

*The
Signature
of
All Things*

ELIZABETH
GILBERT

BLOOMSBURY

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GILBERT

author of the #1 NEW YORK TIMES bestseller

EAT, PRAY, LOVE



THE SIGNATURE

of

ALL THINGS

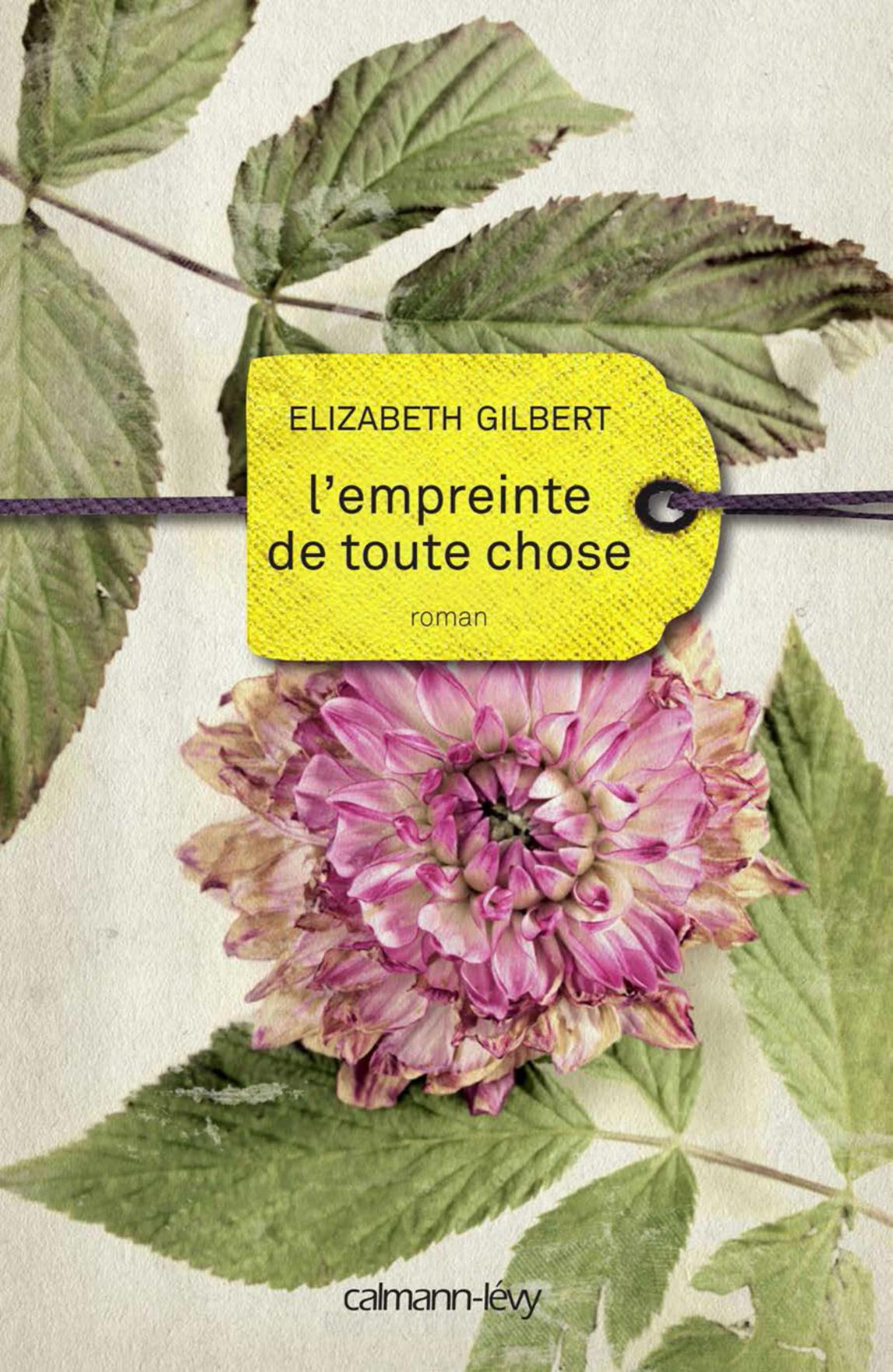
A NOVEL



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The Signature of All Things



ELIZABETH GILBERT

l'empreinte
de toute chose

roman

calmann-lévy



ELIZABETH GILBERT



autora de *Come reza ama*

LA FIRMA *de* TODAS LAS COSAS



SUMA
de letras



VAN DE AUTEUR VAN

ETEN
BIDDEN
BEMINNEN

ELIZABETH
GILBERT

Het hart
van alle
dingen

ROMAN • CARGO

ELIZABETH GILBERT

Da mesma autora de

COMER, REZAR, AMAR



A ASSINATURA *de* TODAS AS COISAS

ROMANCE

ALFAGUARA



FRA FORFATTEREN AV
SPIS ELSK LEV

The book cover features a woman in a white dress seen from behind, looking out over a green valley. The scene is framed by large, detailed flowers in the foreground, and the background shows rolling hills under a soft sky.

ELIZABETH GILBERT

ALMA WHITTAKERS
BETYDELIGE OPPDAGELSER

CAPPELEN DAMM

от автора бестселлера
Есть, Молиться, Любить

ЭЛИЗАБЕТ
ГИЛБЕРТ



ПРОИСХОЖДЕНИЕ
ВСЕХ ВЕЩЕЙ

Signatura Rerum



роман

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ALSO BY ELIZABETH GILBERT

Pilgrims

Stern Men

The Last American Man

Eat, Pray, Love:

*One Woman's Search for Everything
Across Italy, India and Indonesia*

Committed: A Love Story

At Home on the Range, by Margaret Yardley Potter

*The
Signature
of All Things*

ELIZABETH GILBERT

B L O O M S B U R Y
LONDON • NEW DELHI • NEW YORK • SYDNEY

For my grandmother

Maude Edna Morcomb Olson

in honor of her hundredth birthday

What life *is*, we know not. What life *does*, we know well.

—l or d pEr cEvAl

Prologue

Alma Whittaker, born with the century, slid into our world on the fifth of January, 1800.

Swiftly—nearly immediately—opinions began to form around her.

Alma's mother, upon viewing the infant for the first time, felt quite satisfied with the outcome. Beatrix Whittaker had suffered poor luck thus far generating an heir. Her first three attempts at conception had vanished in sad rivulets before they'd ever quickened. Her most recent attempt—a perfectly formed son—had come right to the brink of life, but had then changed his mind about it on the very morning he was meant to be born, and arrived already departed. After such losses, any child who survives is a satisfactory child.

Holding her robust infant, Beatrix murmured a prayer in her native Dutch. She prayed that her daughter would grow up to be healthy and sensible and intelligent, and would never form associations with overly powdered girls, or laugh at vulgar stories, or sit at gaming tables with careless men, or read French novels, or behave in a manner suited only to a savage Indian, or in any way whatsoever become the worst sort of discredit to a good family; namely, that she not grow up to be *een onnozelaar*, a simpleton. Thus concluded her blessing—or what constitutes a blessing, from so austere a woman as Beatrix Whittaker.

The midwife, a German-born local woman, was of the opinion that this

had been a decent birth in a decent house, and thus Alma Whittaker was a decent baby. The bedroom had been warm, soup and beer had been freely offered, and the mother had been stalwart—just as one would expect from the Dutch. Moreover, the midwife knew that she would be paid, and paid handsomely. Any baby who brings money is an acceptable baby. Therefore, the midwife offered a blessing to Alma as well, although without excessive passion.

Hanneke de Groot, the head housekeeper of the estate, was less impressed. The baby was neither a boy nor was it pretty. It had a face like a bowl of porridge, and was pale as a painted floor. Like all children, it would bring work. Like all work, it would probably fall on her shoulders. But she blessed the child anyway, because the blessing of a new baby is a responsibility, and Hanneke de Groot always met her responsibilities. Hanneke paid off the midwife and changed the bedsheets. She was helped in her efforts, although not ably, by a young maid—a talkative country girl and recent addition to the household—who was more interested in looking at the baby than in tidying up the bedroom. The maid's name does not bear recording here, because Hanneke de Groot would dismiss the girl as useless the next day, and send her off without references. Nonetheless, for that one night, the useless and doomed maid fussed over the new baby, and longed for a baby herself, and imparted a rather sweet and sincere blessing upon young Alma.

Dick Yancey—a tall, intimidating Yorkshireman, who worked for the gentleman of the house as the iron-handed enforcer of all his international trade concerns (and who happened to be residing at the estate that January, waiting for the Philadelphia ports to thaw so he could proceed on to the Dutch East Indies)—had few words to say about the new infant. To be fair, he was not much given to excessive conversation under any circumstances. When told that Mrs. Whittaker had given birth to a healthy baby girl, Mr. Yancey merely frowned and pronounced, with characteristic economy of speech, “Hard trade, living.” Was that a blessing? Difficult to say. Let us give him the benefit of the doubt and take it as one. Surely he did not intend it as a curse.

As for Alma's father—Henry Whittaker, the gentleman of the estate—he was pleased with his child. Most pleased. He did not mind that the infant was not a boy, nor that it was not pretty. He did not bless Alma, but only

because he was not the blessing type. (“God’s business is none of my business,” he frequently said.) Without reservation, though, Henry *admired* his child. Then again, he had made his child, and Henry Whittaker’s tendency in life was to admire without reservation everything he made.

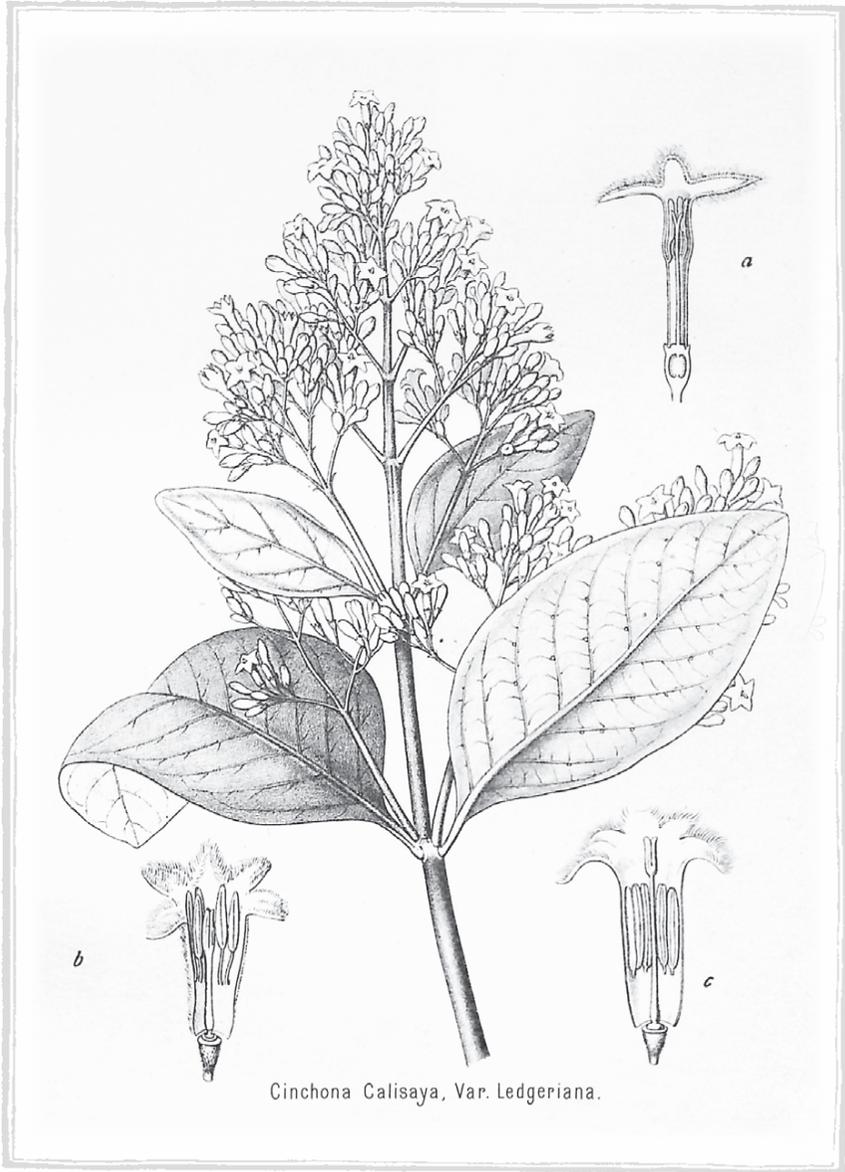
To mark the occasion, Henry harvested a pineapple from his largest greenhouse and divided it in equal shares with everyone in the household. Outside it was snowing, a perfect Pennsylvania winter, but this man possessed several coal-fired greenhouses of his own design—structures that made him not only the envy of every plantsman and botanist in the Americas, but also blisteringly rich—and if he wanted a pineapple in January, by God he could have a pineapple in January. Cherries in March, as well.

He then retired to his study and opened up his ledger, where, as he did every night, he recorded all manner of estate transactions, both official and intimate. He began: “A new nobbel and entresting pasennger has joyned us,” and continued with the details, the timing, and the expenses of Alma Whittaker’s birth. His penmanship was shamefully crabbed. Each sentence was a crowded village of capital letters and small letters, living side by side in tight misery, crawling up on one another as though trying to escape the page. His spelling was several degrees beyond arbitrary, and his punctuation brought reason to sigh with unhappiness.

But Henry wrote up his account, nonetheless. It was important for him to keep track of things. While he knew that these pages would look appalling to any educated man, he also knew that nobody would ever see his writing—except his wife. When Beatrix recovered her strength, she would transcribe his notes into her own ledgers, as she always did, and her elegantly penned translation of Henry’s scrawls would become the official household record. The partner of his days, was Beatrix—and a good value, at that. She would do this task for him, and a hundred other tasks besides.

God willing, she would be back at it shortly.

Paperwork was already piling up.



Cinchona calisaya, var. *ledgeriana*

PART ONE

The Tree of Fevers

Chapter One

For the first five years of her life, Alma Whittaker was indeed a mere passenger in the world—as we all are passengers in such early youth—and so her story was not yet noble, nor was it particularly interesting, beyond the fact that this homely toddler passed her days without illness or incident, surrounded by a degree of wealth nearly unknown in the America of that time, even within elegant Philadelphia. How her father came to be in possession of such great wealth is a story worth telling here, while we wait for the girl to grow up and catch our interest again. For it was no more common in 1800 than it has ever been for a poor-born and nearly illiterate man to become the richest inhabitant of his city, and so the means by which Henry Whittaker prospered are indeed interesting—although perhaps not noble, as he himself would have been the first to confess.

Henry Whittaker was born in 1760 in the village of Richmond, just up the Thames from London. He was the youngest son of poor parents who had a few too many children already. He was raised in two small rooms with a floor of beaten earth, with an almost adequate roof, with a meal on the hearth nearly every day, with a mother who did not drink and a father who did not beat his family—by comparison to many families of the day, in other words, a nearly genteel existence. His mother even had a private spot of dirt behind the house in which to grow larkspurs and lupines, decoratively, like a lady. But Henry was not fooled by larkspurs and lupines. He

grew up sleeping one wall away from the pigs, and there was not a moment in his life when poverty did not humiliate him.

Perhaps Henry would have taken less offense at his destiny had he never seen wealth around him against which to compare his own poor circumstances—but the boy grew up witnessing not only wealth, but royalty. There was a palace at Richmond, and there were pleasure gardens there, too, called Kew, cultivated with expertise by Princess Augusta, who had brought with her from Germany a retinue of gardeners eager to make a false and regal landscape out of real and humble English meadows. Her son, the future King George III, spent his childhood summers there. When he became king, George sought to turn Kew into a botanical garden worthy of any Continental rival. The English, on their cold, wet, isolated island, were far behind the rest of Europe on botanizing, and George III was eager to catch up.

Henry's father was an orchardman at Kew—a humble man, respected by his masters, as much as anyone could respect a humble orchardman. Mr. Whittaker had a gift for fruiting trees, and a reverence for them. (“They pay the land for its trouble,” he would say, “unlike all the others.”) He had once saved the king's favorite apple tree by whip-grafting a scion of the ailing specimen onto sturdier rootstock and claying it secure. The tree had fruited off the new graft that very year, and soon produced bushels. For this miracle, Mr. Whittaker had been nicknamed “the Apple Magus” by the king himself.

The Apple Magus, for all his talents, was a simple man, with a timid wife, but they somehow turned out six rough and violent sons (including one boy called “the Terror of Richmond” and two others who would end up dead in tavern brawls). Henry, the youngest, was in some ways the roughest of them all, and perhaps needed to be, to survive his brothers. He was a stubborn and enduring little whippet, a thin and exploding contrivance, who could be trusted to receive his brothers' beatings stoically, and whose fearlessness was frequently put to the test by others, who liked to dare him into taking risks. Even apart from his brothers, Henry was a dangerous experimentalist, a lighter of illicit fires, a roof-scampering taunter of housewives, a menace to smaller children; a boy who one would not have been surprised to learn had fallen from a church steeple or drowned in the Thames—though by sheer happenstance these scenarios never came to pass.

But unlike his brothers, Henry had a redeeming attribute. Two of them, to be exact: he was intelligent, and he was interested in trees. It would be exaggeration to claim that Henry revered trees, as his father did, but he was interested in trees because they were one of the few things in his impoverished world that could readily be learned, and experience had already instructed Henry that learning things gave a person advantage over other people. If one wanted to continue living (and Henry did) and if one wanted to ultimately prosper (and Henry did), then anything that could be learned, should be learned. Latin, penmanship, archery, riding, dancing—all of these were out of reach to Henry. But he had trees, and he had his father, the Apple Magus, who patiently took the trouble to teach him.

So Henry learned all about the grafter's tools of clay and wax and knives, and about the tricks of budding, booting, clefting, planting, and pruning with a judicious hand. He learned how to transplant trees in the springtime, if the soil was retentive and dense, or how to do it in the autumn, if the soil was loose and dry. He learned how to stake and drape the apricots in order to save them from wind, how to cultivate citruses in the orangery, how to smoke the mildew off the gooseberries, how to amputate diseased limbs from the figs, and when not to bother. He learned how to strip the tattered bark from an old tree and take the thing right down to the ground, without sentimentality or remorse, in order to demand life back out of it for a dozen more seasons to come.

Henry learned much from his father, though he was ashamed of the man, who he felt was weak. If Mr. Whittaker truly was the Apple Magus, Henry reasoned, then why had the king's admiration not been parlayed into wealth? Stupid men were rich—many of them. Why did the Whittakers still live with pigs, when just nearby were the great wide green lawns of the palace, and the pleasant houses on Maid of Honor Row, where the queen's servants slept on French linens? Henry, climbing to the top of an elaborate garden wall one day, had spied a lady, dressed in an ivory gown, practicing manège on her immaculate white horse while a servant played the violin to entertain her. People were living like this, right there in Richmond, while the Whittakers did not even have a floor.

But Henry's father never fought for anything fine. He'd earned the same paltry wage for thirty years, and had never once disputed it, nor had he ever complained about working outdoors in the foulest of weather for so long

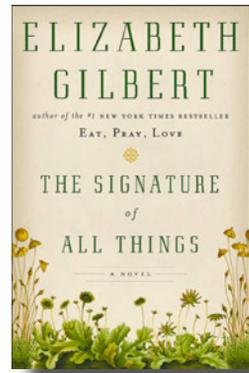
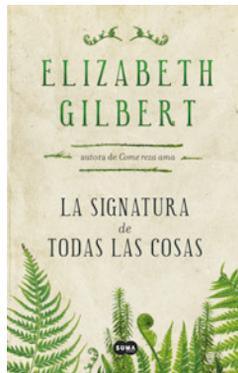
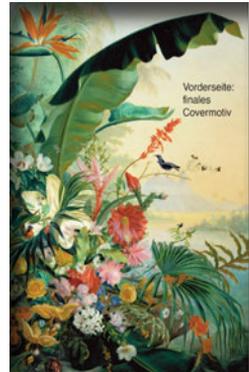
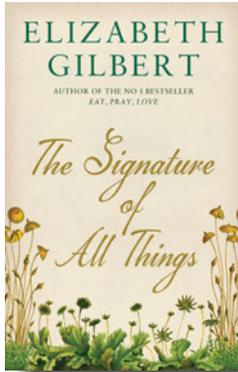
that his health had been ruined by it. Henry's father had chosen the carefullest steps through life, particularly when interacting with his betters—and he regarded everyone as his better. Mr. Whittaker made a point never to offend, and never to take advantage, even when advantages may have been ripe for plucking. He told his son, “Henry, do not be bold. You can butcher the sheep only once. But if you are careful, you can shear the sheep every year.”

With a father so forceless and complacent, what could Henry expect to receive out of life, aside from whatever he could clutch at with his own hands? A man should profit, Henry started telling himself when he was only thirteen years old. A man should butcher a sheep every day.

But where to find the sheep?

That's when Henry Whittaker started stealing.

Thank you for reading this extract, we hope that you enjoyed it. If you would now like to pre-order *The Signature of All Things*, please click on this page.



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