

For a Good Clause

"This is no ordinary grammar guide," thought **Maira Kalman** as she flipped through the pages of **William Strunk Jr.** and **E. B. White's** *The Elements of Style* at a yard sale.

Her imagination was piqued by the handbook's pairing of clarity and eccentricity, and she knew immediately that she wanted to create drawings for it. "I felt a kinship," says Kalman, a veteran children's book illustrator and frequent *New Yorker* contributor.

Strunk, an English professor at Cornell University, drafted the now-classic guide to aid his students—including White, who had it published in 1959. In *The Elements of Style Illustrated*, just out from Penguin, Kalman complements the book's quirky humor with whimsical images of people, animals, and interiors. Some provide a literal representation of Strunk's example sentences—the illustration of "He noticed a large stain right in the center of the rug," used in a lesson on keeping related words together, reveals said stain to be emanating from a dead body. Others are more interpretive and offer a visual mnemonic—a crooked staircase leading up to a closed door represents a "sentence fragment."

There are 57 cheerful gouache illustrations in the book, but the inspiration did not stop there. "When I was painting, I was singing the words," says Kalman. She enlisted composer **Nico Muhly** to draft the score for an opera based on the book, which was performed at the New York Public Library this fall and featured musical "instruments" mentioned in the text, such as an eggbeater and a typewriter.

Kalman also drew upon linguistics for the textile works in her show, "I Can't Stand the Excitement," on view through the 10th of this month at New York's Julie Saul Gallery. She embroidered recognizable phrases and clichés ranging from **Goethe** to "Don't cry over spilled milk." She observes how working on Strunk and White's handbook has affected her art: "I did learn a lot—the sense of precision, of learning how to pare down to what you absolutely need."

—Sarah P. Hanson



Maira Kalman illustrated the misused words "illusion" vs. "allusion" (above) and the example sentence, "He noticed a large stain right in the center of the rug" (below).