

BOOK CLUB To Go!

Eat, Pray, Love

By Elizabeth Gilbert

Introduction

From the way Elizabeth Gilbert's tale begins – with our heroine in Rome, fawning over a sexy, young Italian – one could be forgiven for thinking that *Eat, Pray, Love* might just belong on the chick-lit shelf next to Amy Sohn's *Run, Catch, Kiss*. But first blushes can be deceiving, and from the book's introductory quote – “Tell the truth, tell the truth, tell the truth” – we know Gilbert's not out to deceive. Not her readers and, most important, not herself.

In what could be construed as a coming-of-age story for thirtysomethings, Gilbert leaves behind an excruciating divorce, tumultuous affair, and debilitating depression as she sets off on a year-long quest to bridge the gulf between body, mind, and spirit. Part self-deprecating tour guide, part wry, witty chronicler, Gilbert relates this chapter of her life with a compelling, richly detailed narrative that eschews the easy answers of New Age rhetoric. In the book's early pages, a flashback finds the smart, savvy, successful Gilbert on her knees on the bathroom floor of the Westchester house she inhabits with her husband, wailing and wallowing in sorrow, snot, and tears (“a veritable Lake Inferior”), awkwardly embarking on her first conversation with God.

During the interminable wait for her divorce, Gilbert accepts a magazine assignment in Bali, where she meets a ninth-generation medicine man “whose resemblance to the *Star Wars* character Yoda cannot be exaggerated.” He evaluates her palm, forecasting her return to Bali – a prediction that resurfaces when she hatches an escape plan from pain “to explore the art of pleasure in Italy, the art of devotion in India, and, in Indonesia, the art of balancing the two.”

By the time Gilbert arrives in Indonesia, she has shed her grief, realizing her own ability to control her reaction to life's events. She is strong, enjoying a succession of simple days spent with the medicine man, a Javanese surfer dude, and a healer. Bicycling around Bali, she finds balance and, as the title suggests, love. Happiness, Gilbert comes to realize, “is the consequence of personal effort. You fight for it, strive for it, insist upon it, and sometimes even travel around the world looking for it.”

(Penguin Book Club)

About the Author

Elizabeth Gilbert was born in 1969 in Connecticut. She grew up on a small family tree farm, with her sister, novelist and historian Catharine Gilbert Murdock (author of *Dairy Queen*, the first in a series for teens). Gilbert attended New York University and graduated in 1991 with a BA in Political Science.

In addition to writing books, she has worked steadily as a journalist. Throughout much of the 1990's she was on staff at *SPIN Magazine*, where she wrote about everything from rodeo's Buckle Bunnies (reprinted in *The KGB Bar Reader*) to China's headlong construction of the Three Gorges Dam. In 1999, Gilbert began working for *GQ* magazine, where her profiles of extraordinary men – from singers Hank Williams III and Tom Waits (reprinted in *The Tom Waits Reader*) to quadriplegic athlete Jim MacLaren – earned her three National Magazine Award Nominations, as well as repeated appearances in the “Best American” magazine writing anthologies. She has also written for such publications as *The New York Times Magazine*, *Real Simple*, *Allure*, *Travel and Leisure* and *O*, the Oprah Magazine (where her memoir *Eat, Pray, Love* was excerpted in March, 2006).

Much of her writing has been optioned by Hollywood. Her *GQ* memoir about her bartending years became the Disney movie “Coyote Ugly” and Paramount Pictures has acquired screen rights to the *Eat, Pray, Love*.

(*BookBrowse.com*)

Reviews

“Gilbert’s journey is full of mystical dreams, visions and uncanny coincidences . . . Yet for every ounce of self-absorption her classical New-Age journey demands, Gilbert is ready with an equal measure of intelligence, humor and self-deprecation . . .” -- *Los Angeles Times*

“This is an intriguing and substantive journey recounted with verve, humor and insight. Others have preceded Gilbert in writing this sort of memoir, but few indeed have done it better.” -- *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*

Further Reading

History of Love by Nicole Krauss

Middlesex by Jeffrey Eugenides

Love in the Time of Cholera by Gabriel Garcia Marquez

Four Agreements: A Practical Guide to Personal Freedom by Miguel Ruiz

Friday Night Knitting Club by Kate Jacobs

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Possible 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 quiet 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 18, 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? If they are, then 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?

(ReadingGroupGuides.com)