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Adventure in Ambiguity

E.B.



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When I first read E.B. White's "Stuart Little" as a child, the ending disturbed me. The title character has left his New York City home in search of a bird, Margalo, whom he

loves dearly. Does Stuart find her? We never find out. All we learn is that “he somehow felt he was headed in the right direction.”

Children’s books don’t usually end in the middle of an adventure. I remember wondering, “Where’s the rest of this story?” Other children wondered the same thing, and so did some of their schoolteachers. White’s correspondence, housed at Cornell University, contains many packets from teachers who enclosed their students’ attempts to bring Stuart Little to a more definitive and conventional conclusion.

White was neither pleased nor amused by these efforts. He wanted to preserve the uncertainty of Stuart’s journey.

That final uncertainty made “Stuart Little” a pioneering children’s book. White’s departure from the predictable and tendentious moralism that prevailed in earlier children’s stories made “Stuart Little” an instant classic. The ambiguity of the novel begins with its opening lines. “When Mrs. Frederick C. Little’s second son was born,” White wrote, “the baby looked very much like a mouse in every way.”

White was being precise. Stuart is not a mouse. He just looks like one. In fact, in later editions of the book, White replaced the word “born” with “arrived,” which clouds Stuart’s origins even further.

The early manuscripts of “Stuart Little”—likewise preserved in White’s Cornell archive—show the author searching for a tense balance between human and mouse. White emphasizes Stuart’s murine looks, but the author also discarded numerous episodes that made Stuart look too mouselike. In one draft, White has Stuart describe himself as a “young man,” but White then crossed out “man,” and tried “mouse.” But he didn’t stay with that either. In the published book, he settles for “person.”

If Stuart isn’t a mouse, then what is he? Actually, he’s something of a freak.

When Stuart Little was published in 1945, freak shows were waning in the U.S. after more than a century of enormous popularity. Their prurient human displays

exploited people's capacity for wonder. The rise of medical science hastened the freak show's decline because it effaced wonder in favor of prosaic fact. In this way, "the miraculous bearded lady" could be reclassified as "an unfortunate victim of Congenital Generalized Hypertrichosis."

The practice of having disabled people perform ordinary feats in extraordinary ways was a staple practice of freak shows. The historian Robert Bogdan calls this an "aggrandized" freak presentation, in which skill pointedly contrasts with disability—and it describes Stuart's portrayal, as when he turns on the bathroom faucet with a miniature sledgehammer.

But if White presents Stuart as an aggrandized freak, he also pushes back against the idea. Freak shows dehumanize their participants, and White reveals Stuart as a fully human personality housed in an anomalous body.

Stuart's ambitions and desires thoroughly humanize him. When Margalo arrives, Stuart falls in love with her beauty. The mock-heroic episode in which Stuart protects the sleeping Margalo by aiming a tiny arrow into the ear of the stalking family cat shows his dignity and courage. And when Margalo saves him from a garbage scow, Stuart displays stoic endurance under stress.

These moments cement Stuart's devotion to Margalo. Her abrupt departure, in the face of further feline threats, breaks his heart.

From his disappointment, Stuart finds his resolve. He goes forth into the world in search of Margalo and, it is clear, himself too. His wanderings lead to various adventures, including a turn as a substitute teacher.

Stuart reaches a personal crossroads in the appropriately named town of Ames' Crossing. (The name is doubly suggestive, for "Ames" invokes the French word for "soul.") There Stuart confronts his fears and insecurities when he briefly courts Harriet Ames, a young woman of his own height. He confesses to her that "my only drawback is that I look something like a mouse."

Stuart's meticulously choreographed plans for a romantic canoe trip with Harriet are scuttled when his tiny boat is vandalized. He gathers his "broken dreams" and sets his northward course.

It has been 75 years since E.B. White launched *Stuart Little* on his open-ended journey. The novel has overcome considerable adult opposition along the way.

A powerful children's librarian, Anne Moore, read the galleys of "*Stuart Little*" in 1945, and tried hard to persuade White not to publish it on the grounds that it was "non-affirmative" and therefore inappropriate for children. The first television version of "*Stuart Little*," in 1966, omitted the Harriet Ames episode, presumably for similar reasons. About the execrable 1999 movie, let it suffice to say that not only Harriet but also Margalo are written out of the story.

"*Stuart Little*" may start out as a freak show, but in an essay in the *New York Times* White described Stuart's final aim as "a quest for beauty." Stuart's trust in his own course mirrors White's trust in his young readers. "Life," White wrote, "is essentially inconclusive." He believed that children—of all ages—should be able to understand that.

—Mr. Cassuto is a professor of English at Fordham University and a columnist for the Chronicle of Higher Education. His next book, "The New PhD: How to Build a Better Graduate Education" (with Robert Weisbuch), will be published next month by Johns Hopkins University Press.

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