

BookWisdom from the Garden

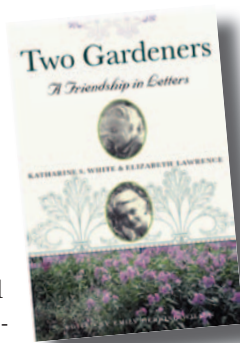
Story by Ann Daly

OF ALL THE LIFE METAPHORS I KNOW, **Girlfriends**

gardening is the most spacious and gracious. No matter what your situation, you can go to the garden for sage advice. The impulse to write about gardening and its metaphors has existed as long as gardening itself. My stack of bedside reading always includes at least one gardening book.

Gardening books come in an accommodating range of genres - reference, instructional, literary, historic and photographic. My favorite is the kind that reveals the garden not just as a natural phenomenon but also as an essential human enterprise. I prefer the books that root around in the primal longings that summon us into the garden in the first place - experiences like joy or loss, the desire to find beauty and make art and the search for paradise.

These gardening books won't offer advice on your ailing azaleas, which are not a good choice for Austin anyway, but they will give you glimpse into the countless possibilities for soulful living.



For Katharine S. White and Elizabeth Lawrence, gardening provided the ground for a 19-year friendship.

Their long-distance relationship (they met only once, for a brief lunch) began in 1958 with a fan letter from Lawrence, a garden columnist for *The Charlotte Observer*, in response to White's first gardening essay in *The New Yorker*. Lawrence lived in Charlotte, NC, and White in Maine.

White, a longtime editor of *The New Yorker*, was charmed by the easy, if formal, enthusiasm of her correspondent, who offered numerous suggestions for further reading. Their exchange, documented in the 166 letters reprinted here, ended with White's death in 1977.

Two Gardeners is a rarity because it tells the story of female friendship. It is an uncommon portrait of the intimate world of "girlfriends" - the literary, female equivalent of the ubiquitous "buddy movie."

White and Lawrence weren't gardeners in any prosaic sense. They were garden writers. As writers, they were driven by curiosity, and gardening provided each woman with more than a

lifetime's worth of material. Lawrence understood gardening as a personal and social expression. She wrote about gardens, but, more importantly, she wrote about the lives of the people who created them. White, the more literary-oriented of the two, was constantly on the prowl for worthy garden books, new or old, to review.

I love the old-fashioned gentility of White and Lawrence's epistolary conversations. They share their garden news, confess their literary doubts, bemoan the inevitable ravages of age and always urge each other on to the next article or book.

Both women embraced their traditional caretaker roles, despite the disruptions to their literary ambitions. Lawrence, as a single daughter, cared for her invalid mother. White served as amanuensis for her husband, famed *New Yorker* essayist and children's book author E. B. White. Neither woman found enough time to complete her final book, although each was published posthumously.

But by the end of the story, readers recognize these two gardeners as proto-feminists. They were kindred spirits who desired to lay claim to a writer's voice. At a time when there were few pathways into public life for

women, they succeeded in inventing a writing life in the public sphere out of the private, genteel, "female" world of backyard gardening.

Impossible Dreams

For Claude Monet, his home garden in Giverny, France, was the closest thing he had to a muse. The Impressionist painter started his now-famous garden in 1883 and lived there until his death in 1926. For more than four decades, he sustained his ideal life in Giverny, a refuge where he fulfilled his needs for nature, family and art making.

Monet led a ritualized life centered in and around the garden. According to Caroline Holmes in *Monet at Giverny*, he was often at the pond by sunrise, ready to capture the morning light through the willows and wisteria. He had awoken at 4 or 5 a.m., immediately opening his window to study the sky. Holmes elaborates, "If the dawn augured well for that day's weather, he would take a cold bath, followed at 5:30 a.m. by a hearty breakfast. He then set off to paint, sometimes with members of his family as helpers, returning at 11 a.m. Lunch had to be



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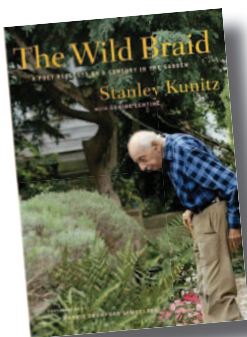


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served on the dot of 11:30 a.m., and was followed by coffee and home-made plum brandy. After a short rest he resumed work out of doors, observing changes in the sky as reflected in the nearby river or, in later years, by the pool in his garden; alternatively he would paint in his studio. The bell for dinner would ring at 7 p.m., and bedtime, like Monet's hour of rising, was early, at 9:30 p.m."

Giverny was not a garden for display or recreation. It was a laboratory where the artist observed in minute detail the ever-changing effects of light. When Monet began painting there, he perceived the shifting atmosphere in half-hour intervals. By the end of his life, he detected visual scene changes in mere minutes. He felt he had to race to keep up with the sun in order "to ensnare the light, and throw it onto the canvas."

Like all gardeners, Monet was seduced by the garden's cruel promise of perfection. "I am chasing a dream," he wrote. "I want the unattainable. Other artists paint a bridge, a house, a boat; and that's the end. They've finished. I want to paint the air which surrounds the bridge, the house, the boat; the beauty of the air in which these objects are located; and that is nothing short of impossible." Like all gardeners, he lamented, "If only I could satisfy myself with what is possible!"



Final Words

For Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Stanley Kunitz, it was his garden that drew him forward when he suffered a near-fatal health crisis in his late 90s. "Clear my schedule," he told his assistant. "All I want to do is write poems and be in the garden."

The Wild Braid celebrates Kunitz's century in the garden, from the wild woods where he would escape from his gloomy childhood to the sloping seaside garden he created years later in Provincetown, MA. Throughout the journey, Kunitz is fascinated by the natural world and by language, and he forges out of the two a lifelong passion. He explained, "I find the combination of the gardening and the long nighttime hours at my desk to be just the right medicine for my soul."

The Mother's Guide to Self-Renewal The Mother's Day Gift That Will Keep on Giving

Story by Sara Scott

IN THE JANUARY ISSUE OF *austinwoman*, career coach Renee Trudeau revealed what she feels is the key to life fulfillment when she said, "Self-knowledge is the ultimate compass. It guides you more than any other single resource. Our personality, experience and skills matter, but only to the extent that they help us know who we are and what fuels us."

Now, with the release of her book, *The Mother's Guide to Self-Renewal: How to Reclaim, Rejuvenate and Re-Balance Your Life*, Trudeau aims to help readers find that self-awareness and use it to re-shape their lives in a truly satisfying way.

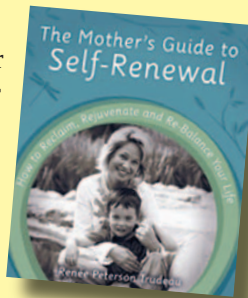
The book is structured into monthly themes such as "Motherhood and Identity," "Saying No and Asking for Help," and "Unleashing Your Creativity," and includes exercises like guided journaling. Trudeau's own first-person anecdotes make *The Mother's Guide* easily relatable. Reading through the pages feels like you're hearing stories from an insightful friend who is saying, "This is what happened to me, and this, when I figured out what to do about it."

Trudeau's book is just part of a larger movement she has started to bring

mothers together to balance their lives. The book is filled with testimonials from moms who have joined Personal Renewal Groups - life-coaching groups that follow the principles Trudeau shares in *The Mother's Guide*. On Trudeau's website, you can find a group to join or sign up to be trained to lead your own group.

In honor of the nationwide release of the book, which coincides with Mother's Day, moms, daughters, grandmas and friends are invited to celebrate with an Evening of Self-Renewal on Wednesday, May 9th at Mercury Hall. Ticket price includes a signed copy of the book, food and wine. Singer/songwriter Sara Hickman will be performing music from her latest CD *Motherlode*. A portion of the proceeds from the evening will benefit the Girls Empowerment Network of Austin.

The Mother's Guide to Self-Renewal will be available for purchase at BookPeople, BookWoman and at Trudeau's website beginning May 9th. ★



Reclaim, Rejuvenate, Re-Balance: An Evening of Self-Renewal for Mothers

May 9th, 6:30 - 9:30 p.m., Mercury Hall

Tickets: \$30 in advance, \$35 at the door

For launch tickets or to purchase a book, visit: www.reneetrudeau.com

In this volume of conversations and poems and photographs, the garden prompts the poet's meditations on life, death and poetry. He speaks eloquently about the longing we have to be in our gardens and the real and imaginative ways we manage to remain there. He elaborates on the affinities between poetry and gardening: "I conceived of the garden as a poem in stanzas." He pulls no punches about the reminders of mortality that face us daily in the garden. "We are all candidates for composting."

It only makes sense that it is a poet who reveals the kind of artistic devotion that the garden requires and reciprocates. So, to the poet belong the final words: "I associate the garden with the whole experience of be-

ing alive, and so, there is nothing in the range of human experience that is separate from what the garden can signify in its eagerness and its insistence, and in its driving energy to live - to grow, to bear fruit."

To hear more about these and other garden books that will inspire and improve your life, join us on May 24th at 7 p.m. at BookWoman for the second in the BookWisdom series. ★

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