

*Books by*  
E. B. WHITE

THE FOX OF PEAPACK  
EVERY DAY IS SATURDAY  
FAREWELL TO MODEL T  
THE LADY IS COLD  
QUO VADIMUS?  
ONE MAN'S MEAT

# One Man's Meat

*A New and Enlarged Edition*

E. B. WHITE



---

HARPER & BROTHERS PUBLISHERS

*New York and London*

1944

Another time I caught myself carrying a paper napkin in my hand, as I wandered here and there. I have never seen a farmer carrying a paper napkin around his barnyard.

For all its implausibility, however, my farming has the excitement, the calamities, and sometimes the nobility of the real thing. For sheer surprise there is nothing to beat this life. For example, I had read widely on the subject of lice and mites, had treated my flock diligently. The specter of infestation was with me constantly. Yet when trouble finally came to my farm, it was not my hens that developed lice, but my Victrola. The old machine, I discovered the other day, is fairly alive with parasites—in the seams where the old needles lodge, and running in and out the little cup where old and new needles mingle in democratic equality. I use Black Leaf 40 (nicotine sulphate) for my hens, smearing it on the roosts according to directions on the bottle. But I'm damned if I know how to apply nicotine sulphate to a Victrola, and there is nothing in my agricultural bulletins which covers the subject. I suppose I could rub the stuff on a Benny Goodman record and let him swing it, but it sounds like a mess. It is this sort of thing that makes the land so richly exciting: you never know where the enemy is going to strike.

[ November 1938 ]

## CHILDREN'S BOOKS

AMONG the goat feathers which stick to us at this season of the year are some two hundred children's books. They are review copies, sent to my wife by the publishers. They lie dormant in every room, like November flies.

This inundation of juvenile literature is an annual emergency to which I have gradually become accustomed—the way the people of the Connecticut River valley get used to having the river come into their parlor. The books arrive in the mail by tens and twenties; we live with them for a few crowded, fever-laden weeks, and then fumigate. Lacking shelf space, we pile them everywhere—on chairs, beds, davenport, ledges, stair landings. Some of them we tuck away in spidery cupboards, among the crocks and fragments of an older civilization. Turn over a birch log on my hearth and you won't find a beetle, you'll find *Bumble-buzz*, the chronicle of a bee. Throw open the door of our kitchen cabinet, out will fall *The Story of Tea*. Pick up a sofa cushion and there, mashed to a pulp, will be a definitive work on drums, tomtoms, and rattles. For the past three weeks I have shared my best armchair with the *Boyhood Adventures of Our Presidents* and a rather heavy book about the valley of the Euphrates. Mine is an uncomfortable, but not uninformative, existence.

I have naturally come to know something about children's books from living so close to them and gazing hatefully at their jackets. A man can't be dogged from room to room by camels, pandas, and cocker spaniels and not gain some knowledge of their peculiar quality. Besides, although I resent their presence, I am not quite proof against children's books: yesterday I could have been found flat on my stomach studying, with every evi-

dence of complete absorption, an outdoor handicraft book in which I had discovered a chapter on how to build a tree-house. (There may have been, in this particular case, an unconscious urge to escape to green mansions; but anyway, there I was, and I didn't stop till I read that the finishing touch to a boy's 1939 tree-house was to equip it with a little radio.)

A man today should keep abreast of what the children of his country are reading. Juvenile books seem to follow old familiar paths, but in new clothes and with a new sense of destinations. Indians, animals, fairies, these old reliables still occupy the key positions. Indians seem, if anything, to be gaining—gaining in stature and in numbers. The child of twenty-five years ago had his Fenimore Cooper Indian, his cigar-store Indian, his lead-soldier Indian, and his Indian suit with a feather headdress; but he thought of an Indian as an agreeably bloodthirsty but bygone creature of history, definitely suspect. Today, thanks to progressive education and some appreciative artists and writers in the Southwest, the Indian stands reborn—in a fine clean region of his own, half way between DiMaggio and Christ. He is high class. His pottery, his dance, his legends, his profile are cultural and good. To my own son the American Indian is a living presence, more vivid than Popeye. To my boy next month isn't December—it is the Month of the Long Night Moon.

It's a funny thing about Indians. Everything about their persons and their habits seems to satisfy the imagination of youngsters. The farther the Indians get from the original, as the years roll on, the more dignity and caste they seem to acquire. There is a certain charm in this tardy deification of the American primitive, but it sometimes strikes me as a little far from life: or maybe I don't meet the right Indians. The only live Indians I've come up against in the past few years were a rather pale group I saw in the Grand Central Galleries, sulkily admiring their own paintings, and an extremely brisk master-of-ceremonies at the Sportsman's Show, squealing like a moose into a loud speaker.

Close physical contact with the field of juvenile literature leads me to the conclusion that it must be a lot of fun to write for children—reasonably easy work, perhaps even important work. One side of it which must be exciting is finding a place, a period, or a thing that hasn't already been written about. This season's list indicates that the authors set about their task with a will. One of them, as I said before, hit upon the valley of the Euphrates. Another one shut his eyes, opened an atlas, and let his finger fall on the Louisiana bayous. Another, with enviable prescience, managed to turn out the third book of a trilogy on Czechoslovakia. Munro Leaf, scouring the earth for another *Ferdinand*, wound up in the Scotland of the MacGregors and the Maxine Sullivans. (Such is the staying power of success, you can have this rather flat tale in either the standard or the special de luxe edition.)

The custom of providing an authentic background for books for the young is almost universal. Authors are most specific. This winter, if a child should yearn to read of an American country town, he can have his choice between a country town in the Eighties and a country town in the Seventies. If his fancy turns to the California scene, he can have the Mexican quarter of Los Angeles or a prune ranch in the Santa Clara Valley. If he dotes on the deep South, he can assuage his hunger in the colored section of Charleston, the colored section of a small town in Florida, or that Louisiana bayou. If depressions are his hobby, he can enjoy the depression of 1817 on the Ohio River or the depression of 1932 on the Potomac. Let his glance rest on the sea, he can amuse himself with the displacement of a battleship, the misadventures of a yawl in a storm, or, tiring of surface matters, he can go right down into the sea in company with nymphs, scuds, and crayfish. If yaks are his passion, he can have a whimsical London yak or a yak of a more practical sort in Tibet. Modern tidewater Virginia vies with Williamsburg before the Revolution. Ecuador competes with Bali. A mongrel of Kips Bay

competes with an outlaw dog on a high windswept tract of Exmoor. Hawaii, Bermuda, South Africa, the Gobi Desert, the Ionian Sea—the authors go journeying on.

Not less impressive than its geographical scope is the polyglot character of this literature. A child who romps around in the juvenile field today picks up a smattering of many tongues and dialects. I have just been browsing hit and miss in a deep pile of books, opening them in the middle and reading a page or two. The experience has left me gibbering.

The first book I opened was *Exploring With Andrews*. "Shortly after we left," I began, "torrential downpours swept away half a dozen yurts pitched at the bottom of a steep bluff."

Without going back to find out what a yurt was, I drifted on into the next book, *Soomoon, Boy of Bali*. It was my luck to alight on page 40, where, from somewhere in the village, "came the deep, hollow tones of a *gamelang*."

Yurts to you, *gamelang*, I thought to myself, and picked up the next book. It happened to be *Benjie's Hat*.

"Thee is an abomination, Eliphalet!" cried a character in this book.

"Who'all 'bomination?" squeaked Eliphalet.

"Thee is," declared Benjie.

I laid Benjie down and picked up *King of the Tinkers*, which seemed to have an Irish flavor to it.

"Sit down here wid me," piped up a fellow in my new book, "we'll have a long collogue together."

"I won't mind," interrupted a Hawaiian in *Hawaiian Holiday*, "if I can have Moki sit on my *lanai* and tell me stories until I go to sleep."

All right, Moki, I muttered drunkenly, thee can sit on my *lanai* and we'll all have a good old-fashioned collogue. Groggy, I picked up *Olympiad*, a book about ancient Greece, but I found no surcease. In fact I immediately encountered a young

athlete who was being scraped with a strigil and taken to the *konisterion*.

Before I finished my browsing, I had learned how to count up to three in Siamese (*satu, dua, tiga*), and I knew that a *coati mundi* is also called a snookum bear, that *bei shung* is Chinese for panda, that *begashi* is Navajo for cows, and that *gu-bu-du gu-bu-du* is Zulu for bumpity bumpity. Right there I rested.

Like toys, books for children reflect surely the temper of the period into which they are born. With science dominating life nowadays, books for young people are largely scientific in their approach to their subject matter, whatever it may be. Even the cute animals of the nonsense school move against impeccable backgrounds of natural history; even a female ant who is sufficiently irregular to be able to talk English lays her eggs at the proper time and in the accepted manner.

In this year of infinite terror, when adults search the sky for trouble and when the desire of everyone is for a safe hole to hide in, it is not surprising to find writers of juveniles glorifying the idea of safety. There are two safety books on my sofa. One is called, somewhat wistfully, *Safety Can Be Fun*. The other, *The Safe-Way Club*, struck me as not far short of hilarious. It tells about a neighborhood organization started "by some fun-loving children to prevent accidents" and it contains the priceless sentence: "The Safe-Way Club had two weeks to get ready for the Parent-Teacher Association Meeting, and what busy weeks they were!"

One laughs in demonic glee at this sort of wild fantasy, but the laugh has a hollow sound. Books on safety for children by today's grown-up authors somehow lack conviction, and the very want of it is sobering. It is an odd place, this front yard of World Crisis, where adults with blueprints of bombproof shelters sticking from their pants pockets solemnly caution their little ones against running downstairs with lollypops in their mouths.

I have heard it said that rats collect trinkets, that if you expose a rat's nest, you may find bright bits of glass and other small desirable objects. A child's mind is such a repository—full of gems of questionable merit, paste and real, held in storage. What shining jewels shall we contribute this morning, sir, to this amazing collection? Educators and psychologists are full of theory about the young: they profess to know what a child should be taught and how he should be taught it, and they are often quite positive and surly about the matter. Yet the education of our young, in schools and in libraries, is a function of home and state which gives every appearance of having brilliantly failed the world. A Sunday night radio invasion of the little people from Mars is still more credible than a book on the courses of the stars.

Much of our adult morality, in books and out of them, has a stuffiness unworthy of childhood. Our grown-up conclusions often rest on perilously soft bottom. Try to tell a child even the simplest truths about planetary, cosmical, or spiritual things, and you hear strange echoes in your own head. "Can this be me?" a voice keeps asking, "can this be me?" Dozens of times in the course of trying to act like a parent I have caught myself telling my boy things I didn't thoroughly comprehend myself, urging him toward conventional attitudes of mind and spirit I only half believed in and would myself gladly chuck overboard.

Such thoughts trouble you when you delve in children's books. A book like *Johnny Get Your Money's Worth*, for example, a primer for the young skeptic, inducting him into the world of consumers, where he mustn't even buy a pencil without biting it to see if it's made of cedar. Or a sycophantic book like *Favorite Stories of Famous Children* (when interviewed Miss Temple wore white linen with hand embroidered triangles in Alice Blue). Or the group of youth novels, which seem almost like parodies of the novel form, and whose expurgated account of life is an insult to the intelligence of adolescence.

A large amount of the published material is dull, prosy stuff, by writers who mistake oddity for fantasy and whose wildly beating wings never get them an inch off the ground. (Incidentally, one of the few books which struck me as being in the true spirit of nonsense is one called *The 500 Hats of Bartholomew Cubbins*, by Dr. Suess.) Some of the books are patronizing, some are mushy, some are grand. Almost all are beautifully illustrated. From them you can discover how to build everything from a Chippewa water drum to a pair of undersea goggles. The exciting thing about them is that, whatever else they are, they are free to be read, untainted by anything but the rigors and joys of pure creation. From *Bumblebuzz* to the *Boy Scouts Yearbook of Fun in Fiction*, there's nothing that can be construed as government propaganda.

The gamut of life must seem splendidly wide to children whose books these are. They may begin with *Little Orphan Willie Mouse*, but they must end with *Windows of the World*, whose unsparing author fixes them with his eye and asks:

And if you are in the trenches, what can you hope for? If you're a man between 18 to 40, that's probably where you'll be. You may be burned to death by flame-throwers, riddled by machine-gun bullets, pulverized by hurtling bombs, chewed by rats in the night, suffocated in leaking gas masks, thrust through your eyes, chest, or belly with triple-bladed bayonets, poisoned with drinking water polluted by unburied bodies.

From such macabre interrogation I had to turn away, being no longer a child. Luckily I found solace in a good wholesome juvenile mystery, which began: "The long, luxurious Rolls Royce, glittering with chromium and enamel, slid over the crest of Cajon Pass and shot down the smooth incline leading into the desert. The hour was sunset."

Sunset in Cajon Pass, and a Rolls Royce under me! This was more like it!