

# E. B. WHITE



## Notes on Our *T*imes

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### FOREWORD

Oracles move among us unnoticed, their plainspoken auguries hidden in the murmur of daily life, overlooked by all but the most astute of listeners. Over his many decades with *The New Yorker*, E. B. White became just such a listener as he wrote his incisive essays for the magazine's Notes and Comment page.

The essays in this collection first appeared in *The New Yorker* between 1937 and 1952, an interval framed by a waning Great Depression on one end and a waxing Cold War on the other. In between were the Holocaust, World War II, the atomic bomb, Walt Disney, the Iron Curtain, Chuck Yeager, television, the United Nations, and, barely noticed, the invention of the transistor and birth of the modern electronic age. Even when compared with events today, it was a period of unprecedented tumult and uncertainty.

It was also a period when writers were not afraid to tackle the big issues head-on in print, as experts filled editorial pages and bookstores with their prescriptions for meeting the great

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challenges of the time. In contrast to these top-down explicators, White worked up from the specific in his understated way, leading the reader to a conclusion so self-evident by essay's end that he barely needed to mention it. "The Age of Dust" is an especially elegant example, gently revealing the lunatic, Strangelovian illogic of radiological warfare with references to a swing, a little girl and her handkerchief.

White writes about what the poet Robinson Jeffers called "permanent things." The garden-mad "department-store peasantry" depicted in "Country Dwellers" are still among us, driving SUVs instead of station wagons and relying on the Web and FedEx to deliver their wooden armchairs and pearwood soap dishes. This focus on the universal human experience does not merely make White relevant today—it is what gives these essays their predictive power, for the novelties that so surprise us are inevitably the expression of unchanging human hopes and fears, follies and desires.

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White writes about perennial human truths, but one must read these essays more than once to fully appreciate their timelessness. On first reading, give in to the inevitable desire to focus on mention of the unfamiliar: a Victrola, a Pullman berth, or a now-ancient Convair turboprop airliner. The first time through, the description of a modern pig nursery in "Remembrance of Things Past" is arresting for its mention of a long-obsolete piglet-comforting Victrola. But read again, the piece presages the issues surrounding humankind's separation from nature and the safety of livestock antibiotics, issues that remain pressing concerns today.

Mark Twain is said to have observed that history doesn't repeat itself, but sometimes it rhymes. One such parallel can be found in White's description of stratospheric explorer Jean Piccard's 1937 trip into the blue, hanging from 92 latex balloons: it anticipates the 1982 flight of one Larry Walters from Long Beach, California, who floated over Los Angeles at 16,000 feet in a lawn chair suspended from forty-two weather balloons. Like

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Piccard, Walters initiated his descent by carefully shooting out one balloon after another, as the pilots of passing airliners on approach to LAX looked on in astonishment. The constant, of course, is the intrinsic nuttiness of humans, be they madcap professors (Piccard's twin brother was, in fact, the inspiration for Professor Calculus in Hervé's *Tintin* books) or California free spirits hoping to cross the continent on the jet stream. As White observes in the final essay of this collection, "Man's inventions, directed always onward and upward, have an odd way of leading back to man himself..."

White's oracular side pops up repeatedly in these essays. I recalled his "Age of Dust" meditation with a shudder when I first learned of Alexander Litvinenko's 2006 poisoning by polonium. And in "Censorship," Janet Jackson's 2004 "wardrobe malfunction" is foreshadowed in White's commentary on a 1939 ruling that one female breast, but not two, could be exposed at the 1939 World's Fair "World of Tomorrow." Americans' fretting over things moral is, it seems,

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a constant. These examples may be lucky hits, but in other instances, White's prescience feels more than coincidental. In "Rainmakers," he observes, "New York's water shortage is caused less by lack of rain than by lack of foresight, lack of a decent feeling for nature." If only our public servants had taken White's comment to heart when he wrote these prophetic words, perhaps we would now be better prepared for the gathering crisis of global climate change.

The Greeks revered their oracles because their utterances inevitably invited petitioners to look inside themselves for an answer. This is where White is at his very best, framing his essays in a way that all but compels introspection. "Sound" explores the impact of radio and long-forgotten political sound trucks, but it also speaks eloquently to the challenges raised by today's tumultuous digital media revolution. White's observation that "amplification, therefore, is something like alcohol: it can heighten our meanings, but it can also destroy our reason" resonates with worries today regarding the impact

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of the vast chatter in the blogosphere or the studied vulgarity of talk show hosts competing for listener attention.

Each of the essays printed here offers similar invitations to shine a distant mirror on the future. The predicament of Mrs. Wienckus, a well-off, hard-working domestic who is arrested for sleeping in a hallway, parallels that of today's working poor who live in gypsy RVs surreptitiously parked on the streets of wealthy California beach suburbs. White's musing on the impromptu water landing of an off-course Northeast Airlines Convair, and the subsequent chiding from a "time-fitted" TWA pilot comfortably peering into a future that's arriving at two miles a minute, both anticipate today's debates over the reliability of the ever-more advanced technologies that hold our lives in the balance. In the same essay, "Heavier Than Air," White refers to the "new normalcy," an eerie anticipation of the "new normal," a neologism popular immediately after the dot-com crash earlier in this decade.

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These essays are a compelling reminder that no matter how formal the method, or formidable the analytic tool, all forecasts worth their salt are underpinned by careful observation of the overlooked present and a willingness to swim against the stream of popular consciousness and opinion. In this age when the Web and myriad new media make it harder than ever to drown out the din of the present, I keep E. B. White close by as a reminder of what is truly important: the long view.

In the course of exploring White's expository revelations, I carried these essays on more trips than I recall, covering more miles than I remember. His observations have resonated in surprising ways with the geographies I traversed. I reread "The Dream of the American Male" after a visit to one of our larger army bases, and although the essay's description of a soldier's feminine ideal might raise eyebrows today, its sentiment rings true in the milieu of young warriors riding into battle in Humvees and Blackhawks.

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I suggest you carry this book with you, allowing the connection between what is on its pages and what you see in the world to heighten your sense of the future as well as your appreciation of the past. In another book by E. B. White, Stuart Little asks his classmates, “How many of you know what’s important?” These essays are not only White’s eloquent answer to that question, but also an invitation to ask that question of ourselves.

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