

E. B. White on Dogs

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Martha White, Editor

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While writing numerous animal characters in his children's books, E. B. White also scribed humorous biographical essays documenting his observations of man's best friend—collected here.

E. B. White has been called a defining voice of American letters. Essayist for the *New Yorker*, beloved author of *Charlotte's Web* and *Stuart Little*, and co-author of *The Elements of Style*, White's work has rested on his exact observations and his superbly compassionate and humorous voice.

This book collects whatever he wrote about dogs—in columns, essays, and private correspondence—most of it previously published in other collections. Granddaughter Martha White edits and introduces the collection.

The pieces, supplemented by an occasional photograph, are arranged chronologically. Thus, the reader moves with White through life in New York, the early days of his marriage to editor Katharine White, their move to a Maine farm, children and grandchildren, World War II, Katharine's death, and old age. All along, White keeps dogs and a menagerie of other creatures.

Why write about dogs? Edward Hoagland, reviewing White's work for the *New York Times*, notes that an essayist might "muse about himself partly by way of speculating on the nature of beasts. Also it is a means of avoiding being controversial while edging into controversy." In fact, the collection includes pieces in which White addresses current events with a certain sideways clarity both pointed and charming. White himself described what he was about with characteristic modesty: "All that I ever hope to say in books is that I love the world. ... Animals are part of my world and I try to report them faithfully and with respect."

It hardly matters. While this collection may not be the most complete introduction to White's work, it's a good introduction to White. And any dose of this reasonable, witty voice is a welcome shot in the arm.

White's marvelous portraits of dogs are alive with love and humor. Daisy, the Scottish terrier, who had a habit of holding people around the ankle, "suffered from a chronic perplexity, and it relieved her to take hold of something." Daisy can also take matters in paw, writing to newly pregnant Katharine on behalf of nervous White. The dissolute dachshund Fred reigns supreme, as here: And when I answer his preemptory scratch at the door and hold[s] the door open for him to walk through, he stops in the middle and lights a cigarette, just to hold me up."

Good reading for dog and White fans alike, this book makes one almost wish to be a dog, if that's what it takes to be so closely observed and understood.

TERESA SCOLLON (Summer 2013)

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