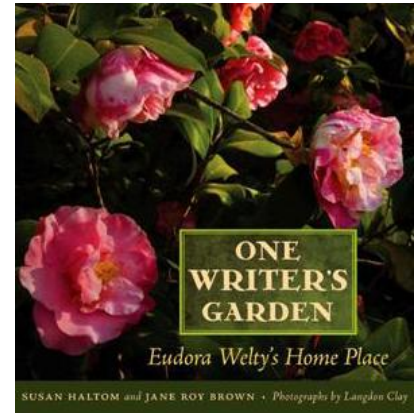


# CONVERSATIONS

## Two Authors and *One Writer's Garden*: Susan Haltom and Jane Roy Brown

*One Writer's Garden: Eudora Welty's Home Place*, a new book by Susan Haltom and Jane Roy Brown, COGdesign's CONVERSATIONS columnist, tells the story of an iconic American writer and her relationship with her garden in Jackson, Mississippi. The book reveals the rich connection between Welty's garden and her work, the social importance of gardening for women during the early 20th century, and the story of how Haltom restored the garden, guided by Eudora Welty's memories. In this conversation, the coauthors talk about their book and the garden.



### **Susan, when did you realize you wanted to write a book about Eudora Welty's garden?**

About a year after I began to work in the garden, in the mid-1990s. At night I was re-reading Welty short stories, and it struck me that the garden was typical of those in her prose, and its many uniquely



Susan Haltom, co-author, *One Writer's Garden*.

Southern plants were often found in their landscapes. Although Miss Welty always called it her mother's garden, I had a sense that it was her garden too. I asked for her permission to tell the story of the garden, and she granted it in writing.

I wanted to share her depth of feeling about the meaning of gardens and plants, to link her own garden with her stories, and to show how the Welty home garden—like any home garden—was greatly important to her and her mother. In sadness, grief, and wartime, and as a place of inspiration and healing, this garden offered them what nature can offer all of us, if we allow it. Also, as Miss Welty's correspondence was catalogued and made public, my trove of fascinating information grew.

### **Why did you invite Jane to co-write this story?**



Jane Roy Brown, co-author, *One Writer's Garden*.

I had not been actively seeking a coauthor. In fact, I had done all the research alone up to this point, thrilled with what I was finding, yet starting to feel overwhelmed. I am an artist and horticulturist, not a journalist. I wanted to do the story justice, as a tribute to Miss Welty and in a manner that might have pleased her, and not to make it merely a how-to garden book or a documentation of a process.

When Jane interviewed me for a newspaper story after the garden opened to the public, I immediately felt a connection with her. She

was so easy to talk to, and she was a landscape historian as well as a journalist. I had no idea that months later her name would pop into my mind as someone I would like to work with. I was supremely naive. But blessed.

**Jane, what did you think when Susan called to ask you?**

I was thrilled and flattered. I definitely saw a story with the potential to develop into a book-length project, and I felt a “click” when I met Susan. She was completely unpretentious—and was wearing a great pair of cowboy boots. I tried to think the prospect through rationally, but that phase didn’t last long.

**As the more experienced writer, did you have a clear sense about how to write the book, especially with a coauthor?**

Absolutely not. But after circling this wealth of material for a while, we unrolled some newsprint on the Haltoms’ pool table and mapped out our thoughts. That got us rolling.

**Susan, what was Eudora Welty like?**

Miss Welty was always interested in garden talk. I don't think anyone really spoke to her at that time about things a gardener loves to ponder—plant explorers, garden design, the plants of her youth. I made it a habit not to intrude, staying in the background while I monitored what plants appeared each season. She was witty, humble, self-effacing, and always fascinated by what I reported. She told me, "You all coming has given me a new outlook."

**What was it like for you to sit and talk with her about the garden?**

At first I wanted her to remember everything at once: what the design was, which plants grew where, and so on, but she liked to recount stories, and one would lead to another. Many of these I recognized from her writing. She often told me that her mother had kept a garden notebook, with diagrams, which I desperately wanted to find, but she said they were upstairs in the attic and she “would get them one day,” even though she could no longer climb stairs. They came to light after she died.

**How much of the garden was restored by the time she died, in 2001?**

I had only finished a partial clean-up and planting. The spatial relationships were not restored until a few years later, when Evelyn and Michael Jefcoat, trustees of the Eudora Welty Foundation, funded the replacement of the arbors and trellises.

**How did she feel about the project?**

She told me, "Don't make the garden something it wasn't," which I took to mean a pretentious place filled with ever-blooming modern plants. She thought that “sightseeing a garden” was not something you could or should do—she thought of a garden as a private working space. Even as I knew that



Welty garden, early 1930s. Hand colored glass slide courtesy Eudora Welty LLC.



Restored arbor, lower garden. Photo by Langdon Clay.

visitors would one day be “sightseeing” this very garden, I was more concerned that without my intervention, a layer of history would be lost, replaced by a bland assortment of low-maintenance, meatball-shaped shrubs against the house.



Restored arbors and treillage in the Welty garden. Photo by Langdon Clay.

### **What was your background before restoring the garden?**

I was a self-taught garden designer with a background in painting. I had worked as a museum curator, so three-dimensional design was nothing new to me. A curious nature is one of my best qualities—I love to research. And I love our Mississippi sense of place.

### **Jane, what did you bring to the project?**

I sank my teeth into the historical context of the garden—was this typical of other 1920s gardens in the South? Elsewhere in the country? If so, what ideas or social currents were shaping the design? Researching these questions led us into a rich chain of connections, starting with women of the Progressive era seeking to educate themselves through woman’s clubs, followed by gardening and garden clubs, then the Woman’s Land Army of World War I—all before suffrage. These things, and the relationship between the evolving physical form of domestic gardens and the public streetscape, confirmed that gardens embody social history as well as personal meaning.



Through the front windows in the upstairs room where she worked and slept, the writer Eudora Welty could gaze out on neighbors strolling the sidewalk, and on the great live oaks shading the campus of the Presbyterian college across the street. But mainly she looked out on the old water oak in the front yard and the winter-blooming camellias directly below, their white and magenta blossoms floating on glossy leaves. . . Throughout her life, the garden wove its way into her fiction and framed moments of quiet epiphany in her letters.

From *The view from Eudora Welty’s window* by Jane Roy Brown, Christian Science Monitor, February 8, 2007



Eudora watering the garden. Photo courtesy Eudora Welty LLC.