Though their small stature and inexperience is what may first come to mind when we think of children’s vulnerable nature, children are both physically and emotionally vulnerable. They are not only unsure of how they might handle threats upon their lives, but of the value of the life that might be taken from them. Indeed, their need to feel special inspires its own fear—namely, that it might make them vulnerable to predators. Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Treasure Island* and E. B. White’s *Charlotte’s Web* well capture how much children hope to be thought worthy by discerning adults. Their child protagonists, Jim Hawkins and Wilbur, are initially unsure of their worth, and therefore also unsure of how much they deserve the high praise they first receive. They both, however, do find ways to assure themselves that they matter to those whose respect they so highly prize.

Jim begins his account by showing himself as just an ordinary boy. It is Billy Bones, the fearsome pirate who visits his parent’s inn, that he describes as impossible to ignore. Bones, then, Jim’s first textual representation of someone with presence, is the perfect person for young Jim to use as a touchstone to gauge his own importance. Most people were frightened by Bones (4), and though Jim tells us that he “was far less afraid of the captain himself than anybody else who knew him” (3), and though he tells us that the captain took a special interest in him, Jim portrays Bones as attending to and praising him only to make use of him. When he takes Jim “aside” (3), when he tells Jim that he “had taken quite a fancy to [him]” (8), both the reader and Jim sense that Bones thinks of him as but a potentially useful tool—never, however, a self-evidently useful one. Jim is portrayed as having made little impression upon Bones; it is Bones, rather, especially when he tries to bribe Jim and thereby shows he really thinks him more common than special, who powerfully affects Jim.

Before Jim’s truly remarkable escapades on Treasure Island, whenever he receives praise, the praise ends up proving worse than worthless. For example, the squire, who has just met Jim, gauges “this lad Hawkins is a trump” (31), and proceeds to deplete this high assessment of all value when he subsequently also calls the “cook,” John Silver, “a perfect trump” (46). Silver lets Jim know right away he thinks him “smart as paint,” and then suggests just how dull and easily lead he really thinks he is by subsequently trying to persuade him that “none of the pair us smart” (45).
(Jim, when he overhears Silver call another boy “as smart as paint” [58], is later provided with further evidence that Silver had actually judged him of little merit.) But before landing on Treasure Island, Jim actually does little to merit being singled out as special, so it is appropriate that the praise he receives proves the kind readily dispensed by flatterers. For, though he retrieves a valuable map which launches a great adventure, though he spots Black Dog at the Spy Glass and puts all Long John Silver’s plans at risk, there is little sense that these actions could not have been accomplished by pretty much anyone.

Jim’s account ends up making the argument that if one wants to be certain that the praise or attention one receives is honest, it is really better to receive it only after accomplishing something others likely would not have managed, and after having first been underestimated. We know, for instance, that the only person whose status increased after his encounter with Bones was Doctor Livesey, who remained “calm and steady” (6) after the captain threatened him with a knife. Bones clearly had underestimated the “neat, bright doctor” (5), and as a result still has him on his mind months afterwards (7). And once Jim ends up accomplishing things that truly defy expectation, he too is provided with clear indication that significant personages had reappraised his worth.

After Jim leaves his friends and joins the pirates as they embark for the island, Livesey, who temporarily takes control of the narrative, talks of how he “wonder[ed] over poor Jim Hawkins’s fate” (96). As far as the Livesey was concerned, Jim was so much the vulnerable and frail boy he thought him sure to succumb to the various threats the island or—more especially—the pirates would incur upon him. But by ending his narration with Jim’s sudden, dramatic appearance at their camp, he documents how much he had underestimated Jim’s survival skills; just how surprised he was to see him return unscathed. When he once again unexpectedly finds Jim before him, the doctor, who previously had a habit of casually interrupting him (29), shows how much he now respects him by listening to what he had to say in full and “in silence” (168) before responding. Livesey then tells Jim he judges him someone who at “[e]very step, [. . .] saves our lives” (168), and thereby provides him with a very flattering but still just-plain-accurate assessment of his value to their party. Jim ends up surprising Silver with an unexpected “visit” as well, and he informs the person who had once so readily sized him up as simply an impressionable and needy young boy that he had killed some of his men and taken control of the schooner.
And though Jim writes that he wasn’t quite sure whether or not the “curious” “accent” Silver adopts in reply showed he “had been favourably affected by [his] courage” (152), Silver, by subsequently putting all his cunning into saving Jim’s life, ends up showing that he too now considers him the sort of person who might very well end up saving his own life one day.

Because by the end of his account he has had a chance to show he thrives in dangerous situations, can do the unexpected and effect miraculous results, Jim likens himself to someone beside whom Billy Bones pales in comparison—Long John Silver himself. Jim even structures his narrative to encourage a temporary conflation between the two of them. He does this by following the termination of the doctor’s control over the narrative with a chapter that ends with Silver now making a sudden and unexpected appearance at their camp. And Silver, the man who could so easily become a “bland, polite, obsequious seaman” (186) when it suits his purpose but whose true worth is never in doubt, is the perfect person for someone like Jim to try and make himself seem—even if only momentarily—comparable to. For, remembering how insignificant and invisible he seemed in comparison to Bones, Jim could never convince himself he is the “born favourite” (185) his miraculous accomplishments end up persuading others (specifically, Captain Smollett) he must be. He would, however, be able to convince himself that his adventure to Treasure Island has left him someone only the ignorant would mistake for but an ordinary boy.

In Charlotte’s Web, Wilbur tries to imitate Charlotte’s ability to spin webs. Like Jim, he wants to do things he knows would prove he’s of worth. Jim was to be a simple “cabin-boy” (34) on the journey, someone who would tag along, whom others would need to protect. Similarly, Wilbur was assigned no role in the planning and execution of Charlotte’s efforts to save him. But whereas Jim repeatedly achieves the near impossible, and is therefore deemed someone not only competent to take care of himself but someone who would be counted on to save others, Wilbur of course fails in his repeated attempts to spin a web, decides that Charlotte is just so “much cleverer [and] brighter” (60) than he is, and tries to content himself by admiring her own expertise.

His failure to spin a web is so deflating for Wilbur because, like Jim, he has little sense that he is worth all that much. Wilbur is a runt, the very opposite of a born favorite, and his status as the weakest of his litter, the one a farmer would rightly deem most likely to live a sickly life and incur an early death, makes Fern’s father
think of him as simply something “to [be quickly done] away with” (1). Not even Fern’s frantic efforts to save Wilbur, nor her enthusiastic appraisal of him as “absolutely perfect” (4), provide clear evidence of his worth. For unlike Silver’s risky efforts to save Jim, which seemed appropriate not just because he might prove useful but because he is someone whose true nature, once revealed, draws instant respect from those who also had started early and thereafter had only known dangerous living, Fern tries to save Wilbur before he has actually done anything to warrant such an enthusiastic response from her. And though Fern likely values him for other reasons, it is clear that she judges Wilbur absolutely perfect primarily because she sees in him the ideal means to calm down fears she is currently suffering from. For her, that is, saving the new-born runt tends to her doubts that someone might not always be there to help her when feeling especially vulnerable.

Since being vulnerable, dependent, can be withering to one’s sense of self, taking charge of Wilbur might also have helped Fern develop a stronger sense of her own worth. She says she “feel[s] lucky” (7) to have him, and she is lucky to have him, for looking over Wilbur lets her conceive of herself more as a benefactor than a dependent. Wilbur becomes her baby, someone she takes pleasure in “taking charge” (7) of. She nurtures him, she names him, and Wilbur greets her attention with his own “adoring eyes” (8)—with sure confirmation of her importance to him, that is. But as Fern grows older and becomes more desirous of attention from boys than from babies, it is no surprise that though she saved Wilbur’s life, she did not do much to make him sure enough of himself that he wouldn’t doubt the motives behind subsequent eager efforts by others to befriend him.

When Charlotte takes over Fern’s role as his guardian and protector, Wilbur conveys to her just how unsure he is of himself. He insists to Charlotte that he is “not terrific,” that he is really “just about average” (91), and he might thereby be trying to establish a clearer sense as to why Charlotte has taken such a keen interest in him. But Charlotte, seemingly oblivious or indifferent to how poorly others’ validation has hereto succeeded in making him feel special, tells him he should be content to know she finds him “terrific” and “sensational” (91). But actually Wilbur has very good reasons not to content himself with he praise. For one, the use of the word “sensational” suggests over-praise, that is—false praise: it is exactly the sort of word Charlotte might put in her web to suggest to others that they must surely be seeing what they clearly wouldn’t have seen, absent her miraculous advertising. For
another, Charlotte, by choosing to plot Wilbur’s rescue all by herself, not only ensures Wilbur relates to her in the same dependent, worshipful way he related to Fern, but that all credit for saving his life belongs to her alone.

It is not impossible that Wilbur suspects Charlotte is using him to make herself feel special. She certainly provides evidence that in reality she actually swoons far more over spectacular accomplishments than she does humble good tries. She tells him a true tale of her cousin successfully capturing a “wildly thrashing” (102) fish. It is a epic, “never-to-be-forgotten battle” that will immortalize its hero—and so too then, surely, her own efforts to use webbing to ensnare not just a fish but beguiled whole crowds of astonished people.

The fully domesticated Wilbur, however, whose own high public regard shows only Charlotte’s cleverness and the public’s “gullib[ility]” (67), probably would have a hard time imagining himself akin to either of the noble combatants Charlotte describes in the tale. But he actually had once thrashed about as wildly and as spectacularly as the fish had, and he will end up capturing something as significant as the tale’s spider managed to obtain. Before he met Charlotte, before he accommodated himself to farm life, slippery Wilbur evaded farmer and farmhand alike, and, indeed, never was caught by any of them. And this activity resulted in his earning indisputably well-earned praise—of the sort, that is, which would lead him to truly believing he must in fact be “quite [the] [. . .] pig” (23). And whether or not Wilbur might have intuited the conditions necessary for him to once again be truly praiseworthy, Wilbur finally ends up capturing something of great value only when he once again finds himself away from the barn, and without Charlotte there to assist him. At the fair, and with Charlotte near death, his quick-thinking and assertiveness results in the retrieval of Charlotte’s “magnum opus” (144; emphasis in original), her greatest creation—her egg sack. And the feint wink Charlotte gives him in reply no doubt outdoes all her previous web-spinning efforts in making him feel special.

Both Jim Hawkins and Wilbur are uncertain of their worth, and both end up seeming worthy of recognition only after they are able to accomplish something of evident worth, that others, for lack of enterprise, could not have managed. This means performing bravely and with perspicacity, outside of environments they had become accustomed to and had been domesticated in. In both books, then, the potentially dangerous and unpredictable outside world is not simply a place children should fear, it is also a treasure trove in which they could discover true value, a
strange fair in which they might fairly claim the respect they so highly prize.

Works Cited