

FICTION

A last laugh on the rich

Elements of Style

By Wendy Wasserstein
Knopf, 307 pages, \$31.95

REVIEWED BY JOY PARKS

It isn't easy reviewing a recently deceased author. Anything faintly critical feels like it's in bad taste. Wendy Wasserstein died at the age of 55 this past January. A brilliant playwright, she won both a Tony and a Pulitzer Prize for *The Heidi Chronicles*. Through this play and others such as *Uncommon Women* and *The Sisters Rosensweig*, she brought us images of wonderfully unconventional, bright and funny women, never before seen on the mainstream stage — women who had grown up influenced by the freedom of the 1960s, the sexual revolution and feminism, those who were now baby boomers and navigating their often conflicting roles.

Her essay collections, *Shiksa Goddess* and *Bachelor Girls*, offer up hilarious and intimate looks at her own life as a professional woman who got to go to Yale because her parents thought it meant a better

selection of husbands, a playwright who became a modern legend of Broadway despite (or because of) her highly political work, and a woman who had the guts to become a single mother at the age of 48.

Elements of Style, Wasserstein's first and, unfortunately, last novel, carries the same razor-sharp wit as her best plays. But this is much darker and all-encompassing. It is a comic novel, written to send up the very, very rich, the cream of New York society who get dressed up and get seen in the right places with the right people. Recent catastrophic events have done little but give this group more benefits to attend.

Set against her version of a post-9/11 New York, one even more terrifying than the real one, Wasserstein writes about the women who shop. She writes about their shoes and their Birkin bags, their summer homes and their decorators, and the professionalism with which they attack the scheduling of play dates and the seating of dinner guests. Her tongue-firmly-planted-in-cheek narrative is enlightening, even revealing, and quite vicious. But there is a danger: What if readers aren't aware of Wasserstein's

previous body of work? What if they are under the influence of the pervading culture that worships celebrity and money? It's possible that *Elements of Style*, with its pretty pink cover and scripty font, could be mistaken for the most recent escapist, how-to-marry-money, chick-lit fantasy. That would be a tragedy.

The truth is, the novel doesn't lend itself to farce as well as plays do, but every Wasserstein-ism one finds here feels like buried treasure. And there is the origin of the book's title, central to the comic theme, which has nothing to do with the "style" her characters confuse for the right combination of hair, clothes, accessories and escorts. Instead, it comes from an anecdote in which one of the characters explains how, as a new immigrant, he read William Strunk and E. B. White's classic writing aid, *Elements of Style*, over and over until he felt he could be accepted by New York's elite. He wasn't sure what he was saying, but as long as he said it correctly, all would be fine.

There's no point in describing the characters; they're too much alike. The only one who really stands out



JILL KREMENTZ/AP

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is pediatrician Frankie Weissman, who has a lot in common with the author and actually dares to put poor sick kids in the same waiting rooms as tomorrow's elite. Her father is gradually forgetting her, and while she toys briefly with one of the cast-off husbands, she knows she's not part of their world. This is pure Wasserstein, the outsider looking in, feeling more than a little morally superior to those who will reject her.

The biggest difference between this book and Wasserstein's pre-

vious work isn't so much that *Elements of Style* deals with characters who don't winter where they summer, who Botox their expressions away, a far cry from her Brooklyn aunts and free-thinking working women. It's that the author really doesn't like these characters and it shows, in moments of truly bitter satire, in superficial, arcane conversations, in tragic punishments and outlandish priorities and motivations that seem overdone even for a dark comedy.

No, it's not universal truths, which one would want every author's final work to be, but *Elements of Style* does, in its own way, right some obvious wrongs. Yes, the rich are different, but they certainly aren't better; in fact, they're quite miserable and somehow we always knew that. With *Elements of Style*, Wasserstein has definitely had the last laugh on the whole old-money establishment, showing us style and substance and, more important, how to tell the difference.

Joy Parks winters where she summers. For her, "style" has something to do with grammar and capitalization.

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