She begins life as a baby with “a face like a bowl of porridge . . . pale as a painted floor” (p. 2). She is to end it as a biologist of unique accomplishments, mentioned in the same breath with the great evolutionists Alfred Russel Wallace and Charles Darwin. In the more than eighty years in between, she will know extraordinary wealth and almost total deprivation. She will experience the heights of passion and the utter depths of loneliness. She will very nearly circle the globe in search of answers, both to scientific mysteries and to the inexplicable riddles of the human heart. She is Alma Whittaker, the heroine of Elizabeth Gilbert’s panoramic novel *The Signature of All Things*, and she is one of the most memorable creations in the current generation of American fiction.

Alma is the only biological daughter of Henry Whittaker, an Englishman who has used every means within his grasp to rise from poverty to wrestle wealth from a scornful and resistant world. The ticket to Henry’s success has been an almost instinctive knowledge of plants, passed down to him by his own father, a master horticulturist at the court of King George III. Unlike his threadbare father, Henry has learned how to make plants pay; he comes to dominate the market for the trees used to produce quinine and becomes the wealthiest man in his adopted home of Philadelphia. Alma inherits her father’s fascination with botany, as well as his love of argument and confrontation, but she also has what he does not have: an unquenchable sense of wonder and a zeal for knowledge that is driven not by the love of profit, but by the love of life and all that makes it function. Lonely and misunderstood, but also brilliant and intensely curious, Alma studies the humblest forms of plant life, unwittingly embarking on a path of inquiry that will lead her to the darkest mysteries of evolutionary theory. On the way, she falls in love with Ambrose Pike, a uniquely gifted artist whose airy idealism and spiritual light attract her like a moth to a flame. Body clashes with spirit and science intertwines with religion as the two unlikely lovers journey, together and apart, toward their strange and improbable destinies.

Brilliantly researched and lovingly crafted by the internationally renowned author of *Eat, Pray, Love*, *The Signature of All Things* carries the reader breathlessly across the globe. The novel also covers equally vast spaces in human consciousness, ranging from the coolly rational to the pitifully insane. It is a work of extraordinary faith and of deep scientific reflection. Perhaps above all, it is the story of an irrepressible woman, determined to satisfy her most powerful urges toward both love and knowledge. A novel immersed in all the great questions of the nineteenth century, *The Signature of All Things* is also very much a novel for our times—and for all time.
About the Author

Born in Waterbury, Connecticut, Elizabeth Gilbert grew up on a family Christmas-tree farm and went on to study political science at New York University. Her first book, a short-story collection titled Pilgrims, was a finalist for the PEN/Hemingway Award. Her first novel, Stern Men, was named a New York Times Notable Book. Her first nonfiction book, The Last American Man, was a finalist for both the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award. Gilbert achieved superstardom with her 2006 memoir Eat, Pray, Love, which has sold more than ten million copies. Her follow-up memoir, Committed, also topped the New York Times bestseller list. Gilbert lives in Frenchtown, New Jersey.

A Conversation with Elizabeth Gilbert

After the stunning dual success of your memoirs Eat, Pray, Love and Committed, the safer, more obvious choice for you would have been to continue in nonfiction. What was it that prompted you to return to the novel with The Signature of All Things?

I needed to come home to my roots as a writer. Fiction is where I began my writing journey, and all I ever wanted to be was a pure novelist. Fate intervened and led me into the world of memoir (and believe me, I am grateful for my success there!), but the next thing I knew, a dozen years had passed since I'd written a word of fiction. I simply couldn't let another year go by, so I embarked on this novel.

How difficult is it for you to shift gears between genres?

I thought it would be more difficult than it was. I feared I had lost the skill of fiction entirely (almost the way you can lose a foreign language if you don't practice it often) and so I was intimidated by the prospect of returning to the form of a novel. As a result of my fear, I overprepared for this book ridiculously. I did ten times the research I actually needed, just to feel covered and safe. Up till the very day I put down the research and began actually writing the novel, I honestly wasn't sure if I could do it. But as soon as I began, the moment Alma was born, I realized, "Oh! I was so wrong! Fiction isn't a foreign language; it's my mother tongue!" I had forgotten nothing, except the joy of it. It felt like a homecoming.

The mass popularity you achieved with Eat, Pray, Love has probably changed your definition of success. As you go forward, what does it mean to you now to succeed as a writer?

I'm lucky in that pressure for success is completely off for me—at least as far as I'm concerned. Fortunately, there is no way to match the phenomenon of Eat, Pray, Love, so I don't even have to attempt it! What Eat, Pray, Love did for me was to give me the liberty (both artistically and financially) to pursue my own private literary passions in whatever direction I wanted. There could be no Signature of All Things without the beneficence of Eat, Pray, Love. That book has been my great enabler, my great patron. My notion of success now is simply to keep following my interests, wherever they may take me.

The epigraph of The Signature of All Things reads, “What life is, we know not. What life does, we know well.” How do you think it comments on Alma Whittaker's story?

I think it's such a lovely quote because it sheds light on the dilemma of all scientific inquiry. Life's basic doings are fairly simple to decode. From careful observations, we have been able to figure out how systems like photosynthesis and cell regeneration and reproduction all function. That part is straightforward. But that still doesn't tell us what life IS. Why are we here? Why do we have these extraordinarily overevolved minds? Why do we long for the divine? Why do we suffer? Why do we feel that we have souls? Why are we moral or immoral? Why do we contradict and surprise ourselves so? Despite all our intellect, we are no closer to answering these questions than ever—as Alma, by the end of her journey, well realized.
The title of your novel alludes to a theory set forth by a sort of scientific mystic from the 1500s, Jacob Boehme, who argued that the entire natural world is a divine code, crafted and encrypted by God for the betterment of humankind. Boehme was a pretty weak scientist but a highly inspirational thinker. Why did you choose his phrase “the signature of all things” as the name of your novel?

First of all, the phrase itself is simply beautiful. But I also felt that Boehme's theory speaks to a common longing that unites scientists, the religious, and the artistic—namely, an urge to break the code, to look behind the veil, to be shown the secret answers. I feel as though all the main characters in the novel are, in their own ways, searching for the Signature of All Things. They don't merely want some of the answers: they want THE answer.

Your book has much of the feel of a novel written in the nineteenth century. How, as a writer, did you go about establishing the authenticity of your novel's mood?

I completely immersed myself in nineteenth-century prose and ideas. Fortunately this was fun for me; I have always had a particular love for writers like Dickens, Trollope, Eliot, Austen, and James. I went back and reread many of those great novels, and, of course, I also sought out as much information as I could on the botanical exploration and history of the day. But mostly I read letters—not only letters of great naturalists, but also the letters of common people. Those unguarded everyday letters are where I could best hear people's common speech, and that helped me fall down the rabbit hole of time and language.

Henry Whittaker, your heroine's father, dominates the first fifty pages of the book, and he rules much of his daughter Alma's life thereafter. He's a trifle like a premodern Gatsby: an uncultured roughneck who parleys his I'll-show-them attitude into an incalculable fortune. Do you see his story as a commentary on the temptations and pitfalls of the American Dream?

I didn't intend for Henry to be a commentary on the American Dream, to be honest . . . partially because I don't totally see Henry as American and partially because I don't see his trajectory as being tragic in the manner of Gatsby. Henry doesn't have enough self-doubt or self-awareness to be a tragedy, and he never really fails, either. There is nothing he longs for that he does not achieve—except immortality, of course. I see Henry more as a countryless force of nature, as a creature who is, from birth to death, composed of pure and unstoppable will. It was exhilarating for me to write Henry Whittaker, because he is so huge and relentless and shameless. It was so fun to write of his galloping ascent and his stubborn endurance. He's the power source whose energy fuels the whole first half of the book. I think of him like the booster rocket who eventually thrusts Alma out into the stratosphere. Yes, he is domineering, but he also loves and challenges his daughter, and without the example of his ruthless might, Alma could never have been the force that she turns out to be.

Henry represents a highly seductive vision of American possibility. But Alma ultimately and emphatically rejects that vision. Why?

Because she didn't earn it herself. I think Alma realizes around the age of fifty that the Whittaker fortune was never really hers—that, in fact, she has never made or done anything on her own. This realization is partially what spurs her own journey, and what makes her walk away from her inheritance. Also, she feels she has reparations to make—to her sister, Prudence, and to society as a whole—for the Whittaker family's selfishness. Ultimately, she can't stay in America because there is nothing left there for her to test herself against. She needs to leave it all behind in order to find out what she's made of.

Your heroine, Alma Whittaker, may be one of the most fully developed characters in all of American fiction. Were there real-life nineteenth-century women to whom you referred in creating her?

I looked closely at the lives of such women as Mrs. Mary Treat (a New Jersey–based expert on carnivorous plants who was a correspondent of Darwin's), Elizabeth Knight Britton (a respected moss expert who founded the New York Botanical Gardens along with her husband), and Marianne North (a wonderful and fearless botanical illustrator who, like Alma, set out alone to explore the world quite late in life) . . . and many more besides! In the nineteenth century, botany was considered the only science that was truly open to women (flowers and gardens being “feminine” topics,
you know), so I found no shortage of brilliant and tireless female researchers from whom to draw inspiration for Alma’s work. Emotionally, though, Alma is my own creation. From the very first page, I simply felt that I knew her in my bones, and that I had an obligation to tell her story as honorably and thoroughly as I could.

One not-so-nineteenth-century aspect of the novel is your deep exploration of Alma’s sexuality. But what’s interesting there is that so little of her sex life is acted out; so much of it is inside her head. What is your understanding of Alma as a sexual being?

It was really important to me that Alma be an earthy, carnal, and passionate woman. These sorts of sensual urges just seemed a natural expression of her rapacious, insatiable curiosity for life. But because she is trapped in an era when women’s desire is seen as abhorrent, and because she is not beautiful or seductive enough to attract male sexual attention, all that yearning has to be sublimated and hidden. Alma is, in fact, never able to experience complete sexual union with another person. Yet she makes something of her energies, anyhow—she turns it all toward her scientific pursuits—and she finds a way to live a full and satisfied life. One of the themes that I wanted to explore in this novel is the truth that women are capable of enduring a tremendous amount of disappointment, and carrying on their lives with dignity nonetheless. Most nineteenth-century novels about women have only one of two endings: either our heroine wins a good husband and we have a happy conclusion, or our heroine is utterly ruined and disgraced (usually on account of a sensual error that destroys her life). But I think the far more accurate reality of women’s lives (then as now) is that most women don’t necessarily get everything they desire in their romantic relationships, and yet most women find ways to live noble and meaningful lives nonetheless. Alma is neither entirely gratified by life nor entirely ruined by it; she merely does what many women eventually do—she absorbs her heartaches and disappointments, turns her energies elsewhere, and marches forward with her life regardless.

Alma’s life is simultaneously tremendously full and despairingly empty. One of the book’s many triumphs is its depiction of Alma’s loneliness. She just doesn’t meet many people who can follow her to the amazing places that her mind takes her. Do you think that a kind of loneliness is the fate of every exceptional intellect?

I don’t know if isolation is a universal fate for all exceptional people, but the circumstances of Alma’s life certainly made her susceptible to loneliness. She is different from everyone else. She is richer than everyone else. She is more brilliant than everyone else. She is decidedly not the female paragon of the times—neither dainty, nor coy, nor submissive, nor flirtatious. (I think of Alma as a tree among flowers, when you compare her to the other girls of early nineteenth-century Philadelphia.) Her towering stature—both physically and intellectually—brings her solitude, but also provides her with a kind of loftiness that I don’t think is entirely a curse. A flirty social butterfly could never have traveled alone on whaling ships filled with rough sailors, for instance, but Alma can. It is also that loftiness that helps her to cultivate her mind to such an extensive degree. In fact, there are moments in the book when we see her longing for even MORE privacy, in which to work on her theories uninterrupted. (As a writer, I can relate!) I think what ultimately saves Alma from despair is the love of her work, the sense of her purpose. In the end, I see her as a bride of science itself. This is not an insignificant union. She doesn’t pity her fate . . . nor do I. I admire it.

Alma’s great nonsexual passion is for botany. You yourself were raised on a tree farm. Like Alma, you had a childhood with few neighbors and a lot of books. What other similarities between you and Alma might it benefit readers to know about?

A dear friend who read the novel early on said, “It’s so interesting to see bits of your DNA woven into Alma’s character, and then transformed and exaggerated.” This comment surprised me, because I honestly hadn’t seen the resemblance! Then I thought, well, let’s see . . . I also had a charismatic and somewhat self-absorbed father, quite gifted with trees, whom I absolutely adored. I also had a pragmatic and efficient mother whom I loved and respected, and who (like Beatrix and Hanneke, both) taught me the gift of discipline and never permitted me to wallow in my sorrows. (Though my mother is infinitely more affectionate than Beatrix.) I also had, from earliest childhood, an instinctive thrill of learning, and was always exploding with curiosity. I also grew up without friends and neighbors nearby, in the isolated bubble of my parents’ farm. As an adolescent, I was also tall and ungainly, and I longed for male attention that I could never hope to receive. And as an adult, I have also sought (and found) deep refuge and
satisfaction in my work—especially at times when my personal life may have disappointed or hurt me. This last bit is really what Alma and I most share in common. The name Alma itself means “soul,” and in this regard (her lifelong passion for her work) Alma is indeed my soul.

In the “Three Fast Friends”—Alma, Prudence, and Retta—you present a trio of characters who seem to have little in common but who mesh into a delightful unit. Did you see them as representing different parts of a single personality, intellect, morality, and impulse, each in need of the other two to achieve stability and balance?

What a lovely notion! I hadn’t thought it through quite so clearly, but this idea makes perfect sense. As I was writing about their friendship, I thought of them more as girls who were accidentally thrown together by fate, timing, and proximity—who shared little in common except their loneliness and their need for companionship. None of them is quite normal, yet somehow, for a brief moment in youth, they are able to normalize and stabilize each other. I thought of their friendship as a chemical equation almost more than an emotional one.

For each of the friends, marriage turns out to be, to one degree or another, a catastrophe. You have reflected a great deal about marriage in your other writings, especially in the memoir Committed. What do you think your characters’ errors might teach us about the rather tricky business of matrimony?

I think, to be honest, the depiction of their marriages is a bit more realistic and accurate than the model that most romantic novels would have us believe! I didn’t intentionally set out to make these women suffer, but I wanted to show what would really and truly have happened in these mismatched unions. None of their husbands are bad men (in fact, there is not a villain of any kind in the entire novel), but they are simply not the right fit. We all know that this can happen. Poor Retta Snow is the only one who is really undone by matrimony (though I suspect her mind would have unraveled over time anyhow, no matter whom she had married). Prudence and Alma both survive their marriages with dignity. As their mother teaches them early on, dignity is the only thing that matters, and time will reveal who has it. I feel proud that, by the end of the novel, they both have earned their dignified lives.

Your novel looks at nature in search of something like divinity. Your observation that moss “is a resurrection engine” typifies this quest (p. 169). Can we find God in the physical world?

Well, people sure used to think so. Up until the middle of the nineteenth century, men of science were all believers. Most of the great early English naturalists were also ministers; they were the only ones who had education and leisure for such pursuits. Darwin himself almost became a minister. God’s power was always thought to be most easily and obviously revealed in the majestic works of nature. (I think we still instinctively feel that sense of awe and humility when we are faced by nature’s wonders.) The problem came when the scientific evidence began to contradict the biblical record. We must never forget how painful this schism was—and remains—to the deeply devout. As early as 1850, you start to see people having to choose sides, and this choosing seemed to tear something vital out of everyone. Now we live in a world full of scientists who live without divinity, and believers who live without science. I feel something has been lost here—reverence on one side, rationality on the other. I hope my book speaks to that loss. And I love giving the last chapters of my novel to Alfred Russel Wallace, who was a great evolutionary scientist, as well as a believer in the notion that there exists in the universe some “supreme intelligence” who calls to us and longs for communion with us. Wallace saw no inherent contradiction in these two ideas, and he died a happy man.

Alma and Ambrose search for the idea that lends its name to your novel: “the signature of all things.” We took this phrase to mean some kind of unifying principle that connects and explains all phenomena, both physical and metaphysical. We suspect that a lot of people are still trying to find this signature, either in their lives or in the world at large. Should they keep looking?

As long as we live and breathe.
Suggested Questions for Discussion

1. *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?

2. 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?

3. How does Alma resemble her father? In what crucial ways do they differ?

4. What role is played in the novel by the Whittakers’ servant Hanneke de Groot? In what ways is her perspective essential to the story?

5. 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 (pp. 170–71). 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?

6. 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?

7. 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 criticize, in the hands of an asocial, self-denying oddball?

8. 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?

9. Alma's decision to devote her life to studying mosses is compared to a “religious conversion” (p. 163). In *The Signature of All Things*, science and religion often intertwine. Are they ever finally reconciled? If so, how? If not, why not?

10. 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?

11. On pages 319–20, Alma takes “an honest accounting” of her life thus far. At this point in her life, is she a success or a failure? What are the arguments on either side of the question? What are your own criteria for a life well lived?

12. 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” (p. 336). Why might she think this, and what does it tell us about her character?

13. 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?

14. 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” (p. 497). How has this limitation to her curiosity helped her? Has it harmed her?