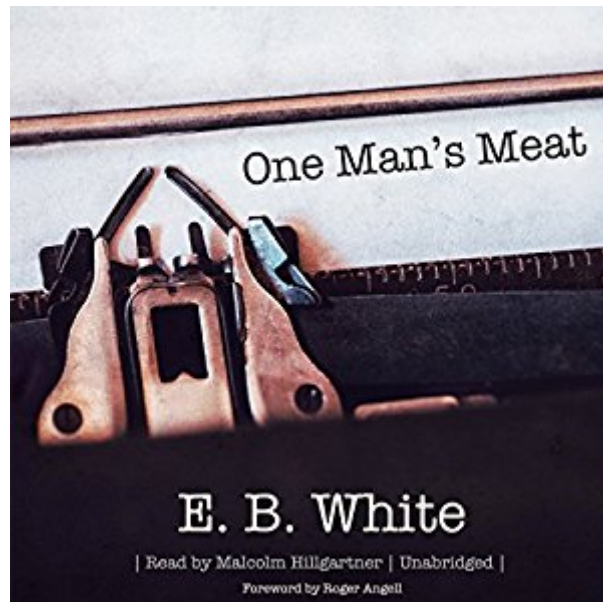


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One Man's Meat



Synopsis

In print for over 50 years, *One Man's Meat* continues to delight listeners with E. B. White's witty, succinct observations on daily life at a Maine saltwater farm. Too personal for an almanac, too sophisticated for a domestic history, and too funny and self-doubting for a literary journal, *One Man's Meat* can best be described as a primer of a countryman's lessons and a timeless recounting of experience that will never go out of style.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This collection of essays is such a fine book; it deserves a much better commentary than it currently has here. And given the times we live in, its subject matter is particularly timely for American readers -- the period of history leading up to the attack on Pearl Harbor and the early years of the war effort -- all told from the point of view of a thoughtful writer on a small farm in Maine. White had moved there with his wife and young son from New York, where he'd been writing for *The New Yorker*, and took up country living, turning his attention to the annual round of the seasons, farm work, the nearby seaside, and the company of independent rural people. Most of the essays in this collection were written and published monthly in *Harpers* from July 1938 to January 1943. In them, there is White's awareness of the ominous threat of fascism emerging in Europe, as well as the vulnerability that Americans felt as they found themselves facing prolonged armed conflict with powerful enemies. These were dark days, and they provide a constant undertone in these otherwise upbeat essays about rural and small-town life. And they are upbeat, celebrating the pleasures and gentle ironies of daily life with a few side trips into the world beyond -- the birth of a lamb, paying

taxes, farm dogs, hay fever, raising chickens, Sunday mornings, radio broadcasts, civil defense drills, a visit to Walden pond, a day at the World's Fair, and unrealistic Hollywood portrayals of the pastoral. There is also here his famous essay "Once More to the Lake." In many ways, the world he writes about is gone forever. But it's a world whose spirit remains at the heart of the national identity -- participatory democracy, individualism, citizenship, self-discovery, and self-reliance. Reading these essays, while they are often about seemingly trivial matters, you sense White's deepening faith in the American Experiment -- a belief in America as a work in progress. And, of course, there is the famous White style, both simple and elegant. Its language, sentence structure, and movement of thought convey both sharpness of mind and generosity of spirit, in a manner that looks and sounds easy, but it is very hard to imitate. I recommend this book to anyone with an interest in the WWII homefront, the essay as a literary form, and a curiosity about rural life before farm subsidies and agribusiness.

Understanding E.B. White is not an easy task. He was a reserved man, very straightforward in his writing and simple in nature. However, White found that he was able to express himself with his writing, and none of his books is a more direct window into his soul than "One Man's Meat." Written over the course of White's later years of living on a Maine farm, this book contains witty accounts of geographic novelty, reminiscences on the promise of youth, and powerful insights into the little things in life that can make all the difference. No reader of E.B. White can gain a full knowledge of what the man was all about without having thoroughly digested this book.

E. B. White's essays are sweet and courageous. It's a rare and wonderful combination. They are also, to use that severely abused word, poignant, which means, painfully affecting the feelings. Consider the opening line to the essay, World War I: "I keep forgetting that soldiers are so young." He wrote that line in 1939. I think of that every day in the context of Iraq and Afghanistan. One Man's Meat, first published in 1942, is the companion volume to the Essays of E. B. White. Both books include his classic, Once More to the Lake, an essay about taking his own son to the lake that made such an impression on him when he was taken there by his own father. There is minimal overlap between the two books. In 1940 he lamented the effects of the automobile on community life: "Everything in life is somewhere else, and you get there in a car." This book also includes the best thing I have ever read about poetry. Poems must be short, he said, because, "Poetry is intensity, and nothing is intense for long." One of the things that struck me most in this group of essays was his statement about writers, since I am one. He wrote: "In a free country it is the duty of writers to

pay no attention to duty." I love this man. I could rant on for hours about the joy of reading this book, but it's better that you spend your time reading his work instead of mine.

An experience awaits you. (I recently overheard, or saw only in my peripheral vision, or almost read a comment by a professor of literature. "I would give anything," he said, "for the pleasure of reading 'Romeo and Juliet' again for the first time.") That experience awaits you here. That experience and the companion experience that the sly, lively E.B. White is just behind you, just over your shoulder as you read. The words are that alive. Listen to Mr. White contemplate as he attempts to complete a government questionnaire: "Under JOB FOR WHICH YOU ARE BEST FITTED I wrote "Editor and writer." Under JOB FOR WHICH YOU ARE NEXT BEST FITTED I wrote "Poultryman and farmer." But I realize . . . it is hard to tell about fitness. Physically I am better fitted for writing than for farming, because farming takes great strength and great endurance. Intellectually I am better fitted for farming than writing." That, for me, was the best of many extraordinary lines in one of many exceptional paragraphs in one of many excellent essays. I have a habit of dog-earring pages of books where I feel wisdom is revealed. No book I have read in the last few years has as many pages folded over as this book of essays. Read. Enjoy. Have that wonderful first experience. Allow in this avuncular Yankee; he will live in you forever more.

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