

*Foreword by Kate DiCamillo**

I was a kid who judged a book by its cover, and the cover of *Charlotte's Web* made me nervous.

For one thing, the pig looked worried. For another, the girl seemed stoically resigned to whatever it was that the pig was worried about. Together with a sheep, a goose, and a spider, the worried pig and the resigned girl formed a tableau that virtually guaranteed the reader some sort of misery, and I wanted nothing to do with misery.

Week after week, year after year, I glanced at the troubled face of Wilbur in the paperback spin rack at Cooper Memorial Library. Hooked and then I closed my eyes and spun the rack so that the book, the pig, the potential suffering, disappeared from my sight.

All of which is to say that I came to *Charlotte's Web* late. I didn't read the story of Wilbur and Charlotte and Fern until I was thirty-one years old. And I only read it then because I was strong-armed into it by a writing teacher who held the hook up as a miracle of storytelling. This teacher intoned the opening line of the book ("Where's Papa going with that ax?") often and with passionate conviction. According to her,

anyone who wanted to write must read *Charlotte's Web*.

And I wanted, very much, to write.

So, shamed, resentful, and more than a little anxious (an ax *and* a worried pig! It was just as I had long suspected; things couldn't possibly turn out well) I read *Charlotte's Web*.

And things didn't turn out well.

But they also *did* turn out well.

And that, for me, is the crux of the miracle of this book: within the confines of its pages, something terrible, something unbearable, happens. And yet, we bear this unbearable thing. And in the end, we even rejoice. E. B. White said, "All that I hope to say in books, all that I ever hope to say, is that I love the world."

White loved barns and pastures, dumps and fair grounds, ponds and kitchens. He loved pigs and sheep
and geese and spiders. He loved rain, harnesses, pitchforks, springtime, fall. He loved spider webs, monkey wrenches, Ferris wheels.

Every word of *Charlotte's Web* bears the full weight of White's love for the people, seasons, animals, and arachnids of this world. And every

word of the book shows us how we can bear the triumphs and despairs, the wonders and the heartbreaks, the small and large glories and tragedies of being here.

We can bear it all by loving it all.

The autumn days will shorten and grow old. The leaves will shake loose from the trees and fall Christmas will come, then the snows of winter You will live to enjoy the beauty of the frozen world... Winter will pass, the days will lengthen, the ice will melt in the pasture pond. The song sparrow will return and sing, the frogs will awake, the warm wind will blow again. All these sights and sounds and smells will be yours to enjoy, Wilbur —this lovely world, these precious days . . .

This is Charlotte's promise to Wilbur.

It is also E. B. White's promise to his reader: things will continue; life will go on. It will be beautiful, astonishing, heartbreaking. And as long as you keep your eyes and heart open to the wonder of it, as long as you love, it will be okay.

I wish that I could be in the library beside that child who stood at the spin rack considering Wilbur's face.

"Wait," I would say, "what about this book? This one with the pig?"

"No," she would say. "It scares me."

"Why?"

"I'm afraid of how it will turn out."

"It turns out beautifully. I promise."

"You promise?"

"I promise."

I don't know if that small girl would have believed me. But I do know that she needed the words, the love, in this book.

We all do.

* Charlotte's Web Revised edition, 2012, Harper

Source for the following text Chapters 1-3 of Charlotte's Web:
http://showpdf.rahnuma.org/children/Stories/Charlotte_s_Web_Complete.pdf