

A Letter from E.B. White

Charlotte's Web was written by American author, E.B. White. It tells the story of a pig called Wilbur who makes an unlikely friendship with a spider called Charlotte. This letter was written by E.B. White, who was asked by his editor to explain why he wrote the book.

I have been asked to tell how I came to write "Charlotte's Web." Well, I like animals, and it would be odd if I failed to write about them. Animals are a weakness with me, and when I got a place in the country I was quite sure animals would appear, and they did...

5 As for Charlotte herself, I had never paid much attention to spiders until a few years ago. Once you begin watching spiders, you haven't time for much else — the world is really loaded with them. I do not find them repulsive or revolting, any more than I find anything in nature repulsive or revolting, and I think it is too bad that children are often corrupted by their elders in this hate campaign. Spiders are skilful, amusing
10 and useful, and only in rare instances has anybody ever come to grief because of a spider.

One cold October evening I was lucky enough to see *Aranea Cavatica* spin her egg sac and deposit her eggs. (I did not know her name at the time, but I admired her, and later Mr. Willis J. Gertsch of the American Museum of Natural History told me
15 her name.) When I saw that she was fixing to become a mother, I got a stepladder and an extension light and had an excellent view of the whole business. A few days later, when it was time to return to New York, not wishing to part with my spider, I took a razor blade, cut the sac adrift from the underside of the shed roof, put spider and sac in a candy box, and carried them to town. I tossed the box on my dresser. Some weeks later
20 I was surprised and pleased to find that Charlotte's daughters were emerging from the air holes in the cover of the box. They strung tiny lines from my comb to my brush, from my brush to my mirror, and from my mirror to my nail scissors. They were very busy and almost invisible, they were so small. We all lived together happily for a couple of weeks, and then somebody whose duty it was to dust my dresser balked, and I broke up
25 the show.

At the present time, three of Charlotte's granddaughters are trapping at the foot of the stairs in my barn cellar, where the morning light, coming through the east window, illuminates their embroidery and makes it seem even more wonderful than it is.

I haven't told why I wrote the book, but I haven't told you why I sneeze, either.
30 A book is a sneeze.

[Signed]

1 Why do you think E.B. White says that animals are "a weakness" (line 2) with him?

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2 marks

2 What do you think the word "corrupted" means in line 9? Check your answer in a dictionary.

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1 mark

3 How does E.B. White explain that many children come to dislike spiders?

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1 mark

4 E.B. White describes spiders' webs as "embroidery" (line 28). Why do you think he chose this word?

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1 mark

5 E.B. White says "A book is a sneeze" (line 30). What is this an example of? Circle one.

- a. idiom b. simile c. metaphor d. personification

1 mark

6 After reading the letter, how would you describe E.B. White's personality? Use two adjectives to describe him, and then explain your choices.

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2 marks

7 Do you think this letter explains why E.B. White wrote the book? Explain your answer.

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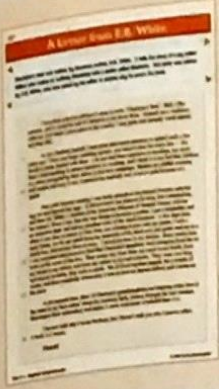
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2 marks

Total
out of 10

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Question Book:

Year 5, pages 20-21

Author / Source:

E.B. White

Genre:

Non-fiction — letter

Cross-curricular links:

- Science (spiders)

Introduction

E.B. White's letter to his editor is full of subtle humour and gentle eccentricity. Some students may not have read *Charlotte's Web*, so make sure that all pupils read the introduction before they read the letter. Ensure that pupils are aware that, in the book, Charlotte is a spider and Wilbur is a pig, and both animals can talk. Before pupils read the letter, ask them to think of reasons why authors might write books.

Answers

1. E.g. A weakness can be used to describe something that can't be resisted. E.B. White says that animals are a weakness with him because he can't resist writing about animals or being fascinated by them.
2. E.g. When a person changes for the worse.
3. E.g. He thinks that adults teach children to dislike spiders.
4. E.g. Because it makes the spiders' webs sound beautiful and shows how skilful and hardworking spiders are.
5. c. metaphor
6. E.g. Kind and funny. He seems like a kind man because he treats the spiders in a gentle and caring way, and he sounds like he has a sense of humour because he says that "A book is a sneeze".
7. Any appropriate answer. E.g. Yes, because he says "A book is a sneeze", which tells you that he wrote the book because he felt like it was something he just had to do, rather than something he decided to do.
OR E.g. No, I don't think it explains why he wrote the book — it just explains why he likes spiders.

Extra Activities

- With the whole class, discuss what E.B. White means when he says "A book is a sneeze". How does this explanation compare with the reasons for writing that pupils suggested before reading the letter?
- As a group, discuss the techniques E.B. White uses to describe spiders, and how they affect the reader.
- Ask pupils to imagine that they are E.B. White. They should write a letter to their friend, using figurative language, to describe their favourite animal.
- Get pupils to create a spidergram of all the adjectives, verbs and adverbs they can think of that describe the way spiders look and behave. Pupils should then write a short descriptive passage about a spider, using as many of these words as possible.
- In the letter, E.B. White describes spiders as "skilful, amusing and useful". Ask pupils to research spiders' behaviour to find evidence for and against this view. They can then use the evidence they have gathered to debate positive and negative views of spiders.
- The spider E.B. White describes in his letter is from the species *Araneus cavaticus*. Get pupils to research this species and produce a poster describing its appearance, habitat and behaviour.

