

MAIRA KALMAN

THE ELEMENTS OF STYLE

*(illustrations)*



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William Strunk, Jr.

**M**ost writers, good writers, read and reread periodically *The Elements of Style*, the William Strunk, Jr., and E. B. White treatise on clear and effective writing, originally published in 1957. For many college students it is required reading. Writer, artist, and illustrator Maira Kalman had the idea of creating illustrations for the slim volume. In 2005, after a few years of negotiating the rights, she published an illustrated version. I had seen some of Kalman's paintings in 2003 at the Julie Saul Gallery in New York. Two years later at Kalman's second exhibition there, which coincided with the release of *The Elements of Style (Illustrated)* (Penguin Press), my admiration for Kalman's art soared. I also became more attuned to language, its irony and whimsy. Kalman's books for children were already widely known and well received. I came to know her larger body of work in reverse order and can only imagine the wonder of discovering Kalman's curlicues, adventures, and visual non sequiturs at a more impressionable age. Kalman, mother to Lulu and Alex, said, "If you live with children, the kinds of conversation you have during the day range from the surreal to the mundane to insane to the pedantic."<sup>1</sup> By unleashing her inner child, Kalman speaks to the innocence in each of us, and her illustrations for *The Elements of Style* awaken the merits of clarity in creative endeavors extolled initially by William Strunk, Jr., for his student, the young E. B. White:

**Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no**



unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all sentences short or avoid all detail and treat subjects only in outline, but that every word tell. <sup>ii</sup>

Kalman's idiosyncratic simplicity makes every word, every object, every line "tell." Her ear for language is as acute as her eye for image. In the chapter "Words and Expressions Commonly Misused," Strunk and White give examples of sentences that use and misuse the word "unique," which means "without like or equal" and cannot correctly be expressed with a qualifier. An eggbeater cannot be more unique or the most unique. To accompany the sentence illustrating the correct usage, "It was a unique eggbeater," Kalman painted a single eggbeater against a white background recalling the readymades of Marcel Duchamp. Readymades appear frequently in Kalman's works—on the page as well as in her home and in installations

made for exhibitions. For her 2007 retrospective, organized by the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, the artist arranged "many tables of many things." <sup>iii</sup>

Kalman commissioned Nico Muhly to compose a song cycle or opera for *The Elements of Style*. Muhly scored a song cycle for soprano, tenor, viola, banjo, percussion, and random sounds in the



*It was a unique eggbeater.*

unorthodox style of Dadaist and Futurist performances. It was to be performed on "kitchen utensils, vintage eggbeaters, meat grinders, a set of dice shaken in a bowl, a Rolodex, clattering tea cups and saucers, Slinkys, and jars of buttons." <sup>iv</sup> For her exhibition at the **Frist Center for the Visual Arts**, she will arrange the instruments used for the opera on a table to accompany the fifty-six original paintings that were used to illustrate *The Elements of Style*. Together, these exhibition components demonstrate the artist's penchant for consistently arranging the best stuff—shapes and textures—in the best design with no unnecessary parts.

As a freshman at New York University, Kalman planned to study literature. Soon, she migrated toward painting her words and became a supreme storyteller.

Among her portraits are endearing renderings of Vladimir Nabokov and Emily Dickinson. Marcel Proust and Fyodor Dostoyevsky hover thematically. Writing about an artist so steeped in literature, and specifically to write about her images illustrating a canonical writing manual, is more than a little intimidating. I am forewarned to follow the rules of good grammar and punctuation. I am mindful, for example, to enclose parenthetical expressions between commas. Still, I identify with Kalman's irrepressible painting of a forlorn Basset Hound that accompanies the example for the proper use of commas in a parenthetical expression: *Well,*



*Well, Susan, this is a fine mess you are in.*

*Susan, this is a fine mess you are in* (2004). Being concise is a challenge for me because Kalman embraces all that she observes and experiences. Her joie de vivre is infectious. We as readers and viewers feel empowered to make expansive leaps back and forth recalling her voluminous sources from literature, art, and poetry, as well as her delightful appreciation of everything from a donut to the idea that a person wearing alligator shoes would have an alligator on each foot.

In 1969, Maira Berman met her future husband, Tibor Kalman, who would found the design firm M&Co. in 1979. Both were the children of immigrants, outsiders energized by the contradiction and complexity of New York City. Their collaborations proceeded hand in glove, contributing to an integrated process. They shared a love of letters and typography, favoring the concrete and visual poetry of the Dadaists and Futurists. Tibor's infamous work for Benetton's *Colors* magazine could be biting, but it was always

germane. Tibor Kalman died in 1999, thirty years after meeting Maira. Ingrid Schaffner notes that Maira, mindful of the brevity of life, its fragility, and the nightmare before us, infuses her art with the solace that can be found in life's distractions among "the cakes, the kids, the family, the fish."<sup>v</sup>

In Chapter II of *The Elements of Style*, Strunk and White write, "A basic structural design underlies every kind of



*A basic structural design underlies every kind of writing., 2003*

writing." Kalman's accompanying monochromatic painting depicts a Fred Sandback yarn sculpture. Sandback, the renowned minimalist sculptor and conceptual artist who died in 2003, was fond of installing his yarn sculptures in the corners of rooms where shifting



*Her story is strange.*

shadows and open spaces could prompt the viewer to imagine a complete structure. For Kalman, line is both content and substance in her writing, paintings, and illustrations. She is an obvious heir of



## Mother-Artist-Illustrator-Raconteur-Author...

MAIRA Kalman is all of these and more, although one would be hard pressed to establish a hierarchy of her many talents and accomplishments. Her words are often inseparable from her painted illustrations. Many of her books for children bring to mind Samuel Taylor Coleridge's declaration that "poetry is the best words in their best order." Wedding image and text, Kalman gives avant-garde compositions innocence, accessibility, and delight. Writing was Kalman's first career and her infectious love of language feeds her insatiable intellect and multidimensional talent. Hiroko Tanaka declares, "You might feel a little awed or even frightened when an adult draws like a kid, since there is so little pretention. Her work is so unrestrained that you might even feel jealous. [Maira Kalman's] pictures are so crazy that everyone wants to hug them."<sup>vii</sup> I would add that Kalman gives us permission to give ourselves a hug in an uncertain world. She assures us that it is okay to be a kid at heart, to invest in the solace of distractions, to love abundantly, and once in a while to slip into a comfortable pair of alligators.

Susan H. Edwards, Ph.D.

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### Notes

- i. Ingrid Schaffner, *Maira Kalman: Various Illuminations (of a Crazy World)* (Munich, Berlin, London, New York: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania with DelMonico Books-Prestel), 2009, Quoted in Chee Pearlman, "Unleashing Her Inner Child," *The New York Times*, November 1, 2001, 8.
- ii. William Strunk, Jr., and E. B. White; illustrated by Maira Kalman. *The Elements of Style* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2005), xiv.
- iii. Schaffner, 127.
- iv. Jeremy Eichler, "Style Gets New Elements," *The New York Times*, October 19, 2005. [http://www.nytimes.com/2005/10/19/arts/19styl.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2005/10/19/arts/19styl.html?_r=0).
- v. Schaffner, 48.
- vi. Strunk and White, 113-114.
- vii. Schaffner, 41.

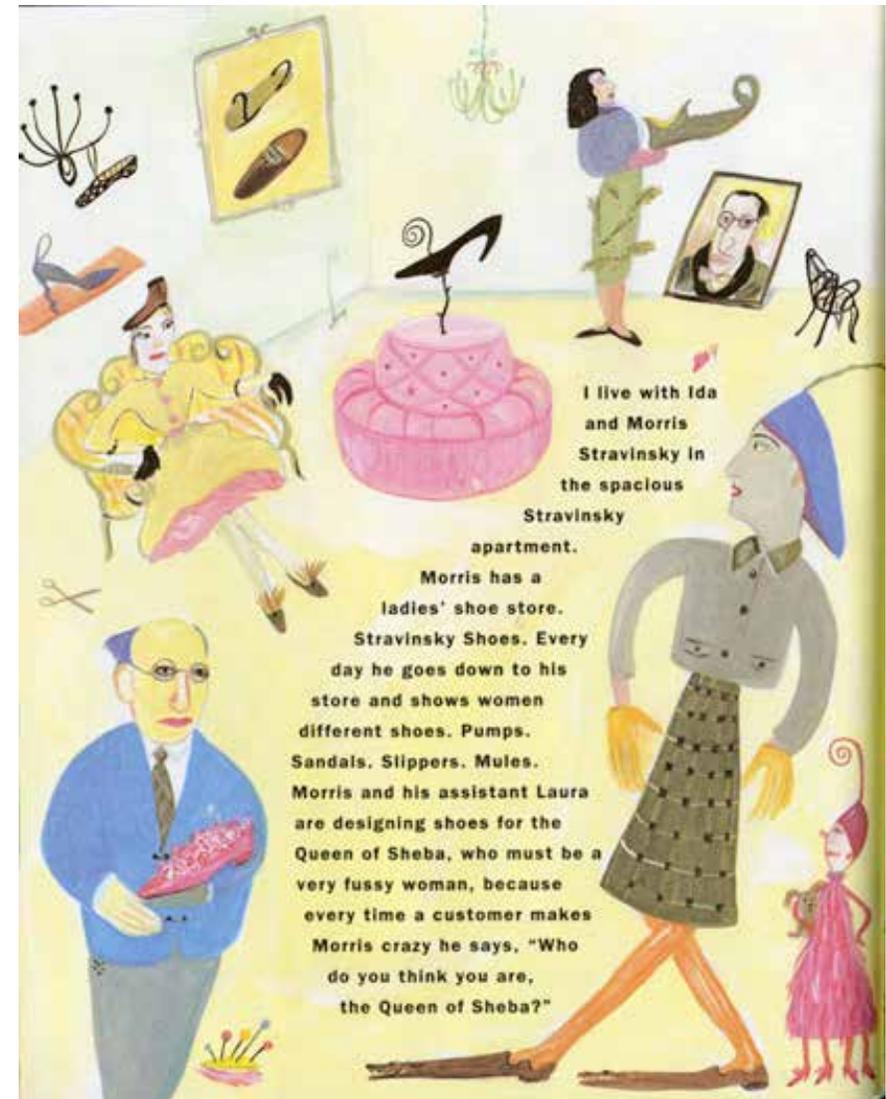


Illustration from *Max Makes a Million*, Viking Juvenile (October 1, 1990). © Maira Kalman

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