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ON WRITING

A LESSON IN SIMPLICITY FROM MR. AND MS. WHITE

BY DANNY HEITMAN, FORUM EDITOR



E.B. White is my biggest writing hero, so when a biography of his wife, Katherine, appeared earlier this year, I knew I had to read it.

E.B. White, who died at 86 in 1985, was a masterful magazine essayist and the celebrated children's author behind *Charlotte's Web* and *Stuart Little*. He also updated a small writing manual written by his former college professor, William Strunk, and published it in 1959 as *The Elements of Style*. It's been a classic primer on writing good prose ever since, known affectionately by many of its fans as "Strunk and White."

Katherine White had her own claim to fame as *The New Yorker's* early fiction editor, the guiding hand in bringing voices as varied as John Updike, Vladimir Nabokov, Elizabeth Bishop, and Nadine Gordimer into print. She also had an interesting sideline as a wise and perceptive garden writer. *Onward and Upward in the Garden*, a collection of her essays about growing things, was well received when it was published after her death at 84 in 1977.

E.B. White's fame easily eclipsed his wife's. But in *The World She Edited*, a richly documented account of Katherine's life, biographer Amy Reading argues that Katherine White deserves to be widely remembered, too. I'm glad that Katherine is getting her due, though it's easy to understand why her reputation was overshadowed by her husband's. She worked at a time when women were expected to operate quietly behind their spouse, and her chosen vocation, magazine editing, placed her behind the scenes, too.

But what an editor Katherine White was. She had many gifts in helping writers

to be their best, too many to detail here. One worth mentioning was her keen insight into what writers *shouldn't* say. Like any great editor, she was good at seeing what could be left out so that what remained was even stronger. Here's how Reading summarizes Katherine White's gift for verbal economy: "Cutting a writer's words can be a gift; silences can be audible."

In their embrace of simplicity for the English language, Katherine and E.B. White were deeply consonant. In his own crystalline sentences, E.B. White took to heart these words from his mentor, Will Strunk: "Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that every word tell."

One of the most moving pictures in *The World She Edited* is a photo of the adjacent tombstones above the graves of E.B. and Katherine White in Maine. Because they were both writers, a visitor might expect to see a solemn literary quotation or two on the headstones. Instead, they bear only the couple's names, along with their birth and death dates.

That was just like E.B. and Katherine White, masters of simplicity in language until the end.

Photos above: Katherine White (left) and E.B. White (right)



Forum editor **DANNY HEITMAN** has written about the writing craft for numerous publications, including *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*, and he's taught writing to university students.