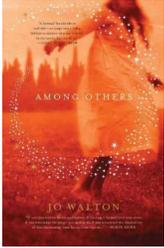


Books by the Stack



The Signature of All Things by Elizabeth Gilbert

The multi-generational saga of the Whittaker family, whose progenitor makes a fortune in the quinine trade before his daughter, a gifted botanist, researches to mysteries of evolution while falling in love with an artist.

Why you'll like it: *Quickly paced. Globetrotting. Age of Enlightenment. Elegant.*

About the Author: Elizabeth Gilbert was born in Waterbury, Connecticut on July 18, 1969. She received an undergraduate degree in political science from New York University. After college, she spent several years traveling around the country, working odd jobs and writing short stories. Early in her career, she also worked as a journalist for such publications as Spin, GQ and The New York Times Magazine. An article she wrote in GQ about her experiences bartending on the Lower East Side eventually became the basis for the movie Coyote Ugly. She writes both fiction and nonfiction and her books include the short story collection Pilgrims, Stern Men, The Last American Man, and Committed. Her memoir Eat, Pray, Love, was adapted into a movie starring Julia Roberts and led to Time Magazine naming her one of the 100 Most Influential People in the World in 2008. In 2010 Gilbert wrote the follow-up book to Eat, Pray, Love which she entitled, Committed: A Sceptic Makes Peace with Marriage. (Bowker Author Biography)

Questions for Discussion

1. *The Signature of All Things* takes its first focus not on the book's heroine, Alma Whittacker, 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 Whittacker 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. Why do you think Gilbert made the decision to make Alma "ugly." Our first introduction to Alma refers to her being an ugly baby and looking like her father. Why would ugliness be essential to her character? How might her life have been different if she were prettier?
4. Prudence and Alma are painted as total opposites but in what ways are they alike? Often Alma seems to envy Prudence, but do you think Prudence ever envied Alma? Why?
5. Prudence chooses to marry her teacher. Why would she choose to marry at all? What purpose did marriage serve for Prudence other than taking her off the market?
6. 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?
7. 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. 170-171) 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?

8. 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?

9. 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?

10. Why do you think Alma renounced her inheritance? Why, after being raised in splendor, would Alma choose to live out her days very modestly? Did she feel guilty? Why?

11. In the end, did Alma finally get what she truly wanted in Holland? After all, she found companionship, a job and family. Was this her happy ending or was this simply Alma settling for the best she could get?



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