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'It's what I'm giving all my girl friends' Julia Roberts

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eat

pray

love

One Woman's Search for Everything

ELIZABETH GILBERT



READING GROUP NOTES

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About the book

A funny, tender, utterly beguiling story about a woman's search for happiness.

At 32, Elizabeth Gilbert discovers that she has everything that Western society expects of her — a husband, a nice house in New York, a baby on the horizon, if not on the way — but that she has somehow lost herself in the process. After a messy divorce and an even messier love affair, she begins a year-long journey of self-discovery and spiritual healing, taking in the 'three Is': In Italy she learns the language of seduction whilst heroically resisting the abundant local talent, and devours the dolce vita in a blitz of double-mozzarella pizzas and gelato, gaining 25 pounds; in India she meditates in an ashram and discovers that the recipe for contentment involves a lot of very early mornings, hard work and sitting still; in Indonesia she seeks balance and finds it with the help of a ninth-generation medicine man 'whose resemblance to the Star Wars character Yoda cannot be exaggerated', and a rather dashing Brazilian.

Deeply spiritual, daringly irreverent and crowded with a cast of increasingly colourful characters, *Eat, Pray, Love* is about what happens when you turn your back on the life you were meant to lead and instead go in search of the one you want.

About the author

Elizabeth Gilbert was born in Connecticut in 1969 and was raised on a small family Christmas tree farm with her only sister, the novelist and historian Catherine Murdock. She studied Political Science at New York University in the early 1990s, and spent the following years travelling around the US and the world experiencing life as — amongst other things — a cook, a waitress and a magazine lackey, in order to write about it.

After more than five years of sending out work for publication and collecting only rejection letters, Liz finally broke onto the US literary scene in 1993, when one of her short stories was pulled from the slush pile at *Esquire*, making her the first unpublished short-story writer to debut in the magazine since Norman Mailer. This led to steady work as a journalist for a variety of US publications, including *SPIN*, *GQ* and *The New York Times*. Her 1997 *GQ* article, 'The Muse of the Coyote Ugly Saloon', a memoir of her experiences as a bartender in an East Village dive, was the basis for the film *Coyote Ugly*.

Liz's first book, *Pilgrims*, a collection of short stories, was published in 1997 to high praise. Annie Proulx called it the work of 'a young writer of incandescent talent'; it was a New York Times Notable Book, won the Pushcart Prize and was a finalist for the PEN/Hemingway Award. Her next book, a bittersweet novel called *Stern Men* (2000), was based on the lobster fishing territory wars off the coast of Maine. It also became a New York Times Notable Book. *The Last American Man*, her biography of Eustace Conway, an eclectic modern day woodsman, was a finalist in 2002 for both The National Book Award and The National Book Critic's Circle Award. *Eat, Pray, Love*, Liz's most recent book, is a New York Times number 1 bestseller, has sold over 2 million copies, and has been published in over thirty languages worldwide. Paramount Pictures has acquired film rights with Julia Roberts slated to star.

Elizabeth Gilbert is now writer-at-large for American *GQ*. She currently lives between Philadelphia and Brazil, and is at work on a new book.

Suggested points for discussion

- ☞ Liz's husband signs their divorce papers minutes after Liz's petition to God on the subject; Ketut's various predictions come true; Liz's nephew sleeps well after she has prayed for him. Are we supposed to view these incidents as mini miracles, pure coincidence or self-made luck? What part does fate play in *Eat, Pray, Love*?
- ☞ 'I come from a long line of superconscientious people. My mother's family were Swedish immigrant farmers ... My father's ... were English Puritans.' How seriously do you think Liz takes her 'cultural paradigm'? What evidence is there in *Eat, Pray, Love* of Liz being 'a good New Englander'? To what extent does Liz's heritage shape her journey? Do you think this is a broadly American memoir? Why [not]?
- ☞ Can you tell that Liz is a journalist? If so, what gives her away? Her writing style? Her behaviour? Her attitude?
- ☞ 'Hello, God. How are you? I'm Liz. It's nice to meet you.' What do you make of the way Liz communicates with God? She mentions the idea of a 'spiritual vocabulary' — what part does language play in her communion with the Divine? Does this change in each country she visits? How might Liz's understanding of the relationship between language and religion differ from that of more doctrine-based religious perspectives?
- ☞ "'You have the opposite of poker face. You have, like ... miniature golf face'". How important is humour in *Eat, Pray, Love*?
- ☞ "'Tell the truth, tell the truth, tell the truth'". This is the hallowed advice of Liz's friend Sheryl, and is the epigraph for *Eat, Pray, Love*. Do you think that all of Liz's anecdotes are 100% true and accurate? Does it matter?
- ☞ 'First you are a child, then you are a teenager, then you are a young married person, then you are a parent, then you are retired, then you are a grandparent'. How much does 'social expectation' — of work, motherhood, relationships — shape this book? Would you say that Liz's rejection of various gender expectations makes her a feminist? Is she an anarchist?
- ☞ 'I can make friends with anybody'. Do you agree? Do you like Liz? If so, what tactics does she use to win you over?
- ☞ Do you find it relevant that Liz's 'day job' involves writing for the men's magazine *GQ*? Do you think she relates better to men than women? Why [not]?
- ☞ In many ways Liz's quest for enlightenment could be seen as a universal one, but how much do you think it's of its time and place?
- ☞ 'At least I have my writing'. How important is the act of writing and reading in *Eat, Pray, Love*? Is there something profound or special about Liz committing her thoughts to paper? What is the reader's role? Are we invited to play God too?

☞ ‘Sofie and I each order another pie — another whole pizza each. Why is Liz so hungry in Italy? Is she a greedy person?’

☞ “‘True knowledge is impossible without a Guru’”. Are you persuaded by this assertion of Gandhi’s? Do you think Liz would have found what she was looking for without her guru and Swamiji? What part does her guru play in her spiritual journey, exactly?

☞ ‘Groceries — you got some serious control issues’. Do you think Texas Richard’s accusation is true? Does Liz’s relationship with control change throughout *Eat, Pray, Love*? Are ‘control issues’ necessarily a bad thing? What does the book’s structure tell us about control?

☞ How important is friendship in *Eat, Pray, Love*? Is Liz’s journey ultimately a solitary one?

☞ ‘I think you have every right to cherry-pick when it comes to moving your spirit and finding peace in God’. What do you think of Liz’s attitude towards ‘choosing her religion’?

☞ Given Liz’s views on happiness, how important is it that *Eat, Pray, Love* has ‘an almost ludicrously fairy-tale ending’?

Suggested further reading

Eating Up Italy: Voyages on a Vespa by Matthew Fort

The Italians by Luigi Barzini

Yoga School Dropout by Lucy Edge

The Battersea Park Road to Enlightenment by Isabel Losada

The Spiritual Tourist: A Personal Odyssey Through the Outer Reaches of Belief by Mick Brown

Everything I’ve Ever Done That Worked by Lesley Garner

Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith by Anne Lamott

Other books by Elizabeth Gilbert

Pilgrims (1997)

Stern Men (2000)

The Last American Man (2002)