The White Stuff

By Bruce Bawer

A new biography portrays the woman who created the New Yorker mentality.

In my whole life, I don't think I've read any essay more times than Tom Wolfe's hilarious 1965 takedown of the *New Yorker.* Published in two parts in *New York* magazine, it did a terrific job of capturing the absurd self-importance, the pretense at seriousness and sophistication, and the sheer anal retentiveness of a weekly rag that was, when it came right down to it, nothing more than a class totem for readers – mostly women – who saw themselves as urbane and were prosperous enough to buy the high-end luxury items advertised in its pages. As Wolfe pointed out, the really important writers of short fiction during the previous couple of decades had, with few exceptions, published their work in *Esquire* and the *Saturday Evening Post,* not the *New Yorker.* This pattern has continued ever since, even as the magazine has undergone its share of changes.

In the prologue to *The World She Edited,* her worshipful new biography of the longtime *New Yorker* fiction editor, Katharine S. White, Amy Reading (yes, Reading) acknowledges the curious status of *New Yorker* fiction, although she doesn't really intend to. She does this by opening with an anecdote about

an exchange of letters between Katharine and Frances Gray Patton, who had contributed a number of short stories to the magazine. At the time, Patton was in the doldrums, unable to write anything that won Katharine's approval, and Katharine took her concerns seriously, replying at considerable length with suggestions for a solution to her dilemma.

One question: Frances who? This is only the first of several times in Reading's book that she mentions a *New Yorker* fiction contributor, usually a woman, whose name I don't think I've ever heard before. Reading's fundamental premise is that Katharine's life story is worth telling because of the important contribution that her superlative editing skills made to American letters. But what difference did Frances Gray Patton ever make to American letters?

Here's Reading's take on the nature of Katharine's contribution. "Good editing," she posits, is invisible, but masterful editing makes visible the unsaid, because a great editor received what is not on the page: the realized, the unthought, the assumed, the retracted, the tentative, the implied. Once in a while, the art of editing consists of reading not words but their author, of stepping into the private compositional process to help build the architecture of the writer's inner life. This kind of editing can be intensely personal, and this is the kind of editing that Katharine S. White perfected.

Sorry, but this strikes me as, first of all, the height of pretentiousness (which I suppose is appropriate in a book about the *New Yorker*). Second of all, it describes a kind of editing that goes well beyond editing into an area more properly described as rewriting. Decades ago, just out of grad school, I applied for a job at a monthly science magazine that, it turned out, would involve not just editing but entirely reworking, from the ground up, the columns of a famous science commentator who, I discovered, could barely put

a sentence together on the page, let alone structure a thousand-word column. A bridge too far, it seemed to me.

In later years I would write op-eds for major newspapers. At the *Wall Street Journal* and *Washington Post,* editors rarely touched a word of my prose; at the *New York Times,* they rewrote me entirely, resulting in a flat, dull newspaperese that made all their contributors sound exactly alike. Which brings us to the British poet Stephen Spender's 1949 remark about the *New Yorker,* cited by Reading, that its contributors "are edited (or edit themselves) almost out of existence so that everything in it appears to be by an anonymous body called *The New Yorker.*" Yep. That's what Katharine S. White did. Is that "masterful editing"? Not in my book. And especially not when we're talking about imaginative fiction or personal essays rather than, say, straight reportage. (Opinion pieces and reviews, it seems to me, occupy a middle ground.)

Yes, I've had editors who made a great positive difference for me. When I was first writing for the *New Criterion* – again, just out of grad school – then managing editor Erich Eichman taught me how to write long literary essays in such a way that readers would be able to follow my arguments as effortlessly as possible. In the years since, editors have helped me by (for example) fixing typos, correcting dates, suggesting the omission of excess details, and noticing repeated words that could more elegantly be replaced by synonyms. If you're a competent professional writer, that's what you want in an editor: a fresh pair of eyes to catch things you've looked at too many times to notice. And, yes, when you're talking about nonfiction, the question of a publication's "house style" is legitimate, up to a point. But making even fiction sound as if it were the product of a computer program? No, thanks.

To understand Katharine's editorial philosophy, it's important to know some basic biographical data. Born in 1892, Katharine was a daughter of privilege who graduated near the top of her class at Bryn Mawr, the premier women's college of the day.

When hired by the newly launched *New Yorker* in 1925, she "was second only to [editor-in-chief Harold] Ross in the shaping of the magazine's voice." She and her first husband, Ernest Angell, a Wall Street lawyer, occupied a brownstone on East 93rd Street in Manhattan and had a summer/weekend place in the upstate New York hamlet of Snedens Landing. Dressed invariably in "tastefully understated clothes of excellent quality," she employed a cook, maid, and nurse. (And yet she wrote a self-pitying article, in these early years of her career, expressing her mystification at the fact that she and her husband were always "dead broke.")

White was also a dedicated feminist, which at the time meant buying into the claim that upper-class women such as herself were oppressed. The plight of truly underprivileged women was scarcely on her radar. But the key point here is that a great many of the stories she accepted for the *New Yorker* were written by women very much like herself and depicted lives very much like her own. When she edited them, her primary goal was not to improve their literary quality but to make them fit the *New Yorker* mold even more neatly – to ensure, in other words, that they passed for what a well-off middlebrow housewife would find familiar and deem sophisticated even as they carefully excluded anything that she might regard as overly erudite or, heaven forfend, vulgar. As Wolfe put it, the magazine tended to go for "stories about women in curious rural-bourgeois settings" and about men who, located in "some vague exurb or country place or summer place," find themselves "meditat[ing] over their wives and their little children with what used to be called 'inchoate longings' for something else." (Then there were Katharine's repeated efforts to get the Canadian writer Morley Callaghan "to change the locations of his stories to New York and its environs." Yes, as has often been said, the Big Apple *is* the most provincial of cities.)

Frances Gray Patton isn't the only unfamiliar name in

Reading's book. Katharine published several stories by Emily Hahn and Nancy Hale – who? – even as she was rejecting submissions by F. Scott Fitzgerald and D.H. Lawrence because they weren't "really New Yorker material." William Faulkner failed to make the cut, too. The 1920s marked the height of the Harlem Renaissance, but, with one or two exceptions, none of its leading figures was admitted into the august pages of the *New Yorker* – just a few blocks too far north, I guess. Later Ralph Ellison, despite many tries, was never accepted either. One frequent contributor, who became a staffer – and, in 1929, Katharine's second husband – was E.B. (Andy) White, who would go on to become a famous author of children's books (*Charlotte's Web, Stuart Little*) and the co-writer of the perennial bestseller *The Elements of Style,* a slim textbook on writing that I've always viewed as pernicious for reasons that I guess it's a bit off-topic to go into here.

In many ways, indeed, *The New Yorker* was a family affair. Katharine's son, Roger Angell, ended up working for the magazine for seven decades. He wasn't the only legacy employee to enjoy a long career there. Which reminds me of one more anecdote from my immediate post-grad school years: when I was fishing around for a job, the oddest rejection letter I got was one from the *New Yorker.* "We don't hire from outside," it read. "Outside"? It was signed by someone whose last name I recognized as that of a *New Yorker* stalwart but whose first name meant nothing to me – and that I don't remember ever coming across since. In short, some insider's mediocre kid. Of course, given the social, cultural, and ideological insularity of the whole *New Yorker* operation from its founding to the present day, the centrality of nepotism to its institutional dynamic is no surprise.

Anyhow, it was Katharine, whose stint as *New Yorker* fiction editor lasted from 1925 to 1960 and who died in 1977, who first set in stone what kind of stories were and weren't "*New Yorker* material." For example, during a period when she was on

extended leave, with her duties taken over by William Maxwell (much of whose own fiction, I should say, I greatly admire), he fought against accepting Shirley Jackson's short story "The Lottery," which, needless to say, came to be regarded as a classic. If John Updike is the ultimate *New Yorker* writer, it's because he always viewed the magazine as some kind of Mount Olympus, spent his life trying to write (in his short stories, anyway) "*New Yorker* material"and measured his own value, rather pathetically, by the judgments of his editors there – a mentality that, I've long felt, ended up restricting him severely as a literary artist. (For Updike, too, by the way, the *New Yorker* was a family affair: as Wolfe noted in his 1965 piece, one recent issue of the magazine had contained short stories by Updike and Linda Grace Hoyer – who just so happened to be Updike's mother.)

Reading's book clocks in at just short of 600 pages, including the prologue and index. Funny: it's a biography of an editor, and it's more desperately in need of editing than anything I've read in years. On page 14 we learn that in 1898 Katharine's father paid $23,500 for the family home on Walnut Street in Brookline, Massachusetts, which, we're told, measured 4,300 square feet and stood on a 17,600-square-foot plot – and those are just a couple of the particulars about that purchase that Reading supplies us with. On page 32, similarly, we're told that when Katharine's sister and aunt traveled to Italy in 1903 they visited "Taormina, Syracuse, Agrigento, Palermo, Naples, Rome, Assisi, Perugia, and Florence." The entire book is stuffed with such detail. Where's a good editor when you need her?

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