



# Elements of Style

*Wendy Wasserstein*

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From the Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright and author of the essay collection "Shiksa Goddess" ("Utterly delicious"--Judith Thurman), a dazzling debut novel, a comedy about New York's urban gentry living in a post-9/11 world--the arbiters of fashion and the doyennes of charity balls; about the rich and the nouveau rich(er), the glamorous and the desperate to be.

We meet Francesca Weissman, the Upper East Side pediatrician rated number one by "Manhattan" magazine, who takes us into the upper strata of privilege and aspiration (she's originally from Queens with a father in hosiery; life on the fringes of glittering New York is fine with her) . . . Samantha Acton, thoroughbred descendant of the Van Rensselaers and the Carnegies, who defines the social order in the great tradition of Mrs. Astor and Babe Paley . . . Judy Tremont from Modesto, California, daughter of a cop--her life's work, her obsession, is New York society and its richest families . . . Barry Santorini, Republican, moviemaker, winner of twelve Oscars, and his wife, the Italian supermarket heiress and former media rep for Giorgio Armani . . . and many more.

As "Elements of Style" opens out, we see a madcap mosaic of the social lives and mores of twenty-first century Manhattan--of romance, work, family, and friendship. Satiric, fierce, touching--and deliciously Wasserstein.

"Pure Wendy! She effortlessly makes the leap from stage to page with a novel that is loving, compassionate, flat-out funny. Wendy loved the word 'scintillating,' which is the best way to describe her stunning "Elements of Style.""

--John Guare

"Wasserstein gets the trappings and tribulations (of friendship and of romance) right, making her depiction of the rich and fab trying to connect with one another witty and entertaining."

--"Publishers Weekly"

"Bold, nimble, and funny to its fingertips, "Elements of Style" is a delight, a triumph. A book that no self-respecting New Yorker should be without. Those cursed with the hell of multiple residences will self-evidently need several copies--and spares, for houseguests."

--Flora Fraser

## Elements of Style Details

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Author : Wendy Wasserstein

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## From Reader Review Elements of Style for online ebook

### Ashley Ward says

I have been reading a string of really bad books lately. So while this one was also really bad, at least it was marginally entertaining. I need to stop checking out books off the "recommended" shelf at my local library. Clearly, whoever picks those books and I have completely different tastes.

Anyway, I was in Wendy Wasserstein's play called "The Heidi Chronicles" in college, and it is a story very near and dear to my heart. I loved its focus on a woman on the edge of the feminist revolution struggling, and failing, to have it all. So I was intrigued to read something else by her.

Elements of Style focuses on a series of wealthy and universally detestable socialites living in NYC, and takes place much more recently, in the last decade. Each character is concerned almost exclusively with appearances and with maintaining their social status. I've read other books about this type of people (e.g. Bonfire of the Vanities) that were much more interesting and nuanced. This book, however was pure farce. It kept me reading, mostly because it was mildly comedic and because I wanted to see if any of the worthless-yet-priceless characters redeemed themselves in the end. The answer was no.

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### Jane says

Library describes this as "A satirical look at the lives of the New York City socialites shortly after 9/11." I do not think the satire resonates as clearly as some critics found it. I was reminded of Bonfire of the Vanities – this book shows that the "social x-rays" didn't go away after the excesses of the 1980's. Though this book was fairly enjoyable, I cannot say that I will highly recommend it – something seems to be missing.

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### Marlies says

It was a little lame, but I still liked it. I was expecting more from Wendy, but the poor thing is no longer with us, so ....

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### Jessica says

Loved it! Light and delightful at first, but Wasserstein's insights into human nature are quietly observed. I deeply admire her ability to show multiple aspects of her characters, so that in varying turns I felt compelled, repulsed, and compassionate for the same character.

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### Heather says

This is decent chick lit. I'm sure the world expected more of Wendy Wasserstein, but I'm not going to judge

her. It was snoozy and insightful and entertaining. I liked it for a quick read!

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### **Nicholas says**

It's sad to read this four years after Wasserstein's early death. (Apparently the book itself was published posthumously as well.) It's not necessarily moving, but *Elements of Style* is very funny. In my estimation there's only one character for whom the reader is supposed to care (Dr. Frankie Weissman, with whom the book begins and ends), which has clearly made it difficult for many reviewers here to care about the book as a whole. But if you take this as a skewering of the world of the Upper East Side in the early twenty-first century, then it's pretty great fun. Wasserstein is adept at documenting the ways in which old money is out and new money -- the flashier the better -- is in.

While a number of the reviews at the time compared her to Austen (anyone who writes domestic fiction that is halfway honest about women's lot in life always gets compared to Austen), the more apt comparison is to Wharton, and not just because of the location. This is a book about women and social class and, like the *Custom of the Country* (my very fave Wharton), it's somewhat preposterous, but no less enjoyable or astute for being so.

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### **Melissa says**

Clearly written escapism, "*Elements of Style*" draws you in with well-crafted indulgent, ridiculous, and highly unlikeable characters more obsessed with their Upper East Side social status than anything else. Their lavish lifestyles are intriguing, if not unbelievable, and I was quickly intrigued by each character's personal story.

I would have completely loved this book if not for some completely over-the-top plot points. Yes, rich people also have problems, but plaguing every character with seemingly unrealistic problems seemed to be driving the point a little too hard.

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### **Taryn says**

*I think* the characters were all meant to be despised, but I'm still not sure that's what the author wanted to have happen. Maybe she wanted them to seem real by all of their flaws, but they just came off as selfish, snobby, and immoral. I kept waiting for a redeeming factor and it never really came.

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### **Ann says**

I'm not entirely sure what the author's point was for this book. I guess maybe to show the depravity and shallowness of New York socialites? I'm not sure. It also dealt a lot with uncertainty of life in New York after 9/11. Maybe I should think of this as naturalism? I'll decide someday. This wasn't exactly chick-lit, but it seemed to be a close cousin, and it was entertaining on a long car ride. But I was still confused by many choices the characters made. Two characters randomly began an affair, seemingly without warning since

they both came across as fairly happily married. Instead, they seemed to act out of boredom. In fact, that was the motivation for much of the action. I continue to be drawn to these kinds of books for road trips, but I don't think it would have stood up to a print reading.

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### **Alice says**

Very funny book about shallow members of New York society. Eventually some of the shallow characters get insights into their lives--and those are also quite shallow. The problem with the book is that shallow characters get predictable after awhile. I think I might have been fascinated by this if it were my introduction to New York socialites, but this has been done before.

Wasserstein is better known for her plays--this is her first novel. She is best known for depicting middle-aged women who suffer from self-doubt. The women in the story were all in their early 40s, mostly reed thin, obsessed with shopping, spa treatments, getting their kids into the "right schools," being invited to the best dinner parties, blah blah. Also, they wanted to hang onto their rich husbands. Independence could be gained by having personal wealth, but it didn't guarantee confidence. Instead the women were neurotic and narcissistic--which isn't much of a revelation.

The fear and sadness one year after 9/11 is well drawn. Everyone's emotions were raw, the security alerts were always going to orange and even red, people kept prescriptions for Cipro onhand in case they were exposed to anthrax. But most of these characters didn't help during the disaster--they were just concerned with getting out of town. They did hold charity events to raise money afterward, of course.

There is a single, 40sh, Jewish pediatrician who is drawn into the elite social circle for a brief time who has more depth to her character, but her character arc is predictable--when you hang out with shallow people, and you're not one of them (you're Jewish, you're not rich, you're too serious about life), you'll eventually get hurt.

I was sorry to learn that the author died, because I think she would have grown over time.

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### **Simon says**

What a mess. Wendy trains the Big Guns on a sitting duck, i.e. the sort of women (the male characters only exist as appendages to their consorts with one exception) who staff the upper echelons of New York City "society", something that has been a pain in the ass to the rest of the country since Mrs. Astor's fabled 400. As if the shallow, narcissistic harpies that Wasserstein drags out aren't overkill enough, she sets them in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, but even *that* doesn't really do it. So for good measure she invents a Starbucks explosion that kills 70, blowing up child ballerinas.. *Child ballerinas*, people! And still the socialites continue their meaningless lives of excess consumption and hypocritical charity galas. One might almost think they are retreating behind their money! (Large hint there as to what Wasserstein is really doing in this novel).

Wendy's heroine is Dr. Francesca Weissman, who belongs tangentially to this world as a high-priced pediatrician, but who has a foot in Real Life because she donates time to the ethnic/African-American poor, thereby risking professional ostracism from the upper-class girls because their own children might get poor

people cooties in the waiting room. But Francesca-Call-Me-Frankie is also a graduate of Spence and Princeton, so, y'know, she is basically *smart*. And Jewish, with earthy roots in the garment trade.

Wasserstein, like Frankie, was an outsider. In real life, she orbited the kinds of folks she skewers in this play, lived a very comfortable Manhattan life, but, thanks to her gimlet eye, kept her distance. And even though Frankie flirts with the upper classes, she always goes back to those deserving poor. Because they are authentic. Or something. It's hard to tell, since we never actually get a chance to meet any of the poor people because Frankie is too busy panting after the rich bitches.

And bitches they are. There are no real friendships depicted in *Elements of Style*. By the way, get the title? It is all Style *uber alles*, although Wasserstein confuses style with brand names, names scattered throughout the book like confetti. Henry James and Edith Wharton, who effortlessly did what Wasserstein tries to pull off here, don't spend a lot of time looking at the name tags on their characters' clothing. Or presumably separate the upper classes from the lower classes because money and good clothes make you shallow. Or something.

But here's the deal. This is a rewritten *Great Gatsby*. Not a tribute, an actual swipe. Wasserstein cribs the character of Nick Carraway --- that's Frankie. And since it is hard to shake the feeling that Frankie is an avatar for Wendy, Wendy sees herself as Carraway, for those playing the home game. But there is also a Myrtle and a Tom and Daisy Buchanan. Indeed, Wasserstein paraphrases several of *Gatsby's* best lines, one of them so obviously that it made me stop sprawling in my reading chair and sit up in disbelief.

We don't need *The Great Gatsby* Lite. I'd like to think that had Wasserstein lived, she would have thought better of this novel. Because it is a lot closer to Jackie Collins than Scott Fitzgerald.

Even if you like Wasserstein's other work, and I do, not recommended.

separate the upper from the lower classes

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### **George Ilsley says**

Every now and then I read a book and then wonder why on earth I did such a thing. Perhaps such books are palate cleansers but they leave a kind of sticky residue. I did not understand any of these characters, especially what Samantha saw in Barry. Labelled this humour and satire because otherwise it is not anything at all. Sorry, poor dead author. I can only assume you did not really have the chance to finish this.

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### **Christie says**

First off, there will be spoilers so if you want to read this book and don't like to know anything before you read it (like me) then don't read on!

What was this? I love Wendy Wasserstein as a playwright. I couldn't wait to read this book! I thought that it would be a witty satire on New York's "finest" (not the firefighters, the Upper East Siders) after 9/11. I was sorely mistaken.

The first few chapters are delightful and engaging, but soon, you long for the book to go somewhere... 307 pages later you shut the book realizing that it never did!

The political agenda being pushed was nauseating. I daresay it bordered on propaganda!

I liked not one character in this entire book- not one. At the beginning I thought that this was so that Ms Wasserstein would make a point later... SHE NEVER DID.

You can tell Wendy was an excellent playwright from the vivid descriptions of scene. It was written very visually.

I hate to say it, but this book's critical acclaim comes only from Ms Wasserstein's previous success as a playwright and her untimely death. Had she lived she would have discovered that she most certainly wasn't a novelist and should have spent her time writing what she is truly genious at- plays.

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### **Kim says**

This book was awful. I'm not even quite sure why I finished it, but it did. It was so dumb, I can't even find anything even remotely intelligent to say about it. It was set in a post 9/11 NYC about this group of fashionistas, men and women. And the reason that I know it was about a post 9/11 society was because they said it EVERY OTHER PAGE!!!! Ugh! Actually, that's not quite accurate. It was almost like this author wrote the novel and then opened the pages and threw her finger down and said, "Here, here I will jot in something about it being post 9/11 and add some obscure comment about how unsafe we feel." It was totally unrealistic and then the ending was simply and utterly ridiculous. Don't waste your time, don't read this book.

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## **Bookmarks Magazine says**

Critics felt traitorous calling Wendy Wasserstein's debut novel, published so soon after her death, a bit of a disappointment, but many agreed that what works so well on stage (the Pulitzer Prize? and Tony Award?winning play *The Heidi Chronicles*) does not translate well to prose. Some critics thought the novel possessed the verve and "charmingly neurotic" heroine (*USA Today*)—a Wendy stand-in—of her best-known work and praised Wasserstein's keen eye for social satire. Others called *Elements of Style* a so-so effort, filled with cliché—

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