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The Signature Of All Things: A Novel



Synopsis

A glorious, sweeping novel of desire, ambition, and the thirst for knowledge, from the number-one New York Times best-selling author of *Eat, Pray, Love* and *Committed*. In *The Signature of All Things*, Elizabeth Gilbert returns to fiction, inserting her inimitable voice into an enthralling story of love, adventure, and discovery. Spanning much of the 18th and 19th centuries, the novel follows the fortunes of the extraordinary Whittaker family as led by the enterprising Henry Whittaker - a poor-born Englishman who makes a great fortune in the South American quinine trade, eventually becoming the richest man in Philadelphia. Born in 1800, Henry's brilliant daughter, Alma (who inherits both her father's money and his mind), ultimately becomes a botanist of considerable gifts herself. As Alma's research takes her deeper into the mysteries of evolution, she falls in love with a man named Ambrose Pike who makes incomparable paintings of orchids and who draws her in the exact opposite direction - into the realm of the spiritual, the divine, and the magical. Alma is a clear-minded scientist; Ambrose a utopian artist - but what unites this unlikely couple is a desperate need to understand the workings of this world and the mechanisms behind all life. Exquisitely researched and told at a galloping pace, *The Signature of All Things* soars across the globe - from London to Peru to Philadelphia to Tahiti to Amsterdam, and beyond. Along the way, the story is peopled with unforgettable characters: missionaries, abolitionists, adventurers, astronomers, sea captains, geniuses, and the quite mad. But most memorable of all, it is the story of Alma Whittaker, who - born in the Age of Enlightenment, but living well into the Industrial Revolution - bears witness to that extraordinary moment in human history when all the old assumptions about science, religion, commerce, and class were exploding into dangerous new ideas. Written in the bold, questing spirit of that singular time, Gilbert's wise, deep, and spellbinding tale is certain to capture the hearts and minds of listeners.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

When I see a book about a female botanist in the nineteenth century, I expect one of two storylines: either "woman fights sexism to pursue her dreams" or "unconventional woman finds fulfillment in romance"--or both. This book flirts with both narratives but settles down with neither, and is better for it. *The Signature of All Things* is a big, ambitious book, beginning with the world-spanning exploits of one Henry Whittaker, thief turned botanist, in the late 1700s, before moving on to his daughter Alma about 50 pages in. Alma grows up fantastically wealthy and encouraged to follow scientific pursuits, falls in love with a local publisher, and you think you know where this is going.... but then, well, it doesn't go that way, and a third of the way through the book she's 48 years old, and then the real story begins. One of the difficulties with this novel is that there's no real driving plot--or rather, Alma's life is the plot, though there are some significant time-skips--but it consistently defied my expectations and kept my interest. It's a book about the Enlightenment, with a lot of research and discovery and expanding of horizons, and I came away impressed with Gilbert's respect for science. Alma is someone whose intellectual life is as important to her (perhaps more so) than her emotional life, and most authors would have a hard time writing about that sort of character in a positive and believable way--which makes sense; writing a good novel almost always requires an author to be intensely interested in feelings. But Gilbert balances the science and emotion well, and even has me looking at mosses (Alma's specialty) with new eyes.

Let me start by saying that I have indeed read "Eat, Pray, Love". Yep, that's the camp I belong to. Also, I totally loved it. Yep, that's the sub-camp I belong to. Though I am not much into fiction, I was mildly curious to find out how Ms. Gilbert would walk out of memoir mode and segway into the world of fiction (not sure if this is her first fiction but it's the only one I have picked up). Would she be able to enrapture, intrigue and delight us with a tale borne out of her imagination, as she had with her own true story in "Eat, Pray and Love"? Well, the answer is a resounding yes! And by golly, does she have a tale to tell. Set in the 18th -19th century, the story revolves around Alma, the daughter of the very wealthy Henry Whittaker. From her father, Alma has inherited a penchant for plants. She spends most of her waking hours trying to make sense of the botanical world around her, perhaps in

an attempt to understand her own existence. But through the course of her life, she is made to realize how little she knows about her own world, her own self. The story has been skillfully woven into a rich tapestry of adventure, emotions and science. Something also needs to be said about the amount of research that must have gone in; the book is peppered with facts that have been laid out in a manner almost poetic. "Alma learned to tell time by the opening and closing of flowers. At five o'clock in the morning, she noticed, the goatsbeard petals always unfolded. At six o'clock, the daisies and globe-flowers opened. When the clock struck seven, the dandelions would bloom. At eight o'clock, it was the scarlet pimpernel's turn...." Facts infused with poetry or perhaps poetry infused with facts?

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