

# Say It Loud!

## Strunk & White Revisited

Susan Karwoska interviews Maira Kalman

*Generations of writers have turned to William Strunk, Jr. and E. B. White's *The Elements of Style* for the clarity, brevity, and offbeat humor with which it dispenses its advice. It's hard to think of another rulebook regarded with such fondness. Artist Maira Kalman is well known for her bright and witty illustrations and designs, which have been featured on numerous *New Yorker* covers and in the dozen children's books she has authored. Just out this fall, *The Elements of Style Illustrated* marries the wry humor of Strunk and White with Kalman's own sly observations about the place where rules and creativity intersect. In December, Kalman graciously took the time to answer our questions as she was preparing for a month-long trip to India.—Editor.*

**Susan Karwoska:** As a writer, I have a great appreciation for the unique charm and helpfulness of *The Elements of Style*. Even though we are all, as White notes in his introduction, “in serious trouble most of the time, floundering in a swamp,” the book always has the power to make me feel that good, clear writing is within reach, and worth trying for. I was excited to see this new edition of the book, and to see how your illustrations capture the essential spirit of the book.

**Maira Kalman:** Thank you.

**SK:** I've read that the E. B. White estate has named you the sole artist trusted to illustrate *The Elements of Style*. I'm interested in how this whole project came to be. How did the idea for illustrating the book come about?

**MK:** I found the book at a church bazaar on Cape Cod. I collect books on writing—dictionaries, grammar books, encyclopedias. As soon as I started reading it I loved it and had the idea that I wanted to illustrate it. We approached the White estate. My agent to their agent. It worked out. At first they had to think about it, but once they decided it was okay, they let me do whatever I wanted to. No one was looking over my shoulder.

**SK:** Did the book stand out from others you had come across?

**MK:** It did in that it is a book not just about writing, but about how life should be lived. And it is masterfully written.

**SK:** Because the book is an icon, did you ever feel nervous about adding your own stamp to it?

**MK:** I did, yes, but I decided not to worry about it. It felt so right and intuitive when I was working on it—I was really enjoying myself—and I just trusted that feeling.

**SK:** The rules in this book are written as what White calls “sharp commands.” Both these commands and the quirky and often humorous sentences given to illustrate the commands provide wonderfully rich material for your illustrations. How did you choose what to portray?

**MK:** I went by the sentences that I liked—that interested me or made me laugh. I went through and circled them and there were so many I couldn’t do them all. There’s so much humor there, and wit, and the sentences hop around from idea to idea, which suits my style and the way I work.

**SK:** Both you and E. B. White have written books for children and contributed to the *New Yorker*, and you seem to feel a special affinity for his style.

**MK:** I like that we share those things. White is a wonderful writer but his writing is very different from mine. I think Gertrude Stein is more of a model for me, and White was not a fan of her work. He appreciated what she was attempting, but he said that nobody is that brilliant that they can afford to be so elliptical. He said, “Be obscure clearly! Be wild of tongue in a way we can understand!”

**SK:** Who are your favorite authors?

**MK:** I love [Vladimir] Nabokov and Jane Austen and [W. G.] Sebald. I read Sebald sentence by sentence, and each one is so amazing I often can’t remember the sentence before and have to go back and read it again. As far as children’s books, I’m inspired by Lewis Carroll, William Steig.

**SK:** What inspired you to become an artist?

**MK:** I knew very early on that I wanted to be an artist. I came from a family that did not at all encourage me to be practical, and this allowed me the freedom to pursue whatever it was I was interested in. They stayed out of my way. As a parent, I see how hard it is to do this sometimes, but it was wonderful for me as a child. At a young age I came to see words and images as a way I could tell my own story.

**SK:** White says of Strunk that “he scorned the vague, the tame, the colorless, the irresolute,” and felt it was better to be wrong than timid. White quotes Strunk as saying, “If you don’t know how to pronounce a word, say it loud!” In your own career, you seem to have a lively appreciation for such boldness and a willingness to cross boundaries—for instance, with the opera you commissioned from Nico Muhly based on this new edition of *The Elements of Style*. In your own teaching, what are the most important ideas you try to convey to your students?

**MK:** Say it loud.... I love that advice! When I get an idea, I think, “What are my choices?” Well, I can either do it, or I can not do it, and that usually moves me to go ahead. The worst that can happen is that I’ll find out that particular path was not for me. The lessons of the book are the lessons of life. We’re all stumbling along, and the important thing is not to be afraid to make mistakes. It’s important to learn this early, because if you think that your work should be wonderful right away, you’re in trouble. Of course, you don’t want to stay in that phase of revising bad drafts forever, but making mistakes is what moves you forward. I started to paint because I wasn’t happy with my writing. The art made my writing better.

One semester I had the students in my graduate design class [at New York’s School of Visual Arts] go into a nursing home and talk to the residents there. Each student was paired with one resident, and they spent the semester sitting with them, hearing their stories.

**SK:** Could you tell us a little more about this class? What was the design project associated with the assignment and what inspired you to assign this project? Did you feel it was successful?

**MK:** I wanted to encourage graduate design students to go out of the boundaries of what they might consider design. I wanted to engage with people who are often on the fringes of society and don’t get a chance to tell their story. Design is narrative, journalism, humanism. The design component was the project that they created at the end of the semester, telling the story of the person in any way they chose. These were often conceptual in nature. Some of the projects were music, pottery, clothing, games, newspapers, films, books. I encouraged the students to write and to try a form that they had not tried before. Sometimes it was depressing, sometimes elating. I believe the students learned a lot about themselves and gained some sense of empathy for people while thinking about design.

**SK:** The opera you commissioned, *The Elements of Style: Nine Songs*, was a delightful and surprising offshoot of your work on this book. Do you have any plans to develop the opera further?

**MK:** I would add a dance element—some kind of anti-dance movement. I think sitting down and standing up are pretty interesting movements. The composer, Nico Muhly will perhaps write more songs. I would create more visuals.

**SK:** The last illustration in the book accompanies the sentence “Every window, picture, and mirror was smashed.” The illustration shows just that—a room in chaos. This picture faces the copyright page, which has been designed to look like an explosion of sentences. Why this picture, and why this unusual take on the copyright page?

**MK:** I loved that picture and originally wanted it to go next to the phrase it illustrated in the book, but there was no room. Then it occurred to me that it would be great as the last illustration, like a great bursting open at the end of the book, which is what the book is about—learning the rules, but then taking them into the larger world, where you may have to break them to do what you want. I also wanted to put the copyright page at the end and rearrange it and at first the people who take care of that kind of thing went crazy. Luckily my editor, Ann Godoff, was wonderful. She really fought for me. It was like taking my case to the Supreme Court to get my idea approved. I wanted to know why I couldn’t do it the way I wanted to. Where was the law that said I couldn’t? The answer I got was that “It’s just not done.” Well, okay, I said; if it’s just not done then let’s do it. And eventually they let me.