



The signature of all things

By Elizabeth Gilbert

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Genre & subject

Woman botanists

Historical fiction

Synopsis

From the moment Alma Whittaker steps into the world, everything about life intrigues her. Instilled with an unquenchable sense of wonder by her father, a botanical explorer and the richest man in the New World, Alma is raised in a house of luxury and curiosity. It is not long before she becomes a gifted botanist in her own right. But as she flourishes and her research takes her deeper into the mysteries of evolution, the man she comes to love draws her in the opposite direction - into the realm of the spiritual, the divine and the magical.

Author biography

Elizabeth Gilbert was born in Waterbury, Connecticut. Her father was a chemical engineer, her mother a nurse. She is of Swedish descent. 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 neighbours: they did not own a television or record player. Consequently, the family read a great deal, and Gilbert and her sister entertained themselves by writing 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 in short stories, and also briefly in her book *The Last American Man* (Viking 2002).

Discussion starters

- 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?
- 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?
- How does Alma resemble her father? In what crucial ways do they differ?
- What role is played in the novel by the Whittakers' servant Hanneke de Groot? In what ways is her perspective essential to the story?
- 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. 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?

- 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?
- 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 criticise, in the hands of an asocial, self-denying oddball?
- 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?
- Alma's decision to devote her life to studying mosses is compared to a "religious conversion". In *The Signature of All Things*, science and religion often intertwine. Are they ever finally reconciled? If so, how? If not, why not?
- 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?
- 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". Why might she think this, and what does it tell us about her character?
- 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?
- 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". How has this limitation to her curiosity helped her? Has it harmed her?

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