

Eat, Pray, Love
One Woman's Search for Everything
Across Italy, India and Indonesia
by Elizabeth Gilbert

About the Book

In her early thirties, Elizabeth Gilbert had everything a modern American woman was supposed to want — husband, country home, successful career — but instead of feeling happy and fulfilled, she felt consumed by panic and confusion. This wise and rapturous book is the story of how she left behind all these outward marks of success, and of what she found in their place. Following a divorce and a crushing depression, Gilbert set out to examine three different aspects of her nature, set against the backdrop of three different cultures: pleasure in Italy, devotion in India, and on the Indonesian island of Bali, a balance between worldly enjoyment and divine transcendence.

Praise for the Book

“This is a wonderful book, brilliant and personal, rich in spiritual insight.”
— **Anne Lamott**

“If a more likable writer than Gilbert is currently in print, I haven't found him or her. . . . Gilbert's prose is fueled by a mix of intelligence, wit and colloquial exuberance that is close to irresistible.”
— *The New York Times Book Review*

“An engaging, intelligent, and highly entertaining memoir.”
— *Time*

“A meditation on love in its many forms — love of food, language, humanity, God, and most meaningful for Gilbert, love of self. . . . Gilbert's wry, unfettered account of her extraordinary journey lets even the most cynical reader dare to dream of someday finding God in a meditation cave in India, or, perhaps, over a transcendent slice of pizza.”
— *Los Angeles Times*

“This insightful, funny account of her travels reads like a mix of Susan Orlean and Frances Mayes.”
— *Entertainment Weekly*

Courtesy of Penguin Books

About the Author

Elizabeth Gilbert

1969-

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Personal Information: Born 1969 in Waterbury, CT; daughter of a chemical engineer and a nurse; married.

Education: Attended New York University.

Addresses: Home: Hudson Valley, NY. Agent: c/o Author Mail, Viking Publicity, 375 Hudson St., New York, NY 10014.

Career: Writer. Former staff writer for *Spin* magazine; writer-at-large, *GQ* magazine.

Awards: John C. Zacharis First Book Award, *Ploughshares*/Emerson College, 1999, for *Pilgrims*; National Book Award nomination in nonfiction, and National Book Critics Circle Award nomination in biography/ autobiography, both 2002, both for *The Last American Man*; nominated for National Magazine Award; Pushcart Prize winner.

WRITINGS

- *Pilgrims*, Houghton Mifflin (Boston, MA), 1997.
- *Stern Men*, Houghton Mifflin (Boston, MA), 2000.
- *The Last American Man*, Viking (New York, NY), 2002.
- *Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman's Search for Everything across Italy, India, and Indonesia*, Penguin (New York, NY), 2006.

Contributor to magazines, including *Harper's Bazaar* and *Esquire*.

Media Adaptations: Three of Gilbert's stories were adapted by Shira Piven as the play *Pilgrims* and produced in 2001. Gilbert's *GQ* article on working in a Manhattan bar was optioned and loosely adapted into the film *Coyote Ugly*; *The Last American Man* has been optioned by Warner Brothers.

Sidelights

The twelve short stories in Elizabeth Gilbert's debut collection, *Pilgrims*, range in locale from New York City to the ranchlands of the American West. Gilbert's tales do not always end predictably, giving readers the sense that they have been allowed a glimpse into the life of a character that will continue learning and growing even after the window opened by the story is closed. According to *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer Wendy Brandmark, personal epiphany links each story in the collection. In the title story, a city girl longs to run off with a Wyoming ranch hand even though each realizes that the psychologically inhospitable landscape would become a trap. Another story, "Elks," plays on the irony of a city woman who, having moved to the West, now resents the urban ways of her city family when they come to visit. According to Brandmark, "Elks" effectively illustrates parallels in isolation: the family visitors are just as "self-contained" as the woman has come to be in her rural lifestyle. The reviewer claimed that Gilbert

subtly illustrates how “no one can be truly isolated.” In another tale of introspective epiphany, “Alice from the East,” an older woman who helps the inhabitants of a broken-down car shows one of them the depth of his own desires and losses.

Sometimes Gilbert's characters search for their own personal revelations, as in “The Names of Flowers and Girls,” which features an artist who makes experience-seeking trips to the seedy side of town but fails to capture a new female friend in his artwork. In a New York City-based story, “Tall Folks,” a female bar owner senses the end of her business when a strip bar opens across the street. A contributor to *Publishers Weekly* commented on the author's skills with detail, illustrated in “Tall Folks” when Gilbert describes her protagonist's habit of hiring female bartenders, by writing: “She had done very well this way, brokering these particular and necessary loves.” While the *Publishers Weekly* reviewer opined that Gilbert's endings sometimes lacked closure, the reviewer liked the premise and the ending of “The Finest Wife,” a story about an aged school bus driver who enters a fantasy realm and picks up all her lovers for a final bus ride. The critic concluded that “The Finest Wife” was a good portent for the “full length, warm blooded, compelling work to come” from Gilbert. Several reviewers remarked on the author's talent for making much of the silence between the lines, for showing the reader the subtleties of her characters. According to Brandmark, Gilbert's effort is a “rare mixture of compassion and keen observation.”

Gilbert followed up *Pilgrims* with her first novel, *Stern Men*. Writing it was a struggle, she told *Beatrice* interviewer Ron Hogan. “It's difficult to go from a short story, which is just such a lovely moment — not even a chapter, just a glimpse. You don't have to provide more than a glimpse, and you can't get away with that in a novel, though people try to.” The author uses another unique setting, two lobstering towns on neighboring Maine islands, to tell the coming-of-age story of Ruth Ellis, who has returned home after four years at boarding school. She doesn't fit in with her mother's wealthy family, and considers becoming a “stern man” on a lobster boat rather than go to college. When Ruth falls in love with a lobsterman from a competing island, it complicates matters even further. “In this breezily appealing first novel, Elizabeth Gilbert presents us a heroine as smart, sly, plucky and altogether winning as her own prose; it's difficult, in fact, not to develop a knee-weakening crush on both,” *Salon* contributor Jonathan Miles observed. Gilbert's “gift for lively, authentic dialogue and atmospheric settings continually lights up this entertaining, and surprisingly thought-provoking, romp,” a *Publishers Weekly* critic noted. *Library Journal* contributor Debbie Bogenschutz similarly hailed Gilbert's “beautiful novel,” concluding that *Stern Men* is “funny and moving at the same time and populated by some quite memorable characters.”

Although Gilbert has written many nonfiction profiles for magazines such as *GQ* and *Esquire*, it wasn't until 2002's *The Last American Man* that she produced an entire nonfiction volume on one subject. Eustace Conway is a modern woodsman whose determination to promote a more natural lifestyle has led him to build a 1,000-acre camp in the Appalachians, cross America by horseback, and lecture on environmental topics. “I've met some extraordinary people, fascinating characters, but I've never met anyone who thought of himself as being a *man of destiny* — and lived every moment as though

he were that,” Gilbert told the *Powell's Books* Web site. “That makes for an enormous amount of material, just in terms of the strict biography.” Gilbert traces Conway's troubled childhood, recalls how he left home at seventeen to live on his own in the mountains, and details his life's mission — not only to live in harmony with nature, but to teach others how to do the same.

Critics found much to praise in *The Last American Man*, which earned nominations for both the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award. “In the end, her view of him is as balanced as it is entertaining,” Janet Maslin wrote in the *New York Times*. “Without compromising her obvious admiration, Ms. Gilbert presents a warts-and-all portrait of Mr. Conway and a sophisticated understanding of why those warts are only natural.” *New York Times Book Review* contributor James Gorman similarly called *The Last American Man* a “wickedly well-written and finally pain-filled biography,” particularly in its exploration of how young Conway's emotional abuse by a cruelly demanding father is reflected in his own perfectionist personality. “It is hard to imagine a deeper, more insightful portrait,” Anthony Brandt stated in *National Geographic Adventure*. The critic called *The Last American Man* “an important book” for its exploration of Conway's efforts to bring people back to nature, and concluded: “If the message of Conway's life is inherently sad, not just for him but for all of us, Gilbert's book is wise and knowing. She understands the dimensions of the loss we must all suffer through his failure.”

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR

PERIODICALS

- *Booklist*, April 1, 2000, Carolyn Kubisz, review of *Stern Men*, p. 1434; April 1, 2002, Donna Seaman, review of *The Last American Man*, p. 1297.
- *Entertainment Weekly*, May 31, 2002, Karen Valby, “The Man Show: Journalist Elizabeth Gilbert Tracks Down a Recluse Lured by the Call of the Wild,” p. 99.
- *Kirkus Reviews*, March 1, 2002, review of *The Last American Man*, p. 307.
- *Library Journal*, April 1, 2000, Debbie Bogenschutz, review of *The Last American Man*, p. 129.
- *National Geographic Adventure*, June-July, 2002, Anthony Brandt, “The No-Comfort Zone: Eustace Conway Is Modern America's Daniel Boone,” p. 48.
- *New Yorker*, May 20, 2002, Dana Goodyear, “Solitary Man,” p. 25.
- *New York Times*, June 3, 2002, Janet Maslin, “How a Woodsman Found High-Profile Solitude,” p. B6.
- *New York Times Book Review*, June 2, 2002, James Gorman, “Endangered Species,” p. 16.
- *Publishers Weekly*, July 7, 1997, review of *Pilgrims*, p. 47; March 20, 2000, review of *Stern Men*, p. 71; April 22, 2002, review of *The Last American Man*, p. 63.
- *Times Literary Supplement*, May 29, 1998, Wendy Brandmark, review of *Pilgrims*, p. 27.

ONLINE

- *Beatrice Author Interviews*, <http://www.beatrice.com/interviews/> (November 13, 2003), Ron Hogan, "Elizabeth Gilbert."
- *Penguin Putnam Online*, <http://www.penguinputnam.com/Author/> (November 6, 2003).
- *Powell's Books: Author Interviews*, <http://www.powells.com/authors/> (October 31, 2003).
- *Salon.com*, <http://dir.salon.com/books/> (November 13, 2003), Jonathan Miles, review of *Stern Men*.

Source: *Contemporary Authors Online*, Detroit: Gale, 2006.

Source Database: Literature Resource Center

Author Interview

Q: The realization that you did not want to have children serves as a turning point in the reevaluation of your life that led to divorce. Later you quote Virginia Woolf — “Across the broad continent of a woman’s life falls the shadow of a sword” — writing about a woman’s choice between convention and tradition versus “a far more interesting” yet “perilous” life. Do you think this is as true today for the modern, urban American woman?

Elizabeth Gilbert: When modern American women make the deliberate choice not to have children they are still called upon to defend that choice, in a culture where motherhood is still regarded as the natural evolution of a woman’s life. But I remember my own mother musing once that she thought women had been “sold a bill of goods” during the 1970s, in terms of being promised that they could have everything simultaneously — family, career, marriage, privacy, equality, femininity, and autonomy. Reality has taught us that no woman can build an honest life without sacrificing something along the way. Deciding what will be sacrificed is not easy. But the good news is this: increasingly, that decision is *ours*.

Q: Joseph Campbell spent a lifetime studying myths from around the world, ultimately sketching the archetype of the hero as a protagonist who sets out on a journey that ends in personal — and spiritual — transformation. Do you see echoes of the hero’s tale (well, heroine’s) in your own story?

EG: Back when Campbell (whom I love, by the way) was teaching at Sarah Lawrence College, his female students would sometimes ask, “But what about the heroine’s journey? Don’t women get to participate in this universal questing epic?” Traditional world mythology, however, frankly replies: “Nope.” Women (as life bearers) have always been seen by mythmakers (men) as being automatically perfect for their task; they don’t *need* to transform. Well, I was never going to be a life bearer and was painfully yearning for the classically soul-changing quest. So throughout my journey, I definitely identified much more closely with the struggling hero archetype than with the self-possessed goddess archetype.

Q: Do you think travel necessitates personal growth because one is forced to respond to and accept the unfamiliar? In your opinion, how much does it depend on an individual’s willingness to embrace opportunity?

EG: No experience in this world has ever been cathartic without the willing participation of the individual. Life does not automatically bestow wisdom or growth upon anyone just for showing up. You have to work ceaselessly on your end to digest and imbibe your opportunities or, I have come to believe, they will gradually slip away and knock on someone else’s more receptive door.

Q: You have a strong distrust of antidepressants, portraying them as Western medicine's easy answer to despair. In light of the experiences related in the book, do you now believe that seeking help when one needs it is a sign of courage and the first step on the road to healing?

EG: I actually have a great deal of respect for antidepressants; I think they can be enormously mighty tools toward recovery. What I question is the current notion that a little vitamin P is the *only* thing needed to restore a torn life. We are multifaceted beings, and if we are to heal our suffering we must address our wounds on every imaginable level, seeking help from as many sources as possible, not just from pharmaceutical companies. And, yes, that all begins with the brave admission that one is lost and wants to be recovered.

Q: You ended up structuring your book conceptually using *japa mala* — the beads used as an aid in many strands of Eastern meditation — as your model. This allowed you to tell your tale using 108 sections, divided into three groups of 36, your age at the time, with each group representing a different leg of your travels. How did you decide to use this device, and how difficult was it to remain faithful to this format?

EG: Brace yourself for the world's hokiest answer: the idea came to me in meditation in India. The idea arrived fully formed. In one glorious instant I was shown a complete vision of how the book would be organized. This idea was a massive gift to me; the structure kept my storytelling in order, preventing me from rambling digressions. And the idea of the prayer beads kept me on topic emotionally, too, reminding me at every moment that this book was ultimately a spiritual exercise, an offering.

Q: How did you come to the decision to have your sister and, to a lesser extent, your mother serve as points of comparison for your own life?

EG: How could they *not* be comparisons? I think we all compare ourselves to our mothers and sisters, and, in my case, these are the two most influential women in my life — powerful and inspiring. And yet they've made markedly different choices than I have. But I witnessed this truth in them, too — that it was not without a certain level of sacrifice and struggle that they embraced motherhood and marriage. I learned a lot about my own ambivalence by studying theirs from every visible angle, using their experiences to teach me about myself.

Q: The personal encounters you have in Italy, India, and Indonesia seem to affect you deeply, and your guru’s philosophy clearly informs your own. Do you think that self-discovery requires the insights of others? What do you make of this paradox?

EG: I don’t see the paradox; I think sincere self-exploration requires the insight of *everyone*. One of my guru’s most helpful instructions is to “become a scientist of your own experience,” which I take as an invitation to explore every possible line of human spiritual thinking. The world has been blessed with some extraordinary teachers over history — use them! That said, studying can only take you so far. At some point you have to lay aside the books, hope that your mind has actually absorbed some wisdom, and just sit there in silence, letting your soul ascend to its own leadership. And that’s something nobody can do for you.

Q: Before you leave India, your poet-plumber friend from the ashram writes a few lines of verse as a good-bye. In his poem, he describes you as “betwixt and between.” Do you think one can remain continually betwixt and between or is there a point at which this approach to life would become a burden?

EG: Well, you don’t want to become a hunk of driftwood. When I was in India I ran into some travelers who’d never settled down, and they all had that look of tight madness around the eyes. What you do want to remain, though, whether you are traveling or not, is alert. Pay attention to the signals — is it time to lay down roots? Or time to go exploring again? As for me, I’ve come to trust the power of a lifelong quest; if you keep asking honest questions and keep giving honest answers, you will always be instructed clearly on what to do next, and when and with whom. (In other words: I’m happily and quietly living with my sweetheart, for the time being, in Philadelphia.)

Q: *Eat, Pray, Love* marks a point of departure from your previous work by focusing on your own life. Was it difficult for you to turn your talents to your own experience, revealing so much to readers about your internal life and personal journey?

EG: Oddly, I never thought of it as a particularly personal story. To me, the arc of the narrative felt completely universal — doesn’t everyone struggle with these same questions, doubts, and longings? So, no, it wasn’t difficult to write this. Though I do feel it would have been impossible *not* to write it. I was so consumed by questions that I needed the ordering process of writing to help me sort through them. As Joan Didion once said, “I write so I can learn what I think.”

Q: How important does that year in your life seem to you now?

EG: How important was the first breath you ever took the day you were born?

Courtesy of Penguin Books

Discussion Questions

1. Gilbert writes that “the appreciation of pleasure can be the anchor of humanity,” making the argument that America is “an entertainment-seeking nation, not necessarily a pleasure-seeking one.” Is this a fair assessment?
2. After imagining a petition to God for divorce, an exhausted Gilbert answers her phone to news that her husband has finally signed. During a moment of quietude before a Roman fountain, she opens her Louise Glück collection to a verse about a fountain, one reminiscent of the Balinese medicine man’s drawing. After struggling to master a 182-verse daily prayer, she succeeds by focusing on her nephew, who suddenly is free from nightmares. Do these incidents of fortuitous timing signal fate? Cosmic unity? Coincidence?
3. Gilbert hashes out internal debates in a notebook, a place where she can argue with her inner demons and remind herself about the constancy of self-love. When an inner monologue becomes a literal conversation between a divided self, is this a sign of last resort or of self-reliance?
4. When Gilbert finally returns to Bali and seeks out the medicine man who foretold her return to study with him, he doesn’t recognize her. Despite her despair, she persists in her attempts to spark his memory, eventually succeeding. How much of the success of Gilbert’s journey do you attribute to persistence?
5. Prayer and meditation are both things that can be learned and, importantly, improved. In India, Gilbert learns a stoic, ascetic meditation technique. In Bali, she learns an approach based on smiling. Do you think the two can be synergistic? Or is Ketut Liyer right when he describes them as “same-same”?
6. Gender roles come up repeatedly in *Eat, Pray, Love*, be it macho Italian men eating cream puffs after a home team’s soccer loss, or a young Indian’s disdain for the marriage she will be expected to embark upon at age eighteen, or the Balinese healer’s sly approach to male impotence in a society where women are assumed responsible for their childlessness. How relevant is Gilbert’s gender?
7. In what ways is spiritual success similar to other forms of success? How is it different? Can they be so fundamentally different that they’re not comparable?
8. Do you think people are more open to new experiences when they travel? And why?
9. Abstinence in Italy seems extreme, but necessary, for a woman who has repeatedly moved from one man’s arms to another’s. After all, it’s only after Gilbert has found herself that she can share herself fully in love. What does this say about her earlier relationships?

10. Gilbert mentions her ease at making friends, regardless of where she is. At one point at the ashram, she realizes that she is *too* sociable and decides to embark on a period of silence, to become the Quiet Girl in the Back of the Temple. It is just after making this decision that she is assigned the role of ashram key hostess. What does this say about honing one's nature rather than trying to escape it? Do you think perceived faults can be transformed into strengths rather than merely repressed?

11. Sitting in an outdoor café in Rome, Gilbert's friend declares that every city — and every person — has a word. Rome's is "sex," the Vatican's "power"; Gilbert declares New York's to be "achieve," but only later stumbles upon her own word, *antevasin*, Sanskrit for "one who lives at the border." What is your word? Is it possible to choose a word that retains its truth for a lifetime?

Courtesy of Penguin Books