

## Katharine White

Ever read *The New Yorker*? (my confession) Ever read *Charlotte's Web*? *Stuart Little*? *Trumpet of the Swan*?

Katharine Sergeant was born in Winchester, MA on September 17, 1892 and died on July 20, 1977 - just shy of her 85th b'day.

She grew up in Brookline, MA and essentially was brought up by her paternal aunts as her mother died when she was 6. The aunts had gorgeous Victorian gardens and her sister and their friends played a game - "millinery" - as they roamed the Brookline gardens. Each girl would trim her straw hat with the traditional and fragrant blossoms from the shrubs. Deep seeds were planted in Katherine's memory that would later bear fruit.

Katherine was a Boston Brahmin, a product of Miss Winsor's School in Boston and later Bryn Mawr (class of 1914). **[Photo 1]** She married [Ernest Angell](#), an attorney and the future president of the [ACLU](#) in 1915. They had two children - Nancy (1916) and Roger (1920).

In 1925, she began working for [Harold Ross](#), the co-founder of [The New Yorker](#), six months after its inception. She proved indispensable as an editor, writer, and shaper of the magazine. [James Thurber](#) described her as its

“fountain and shrine”. She nurtured many writers, including Nabokov, John O'Hara, Mary McCarthy, John Cheever, John Updike, and Ogden Nash.

In 1926, Katherine met a young writer at The New Yorker - Elwyn Brooks White (he preferred Andy but was better known by his initials - E. B.); he had already submitted "two or three short things" to the new and struggling magazine. In 1929, she divorced her husband and married E. B.

In 1933, they bought a 40-acre-plus saltwater farm in North Brooklin, Maine - the prettiest on the peninsula - on Allen Cove, a small inlet on Blue Hill Bay. The property included a sturdy c. 1795 white clapboard farmhouse, a barn (what portent!), patio, gardens, pond, and a sweeping view of the bay and the distant mountains of Acadia National Park. **[Photos 2, 3 & 4]**

In 1938, although both Whites loved New York, E.B. felt he had to get away to the farmhouse in Maine. He liked sailing and Katherine loved the country. In his words, he “tore Katharine loose from The New Yorker. It was extraordinarily stupid. She had a desk job. I didn't realize until too late what an awful wrench it would be. But she simply set herself up in the job long-distance.” In 1943, they returned to New York City, returning to Brooklin for good in 1957. **[Photo 5]**

It was at the farmhouse that E.B. wrote some of the most enduring words and works in American literature. **[Photo 6]** Katherine, while continuing her work at the New Yorker, added gardening to her focus. Her granddaughter said: “I think she would have preferred to stay in the city and keep going with the magazine. But I think taking up gardening was a way of her establishing a life for herself in Maine that was her own. She always liked to have her independent life going on in tandem.”

Katherine was not your typical Maine home gardener - she was a literate, elegant, and cultivated woman and more used to being in charge than being “hands on”. E.B. gave precious insight into how she gardened. “Every day, a few minutes before lunch, Katharine would “go out among her borders. She never dressed down for her gardens.” She might be wearing a tweed suit and Ferragamo pumps, and if it were muddy, she kicked off the shoes on coming back into the house.

As for her attitude toward flowers, he said, “She didn't mind a ruffled petunia, but never a ruffled snapdragon. She was not a ruffled girl herself.” He also wrote that Katharine did little of the physical work of gardening herself. “...in youth she lacked the time, in age she lacked the strength. Henry Allen, our caretaker and himself as

ardent gardener was her strong right arm. But she masterminded everything.”

And, lunch brought not a refreshing glass of ice tea, but a martini! (I will have to talk to Bob who brings me water in a plastic cup and ½ a sandwich or a piece of fruit on a paper plate when I am too filthy to come inside and there are still more hours of work to do!)

Katherine was influenced by the memories of her aunts’ traditional gardens, and therefore something of a purist/traditionalist - she loved phlox, delphinium, foxglove, pinks (dianthus), lupines, Canterbury bells, violas, monkshood, lilies and petunias - all of which bloomed in her gardens. **[Photos 7 & 8]** Her granddaughter observed that “She liked flowers that reminded her of her gardens from childhood, very old things, simple things, fragrant things you just can’t find anymore.”

Maddeningly, there are very few photos to be found of the gardens and not much written about the Allen Cove gardens

Her Brooklin gardens along with her obsession with seed catalogs and a love of flowers were the catalyst for 14 columns she wrote, during and after her tenure at the magazine, entitled “Onward and Upward in the Garden,” published in The New Yorker beginning on March 1, 1958. The topics were: seed catalogs, herbalism,

gardening books, flower arranging, the history and literature of gardens, and gardening developments.

Katherine's essays in which she critiqued and extolled the writings of "seedmen and nurserymen," those unsung authors who produced her "favorite reading matter" are probably the best known. "She reviewed the various offerings of the major and minor seed companies [Gurneys's, Park, White Flower Farm, etc.] of her day as she would any work of fiction: she commented on such things as the writing style, the typeface and the illustrations. She commented on the lack of information on fragrance, her despair at the sometimes monstrous shapes in new and improved varieties. She could not abide the use of abbreviations, "glads" for "gladiolus" or "delphs" for "delphiniums," would elicit a strong rebuke.

Two years after her death in 1977, E. B. collected and published the series of columns, with a fond introduction. The result is this sharp-eyed appreciation of the green world of growing things, of the aesthetic pleasures of gardens and garden writing, and of the dreams that gardens inspire. *Horticulture* magazine stated, "Although she never claimed to be more than an amateur, her pieces, especially her famous surveys of garden catalogs, are remarkable for their fierce intelligence and crisp prose." The book was reissued in 2015.

You will note how her career as an editor intermingled with and shaped her as a gardener and garden writer! It has been observed that Katharine approached horticulture through the written word - nursery catalogues and books, gathering her global knowledge of the field. E.B. has the ultimate word on this point:

“I suspect, though, the thing that started her off was her discovery that the catalogue makers — the men and women of her dreams were, in fact, writers... Well here in garden catalogs, she stumbled on a whole new flock of creative people, handy substitutes for the O’Haras, the Nabokovs, the Staffords of her professional life.”

She put her finger on a great truism about gardening in this quotation: “From December to March, there are for many of us three gardens - the garden outdoors, the garden of pots and bowls in the house, and the garden of the mind’s eye.” **[Photo 9]**

After Katherine’s death, E.B. lived on at Allen Cove for another eight years until his own death in 1985 at the age of 86. **[Photo 10]** Their son, Joel, a U.S. naval architect, sold the Allen Cove property to Robert and Mary Gallant a couple from South Carolina some months after his father’s death. They lived there happily each summer and fall, dedicated to the land. In 2019, the Gallants put the property up for sale as their advancing years meant they could no longer dedicate themselves as they wished to the

upkeep of the property. Asking price? \$3.7M. (The Whites' caretaker and gardener, Henry Allen, continued with the Gallants for 7 years.)

Just to round out the family's literary stature, Katherine's son Roger Angell has just celebrated his 100th birthday. He is a renowned essayist - especially on the topic of baseball. He has been a regular contributor to The New Yorker and was its chief fiction editor for many years. In a 2014 essay, "The Old Man", he writes about life after the age of 90. It is a marvel.