

“A web of her own: E.B. White’s Charlotte as Advertising ‘Mad Man’ of the Barnyard”

“In our opinion, nobody has done justice, artistically, to advertising. It is patently America’s major contribution to present-day culture; yet the only books, analytical or critical, we have seen on the subject have been either textbooks, which are dull and special, or books debunking advertising, which are ill-tempered, humorless, and out-of-date before they get into print.

--E.B. White “Truth-in-Advertising.” *New Yorker*. 11 July 1936.
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Though the bucolic barnyard in E.B. White’s *Charlotte’s Web* (1952) seems worlds away from the frenetic urban scene of midcentury Manhattan, White himself inhabited both spaces, his Maine gentleman farmer existence financed by the witty, urbane essays he penned for the *New Yorker* and *Harper’s*. Despite this seemingly opposed nature of these two spaces, the farm and the city, they are inextricably linked in their own financial, social, and cultural webbing, especially when it comes to White’s classic children’s novel, featuring a spider gendered as female at a time when women were only beginning to participate in professional life. Though much has been written about White as an American essayist, a grammarian (*Elements of Style*, 1959), and as a writer of children’s novels, critics have dealt only glancingly with the two years he spent as a copywriter for Frank Seaman’s advertising agency when he first arrived in New York. To understand Charlotte’s role in essentially “advertising” Wilbur to the Zuckermans, White’s experience as an ad man needs further exploration. The advertising context is an important frame for understanding Charlotte’s web work, its impact on the barnyard and human communities, and for White’s designation of Charlotte at the last as a “true friend and a good writer” (*Charlotte’s Web* 184).

In this paper, I will take an activist approach to Charlotte’s empathy for Wilbur, placing her within the mad man era of advertising, and exploring how she utilizes advertising techniques such as the hard and the soft sell, as well as market research and analysis in her barnyard brainstorming sessions. I will also contextualize her webwork alongside Virginia Woolf’s and Alice Walker’s essays about the anonymity of women’s labor and lives, set against the American midcentury literary marketplace where a few women such as White’s wife Katharine, his editor Ursula Nordstrom, and children’s librarians and teachers worked in a tireless, though often unacknowledged, way; Charlotte herself is connected to women in the advertising field, and this section examines how White’s unflinching depiction of Charlotte’s death resonates for women whose work was undercompensated and unheralded, though present and influential.