INTRODUCTION:

I have read many books during my lifetime—many books—and Charlotte’s Web is one of my favorites from my childhood.

I was introduced to Charlotte’s Web through a reading textbook while in elementary school. Like most of them, it included selections from many different books. Charlotte’s Web was one of the books and the selection was enough to pique my interest. In fact, most of what I borrowed from the library during that time period were chosen based on my reading books: Little Women, The Hobbit, and Caddie Woodlawn, to name a few.

A few months ago I picked up Charlotte’s Web and began reading it again. When I reached the end of the first chapter, I realized I was grinning. The description of Fern bottle feeding the tiny pig reminded me of why I enjoyed this book so much as a child. In spare moments I finished the book, excited about sharing it with my youngest daughter, an animal lover.

Perhaps your children are like mine. All of them have watched the movies—both the animated version and the more recent one—but a movie doesn’t compare to sitting down and savoring a good book. So, if you haven’t read this classic, or if it has been awhile, I think you and your children will enjoy this wonderful tale of friendship.

SETTING: Rural area in the early 1950s

The author doesn’t specifically say where in the United States the story takes place, but we can assume that, because he was inspired by a spider in the barn on his property in Maine, that he wrote it with that setting in mind.

This book was published in 1952, so the time period is probably the late 1940s to early 1950s. As you are reading the book, notice how Fern and her brother, Avery, spend their summer days.

- How is it similar to the way you, and your siblings, spend your summers? What about other children in the United States? What about other countries?
- How many things do you use on a daily (or weekly) basis that weren’t invented in 1952? If you aren’t sure, look it up. (If you use the computer for research, make sure you have your parents’ permission).
Do you think you could go without any of these inventions for a day? A week? A month? How have they made our lives better or improved them? What negative things have happened because of some (or all) of these inventions?

What major world event had happened within the last decade when this book was published?

Does Fern and Avery’s life sound interesting?

Pick at least one thing that you would like to do that they did in the book. Is it possible and something your parents will allow?

Talk to a grandparent or great-grandparent. Ask them how old they were when this book was published, and ask them about life during this time period.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: E.B. White

Elwyn Brooks (E.B.) White was born on July 11, 1899, to Samuel and Jessie White in Mount Vernon, New York. He was the youngest of six children.

He served in the army before going to college and then attended Cornell University where he acquired the nickname “Andy,” traditionally bestowed on any student with the last name of White in honor of the co-founder of the university, Andrew Dickson White. He kept this nickname for the rest of his life—he had never liked the name of Elwyn.

After graduating in 1921 from Cornell, he worked for the United Press, the American Legion News Service, and was a reporter for The Seattle Times. He also worked for an advertising agency and in 1927 was hired by The New Yorker magazine. He met his wife, Katherine Angell, there. They were married in 1929.

E.B. White, according to James Thurber, disliked publicity. Often, to avoid visitors he didn’t know, he would slip out of his office using the fire escape.

By 1930 he and his family were spending much of their time at their farmhouse in Maine. While in his barn one day, he observed a spider spinning an egg sac. Her skill and cleverness impressed him. This gave him the inspiration for his beloved story, Charlotte’s Web.

In addition to Charlotte’s Web, White wrote two other children’s books, Stuart Little and The Trumpet of the Swan. He also revised The Elements of Style by William Shrunk, Jr., and wrote other books for adults.

Later in life E.B. White suffered from Alzheimer’s disease and eventually passed away in 1985 at his home in Maine. He was survived by his son, Joel; his stepchildren, Roger and Nancy; and many grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR: Garth Williams

Garth Williams (1912-1996) illustrated many well-known books during his lengthy career. In addition to Charlotte’s Web, Mr. Williams illustrated Stuart Little, the eight Little House books by Laura Ingalls, the Frances books by Russell Hoban, A Cricket in Times Square, as well as many others. He estimated that he had illustrated about ninety-seven books by the time he was 81!
In the New York Times Mel Gussow wrote, “He [Garth Williams] believed that books ‘given, or read, to children can have a profound influence.’ For that reason, he said, he used his illustrations to try to ‘awaken something of importance . . . humor, responsibility, respect for others, interest in the world at large.’”

When he died in 1996, he was survived by his five daughters and his son. His daughter, Fiona, had served as his model for Fern when he illustrated Charlotte’s Web.

- More information about Garth Williams
- Obituary in the NY Times by Mel Gussow

* SchoolhouseTeachers.com note: Parents should closely monitor children’s use of YouTube and Wikipedia if you navigate away from the videos and articles cited in these lessons. We also recommend viewing the videos on a full screen setting in order to minimize your students’ exposure to potentially offensive ads.

**FOOD CONNECTION: Homemade Donuts**

In the first chapter, Fern’s mother quickly hands her a donut as she’s getting ready to head to school on the school bus. Although donut shops were in operation, most likely women in rural settings would have made homemade donuts for their family instead of buying them at a shop.

Your family can make a batch of homemade yeast donuts using the recipe I’ve included along with this lesson. Note: The dough needs to rise twice, so plan ahead. From start to finish it requires about 2 ½ hours.

Or, if you are hungry for donuts, but don’t want to wait that long, make a batch of biscuit dough and fry it instead of baking it (this recipe also makes fantastic baked biscuits). Decorate while hot as you would a raised donut with glaze, powdered sugar, and/or sprinkles.

Last option: if you happen to have canned biscuits in your fridge (I never do—I really don’t like the flavor or all the extra ingredients) you can use it to make a quick batch of donuts.

- History of the Doughnut

**SCIENCE: Pigs and Spiders**

**Pigs:** Almost everyone in the United States has seen or is familiar with the domestic pig, but I wonder if you can find some new facts about pigs to share with your family or friends?

Here are a few questions to start with:

*Why do pigs roll around in the mud?*
*Do they have toes? If so, how many on each foot?*
How big do they get? 
How many teeth do they have? 
Are they stupid or smart? 
What do they eat? 

I’ll answer that last one for you. Did you know that pigs are omnivorous? That means they eat both plants and animals.

Pigs in the wild mostly eat leaves, roots, grasses, flowers, and fruits. Domesticated pigs, besides eating scraps, if provided for them, eat corn and soybean meal enriched with vitamins. Because of this we don’t think of them as omnivores, but not that long ago my cousin, who owns a small farm in Idaho, lost a chicken to their pig. The chicken flew over the fence and the pig attacked, killed, and ate it. Definitely not something he or his wife ever expected to happen!

In Charlotte’s Web the author regularly gives us a description of what’s in Wilbur’s food trough. It’s never just one thing, but a mixture of several kinds of food. I wonder if Wilbur ever had the opportunity to eat chicken!

Here are some links:

- Find the meaning of Wilbur’s name
- Fun Pig Facts
- National Geographic for Kids
- More interesting pig facts

**Scientific Classification for Pig**

Kingdom-Animalia  
Phylum-Chordata  
Class-Mammalia  
Subclass-Theria  
Infraclass-Eutheria  
Order-Artiodactyla  
Family-Suidae  
Subfamily-Suinae  
Genus-Sus

**Spiders:** In Chapter 5 Charlotte introduces herself as Charlotte A. Cavatica. I think it’s interesting that E. B. White used a variation of the scientific name for the barn spider*, *Araneus cavaticus*, when he named Charlotte. *Araneus* and *cavaticus* are both Latin words.

Look up the definitions for *araneus* and *cavaticus*. Based on these definitions what does *Araneus cavaticus* literally mean?
Did you know spiders aren’t insects? Spiders are actually part of the arachnid class. Unlike insects, they have eight legs, no antennae or wings. Some of the other species in the arachnid class are scorpions, mites, and daddy long legs.

Arachnids have two body sections: the cephalothorax in the front and the abdomen behind, but some orders have sections that are so close together you can’t see the separation between the two parts. The Latin name for the order of spiders is Araneae.

Some Fun Facts about Spiders:

- Barn spiders are nocturnal—they spin a new web every night.
- You can find spiders on every continent . . . except Antarctica. Maybe it’s just too chilly for them!
- There are about 40,000 different species of spider.
- Spiders don’t have teeth, so they can’t chew. They inject poison into the flies they catch, which turns the insides to mush so they can drink them.
- Arachnids have two main parts two their bodies. Insects have three.
- They are the only arachnid able to spin webs of silk threads.
- Spiders make silk with special organs called spinnerets.
- Not all spider webs are called cobwebs. Cobwebs are spider webs that have been abandoned.
- Very few spiders are harmful to humans. Deaths from spider bites are rare.
- ‘Arachnophobia’ is the abnormal fear of spiders.
- The largest type of spider is a tarantula. They are large and often hairy spiders. Some have been known to kill lizards, mice, and birds!
- The Goliath Birdeater is the largest species of tarantula.
- Most tarantula species are not harmful to humans.
- Giant huntsman spiders, discovered in Laos in 2001, have leg-spans of around 12 inches (30 cm).

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Scientific Classification of a Spider

Kingdom- Animalia
Phylum- Anthropoda
Class: Arachnida
Order- Araneae
Family- Araneidae
Genus- Araneus
Species: A. cavaticus (barn spider)

LANGUAGE ARTS: Greek Mythology—Arachne the Weaver

Many different cultures have myths and legends that involve spiders. The Greeks are no exception and they have a tale about a talented—but proud—young weaver named Arachne. According to the myth,
Arachne boasted that not even the goddess Athena could create works more beautiful than Arachne’s weavings.

You can read the myth, play an interactive version, or find the story in a book of Greek myths. Note: Make sure you read over any story of Arachne first before reading it to your child or using the interactive version. Some versions give details not appropriate for children about what she depicted in her weaving. Also in some stories Arachne hangs herself and then is brought back to life by Athena as a spider. The interactive version link above does mention drunkenness once and that Arachne hangs herself. Please read over it first (I suggested turning off the volume) before allowing your child to use it to make sure it’s appropriate for your child.

This tame, shortened version of the story includes the painting, “The Spinners,” by Diego Velázquez (1599-1660) which depicts the weaving contest between Athena and Arachne.

After reading the story of Arachne, discuss why spiders are called arachnids.

“An interesting fact that relates myth to history is that the art of weaving is said to have originated in Anatolia, a part of modern Turkey, and spiders have been a constant source of inspiration for man to perfect his weaving skill. The story of Arachne from Greek mythology has also been immortalized by science and the taxonomical class name for spiders is Arachnida.” Source: www.greeka.com

GEOGRAPHY: Lydia and Maine

Lydia, Asia: The story of Arachne takes place in Lydia which is located in what is now part of Turkey. The Lydian kingdom was actually fairly large and very prosperous. An interesting fact is that four of the seven churches—Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea—that are mentioned in Revelation 1:11 are located in Lydia. The other three—Ephesus, Smyrna, and Pergamos—are also fairly close to Lydia.

- Map of Lydia (Lydia is a purple section near the top left hand side. Greece is pink and to the left of Lydia across the Aegean Sea.)
- Older students might enjoy researching Lydia and reporting on what they discover. This site has some interesting information.

Maine, United State: Clear on the other side of the world you will find Maine. It’s located in the eastern part of the United States and is bordered by New Hampshire and Canada. North Brooklin, Maine is where E.B. White lived and was inspired to write Charlotte’s Web.

- History of Maine*
- Facts and History
- Timeline of Maine
- Printable map of Maine to color.

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BIBLE CONNECTION: Friendship

In this story Charlotte the spider not only befriends Wilbur, but fabricates a plan to save Wilbur from being slaughtered by Mr. Zuckerman.


Assignment: After reading these verses write one to five paragraphs about friendship.

CRAFT: Preserve a Spider web

There are many spider web craft ideas (see the link to my Pinterest board in the research section), but—instead of making something out of sticks and yarn—preserve a spider web using just a few supplies.

Supplies needed:

- Dark construction paper (or cardstock)
- Talcum powder (baby powder)
- Can of hair spray
- Piece of newspaper
- Scissors

Follow these directions to save a spider web.

WRAP IT UP: A County Fair-Themed Party

As a treat, when you reach the end of the book create your own mini fair. Some food suggestions: popped corn, cotton candy, pickles, peanuts, hot dogs or hamburgers, soda, and cupcakes. If you are feeling really energetic, prepare “carnival” style games like knock-down pins, pin drop, squirt gun games, etc. Pass out tickets whenever they win and, at the end, they can trade in the tickets for prizes or candy.

- History of the County Fair

RESOURCES FOR CHARLOTTE’S WEB:

E.B. White’s Biographies

- Scholastic.com
- Bio.com
- Wikipedia*

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Spiders

- **Spinning Spiders** by Melvin Berger. Lovely pictures with great descriptions and information about spiders.
- **Prickly and Poisonous** by Anita Ganeri. Although this book covers much more than just spiders, it is one of my 5-year-old and 7-year-old sons’ favorites—especially the sections about spiders and snakes.
- **Magic School Bus Spins a Web: A Book about Spiders** by Joanna Cole. The Magic School Bus books are always great resources.

Greek Myths

- **A Book of Myths** by Jeanie Lang. Available on Amazon.com as Kindle edition for free. The story of Arachne is included, but I haven’t read this version myself.

  Note: Make sure you read over any story of Arachne first before reading it to your child. Some versions give details not appropriate for children about what she depicted in her weaving. Also in some Arachne hangs herself and then is brought back to life by Athena as a spider. Proceed with caution.

More ideas/links on my Pinterest board