the lack of rats as characters.



The Plot

Montgomery, Sy. *The Good Good Pig: The Extraordinary Life of Christopher Hogwood*. Ballantine, 2007.

This true story takes place in the author's New England backyard. When she adopts a sickly runt from a litter of pigs, naming him Christopher Hogwood after the symphony conductor, raising him for slaughter isn't an option: Montgomery's a vegetarian and her husband is Jewish. This is a memoir and a great read-aloud to partner with *Charlotte's Web*, possibly in comparing the traits of Wilbur and Christopher.

Rush, Ken. *What about Emma?* Orchard, 1996.

In this tale, a dairy farm family comes on hard times and has to sell off their herd. Sue, the young protagonist that narrates the story, convinces her father to keep her favorite cow, Emma, who is ready to calve.

NOTES

1. Dennis J. Sumara, *Why Reading Literature in School Still Matters: Imagination, Interpretation, Insight* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2002), pp. 5, 9.
2. Peter Hunt, *Criticism, Theory, & Children's Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1991), p. 64.
3. Perry Nodelman, *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children's Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2008), pp. 59–68.
4. Roberta Seelinger Trites, "The Harry Potter Novels as a Test Case for Adolescent Literature," *Style*, 35(3), 2001, pp. 472–485. The quotation is from page 472.
5. Lawrence R. Sipe, *Storytime: Young Children's Literary Understanding in the Classroom* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2008), p. 147.
6. Jim Burke, *The English Teachers Companion* (New York: Heinemann, 2007). On page 6, Burke defines *textual intelligence* by explaining that the word *text* originally meant "to weave," and that studies of the construction of texts "form the heart of textual intelligence."

RECOMMENDED BOOKS

- BLOCK, FRANCESCA LIA. *House of Dolls*. HarperCollins, 2010.
- GARDINER, JOHN REYNOLDS. *Stone Fox*. HarperCollins, 1992.
- GODDEN, RUMER. *The Doll's House*. Viking Press, 1948.
- KROSOCZKA, JARRET J. *Lunch Lady and the Cyborg Substitute*. Knopf, 2009.
- LEE, HARPER. *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Harper, 1963.
- L'ENGLE, MADELINE. *A Wrinkle in Time*. Laurel Leaf, 1976.
- MARTIN, JACQUELINE BRIGGS. *The Lamp, the Ice, and the Boat Called Fish*. Sandpiper, 2005.
- MCKISSACK, PATRICIA, AND FREDRICK L. MCKISSACK. *Christmas in the Big House, Christmas in the Quarters*. Scholastic, 1994.
- PAULSON, GARY. *Nightjohn*. Laurel Leaf, 1995.
- PILKEY, DAV. *The Adventures of Captain Underpants*. Blue Sky Press, 2005.
- ROWLING, J. K. *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. Scholastic, 2008.
- STEAD, REBECCA. *When You Reach Me*. Wendy Lamb Books, 2009.
- TAYLOR, MILDRED. *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*. Dial, 1976.
- WHITE, E. B. *Charlotte's Web*. Harper, 1952.
- WIESNER, DAVID. *Hurricane*. Clarion, 1990.
- WIESNER, DAVID. *The Three Pigs*. Clarion, 2001.
- ZOLOTOW, CHARLOTTE. *The Storm Book*. HarperCollins, 1989.

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