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## Book Club Kit Discussion Guide

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*Eat, Pray, Love*

by

Elizabeth Gilbert

(New York: Penguin Group, 2006)

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### **Author:**

Elizabeth Gilbert is the author of a short story collection, *Pilgrims*, a finalist for the PEN/Hemingway Award, and winner of the 1999 John C. Zacharis First Book Award from Ploughshares-and a novel, *Stern Men*. A Pushcart Prize winner and National Magazine Award-nominated journalist, she works as writer-at-large for *GQ*. Her journalism has been published in *Harper's Bazaar*, *Spin*, and *The New York Times Magazine*, and her stories have appeared in *Esquire*, *Story*, and the *Paris Review*. [Penguin.com]

### **Summary:**

In what could be construed as a coming-of-age story for thirtysomethings, Gilbert leaves behind an excruciating divorce, tumultuous affair, and debilitating depression as she sets off on a yearlong quest to bridge the gulf between body, mind, and spirit. Part self-deprecating tour guide, part wry, witty chronicler, Gilbert relates this chapter of her life with a compelling, richly detailed narrative that eschews the easy answers of New Age rhetoric. In the book's early pages, a flashback finds the smart, savvy, successful Gilbert on her knees on the bathroom floor of the Westchester house she inhabits with her husband, wailing and wallowing in sorrow, snot, and tears ("a veritable Lake Inferior"), awkwardly embarking on her first conversation with God. [Penguin.com]

### **Questions:**

1. Gilbert writes that "the appreciation of pleasure can be the anchor of humanity," making the argument that America is "an entertainment-seeking nation, not necessarily a pleasure-seeking one." Is this a fair assessment?
2. After imagining a petition to God for divorce, an exhausted Gilbert answers her phone to news that her husband has finally signed. During a moment of quietude before a Roman fountain, she opens her Louise Glück collection to a verse about a fountain, one reminiscent of the Balinese medicine man's drawing. After struggling to master a 182-verse daily prayer, she succeeds by focusing on her nephew, who suddenly is free from nightmares. Do these incidents of fortuitous timing signal fate? Cosmic unity? Coincidence?
3. Gilbert hashes out internal debates in a notebook, a place where she can argue with her inner demons and remind herself about the constancy of self-love. When an inner

monologue becomes a literal conversation between a divided self, is this a sign of last resort or of self-reliance?

4. When Gilbert finally returns to Bali and seeks out the medicine man who foretold her return to study with him, he doesn't recognize her. Despite her despair, she persists in her attempts to spark his memory, eventually succeeding. How much of the success of Gilbert's journey do you attribute to persistence?
5. Prayer and meditation are both things that can be learned and, importantly, improved. In India, Gilbert learns a stoic, ascetic meditation technique. In Bali, she learns an approach based on smiling. Do you think the two can be synergistic? Or is Ketut Liyer right when he describes them as "same-same"?
6. Gender roles come up repeatedly in *Eat, Pray, Love*, be it macho Italian men eating cream puffs after a home team's soccer loss, or a young Indian's disdain for the marriage she will be expected to embark upon at age eighteen, or the Balinese healer's sly approach to male impotence in a society where women are assumed responsible for their childlessness. How relevant is Gilbert's gender?
7. In what ways is spiritual success similar to other forms of success? How is it different? Can they be so fundamentally different that they're not comparable?
8. Do you think people are more open to new experiences when they travel? And why?
9. Abstinence in Italy seems extreme, but necessary, for a woman who has repeatedly moved from one man's arms to another's. After all, it's only after Gilbert has found herself that she can share herself fully in love. What does this say about her earlier relationships?
10. Gilbert mentions her ease at making friends, regardless of where she is. At one point at the ashram, she realizes that she is *too* sociable and decides to embark on a period of silence, to become the Quiet Girl in the Back of the Temple. It is just after making this decision that she is assigned the role of ashram key hostess. What does this say about honing one's nature rather than trying to escape it? Do you think perceived faults can be transformed into strengths rather than merely repressed?
11. Sitting in an outdoor café in Rome, Gilbert's friend declares that every city—and every person—has a word. Rome's is "sex," the Vatican's "power"; Gilbert declares New York's to be "achieve," but only later stumbles upon her own word, *antevasin*, Sanskrit for "one who lives at the border." What is your word? Is it possible to choose a word that retains its truth for a lifetime?