

Questions for Discussion

1. Though email has largely taken the letter's place in modern society, women especially have been writing to one another since the quill pen. What qualities in Elizabeth and Ann do you feel allowed them to maintain such a powerful friendship through letters?
2. How do you feel letters differ from autobiography and biography?
3. What differences are there between the letters Elizabeth wrote when she lived in Raleigh, and those after 1948, when she lived in Charlotte?
4. Why do you think Elizabeth chose gardening as a way of life?
5. Is Elizabeth an example of a "Southern belle"? Why or why not?
6. How would you describe Elizabeth based on what she says about herself in the letters? What *doesn't* she tell in the letters?
7. Do you think it's an invasion of privacy to read someone else's letters? Why or why not?



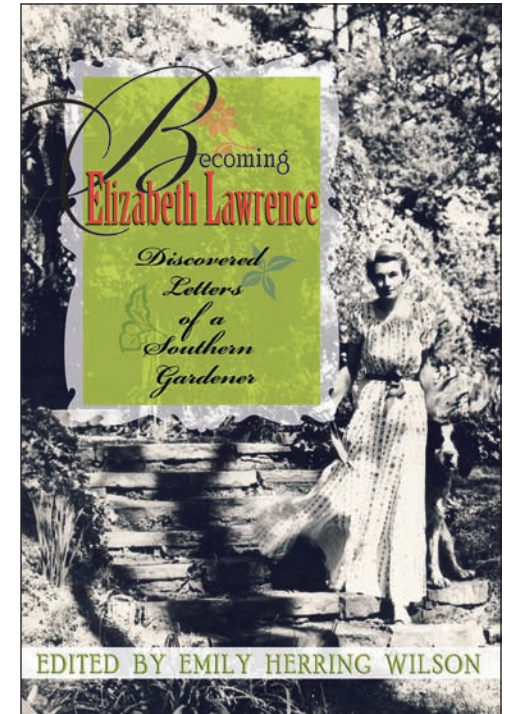
Emily Wilson has lived in North Carolina for most of her life. She is the author of two previous books on Elizabeth Lawrence—*Two Gardeners: Katharine S. White and Elizabeth Lawrence—A Friendship in Letters* and *No One Gardens Alone*, which the *New York Times Book Review* called “one of the finest gardening books published in years.” A graduate of Woman’s College and Wake Forest University, Emily lives and gardens in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. She is available for lectures and book discussions.



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READING GROUP GUIDE



BECOMING ELIZABETH LAWRENCE

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A Word from Emily Wilson

Why have I spent the last ten years working on Elizabeth Lawrence when ten years ago I wasn't a gardener and hadn't heard about her? I think it just goes to show that everybody has an interesting story to tell. Once I started reading Elizabeth's garden books and began gardening myself, I had a better idea of her passion, which led me to my passion to tell her story.

I interviewed family and friends who had known her (she died in 1985). I went to see her house and garden in Charlotte (now open to the public under the sponsorship of Wing Haven Gardens & Bird Sanctuary). I followed the failure of preservationists to save her house in the Hillsborough Street section of old Raleigh (my children wanted their father to buy it and move it to our yard in Winston-Salem, and I rather liked the thought of that old rambling house going down I-40, but alas, it went the way of many old homes). In fact, I traveled to most of the places Elizabeth loved—to her maternal grandmother's house in Parkersburg, West Virginia; to Eudora Welty's home in Jackson, Mississippi; to Hope Plantation in eastern North Carolina; to Barnard College in New York City; and to dozens more. Once I got the scent, I wanted to go everywhere she went, and I mostly did—though Sissinghurst, England, is still on my list.

By the time I started writing, I was immersed in Elizabeth Lawrence—house, garden, and life. I loved getting to know a small, private life, not finding any whiff of scandal or harm, and feeling that I was carrying something precious—a life—like a beautiful piece of glass that I couldn't break or drop.

And so I began, first editing the correspondence between Elizabeth and Katharine White, who retired from her job as an editor at *The New Yorker* to live full time in Maine, where she reviewed garden catalogs with a lot of help from Elizabeth. Then I spent a good year writing Elizabeth's biography (*No One Gardens Alone*), which was a great joy because it allowed me to grow up along with her. I began to think more imaginatively about my own early life and choices. I understood better why Elizabeth hadn't married or had children—mainly because she was content to make the garden her universe and to leave the management of the house to her mother, a lively companion. Living next door to Elizabeth's sister, they had a full life until Mrs. Lawrence's damaging strokes, when Elizabeth showed another side to her personality—stoicism.

Elizabeth said past her seventieth birthday, "I want you to know how much I have loved life and how necessary it was just the way I played it." I used that as the epigraph to the biography. It provided not only guidance but comfort. I felt that she would not mind my telling her story.

Finally, I came to the book that I love

best—a collection of letters written when Elizabeth was thirty, very youthful, very excited about the garden, and learning how to write from Ann Preston Bridgers, a famous playwright and sometimes near-neighbor in Raleigh. *Becoming Elizabeth Lawrence* is a rare and wonderful book of friendship letters between two women. It shows how Elizabeth learned to make the life she had chosen the life she loved. That life was not without its troubles—she had spells of melancholy and insomnia—but she also possessed great wit, read widely, and gardened. The book also provided reassurance of why it was important for me to write about her—I wanted to answer critics who stereotype as old maids the women who don't marry or have children and live at home with their mothers. Elizabeth was a beautiful person who believed in the power of the garden (as well as books, the Episcopal Church liturgy, and family and friends) to transform an ordinary day.

For me, every letter has a little gem of wit. I especially learned about living a good life in hard times, as Elizabeth's letters are vivid accounts of the Depression and World War II. Having tea in her garden or formal dinner at her table with soldiers enjoying a weekend away from duty was a lesson for her—and for readers today. Since Elizabeth Lawrence became my friend, I complain less and enjoy life more. And almost every day, I dip into the letters in *Becoming Elizabeth Lawrence* and feel good.