

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY



Elizabeth Gilbert was born in Waterbury, Connecticut in 1969, and grew up on a small family Christmas tree farm. She attended New York University, where she studied political science by day and worked on her short stories by night. After college, she spent several years traveling around the country, working in bars, diners and ranches, collecting experiences to transform into fiction.

These explorations eventually formed the basis of her first book – a short story collection called *PILGRIMS*, which was a finalist for the PEN/Hemingway award, and which moved Annie Proulx to call her “a young writer of incandescent talent”.

During these early years in New York, she also worked as a journalist for such publications as *Spin*, *GQ* and *The New York Times Magazine*. She was a three-time finalist for *The National Magazine Award*, and an article she wrote in *GQ* about her experiences bartending on the Lower East Side eventually became the basis for the movie *COYOTE UGLY*.

In 2000, Elizabeth published her first novel, *STERN MEN* (a story of brutal territory wars between two remote fishing islands off the coast of Maine) which was a *New York Times* Notable Book. In 2002, Elizabeth published *THE LAST AMERICAN MAN* – the true story of the modern day woodsman Eustace Conway. This book, her first work of non-fiction, was a finalist for both the *National Book Award* and the *National Book Critics Circle Award*.

Elizabeth is best known, however for her 2006 memoir *EAT PRAY LOVE*, which chronicled her journey alone around the world, looking for solace after a difficult divorce. The book was an international bestseller, translated into over thirty languages, with over 12 million copies sold worldwide. In 2010, *EAT PRAY LOVE* was made into a film starring Julia Roberts. The book became so popular that *Time Magazine* named Elizabeth as one of the 100 most influential people in the world.

In 2010, Elizabeth published a follow-up to *EAT PRAY LOVE* called *COMMITTED*—a memoir which explored her ambivalent feelings about the institution of marriage. The book immediately became a #1 *New York Times* Bestseller, and was also received with warm critical praise. As *Newsweek* wrote, *COMMITTED* “retains plenty of Gilbert’s comic ruefulness and wide-eyed wonder”, and NPR called the book “a rich brew of newfound insight and wisdom.”

Her 2013 novel *THE SIGNATURE OF ALL THINGS* is a sprawling tale of 19th century botanical exploration. *O Magazine* named it “the novel of a lifetime”, and the *Wall Street Journal* called it “the most ambitious and purely-imagined work of (Gilbert’s) twenty-year career.” *THE SIGNATURE OF ALL THINGS* was a *New York Times* Bestseller, and Janet

Maslin called it “engrossing...vibrant and hot-blooded.” The novel was named a Best Book of 2013 by The New York Times, O Magazine, The Washington Post, The Chicago Tribune, and The New Yorker.”

In 2015, she published *BIG MAGIC: CREATIVE LIVING BEYOND FEAR*—a book that encapsulates the joyful spirit of adventure and permission that Elizabeth has always brought to her work and to her life.

Her latest novel is *CITY OF GIRLS* — a rollicking, sexy tale of the New York City theater world during the 1940s. It will be published in June of 2019.

Elizabeth divides her time between New York City, rural New Jersey, and everywhere else.

- Author's website

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Elizabeth Gilbert chooses to tell Vivian's story in the form of a letter to a younger woman, Angela. How do you think the story benefits from being told in the voice of 89-year-old Vivian, looking back? What did you learn from this vantage? How did it influence your reading experience?
2. In 1940, nineteen-year-old Vivian's introduction to life in New York City and within the Lily Playhouse is a shock after her world at Vassar and her family outside of the city. What is so different about it all? What elements of this new city and world shape her the most, do you think? And how might they have struck her differently if she'd come from a different kind of family and class background?
3. Vivian receives an atypical sexual education from her new friends, the showgirls, and from her time with Anthony. How does her time at the Lily shape Vivian's ideas about sex and love and desire and appetite as a young woman, and how do these ideas sustain and evolve later in her life? How much do you think her adult ideas about female desire are due to her personality or experience? How typical do you think Vivian's attitudes about sex and love would have been for someone of her age and time?
4. Consider the portrayal of Vivian's friendship with Celia Ray, the smoldering showgirl at the Lily Playhouse. How does it compare to her previous experiences of female friendship from school. How much does this friendship influence what happens next for Vivian? Which of these two women, Vivian or Celia, do you think holds the power in their friendship, and why? How do you imagine their friendship would have played out over the years if certain events had not intervened?
5. How does Vivian's later friendship with Marjorie compare with her younger friendship with Celia Ray? Would Vivian's life with Marjorie and her other friends later in life have been possible if not for knowing Celia and the other women at the Lily when she was younger? Do you see her applying any lessons learned by observing the relationship between Peg and Olive and Uncle Billy?
6. Consider the different male characters in the book – Vivian's father, Walter, Uncle Billy, Mr. Herbert, Arthur, Anthony, Jim, Frank – and their different ideas expectations of women. What accounts for the differences between these men and how they relate to women? In what ways does Vivian meet their expectations or challenge / change them?

7. *City of Girls* is full of descriptions of fantastic costumes and characters with truly original senses of style. What does Vivian learn about fashion and style from the showgirls? From her grandmother? From Edna? Even from Peg and Olive? Consider the role that fashion plays in Vivian’s story and in the various relationships and stages of her life: in boarding school, at the Lily Playhouse, at the Navy Yards, at L’Atelier with Marjorie, and in meeting Angela.
8. Edna, Olive, and Peg represent an older generation of women. Their views and relationships (with Billy, with Arthur) and behaviors influence Vivian in different ways. Consider what Vivian learns from Peg, Olive, and Billy’s domestic / professional arrangement. What about the dynamics she observes between Edna and Arthur? Think about how Edna treats Vivian after Vivian’s betrayal is revealed. Do you think Edna is justified in her behavior? Ultimately Edna decides to stay with Arthur even after what he has done. Do you think Vivian would have stayed with Arthur if she were in Edna’s position? Would Arthur have stayed with Edna if the positions were reversed?
9. Were you surprised by the kind of life that Vivian builds with Marjorie and Nathan? In what ways can you see it growing out of her experiences at the Lily Playhouse in her twenties, and the lifestyle and values she adopts during and after the war? How does Vivian’s adult family life compare to the family she grew up with? Do you think Vivian ever wants more than the life she attains?
10. What kind of love does Vivian have for Frank, and how does this love change the course of her life? How does Vivian’s love for Frank differ from her youthful love of Anthony? How does it compare with any of her other friendships or romantic relationships? How do you think Vivian would describe the difference between a “love” and a “lover”? Can you imagine Frank and Vivian having a physical relationship? How might that have changed Vivian’s life and story?
11. On page 377, Vivian states: “I could have spent the rest of my life trying to prove that I was a good girl—but that would have been unfaithful to who I really was. I believed that I was a good person, if not a good girl.” What does this quote mean to you? Is there a difference between being a good girl and being a good person? Does Vivian live up to this ideal in your opinion?

- <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/318864/city-of-girls-by-elizabeth-gilbert/9781594634741/readers-guide/>

BOOK REVIEWS

Booklist

/ Starred Review */* *Girls Do Want to Have Fun—and Equality*. After Vivian Morris, far more interested in clothes than scholarship, flunks out of Vassar in 1940, her indifferent, well-to-do, conservative parents ship her off to Aunt Peg in Manhattan, who owns and runs a ragtag theater in Midtown. Pretty, naive, and ardently open to suggestion, Vivian finds herself in a chaotic, cash-poor, improvisational, hard-drinking household overseen by stubbornly pragmatic Olive, upon whom Peg relies in ways Vivian cannot imagine. Celia, a ravishing showgirl who loves nothing more than a wild night on the town, promptly initiates Vivian into her life of revelry and casual sex. Their friendship, escapades, and quandaries make for an effervescent pre-WWII variation on *Sex in the City* (with a nod toward Auntie Mame). Gilbert’s previous novel, *The*

Signature of Things (2013), portrayed a nineteenth-century woman scientist who refused to be stymied by the sexism of her time. Here Gilbert writes against the traditional literary grain in which women are harshly punished for enjoying sexual freedom, though she adeptly camouflages her serious intent, which also embraces matters of race, class, and gay rights in a whirl of satin, lace, champagne bubbles, and smoke. And what keenly delicious fun Gilbert has bringing to life the struggling Lily Playhouse and its modest productions aimed at entertaining working-class audiences with larky song-and-dance numbers and leggy lovelies. Vivian's sewing skills grant her full entry into this enthusiastic if makeshift enterprise, especially when the chic and gifted British actor Edna Parker Watson and her handsome young husband arrive. Their London home has been bombed to "matchsticks," and they're in desperate need of sanctuary and work. Peg takes them in and makes them the stars of the theater's next production, *City of Girls*, a play Gilbert revels in creating, from song lyrics and costumes to opening-night reviews. Its improbable success changes everything for everyone involved, and not necessarily for the better. After barely surviving a scorching tabloid scandal—among the intriguing real-life characters Gilbert portrays is the infamous gossip columnist Walter Winchell—followed by wartime demands, Vivian comes into her own as a talented fashion entrepreneur. We learn about her many adventures in retrospect as Vivian, an octogenarian in 2010, vividly recounts her life of choice and independence with sly wit, piquant regrets, and hard-won wisdom. Vivian's confident candor about women's sexuality, including her own preference for sex free of emotional entanglements, is tonic and affirming; the surprising turn she takes to embrace love is deeply moving. Reading *City of Girls* is pure bliss, thanks to its spirited characters, crackling dialogue, rollicking yet affecting story lines, genuinely erotic scenes, and sexual intelligence, suspense, and incisive truths. Gilbert's beguiling blend of comedy and gravitas brings to mind other smart, funny, nimble, and vital novels about early- or mid-twentieth-century women swimming against the tide. Most take place in New York, and some also depict the theater or other creative endeavors as crucibles for social struggles: Fay Weldon's *Worst Fears* (1996); *Bandbox* by Thomas Mallon (2004); Marge Piercy's *Sex Wars* (2005); *The Wife, the Maid, and the Mistress* by Ariel Lawhon (2014); *Searching for Grace Kelly* by Michael Callahan (2015); *Careers for Women* by Joanna Scott (2017); *Lillian Boxfish Takes a Walk* by Kathleen Rooney (2017); *Manhattan Beach* by Jennifer Egan (2017); *The Magnificent Esme Wells* by Adrienne Sharp (2018); *Memories of the Future* by Siri Hustvedt (2019); and *Park Avenue Summer* by Renée Rosen (2019). -- Donna Seaman (Reviewed 3/15/2019) (Booklist, vol 115, number 14, p41)

Publisher's Weekly

/* Starred Review */ Gilbert (*The Signature of All Things*) begins her beguiling tale of an innocent young woman discovering the excitements and pleasures of 1940 New York City with a light touch, as her heroine, Vivian Morris, romps through the city. Gradually the story deepens into a psychologically keen narrative about Vivian's search for independence as she indulges her free spirit and sexuality. Freshly expelled from Vassar for not attending any classes, 19-year-old Vivian is sent by her parents to stay with her aunt Peggy Buell in Manhattan. Peg runs a scruffy theater that offers gaudy musical comedies to its unsophisticated patrons. As WWII rages in Europe, Vivian is oblivious to anything but the wonder behind the stage, as she becomes acquainted with the players in a new musical called *City of Girls*, including the louche leading man with whom she falls in love with passionate abandon. Vivian flits through the nightclubs El Morocco, the

Diamond Horseshoe, and the Latin Quarter, where she hears Count Basie, Billie Holiday, and Louis Prima. Drinking heavily and scooting into the arms of numerous men, one night at the Stork Club she meets Walter Winchell, the notorious gossip columnist, who plays a pivotal role in the tabloid scandal in which Vivian becomes embroiled. Vivian's voice—irreverent, witty, robust with slang—gradually darkens with guilt when she receives a devastating comeuppance. Eventually, she arrives at an understanding of the harsh truths of existence as the country plunges into WWII. Vivian—originally reckless and selfish, eventually thoughtful and humane—is the perfect protagonist for this novel, a page-turner with heart complete with a potent message of fulfillment and happiness. (June) --Staff (Reviewed 04/08/2019) (Publishers Weekly, vol 266, issue 14, p)

Library Journal

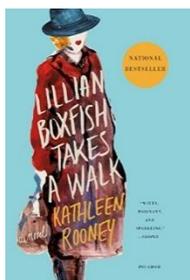
After flunking out of Vassar College, 19-year-old Vivian Morris is sent by her wealthy parents to New York City to live with her unconventional aunt Peg, who owns a crumbling midtown theater called the Lily Playhouse. It's the summer of 1940, and for a girl "so freshly hatched, there was practically yolk" in her hair, Vivian's new home is a bewitching mix of "glamour and grit and mayhem and fun." Vivian eagerly embraces her new life, quickly losing her virginity, embarking on wild escapades with showgirl Celia, and making costumes for the playhouse. But when a careless personal mistake results in a professional scandal, Vivian returns home, chastened, in a short-lived attempt to meet her parents' (and society's) expectations. The first half of Gilbert's (*The Signature of All Things*) historical novel is a rollicking coming-of-age delight, vividly capturing the spirit of the era. But the melancholy second half feels flat, owing to the awkward narrative structure that has ninety-something Vivian reflecting on her life in a letter to the daughter of the man she loves. VERDICT Tart-voiced Vivian and her adventures in 20th-century Manhattan will please readers who enjoyed Kathleen Rooney's *Lillian Boxfish Takes a Walk*. [See Prepub Alert, 12/3/18.] --Wilda Williams (Reviewed 06/01/2019) (Library Journal, vol 144, issue 5, p103)

Kirkus

/* Starred Review */ Someone told Vivian Morris in her youth that she would never be an interesting person. Good thing they didn't put money on it. The delightful narrator of Gilbert's (*Big Magic*, 2015, etc.) fourth novel begins the story of her life in the summer of 1940. At 19, she has just been sent home from Vassar. "I cannot fully recall what I'd been doing with my time during those many hours that I ought to have spent in class, but—knowing me—I suppose I was terribly preoccupied with my appearance." Vivian is very pretty, and she is a talented seamstress, but other than that, she is a silly, naïve girl who doesn't know anything about anything. That phase of her life comes to a swift end when her parents send her to Manhattan to live with her Aunt Peg. Peg is the proprietor of the Lily Playhouse, a grandiose, crumbling theater in midtown that caters to the tastes and wallets of the locals with week after week of original "revues" that inevitably feature a sweet young couple, a villain, a floozy, a drunken hobo, and a horde of showgirls and dancers kicking up a storm. "There were limits to the scope of the stories that we could tell," Vivian explains, "given that the Lily Playhouse only had three backdrops": 19th-century street corner, elegant parlor, and ocean liner. Vivian makes a close friend in Celia Ray, a showgirl so smolderingly beautiful she nearly scorches the pages on which she appears. "I wanted Celia to teach me everything," says Vivian, "about men, about sex, about New York, about life"—and she gets her wish, and then some. The story is

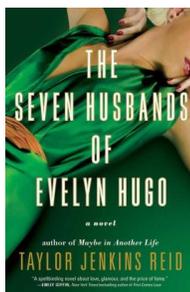
jammed with terrific characters, gorgeous clothing, great one-liners, convincing wartime atmosphere, and excellent descriptions of sex, one of which can only be described (in Vivian's signature italics) as transcendent. There are still many readers who know Gilbert only as a memoirist. Whatever *Eat Pray Love* did or did not do for you, please don't miss out on her wonderful novels any longer. A big old banana split of a book, surely the cure for what ails you. (Kirkus Reviews, March 1, 2019)

READALIKES



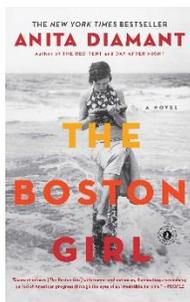
***Lillian Boxfish Takes a Walk* by Kathleen Rooney**

Embarking on a walk across Manhattan on New Year's Eve in 1984, eighty-five-year-old Lillian Boxfish recalls her long and eventful life, which included a brief reign as the highest-paid advertising woman in America, whose career was cut short by marriage and loss.



***The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* by Taylor Jenkins Reid**

When an aging and reclusive Hollywood icon selects an unknown magazine reporter to write her life story, the baffled journalist forges deep ties with the actress during a complicated interview process that exposes their tragic common history.



***The Boston Girl* by Anita Diamant**

Recounting the story of her life to her granddaughter, octogenarian Addie describes how she was raised in early-twentieth-century America by Jewish immigrant parents in a teeming multicultural neighborhood.