Affirmation in the 'Web

E.B. White certainly includes gloomy elements in all his children’s books, especially *Charlotte’s Web*, which follows the natural cycles of life on a farm. *Stuart Little* explores the cruel dangers of individuality and ends with shocking uncertainty and only a note of hope. The tragedy of Lewis the swan’s muteness and the shame of his self-aggrandizing father’s shenanigans add gloom enough to *The Trumpet of the Swan*. These books added a twist to more formulaic “good triumphs over evil” themes that many children’s books offered in the mid-20th century, even classics like *The Chronicles of Narnia* or *The Hobbit*. On the other hand, White’s love for the world shines in his elegant, sparse prose and reflects back from the hearts of readers who have loved his flawed, funny, and real characters for more than fifty years now.

The gloom in *Charlotte’s Web* comes mainly from the hard facts of life on the farm… and the hard facts of life anywhere. The protagonist pig Wilbur is young, timid, and fearful, given to crying and fainting spells, especially at the mention of his porcine destiny. For heaven’s sake, the book begins with this grisly lead-in: “Where’s Papa going with that ax?” (White 1952). Yet this build-up is actually the kind of conflict set-up children expect—this is the problem, there will be a solution, the pig will live happily ever after.

But Charlotte the spider, after saving Wilbur’s life, dies. No child expects that. Have more tears been spilled over any other page in children’s literature?

Joseph Epstein, in his essay “E.B. White, Dark & Lite,” writes pages about the author, his real life of fear and “mental fragility,” and the gloom that is “pervasive in his writing” (Epstein 1986). He contends that *Charlotte’s Web* is simply an obsessive reworking of White’s own neurotic weakness and dependence on his wife Katharine, with White as the helpless, timid piglet and his wife as the wise, care-taking spider, “a true friend and a good writer” (White 1952).

Epstein’s take on White’s possible love of the world is reduced to this (referring to the farm where White lived and which inspired the setting for *Charlotte’s Web*): “While life in Maine for White was less anxious than life in New York… he was still able to discover the cloud in every silver lining” (Epstein 1986). Epstein should perhaps consider returning to *Charlotte’s Web* for a read-aloud to a child, who will not be seeking only support for a theory. “I hope,” simpers Epstein, “…that I do not betray the dreariness of my symbol-minded literary education…” (Epstein 1986) in his analysis of White’s children’s books. Unfortunately, Epstein’s dreary education, combined with what sounds
suspiciously like jealousy of E.B. White’s literary and popular success, has caused him to forget that basic premise of literary criticism: return to the text.

That said, the gloomiest line in *Charlotte’s Web* is almost unforgivable: “No one was with her when she died” (White 1952).

White is guilty of some wallowing here, as his powerful imagery of Charlotte’s lonely death at the heartless fairground implies that both her life and her death were unmarked. It’s poetic exaggeration, for of course she was loved and appreciated by both Wilbur and Fern—and all the farm animals were well aware of her intelligence, talent, determination, and heart. The death passage moves many readers to tears, but it’s a bit of a cheap shot.

Picky criticisms of that one passage aside, *Charlotte’s Web* is fundamentally an uplifting book that supports White’s own assertion that “All that I hope to say in books, all that I ever hope to say, is that I love the world” (Elledge 1984). White’s descriptions of the turn of seasons on the farm, the deep love and understanding in Fern’s family, Charlotte’s courage and loyalty, and Wilbur’s emotional and spiritual growth all reflect his appreciation for what is best in our world. Writer Matt Freeman describes White’s impact on children: “For 50 years now, his book has helped them understand that despite its inevitable pains, life is deeply beautiful and very much worth living” (Freeman 2002).

A recent *Horn Book* review of *Charlotte’s Web* describes the positive impact of the book: “In this increasingly cynical world, E. B. White's simple story fills us with wonder. It delights us with the wonder of nature, the wonder of language, and above all the wonder of life lived in friendship” (Paterson 2000).

The 1973 Hanna-Barbera film version of *Charlotte’s Web* is remarkably true to the story, using much of White’s original dialogue and attempting to convey his original themes of friendship, growth, and how the beauty of nature transcends its necessary losses. Unfortunately, the primitive animation, the loss of description, and the flattening effect of Saturday-morning cartoon style deplete the story’s richness. Neither E.B. White’s supposed gloom nor his self-professed love of the world reveal themselves through the film—it appears generated by machine.

*Charlotte’s Web* will continue to thrive as a classic of children’s literature. E.B. White’s graceful writing, imaginative characters, and unabashed love for the world make this book shine. The writer’s personal fears and anxieties may have helped him portray honestly some of the hard facts of life, but they did not overwhelm his vision of the world of nature and humans as a beautiful place.
Bibliography


Pick your affirmations using the menu on the right hand side – this is our category breakdown. We have 100s of different topics, so use this to start digging down into the area you want to develop in. Or, get started quickly – here are our top 10 most popular positive affirmations. Weight Loss Positive Affirmations. Law of Attraction Positive Affirmations. Attract Money Positive Affirmations. Millionaire Mindset Positive Affirmations. Stop Procrastination Positive Affirmations. Motivation Positive Affirmations. Affirmation or affirm may refer to: Affirmation, a declaration that something is true. In logic, the union of the subject and predicate of a proposition. Affirmation (law), a declaration made by and allowed to those who conscientiously object to taking an oath. Affirmed in law, means that a decision has been reviewed and found valid. Affirm, a financial technology company. Self-affirmation, the psychological process of re-affirming personal values to protect self-identity. Stand in front of the mirror and say your affirmation out loud over and over again for at least minutes. The more you say your affirmation, the more you are encouraging your brain to visualize your positive outcome. [12] X Research source. If you can take 5 minutes twice a day to say your affirmation, that’s even better. Advertisement. Method 3 of 3: Getting the Most from Affirmations. Use your affirmations as a guide for change. Affirmations can be a powerful self-help tool, but just saying them is only part of the process. Affirmations need to be coupled with action in order to be truly effective. Use your affirmation as a guide for the change you want to bring about in your life. Then, take actions to pursue that change. [13] X Research source.