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'Style' Gets New Elements By JEREMY EICHLER

Rulebooks of English grammar are not generally known for their longevity, or for their ability to implant themselves in the broader cultural imagination. But as even William Strunk Jr. and E. B. White conceded, every rule has its exceptions.

Strunk and White's legendary "Elements of Style" was first published in 1959, and in the intervening decades, this little book on language and its proper usage has been force-fed to countless high school English students, who have read it zealously, dog-eared key pages, showered it in graphite love or else completely disregarded and forgotten it, usually at their own risk. Beyond its sage advice on matters of style, it is filled with the Solomonic rules and injunctions - "Make every word tell"; "Use the active voice"; "Be obscure clearly" - that have served as a lifeboat to both professional and amateur writers adrift on the perilous seas of split infinitives, dangling participles and weak or flabby prose.

But while "The Elements of Style" has never lacked fans or dutiful adherents, appreciation for this slim volume takes a turn toward the whimsical and even surreal this week, as the Penguin Press publishes the first illustrated edition, featuring artwork by Maira Kalman, and the young composer Nico Muhly offers a finely wrought "Elements of Style" song cycle, to be given its premiere tonight at 8 in a highly unusual, if oddly appropriate, concert setting: the Rose Main Reading Room of the New York Public Library.

Ms. Kalman, an artist, children's book author, designer and illustrator whose credits include the popular "Newyorkistan" cover of *The New Yorker*, says she had never used Strunk and White as a student but discovered it only four years ago at a yard sale and was immediately struck by its vividness and charm. "Each sentence was so full of incredible visual reference," she recently recalled. "I said to myself, how could anyone not have illustrated this before?"

In the new clothbound edition, Ms. Kalman's whimsical paintings are sprinkled through the text, often responding to the wry or quirky examples the authors chose to enliven what might otherwise have been a dry discussion of grammatical rules. On the topic of pronoun cases, they offer: "Polly loves cake more than she loves

me." On the uses of the dash: "His first thought on getting out of bed - if he had any thought at all - was to get back in again." Ms. Kalman had no shortage of material.

She explained that while she was painting her illustrations, she found herself singing the words and dreaming of a Strunk and White opera, or even a ballet. She turned to Mr. Muhly, whom she had known for more than a decade as a family friend and co-conspirator in various neo-Dadaist adventures. (Ms. Kalman once ran a Rubber Band Society - for people who love rubber bands, naturally - and invited Mr. Muhly to compose a work scored for rubber bands, which he did.) "I knew that Nico and I would have an immediate conversation in shorthand about humor and imagination, and that he'd completely get it," Ms. Kalman said.

Mr. Muhly, 24, is a talented and audacious graduate of the Juilliard School who has worked with [Philip Glass](#) and Bjork. His Strunk and White songs are eloquently scored for soprano, tenor, viola, banjo and percussion. They also include parts for Ms. Kalman's friends and family, who will make "little gentle noises" through amplified kitchen utensils (vintage eggbeaters and meat grinders) and a set of dice shaken in a bowl.

But even with this lineup, the humor of the piece lies more in its straight-faced seriousness. The vocal writing is cast in a distinctly early-music style, the textures as pure and pared down as Strunk and White liked their sentences. There are frequent moments of disarming beauty, as if Mr. Muhly were tempting the listener to forget the jokes and simply listen.

At a rehearsal last week, the tenor Matt Hensrud stood on the elevated catwalk of the library's reading room and sang mellifluously of punctuation and orthography. "Do not use a hyphen between words that can better be written as one word: 'water-fowl, waterfowl,'" he intoned, his voice echoing in the churchlike acoustics. He was joined by the soprano Abby Fischer for some tenderly turned philology: "The steady evolution of the language seems to favor union: two words eventually become one."

The word "eventually" in this line soared with a long,

attractive melisma of the sort Mr. Muhly grew to love during his years singing in a boys' choir in Providence, R.I. His devotion to the Anglican choral tradition is everywhere apparent in these settings, but so is his fondness for American Minimalism, as churning viola figures cushion many of the passages, often bringing a somber, plaintive tone to the music.

"I decided early on that there was going to be this melancholy," he said. "It's already so absurdist, I didn't want too much laughing during the music."

So would Strunk and White have approved? There is little doubt, in Ms. Kalman's eyes. "They both had a great sense of humor and were very irreverent," she said. "It wasn't about being prim and proper."

White's granddaughter Martha White, who granted permission for the illustrations, seems to agree. "He loved a spoof and, of course, produced some classics himself," she wrote of White in an e-mail message, adding that a similar issue had come up before.

She quoted from a letter White wrote in 1981: "You might be amused to know that Strunk and White was adapted for a ballet production recently. I didn't get to the show, but I'm sure Will Strunk, had he been alive, would have lost no time in reaching the scene, to watch dancers move gracefully to his rules of grammar."

"The Elements of Style" is being performed tonight at 8 at the New York Public Library, Fifth Avenue and 42nd Street; (212) 868-4444.