

The Signature of All Things

Elizabeth Gilbert, 2013

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Summary

A glorious, sweeping novel of desire, ambition, and the thirst for knowledge...

In *The Signature of All Things*, Elizabeth Gilbert returns to fiction, inserting her inimitable voice into an enthralling story of love, adventure and discovery. Spanning much of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the novel follows the fortunes of the extraordinary Whittaker family as led by the enterprising Henry Whittaker—a poor-born Englishman who makes a great fortune in the South American quinine trade, eventually becoming the richest man in Philadelphia.

Born in 1800, Henry's brilliant daughter, Alma (who inherits both her father's money and his mind), ultimately becomes a botanist of considerable gifts herself. As Alma's research takes her deeper into the mysteries of evolution, she falls in love with a man named Ambrose Pike who makes incomparable paintings of orchids and who draws her in the exact opposite direction—into the realm of the spiritual, the divine, and the magical. Alma is a clear-minded scientist; Ambrose a utopian artist—but what unites this unlikely couple is a desperate need to understand the workings of this world and the mechanisms behind all life.

Exquisitely researched and told at a galloping pace, *The Signature of All Things* soars across the globe—from London to Peru to Philadelphia to Tahiti to Amsterdam, and beyond. Along the way, the story is peopled with unforgettable characters: missionaries, abolitionists, adventurers, astronomers, sea captains, geniuses, and the quite mad.

But most memorable of all, it is the story of Alma Whittaker, born in the Age of Enlightenment, but living well into the Industrial Revolution. Alma bears witness to that extraordinary moment in human history when all the old assumptions about science, religion, commerce, and class were exploding into dangerous new ideas. Written in the bold, questing spirit of that singular time, Gilbert's wise, deep, and spellbinding tale is certain to capture the hearts and minds of readers. *(From the publisher.)*

Author Bio

Elizabeth M. Gilbert is an American author, essayist, short story writer, biographer, novelist and memoirist. She is best known for her 2006 memoir, *Eat, Pray, Love*, which spent 200 weeks on the *New York Times* Best Seller list, and was also made into a film by the same name in 2010.

Gilbert was born in Waterbury, Connecticut. Her father was a chemical engineer, her mother a nurse. Along with her only sister, novelist Catherine Gilbert Murdock, Gilbert grew up on a small family Christmas tree farm in Litchfield, Connecticut. The family lived in the country with no neighbors, and they didn't own a TV or even a record player. Consequently, they all read a great deal, and Gilbert and her sister entertained themselves by writing little books and plays.

Gilbert earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in Political Science from New York University in 1991, after which she worked as a cook, a waitress, and a magazine employee. She wrote of her experience as a cook on a dude ranch in short stories, and also briefly in her book *The Last American Man* (2002).

Journalism

Esquire published Gilbert's short story "Pilgrims" in 1993, under the headline, "The Debut of an American Writer." She was the first unpublished short story writer to debut in *Esquire* since Norman Mailer. This led to steady—and well paying—work as a journalist for a variety of national magazines, including *SPIN*, *GQ*, *New York Times Magazine*, *Allure*, *Real Simple*, and *Travel + Leisure*.

Her 1997 *GQ* article, "The Muse of the Coyote Ugly Saloon", a memoir of Gilbert's time as a bartender at the very first Coyote Ugly table dancing bar located in the East Village section of New York City, was the basis for the feature film *Coyote Ugly* (2000). She adapted her 1998 *GQ* article, "The Last American Man: Eustace Conway is Not Like Any Man You've Ever Met," into a biography of the modern naturalist, *The Last American Man*, which received a nomination for the National Book Award in non-fiction. "The Ghost," a profile of Hank Williams III published by *GQ* in 2000, was included in *Best American Magazine Writing* 2001.

Early books

Gilbert's first book *Pilgrims* (1997), a collection of short stories, received the Pushcart Prize and was a finalist for the PEN/Hemingway Award. This was followed by her novel *Stern Men* (2000), selected as a *New York Times* "Notable Book." In 2002 she published *The Last American Man* (2002), a biography of Eustace Conway, a modern woodsman and naturalist, which was nominated for National Book Award.

Eat, Pray, Love

In 2006, Gilbert published *Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman's Search for Everything Across Italy, India and Indonesia* (Viking), a chronicle of her year of "spiritual and personal exploration" spent traveling abroad. She financed her world travel for the book with a \$200,000 publisher's advance.

The memoir was on the *New York Times* Best Seller List of non-fiction in the spring of 2006, and in October 2008, after 88 weeks, the book was still on the list at number 2. Gilbert appeared on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* in 2007, and has reappeared on the show to further discuss the book and her philosophy, and to discuss the film. She was named by *Time* as among the 100 most influential people in the world. The film version was released in 2010 with Julia Roberts starring as Gilbert.

After Eat, Pray, Love

Gilbert's fifth book, *Committed: A Skeptic Makes Peace with Marriage*, was released in 2010. The book is somewhat of a sequel to *Eat, Pray, Love* in that it takes up Gilbert's life story where her bestseller left off. *Committed* also reveals Gilbert's decision to marry Felipe, the Brazilian man she met in Indonesia as recounted in the final section of *EPL*. The book is an examination of the institution of marriage from several historical and modern perspectives—including those of people, particularly women, reluctant to marry. In the book, Gilbert also includes perspectives on same-sex marriage and compares this to interracial marriage prior to the 1970s. Gilbert and Felipe are still married and operate a story called Two Buttons.

In 2012, she republished *At Home on the Range*, a 1947 cookbook written by her great-grandmother, the food columnist Margaret Yardley Potter.

Gilbert returned to fiction in 2013 with *The Signature of All Things*, a sprawling 19th-century style novel following the life of a young female botanist. The book brings together that century's fascination with botany, botanical drawing, spiritual inquiry, exploration, and evolution. *Kirkus Reviews* called it "a brilliant exercise of intellect and imagination," and *Booklist* a "must read."

Discussion Questions

1. *The Signature of All Things* takes as its first focus not the book's heroine, Alma Whittaker, but her rough-and-tumble father, Henry. Why do you think Elizabeth Gilbert made this choice in her narration, and why are the first fifty pages essential to the rest of the novel?
2. Alma Whittaker grows up in the richest family in Philadelphia. In what ways does her father's fortune set her free? In what ways is it a prison?
3. How does Alma resemble her father? In what crucial ways do they differ?
4. What role is played in the novel by the Whittakers' servant Hanneke de Groot? In what ways is her perspective essential to the story?
5. Alma postulates that there exist a variety of times, ranging from Human Time to Divine Time, with Geological Time and Moss Time as points in between (pp. 170-71). How might these different notions of time help to relate the world of science to the world of miracles? Is the miracle of creation just a natural process that took a very long time?
6. Gilbert plays with perspective, not only as it relates to time, but also as it relates to space. During the course of the novel, Alma must adapt to dealing with microscopic space as well as

global space. At one point, when she plays the part of a comet in a tableau of the solar system, she even becomes figuratively a part of outer space. How do Gilbert's manipulations of space enrich the experience of reading the novel?

7. Instead of representing Prudence's abolitionist husband, Arthur Dixon, as an unambiguous hero, Gilbert presents him as a somewhat cracked fanatic, who impoverishes and even endangers his family in the name of an idea. What do you think of Gilbert's decision to place the cause of abolitionism, which modern thinkers usually find almost impossible to criticize, in the hands of an asocial, self-denying oddball?

8. One of the more unsettling themes of *The Signature of All Things* is Alma's habitual masturbation. How does her autoeroticism fit into the rest of the novel, and is the book strengthened or weakened by its presence?

9. Alma's decision to devote her life to studying mosses is compared to a "religious conversion" (p. 163). In *The Signature of All Things*, science and religion often intertwine. Are they ever finally reconciled? If so, how? If not, why not?

10. Alma's husband, Ambrose Pike, offers her a marriage filled with deep respect, spiritual love, intellectual adventure-and positively no sex. Should she have been contented with this arrangement?

11. On pages 319-20, Alma takes "an honest accounting" of her life thus far. At this point in her life, is she a success or a failure? What are the arguments on either side of the question? What are your own criteria for a life well lived?

12. As Alma sails toward Tahiti, the whaler that carries her is nearly sunk by a storm. She feels that this brush with violent death was "the happiest experience of her life" (p. 336). Why might she think this, and what does it tell us about her character?

13. Ambrose's spirituality eventually destroys him, whereas that of the Reverend Welles, the Tahitian missionary, enables him to cope with isolation and professional failure. What is the difference between the two men's spiritual understandings? Why is one vision destructive and the other saving?

14. Alma claims at the end of the novel, "I have never felt a need to invent a world beyond this world. . . . All I ever wanted to know was this world" (p. 497). How has this limitation to her curiosity helped her? Has it harmed her?

(Questions issued by the publisher.)