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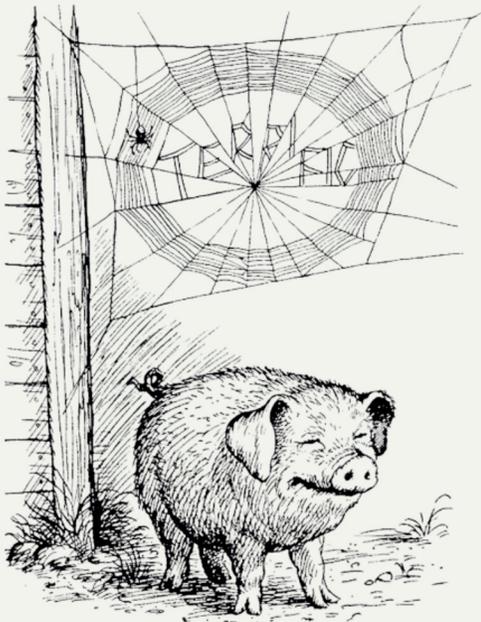
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2026: THE BOOKS THAT SHAPE US

MARCH HIGHLIGHT

CHARLOTTE'S WEB by E.B. WHITE



Young Fern Arable saves a runt piglet from her father's ax who she names Wilbur. The reality of farm life means that it may only be temporary, however, and Wilbur seems destined for the dinner table. Until, that is, a true friend comes along in Charlotte A. Cavatica, an extraordinary grey barn spider.

CONTEXT & IMPACT

Charlotte's Web was first published in 1952 as the sophomore novel by essayist E.B. White. E.B. White was a well-known writer for publications such as *The New Yorker* and *Harper's Magazine*. His wit and accessible style drew many loyal readers, winning many awards, including the Newbery Honor for *Charlotte's Web*, the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the Laura Ingalls Wilder (now Children's Literature Legacy) award, the National Medal for Literature, and a Pulitzer Prize Special Citation for his entire body of work.

E.B. White loved writing, becoming even more influential to writers by undertaking a major revision of *The Elements of Style*, the Strunk & White edition of which was recognized by *Time Magazine's* 2011 "Top 100 nonfiction books since 1923". He wrote on a broad range of topics from nature to existential questions to current politics: whatever caught his attention. He was so well-known as caring about environmental issues that Rachel Carson approached him in 1958 to write an essay about the dangers of pesticides. (He demurred, feeling that Carson herself was the best expert to write the work; she went on to write the groundbreaking book *Silent Spring*.)

White's interest in the natural world comes through in all three of his novels (*Stuart Little*, *Charlotte's Web*, and *The Trumpet of the Swan*). He was scrupulous in his research, determined that each small detail should be correct. One of the inspirations for *Charlotte's Web* came from a spider's egg sac he'd found on his farm and brought home to his New York apartment. One spring day, he was surprised to find hundreds of tiny spiders crawling all over his dressing table. Unlike most of us, he left them there until forced to relocate them by his maid, who refused to clean the room.

Charlotte's name, Charlotte A. Cavatica, even reflects this research. Her name is a nod to the scientific name for her species of barn spider. (The A. stands for *Araneus*, the name of one of Charlotte's daughters that remains with Wilbur at the end.) Charlotte's last name was originally *Epeira* because White had misidentified the spider that inspired him. He went to the American Museum of Natural History to verify his identification and then changed her name to be accurate.

White was well known as an extremely shy man, eschewing large gatherings whenever possible. When visitors would come to the office he shared with James Thurber he would often climb out of the window and scamper down the fire escape. Despite this, he was closely bonded to his family and had close relationships with his nieces and nephews. He actually started writing for children as a favor to his nieces and nephews, developing the novel *Stuart Little* in part by telling them stories.

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One of the reasons E.B. White was so popular was that he refused to write down to children. During this period, children's publishing was seen as less-than; success as a children's editor led to offers of 'promotions' to the adult divisions. Even other professionals working with children, such as famed librarian Anne Carroll Moore, had pedantic views of what children could (and should) read and understand.

White refused to listen to their concerns, however, and moved ahead with writing his unique blend of magic and realism. In a 1969 interview with *The Paris Review*, White said "Anyone who writes down to children is simply wasting his time. You have to write up, not down. Children are demanding. They are the most attentive, curious, eager, observant, sensitive, quick, and generally congenial readers on earth. They accept, almost without question, anything you present them with, as long as it is presented honestly, fearlessly, and clearly. I handed them, against the advice of experts, a mouse-boy, and they accepted it without a quiver. In *Charlotte's Web*, I gave them a literate spider, and they took that." White respected children, and people in general, and that respect is part of the timelessness of his novels.

Charlotte's Web has been perennially popular since it was published. When the New York Public Library compiled a list of the Top 10 books checked out over the library's entire 125-year history, *Charlotte's Web* sits at #6. (The only other children's chapter book to crack the top 10 was *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*.) Beloved by generations, the novel introduced a unique type of magical realism. *Charlotte's Web* is grounded in the magic of the ordinary and of childhood. Author P.L. Travers, who wrote the *Mary Poppins* series, wrote in a review of the novel that *Charlottes' Web* captured "tangible magic" - the essence of childhood. Even though much of life has changed, children are still children. I don't know about you, but I know many children like Avery and Fern, with snakes and frogs in their pockets, or quietly observing and bonding with animals.

The cycle of life, the worries, the growing up - all of it is very real, and the novel approaches those topics head-on. In the 1970s and 80s, several articles were published examining *Charlotte's Web* unique popularity in pediatric cancer wards. There was something about how death is faced head-on that resonates with children. It's not sugarcoated. *Charlotte's* death hurts; we grieve along with Wilbur. We experience what it's like for Wilbur for others to not have the same sadness (for example, Templeton does not care). It's so sad that it took E.B. White 17 takes to read the "Last Day" chapter when he recorded the audiobook - even the author kept tearing up. (If *Charlotte's* death doesn't get you, when her children start to leave probably does!) Yet the focus isn't on *Charlotte's* death, or even Wilbur's: it's on a life well-lived, and how we can continue to live on beyond the time we are allotted on Earth. It's about how friendship and love can change and improve a life.

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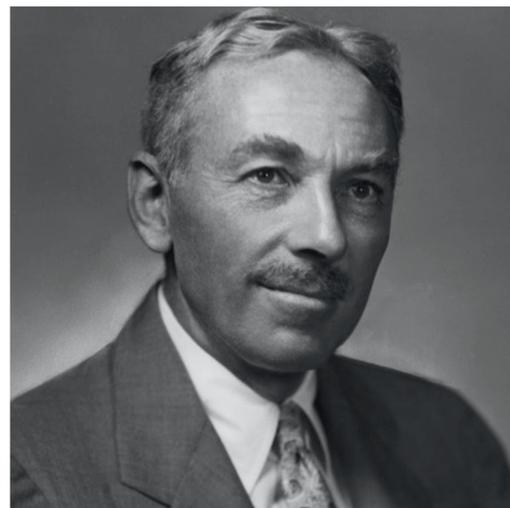
Charlotte's Web revolutionized an industry by showing that children's books could be sophisticated and frank about heavy topics. Though it may not be everyone's favorite children's book, it has something to say to almost every child (and most adults, too!) Many threads of those can be found in later books - would we have had *Bridge to Terabithia* (by Katherine Paterson) without *Charlotte's Web*? What about *The Wild Robot* by Peter Brown or *War Horse* by Michael Morpurgo? I'd like to think that eventually publishing would have caught up with E.B. White's opinions on "writing up" to children, but thankfully we don't have to know.

FUN FACTS

- Ursula Nordstrom, E.B. White's editor at Harper, was also highly influential in the world of children's literature. She edited and published many award winning authors, including Maurice Sendak, Margaret Wise Brown, and Shel Silverstein. She also pioneered the genre of independent readers with the "I Can Read Books" series.
- White's step-granddaughter, Alice, at about 10, was so shocked to learn that a young pig on the farm would be converted to ham and bacon that she made her own large replica of Garth Williams' *SOME PIG* illustration and made her father drive her back during the night to the farm to secretly thumbtack it to the side of the pen. (Alas, the fate of this pig was not the same as Wilbur's.)
- E.B. White surprised his editor, Ursula Nordstrom, when he delivered *Charlotte's Web* to her. Not only did she not know he was working on a new book, he told her that she had the only copy of the manuscript in existence - he hadn't bothered to make a carbon copy! (Nordstrom spent the next days reading and copying the manuscript so it could be sent to Garth Williams for illustrating.)

"E. B. WHITE HAS WRITTEN A BOOK FOR CHILDREN, WHICH IS NICE FOR US OLDER ONES AS IT CALLS FOR BIG TYPE. THE BOOK HAS LIVELINESS AND FELICITY, TENDERNESS AND UNEXPECTEDNESS, GRACE AND HUMOR AND PRAISE OF LIFE, AND THE GOOD BACKBONE OF SUCCINCTNESS THAT ONLY THE MOST HIGHLY IMAGINATIVE STORIES SEEM TO GROW."

—EUDURA WELTY, REVIEW OF *CHARLOTTE'S WEB*



E.B. White, circa 1954

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- E.B. White did not want any of his books marketed as “classics” (though his publishers ignored him). He felt that his book had to actually stand the test of time over generations first. Do you agree with him? What in your mind makes a ‘classic’ novel? Do you think that you can make a prediction if you’d read a newly published book?
- Charlotte’s Web was popular when it was published, and has stayed so, when other books very popular in the 1950s are hardly known now (Tom Swift, Enid Blyton, The Wheel on the School.) Are there wildly popular books in your generation that, though influential, you don’t see as having the staying power that a true classic like Charlotte’s Web has?
- Many readers first read Charlotte’s Web as a child and then revisited it as an adult. Most reviews report that it was just as good at both stages of life. Why do you think makes this book work for so many people at so many stages of life? If you were one of those who re-read the book, did you have different perspectives on it the second time around?
- Does Charlotte’s Web have a villain or antagonist? If so, who or what would you define it as? Likewise, who would you say is the protagonist of the story? Why would you pick that character?
- Dr. Dorian tells Fern’s mother: “When the words appeared, everyone said they were a miracle. But nobody pointed out that the web itself is a miracle.” What other ordinary miracles do you see in the world around you?
- In the book, Charlotte carefully chooses four phrases for her webs to save Wilbur: Some Pig, Terrific, Radiant, and Humble. What word(s) would you choose to put in a web if you were Charlotte, trying to save Wilbur from the ax?
- Wilbur does his best to live up to the words Charlotte uses in her webs for him. What does that say about the type of friends we have surrounding us? What words would you want to live up to in your life?
- Wilbur sees Charlotte as a “true friend”. What makes Charlotte a true friend to Wilbur? What makes someone a good friend in your life?
- There is something different about the relationship between Charlotte and Wilbur than between either of them and any of the other barnyard animals: Old Sheep, Goose, Templeton, etc. What actually makes a friend vs an acquaintance?
- When Wilbur asks Charlotte why she did so much for him, when he’s done nothing for her, she replies: “You have been my friend. That in itself is a tremendous thing.” What does that say about the power of friendship?
- Which aspect of Charlotte’s death was the most emotional for you? If you re-read the novel, has the moment changed over the years?
- Death in Charlotte’s Web is treated not as a tragedy, but as a fact of life. Even though Charlotte is trying to save Wilbur from the holiday dinner table, all of the animals understand that death will come sooner or later. The focus instead is on how to live a good life. What, to you, is living a good life? How will you know if you have succeeded?

SOURCES & MORE

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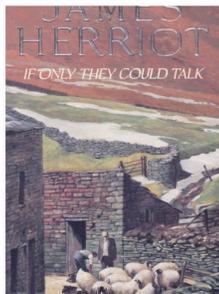
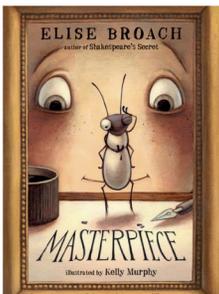
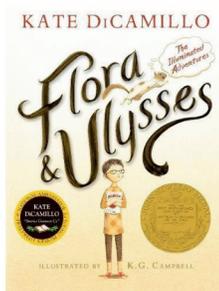
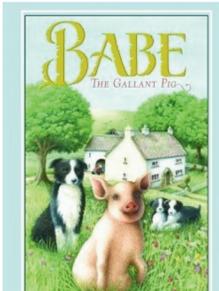
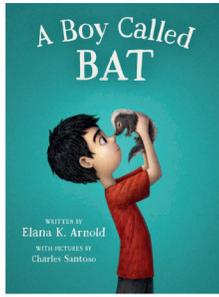
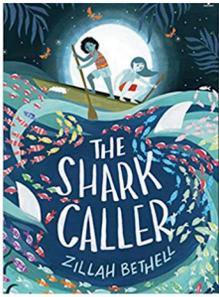
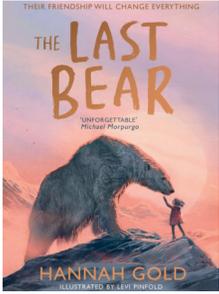
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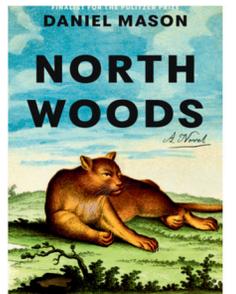
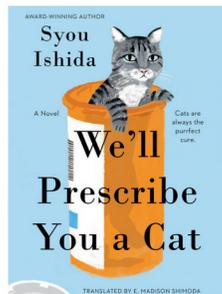
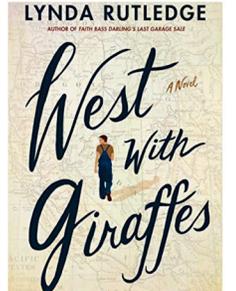
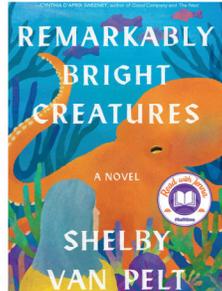
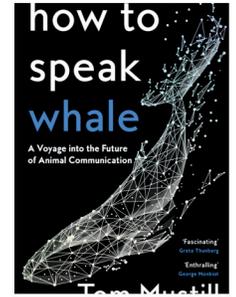
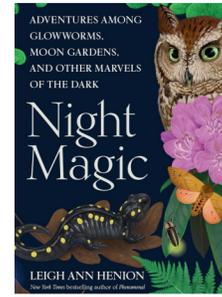
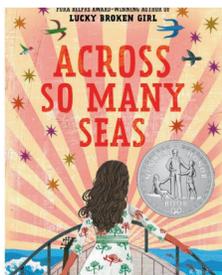
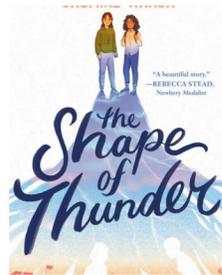
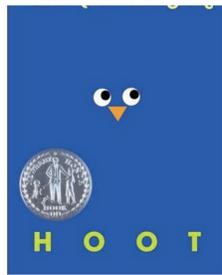
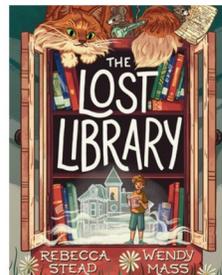
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- *Charlotte's Web*. 2006 live-action.

READ-ALIKES



Books tackling Tough Topics:

- *Octopus Moon* by Bobbie Pyron
- *The Lost Library* by Rebecca Stead
- *Hoot* by Carl Hiaassen
- *The Shape of Thunder* by Jasmine Warga
- *Across So Many Seas* by Ruth Behar
- *Ghost* by Jason Reynolds
- *Hope was Here* by Joan Bauer
- *Show Me a Sign* by Ann Clare LeZotte



You liked the animals:

- *The Last Bear* by Hannah Gold
- *The Wild Robot* by Peter Brown
- *The Shark Caller* by Zillah Bethell
- *A Boy Called Bat* by Elana K. Arnold
- *Babe, the Gallant Pig* by Dick King-Smith
- *Flora and Ulysses* by Kate DiCamillo
- *Masterpiece* by Elise Broach
- *If Only They Could Talk* by James Herriot

You have a few more years of life:

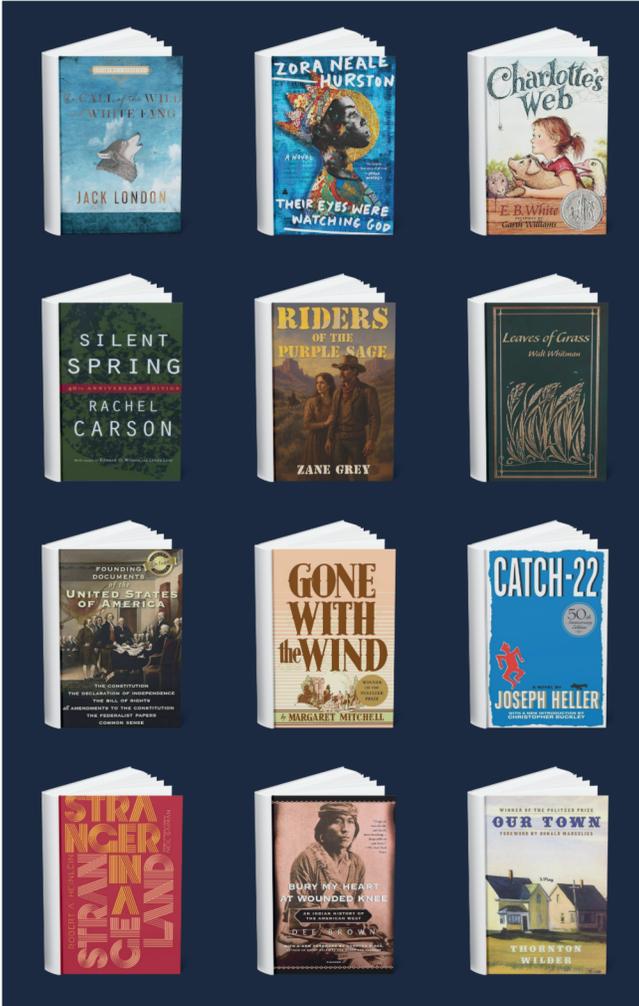
- *H is for Hawk* by Helen Macdonald
- *Three Bags Full* by Leonie Swann
- *Night Magic* by Leigh Ann Henion
- *How to Speak Whale* by Tom Mustill
- *Remarkably Bright Creatures* by Shelby Van Pelt
- *West with Giraffes* by Linda Rutledge
- *We'll Prescribe You a Cat* by Syou Ishida
- *North Woods* by Daniel Mason

UPCOMING SELECTIONS

THE BOOKS THAT SHAPE US



- **January:** *The Call of the Wild* by Jack London
- **February:** *Their Eyes were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston
- **March:** *Charlotte's Web* by E.B. White
- **April:** *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson
- **May:** *Riders of the Purple Sage* by Zane Grey
- **June:** *Leaves of Grass* by Walt Whitman
- **July:** *The Federalist Papers* by Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, & James Madison
- **August:** *Gone with the Wind* by Margaret Mitchell
- **September:** *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller
- **October:** *Stranger in a Strange Land* by Robert Heinlein
- **November:** *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* by Dee Brown
- **December:** *Our Town* by Thornton Wilder



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2026's Read with Your Librarian theme "The Books that Shape Us" honors America's 250th birthday by highlighting books influential in shaping America. Titles were chosen from the list featured in the Library of Congress' 2012 "Books that Shaped America" exhibit.

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