



Interviews

[March 24, 2006](#)

[Click here to find more Elizabeth Gilbert on Audible.com.](#)

Books by Elizabeth Gilbert

[EAT, PRAY, LOVE: One Woman's Search for Everything Across Italy, India and Indonesia](#)

Author

Elizabeth Gilbert

BIO

Elizabeth Gilbert is the author of a short story collection, *PILGRIMS*, a finalist for the PEN/Hemingway Award, and winner of the 1999 John C. Zacharis First Book Award from Ploughshares-and a novel, *Stern Men*. A Pushcart Prize winner and National Magazine Award-nominated journalist, she works as writer-at-large for *GQ*. Her journalism has been published in *Harper's Bazaar*, *Spin*, and *The New York Times Magazine*, and her stories have appeared in *Esquire*, *Story*, and the *Paris Review*.

[Back to top.](#)

INTERVIEW

March 24, 2006

Throughout her writing career, [Elizabeth Gilbert](#) has experimented with several different genres: she has penned a novel, a biography, a short story collection, and worked as a staff journalist for publications like *GQ* and *SPIN*. She tries her hand at yet another --- travel memoir --- with her latest release, **EAT, PRAY, LOVE**. In this interview with Bookreporter.com's contributing writer Alexis Burling, Gilbert talks about why she chose to follow this path and explains how these various styles have affected her abilities as a writer. She also contemplates the pressures that society places on women and shares what she has learned about herself and others from her extensive travels.



Bookreporter.com: Throughout EAT, PRAY, LOVE you hint that you felt "utterly consumed with dread" at 31, yet you

were already an accomplished writer with a successful career, a fully stamped passport, a seemingly healthy upbringing, a husband, and a house in the New York suburbs. You also hint that much of this had to do with the fact that you didn't want to have a baby. There is a huge unspoken pressure for women to have children and to be good mothers/wives on top of (or instead of) being a woman with a successful career. Mommy versus Boss Lady. Where do you think this very real pressure comes from, and what might be done to change matters for the future?

Elizabeth Gilbert: Gosh, I'm not sure how much of that pressure is actually "unspoken." I think it runs pretty boldly through every level of our society. At a reading recently in Dallas, a young woman raised her hand and asked me what she should do about the fact that she feels there is "something wrong" with her because she's not married and having kids yet, at the ripe old age of 24. Apparently she's going to 10 weddings this summer, and the pressure is building. But we shouldn't underestimate how difficult it is to push against these shared cultural assumptions about where (and who) we're all supposed to be by certain ages. I got married young myself because --- although I felt a great deal of ambivalence about marriage --- I felt that my wavering or stalling would hold up the roaring train of progress; I didn't want to slow down the nation, for heaven's sake!

And that's the real problem --- when our warp-speed American cultural assumptions bear down on us so hard that we are not permitted to pause, to call a time-out, or to find a little quiet corner in which we can ask ourselves (un-interfered with by that blaring mass media of ours) what we might actually want. This doesn't just go for questions of whether or not to have children, but in every aspect of our lives --- we are given such precious little time of rest, in which to think (more importantly, feel) for ourselves.

I think the traditional husband-and-baby path is still, for many, many thinking women, a lovely option for how to spend your life. As is the boss-lady path if that's what you love. As are both, if you can somehow wing it. It's just that these choices are not the only options. For me, I've ended up passing on all of those options and settling on the path of, oh, I don't know what to call it except: Liz-ness. But I've been lucky to have learned what Liz-ness means to me, and lucky for my stubbornness in insisting on it. And I think the only way we (men and women alike) can ascend to our own real options is by somehow (and it takes muscular effort, believe me) demanding a bit of stillness from the chaos in which to connect with whatever our own internal voices might be asking from us so we can then follow that call. As the poet Jack Gilbert (no relation, sadly) said recently in an interview in the *Paris Review*: "I don't know why people settle for so little. I don't know why people aren't more greedy to discover what is inside them."

BRC: As a memoirist, you must possess a certain willingness to open yourself up to the world in order to share what you've been through and what you've learned along the way, whether positive or negative. I must say that you have a special vulnerability to your writing --- a quality that endears your readers immediately to your words. Were you scared to be so open with your thoughts, especially after going through "a failed marriage and a devastating, interminable divorce, followed immediately by a passionate love affair that ended in sickening heartache"? If so, how did you work through that fear?

EG: My friends would laugh as I formulate this massive understatement of an answer, but I'm not a particularly private person. I come by it honestly; my mother is the woman standing next to you in line at the grocery store with whom, in the space of four minutes, you find yourself discussing your recent hysterectomy. I'm a sharer, a confider, a (for better or worse) hugely trusting person. I've rarely had an unspoken thought in my life, heaven help us. And even at this age, very little in life has ever taught me that it isn't safe to reveal yourself. (On the contrary --- I think great learning, revelation and intimacy come to us through openness.)

Also, I honestly never thought of this as a particularly "personal" story --- only because I found my journey, my questions and my struggles to be so universal (commonplace, even). I think I'm a fairly representative woman in many ways and what I've gone through seems to be what a lot of people go through. That said, I didn't put everything in the book. I was protective of certain people's privacy and very, very careful to try to say as little as possible, for instance, about my ex-husband and the circumstances of our collapsed marriage. For one thing --- who wants to read that? Also, I just felt, ethically speaking, more comfortable revealing my own dysfunctions than revealing my (almost certainly biased) perspective of someone else's dysfunctions.

BRC: Describe the moment when you realized that your flights were booked, your plans were made, and that you were actually heading off to live in Italy, India and Indonesia for three four-month stretches. Did you ever think you'd actually do it? When did it dawn on you that it wasn't an idea anymore, but a very real reality?

EG: This might sound odd, but there was something deeply familiar about that moment. I had started feeling better, healthier and calmer every day that the trip neared. By the time I got on the plane to Rome my whole being was in a state of giant, relaxed exhalation. Traveling and writing is who I am, what I've always been, what I resemble and love. And when you're living fully and steadily in the manner that best suits you, there is nothing quite like that depth of comfort. As my mom said right before I set off on the journey, "You look like Liz again."

You have to keep in mind how much I had suffered before this trip over the big, nightmarish (for me) question about how in the world I could possibly stay married and have children and be a homeowner and still be that Liz --- the one who always wants to be embarking on a new journey. No matter how many times I tried to calculate it out, I could never make the math work; the traveling Liz would have to die for this other, more domestic, part of my life to begin. And here's the thing --- I felt I had no choice in the matter. It is shocking when I look back on it now, but it's truly how I felt --- that in order to be a full adult, I had to be a wife and mother. (Didn't occur to me that being fully adult can mean living simply in the manner you were made to live.)

As the deadline neared for me to have a baby, I did truly feel like I'd been diagnosed with cancer and had only a few months left to live. I went on a trip to New Zealand for *GQ* magazine right before I turned 30 and I remember weeping on a beach while I was there, thinking, "This is the last time in my life I will ever do anything like this." My love for travel and exploration was so huge that losing it was an unbearable heartache. So, as hard as it was (and it was hard) for me to leave my marriage, I find it difficult to express the vastness of my relief and joy and happiness and excitement when I realized that I had the rest of my life ahead of me, free to be who I actually am. And, truly, that joy has still not passed.

BRC: Richard from Texas is such an interesting character and one who obviously made a huge impact on your life. You mention in the Introduction that he used to be an alcoholic and a junkie, which floored me because he seemed so wise and possessed such an incredibly unique spirit. How do you think Richard got to be so insightful? And so hilarious ... "Groceries!" What a personality!

EG: God, how I love that man. As for his past life of alcoholism and drug use, I'm not so sure how qualified I am to explain it, except to say that wisdom and uniqueness have never guaranteed safeguards against our deeper addictive yearnings. There are some really smart, wonderful people out there who struggle every day against some pretty powerful compulsions (and those compulsions come in many forms --- not just chemical, but often emotional and psychological). We all are born, I suppose, with battling tendencies to either create and expand ourselves or to destroy and contract ourselves, and Richard's victory over his destructive urges is probably what makes him so damn wise, self-possessed and unique now. It's also probably why I find him so inspiring.

I've never fought against chemical addictions, but I was certainly addicted to my ex-boyfriend David, and that was killing me. Richard's advice to me about how to find the strength to let go of the David-dream ("You gotta stop wearin' your wishbone where your backbone oughtta be") came, obviously, from a profound

wellspring of real-life experience that infused his words with a radical truth.

BRC: In the chapter entitled "Final Recognition and Reassurance," you mention that you returned to Bali to visit loved ones over the holidays and that Felipe was waiting for you at the airport. I am dying to ask: What's the next chapter in that story?

EG: As I'm typing this, I'm on an airplane heading home to Philadelphia after my book tour, and Felipe will be waiting for me at that airport, too. After two years together, I can say that it's still such a wonderful, gentle, unassuming and nourishing relationship. With both of us such ramblers, it's just fantastic for each of us to have found at last our traveling companion --- finding love when and where you least expect it is a full-out blessing, and we spend a whole lot of time feeling grateful for each other.

BRC: Have you any advice for people who want to just "pick up and go?"

EG: Pick up and go!

BRC: Where do you think that impulse stems from --- that urge to just drop everything and go? Do all cultures feel that, or is it particularly an American phenomenon?

EG: Oh, I think it's absolutely universal. Humans spent a whole lot of time wandering and seeking and exploring this world (and themselves within it) long before there ever was such a thing as America. I guess the difference is that, in typical American fashion, we've sort of commoditized it and now we market a self-transformation industry, God bless us. But that doesn't make the urge any less real or necessary. You still see all over India these wandering seekers --- men who, around the age of 50, after having successfully and responsibly raised their families and made their fortune, just walk away from it all, don orange robes and become mendicant, penniless monks; this is considered a completely legitimate way to spend your last years on earth --- searching for God.

What has changed about the world, I think, is that women can now take those epic journeys, too. Joseph Campbell (whom I do love, by the way) always said that there was no such thing as the feminine heroic quest; that women have, mythologically speaking, never needed to go out there in the world and "find themselves" because, as life-bearers, as the living goddesses of fertility, we are already perfect and whole. Now, while it certainly is flattering to be deemed a perfected life-goddess, I for one don't personally relate to that icon at all.

I only begin to feel whole and perfect when I set out traveling, when I know I'm on my own vision quest. And I met an awful lot

of women while I was on my journey who were also on their own journeys --- everyone from a middle-aged Australian woman who'd just finished raising the last of her five children, to a 19-year-old Indian girl from a traditional family who admitted to me that she was desperate to avoid marriage, become a writer and "move to Hawaii!" (Let's just hope she gets the chance.)

BRC: What were the glaring differences between America and the three countries you traveled? Did you notice any similarities?

EG: I would say that the three countries I visited are becoming more similar to us than we are to them, and that's sort of a pity. What I mean by that is that I think America's most marked export these days is STRESS, which we seem to be spreading across the world more virulently than any bird flu you could imagine. That saddens me, because I feel like stress and all its attendant vices (sickness, anxiety, societal pressure, aspirational acquisition of soul-numbing consumer goods) run so contrary to our natural human rhythms. I don't want to lash out against America here --- I will always be an American (believe me, nobody's ever going to accidentally mistake me for being Balinese) and I still think that Americans produce the most amazing things out of their lives --- but it just worries me to see how much teeth-grinding, soul-corroding pressure our country puts on itself and on the world, and the impact of that weighs mightily on everyone.

For my part, the best I can do is to make a quiet effort every day to refuse the stress, not to buy into it. Which means, in short, that I'm not going to race you on the highway to beat that red light anymore.

BRC: What are your favorite travel websites? Do you have a secret to traveling cheaply?

EG: Travel websites? Argh! You've exposed me --- I'm so archaic, I wouldn't even know how to explore travel websites! And I did mean it in the book when I said I'm not a great traveler, in the sense of those people who somehow always know the coolest, most off-beat, funkiest places to go and how to get there. But as for traveling cheaply, I don't think it's that different a trick than living cheaply (though maybe that's becoming a lost art, with everyone up to their necks in debt these days). Make a budget, be realistic, live within your means, ask yourself how necessary it is to buy whatever it is that you see before you. As my friend Eustace Conway always says, "The more you know, the less you need."

I think part of the trick is to try to live in the place you are visiting, even if it's only for two weeks. Instead of staying in hotels and eating in restaurants, then, try to rent a flat and do some grocery-shopping. This will make you feel more like you're experiencing the true tempo of a place, anyway. Be less of a

tourist and more of a resident --- that's always cheaper.

BRC: Describe your writing process. Did you write at all while you were traveling, or did you save most of your writing for your return?

EG: I wrote constantly as I was traveling --- both because I knew I was preparing to write a book about the experience, but also because, as Joan Didion said recently, "I write in order to find out how I feel about something." I can't imagine that I would've had half the revelations I did on this journey if I hadn't been writing about it as I went along. Writing has always been my particular way of translating life, of taking experiences out of the ephemeral and digesting them, making them real.

BRC: In the life of your writing career, you have worn many hats. You wrote for *Spin* and *GQ* early on and earned three National Magazine Award nominations for feature writing. You published a short story collection (*PILGRIMS*) that was nominated for the PEN/Hemingway Award, was a *New York Times* Notable Book, and received the Pushcart Prize. You have written a novel (*STERN MEN*) that was also a *New York Times* Notable Book. You wrote a biography (*THE LAST AMERICAN MAN*) that was a finalist for both the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award. You then turned inward to write a travel memoir with *EAT, PRAY, LOVE*. Did you prefer one writing style over all the others? Which came easiest to you? Which was the most difficult?

EG: Fiction, I personally think, is harder, only because you have to create a world in fiction rather than simply report one. But I think my years of writing nonfiction have made my prose far better, cleaner and clearer than it would have been if I'd just stuck with being a novelist and short-story writer. Writing under deadline and with space limitations and for different audiences teaches you how to parboil your skills, how to take yourself less seriously, how to be more nimble and accommodating, and how to not forget that ALWAYS there is someone on the other end who (bless their hearts) actually has to read your masterpiece --- so make sure it's readable.

BRC: Of course, there are many lessons that you must have learned in your year of traveling, and you share many of them with us in *EAT, PRAY, LOVE*. Can you pick out one to share with us that you may not have included?

EG: What I've come to believe (only because I can't not believe it, given what this journey has brought to me) is that there is such a thing as "the physics of a quest" --- which is to say that there is a divine hidden force behind human questing that is as natural and inevitable as gravity or equilibrium or mortality. That equation works something like this --- if you really do commit to going out there in the world (or in there, deep down in yourself)

on a search for truth, and if you really do bravely cut away all that is comforting and confining to you, and if you really are prepared to see anything that happens to you as expression of truth that has been offered up for your own benefit and learning --- then revelation will not be withheld from you. You will be shown who you are and what it all means. And if revelation doesn't occur, well, it either means you need to look more closely or that you weren't really listening carefully enough. Or --- worst-case scenario --- that you can sue the universe for breach of contract...

BRC: Who are some of your favorite writers? What books have you read that have inspired you?

EG: I'm always inspired by Charles Dickens --- oddly, I find a lot of self-help in his work. If I'm feeling depressed or slack, I only have to open *David Copperfield* to any page and it won't be long before I'm infused with delight again at the workings of the world, the bizarre and heartbreaking drama of human life, and --- of course --- joy in the wonders of language. I love the Sufi poet Hafiz, for similar reasons. I love Martin Amis --- that great, indefensible misanthrope --- for his staggering linguistic genius. Annie Proulx will always be a hero of mine, and I've enjoyed watching *Brokeback Mountain*, the greatest short story I've read in recent years, become a national phenomenon. I love Dylan Thomas's short stories. My friend John Hodgman's deranged brilliance in *THE AREAS OF MY EXPERTISE*. Oh, there are more...that's the good news --- there will always be more to read.

BRC: Throughout your year abroad, you must have filled oodles of notebooks/journals with notes on memorable experiences and events that permanently altered your way of thinking about yourself and the world. How did you decide what to include and what not to include in the book?

EG: Think of it like using a diving rod. You know those people who have a gift for walking over the ground holding a stick and then --- when they pass over water --- the stick jumps, an electric shimmer runs up their arms, and they know there's a well to be dug under there? That's how it felt when I was reading over my piles and piles of journals. I would just skim over it until I felt that electric shimmer, and knew that this or that anecdote belonged in the book. But that's a power you earn over years and years of writing, of learning to trust your instincts and impulses, and, most importantly, in learning how to get out of the way of whatever freshwater river of creativity might be running under you, or through you.

BRC: In India, you spent four months living on an ashram, meditating, praying (in the liberal sense of the word), and generally opening yourself up to the world and what it has to offer. In Bali, you spent time with Ketut and Wayan, two natural healers. Have you found it difficult to keep this enlightened perspective and peaceful well-being while back

in America? What methods do you use to get back to "that place?"

EG: Madness will follow anyone who tries to keep up the schedule of an Indian ashram in their normal, American life, so I don't bother trying to uphold all that ritual and discipline. The time I spent in India was a privileged moment. But this day, too, is a privileged moment --- for other reasons, for the other wonders it reveals (which might sometimes be as simple as throwing a ball for my neighbor's dog on my walk to the mailbox). This is not to say that I don't meditate or pray anymore --- I do try to, as much as possible. But I don't hold to it rigorously, because it feels to me that, if your spiritual practices are causing you anxiety because you get panicked trying to carve time out everyday for them, then they have ceased being of much use. I think of my spiritual practice now the same way I think of my writing practice; it's something I do steadfastly, but not with rigid discipline, because that kills the spark.

BRC: One GQ story, a retelling of your career as a bartender in a lowdown East Village dive ("The Muse of the Coyote Ugly Saloon"), became the basis for the Disney movie *Coyote Ugly*. Tell us more!

EG: Oh my word. Well...it was interesting. I had worked at that bar in my early 20s, as part of my efforts to 1) pay the bills and 2) be around as much life and weirdness and language as possible, to help me with my fiction. I wrote a short story inspired by the bar, and that appeared in PILGRIMS. Then, years later, I wrote an essay for GQ about my time at the Coyote Ugly. Much to my disbelief, Disney bought the movie rights. (Truthfully, I still kind of can't believe it.) I didn't have anything to do with the making of the movie, but it still makes me laugh that it exists, and that they managed somehow to make a feel-good teenybopper film about this truly run-down, often very tragic, hard-drinking bar. The magic of Hollywood, I suppose --- anything can be transformed and prettified! Also, a friend was in Thailand recently and sent me an email that the hotel where he was staying was hosting "Coyote Ugly Night," and all the local Thai kids were dressing up to go. I thought, "Dear Lord, what hath I wrought?"

BRC: What is one of your favorite assignments that a magazine sent you on? Why?

EG: What comes to mind was the story I did for *SPIN* about the construction of the Three Gorges Dam, in China, not because it was fun (it wasn't!), but because it was so challenging to figure out how to get that story. I'm not a trained journalist (though I'm not even sure I know what that is) and I'd never been to China, and the whole thing felt sort of dangerous and hard and lonely, but it worked --- I got the story, sorted it all out, wrote the piece. It's not the kind of work I want to do every day, but it was important to learn that I could do it.

I have other favorites for other reasons --- the sheer wildness of going to New Zealand to look for giant squid, the sordid world of Texas rodeo, the amazing two afternoons I got to spend interviewing Tom Waits. But I think going to China and comprehending that story was the biggest personal achievement for me.

BRC: What are you working on now?

EG: Another novel. It's been a long time since I've written fiction and I don't want to lose it (though I'm not sure it's something you ever really "have"; my experience being that you are constantly figuring it out anew). The novel takes place in Brazil in the 1960s. I can't say much more about it than that --- only because I don't really know much more about it yet. But that's what the next two years are for!

► [Click here now to buy this book from Amazon.com.](#)

© Copyright 1996-2006, Bookreporter.com. All rights reserved.

[Back to top.](#)