



## Eat, Pray, Love

Holly Price

### Desperately seeking something

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**Book title:** Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman's Search for Everything across Italy, India and Indonesia

**Author:** Elizabeth Gilbert

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[Image]

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Having suffered a drawn-out divorce, a failed rebound relationship and a debilitating bout of depression, Elizabeth Gilbert decides to go abroad in pursuit of inner peace. Funded by a book advance, she spends a whole year travelling: she goes to Italy to pursue pleasure, to India to pursue devotion and to Indonesia to pursue a balance between the two. The result is *Eat, Pray, Love* (respectively).

Both this memoir and the author behind it have been fondly received by booklovers the world over. Over 5 million copies of *Eat, Pray, Love* have been sold and Gilbert has a website answering the public's questions about her life since the book's last page.[1] Critics have praised the book for its vivid descriptions and self-deprecating humour. Paramount Pictures has bought the movie rights for *Eat, Pray, Love* and it is due to be released in 2011. Julia Robert will star as Elizabeth Gilbert, alongside Javier Bardem

and Richard Jenkins. Ryan Murphy is both the director and screenplay writer, and plans to begin filming this month in New York, Rome, India and Bali.

Elizabeth Gilbert is by nature a seeker. She begins her book with this motto: *'Tell the truth, tell the truth, tell the truth.'* She further insists that *'looking for Truth is not some kind of spazzy free-for-all, not even during this, the great age of the spazzy free-for-all'* (p.20). So her writing is honest and her search earnest. She openly shares her insecurities and failures as well as her triumphs. She unashamedly bases her quest to find divinity, not on external sources such as history or science, but on her personal experience. Her disclaimer: *'I'm tired of being a skeptic, I'm irritated by spiritual prudence and I feel bored and parched by empirical debate. I don't want to hear it anymore. I couldn't care less about evidence and proof and assurances. I just want God'* (p.185).

After her divorce, Gilbert decides to learn Italian for no other reason than because it is pleasurable. When she travels to Rome, she discovers that Italy's food is just as delicious as its language and she savours every morsel, gaining two stone in the process. The Italians' appreciation for doing nothing, for simply enjoying life and beauty, eludes Gilbert at first. She is held back from experiencing this pleasure by what she terms as her *'ingrained sense of Puritan guilt'* (p.65). She feels she hasn't yet earned the right to enjoy this state of freedom, that she isn't worthy of it. Yet she craves it.

The theme of guilt arises several times in the first section of the book, particularly in relation to her desire to end her marriage in search of a less conventional life. She also regrets the pressure she put on her subsequent partner: *'I inflicted upon him my every hope for my salvation and happiness'* (p.19). Gilbert seems to be reaching for someone or something that will bring her true pleasure, but neither her relationships nor her independence have been able to fill this role. And the guilt that has ensued, particularly from her failed relationships, leaves her without hope of being found worthy of a pleasure-giver's attention.

Yet, the craving remains. In fact, at those moments when Gilbert feels most desolate, she finds herself crying out in prayer. She explains

that, because the world is so challenging, *'you sometimes must reach out of its jurisdiction for help, appealing to a higher authority in order to find your comfort'* (p.56). At this stage she is unsure exactly whom she is praying to, but he/she/it displays an unconditional love and unhindered certainty that seem altogether unearthly.

In the second section of *Eat, Pray, Love*, we find Gilbert in a small Ashram near Mumbai. Elizabeth Gilbert perceives the human condition as *'the heart-breaking inability to sustain contentment'* (p.128). The Yogic explanation of this is that *'we have failed to recognize our deeper divine character ... a supreme Self who is eternally at peace'* (p.128).

The majority of Gilbert's time in India is spent, not in blissful union with her inner divinity, but in a battle against herself. She frequently struggles with the yogic disciplines and with her longing to be forgiven by her ex-husband and loved again by her ex-partner. On one of many occasions, Gilbert is caught in a vain attempt to quieten her worrying, insulting and distracting thoughts. This time something/someone intervenes:

*But suddenly it was like a lion was roaring from within my chest, drowning all this claptrap out. A voice bellowed in me like nothing I had ever heard before. It was so internally, eternally loud that I actually clamped my hand over my mouth because I was afraid that if I opened my mouth and let this sound out, it would shake the foundations of buildings as far away as Detroit.*

*And this is what it roared: **YOU HAVE NO IDEA HOW STRONG MY LOVE IS!!!!!!!** The chattering, negative thoughts in my mind scattered in the wind of this statement like birds and jackrabbits and antelopes – they hightailed it out of there, terrified. (p.166)*

In spite of this glimpse of gracious outside help, Elizabeth Gilbert believes that she must keep striving in order to secure another meeting with God. She states that every religion is the same in its requirements for those who want to follow God: *'get up early and pray to your God, hone your virtues, be a good neighbour, respect yourself and others, master your cravings'* (p. 184). This is a common misconception of Christianity, which is

in fact the only religion in which good deeds are not a prerequisite for a relationship with God. As a result of Gilbert's beliefs she approaches prayer, chanting and even forgiveness with a self-sufficient attitude.

Knowing Gilbert needs to give and receive forgiveness over her divorce, a friend advises her to climb to the roof of a tower at night and there resolve all her unresolved emotions. Gilbert comes to this conclusion: *'you can finish the business yourself, from within yourself'* (p. 196). She pictures two disembodied blue souls, one belonging to her husband and the other her own, uniting above her. She goes on to explain that, *'if you bring the right earnestness to your homemade ceremony, God will provide the grace. And that is why we need God'* (p.197). Gilbert admits that this D.I.Y. ceremony cannot do away with her heartbreak completely; it simply provides some closure. I wonder if Gilbert sets her expectations too low here. She misses the opportunity to ask God for forgiveness. She misses the opportunity to ask him to resolve her guilt. She misses the opportunity to experience his love. Using God to merely sprinkle a little grace on what she has done, she misses the expanse of grace God offers her. If God exists, wouldn't you ask him for more?

Elizabeth Gilbert's last stop on her world tour is Bali in Indonesia. Whilst in New York, she envisioned Bali to be an Eden of beauty, contentment and peace. Soon after arriving, she discovers, *'Bali has had exactly as bloody and violent and oppressive a history as anywhere else on earth where human beings have ever lived'* (p.247). At first glance, her Eden looks idyllic and the Balinese look well-balanced, but underneath the surface lurks a brokenness found in all places on earth because it is inherent in all people.

The time Gilbert spends in Bali is imbued with happiness, fortuity and romance. So in some ways her quest for inner peace is made irrelevant by the peacefulness of her situation. As Jennifer Egan puts it:

*Gilbert acknowledges the 'almost ludicrously fairy-tale ending to this story,' but reminds us, 'I was not rescued by a prince; I was the administrator of my own rescue.'*

*Rescue from what? The reader has never been sure. Lacking a ballast of gravitas or grit, the book lists into the realm of magical thinking: nothing Gilbert touches seems to turn out wrong; not a single wish goes unfulfilled. What's missing are the textures and confusion and unfinished business of real life, as if Gilbert were pushing these out of sight so as not to come off as dull or equivocal or downbeat. [2]*

Her apparent and sudden happy ending, leaves one questioning if her balance will continue if and when something in her life begins to go awry again.

Her final trip in Bali is to a remote island, which she first stayed on soon after her divorce. She recalls her experience of trying to deal with her pain and remorse there. Surprised at her ability to forgive herself, she declares:

*I knew then that this is how God loves us all and receives us all, and that there is no such thing in this universe as hell ... Because if even one broken and limited human being could experience even one such episode of absolute forgiveness and acceptance of her own self, then imagine – just imagine! – what God, in all His eternal compassion, can forgive and accept. (p.343)*

Indeed, this description of God's love and of humanity's brokenness is insightful. However, in order for God to be truly good, not only must he be loving, he must be just. God does forgive and accept people, but not by sweeping evil under the carpet and pretending it doesn't exist in people's lives. Instead God dealt with it, once and for all, graciously providing the solution to a problem we cannot solve by ourselves. God justly carried out the punishment for our faults and failings ... on himself. Jesus died so we could stop striving, so we could have our weaknesses and wrongdoing forgiven and, most of all, so that we could know God. God's compassion is so awesome that it compelled him not just to forgive and accept us, but to resolve our problem of sin and bring justice for those hurt as a result of our sin.

Can we be sure that this is what God is like? If so, how? Gilbert explains her definition of God:

*It's like this – I used to have this really great dog ... She was a mixture of about ten different breeds,*

*but seemed to have inherited the finest features of them all. She was brown. When people asked me, 'What kind of dog is that?' I would always give the same answer: 'She's a brown dog.' Similarly, when the question is raised, 'What kind of God do you believe in?' my answer is easy: 'I believe in a magnificent God.' (p. 15)*

Whilst we can imagine God to be whatever we want him to be, our scope is so limited. Our description always comes up short of his perfect divinity. It's as demeaning as comparing the almighty God to a household pet. Because he is otherworldly, infinite and eternal, he must reveal what he is like to us. The way he has done this is primarily through Jesus, who is *'the visible image of the invisible God'* and *'expresses the very character of God'* (Colossians 1:15 and Hebrews 1:3). The truth is infinitely brighter than the construct.

[1] [www.elizabethgilbert.com/faq.htm](http://www.elizabethgilbert.com/faq.htm)

[2] Jennifer Egan, 'The Road to Bali', *New York Times*, 26 February 2006.

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