

HOME & DESIGN

Estate of Mind



The author of "Eat, Pray, Love" chose West Phila.'s little-known Woodlands garden and mansion as the setting for her latest novel, about father and daughter botanists. There's history, travel, mysticism — and sex.

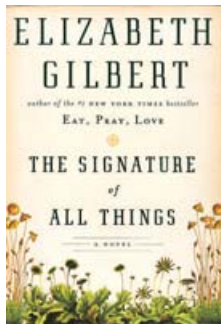
By Virginia A. Smith
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

The Woodlands, the once-grand 18th-century estate on the west bank of the Schuylkill, is one of Philadelphia's lesser-known historic spots.

Yet, novelist Elizabeth Gilbert found her way to 40th Street and Woodland Avenue and chose the run-down mansion, carriage house, and stables, and the surrounding Victorian-era cemetery, as the setting for her new book, *The Signature of All Things*.

"It was so obvious as soon as we drove up. That's it! Everything about the Woodlands was right," says Gilbert, forever to be remembered for what she calls "the freakishly successful" *Eat, Pray, Love*. Her 2006 memoir has sold more than 10 million copies worldwide and was made into a 2010 movie starring Julia Roberts.

Gilbert's latest work, due out Tuesday from Viking, is her first novel in 13 years. Be forewarned: *Signature* is no *Eat, Pray, Love*, which was well-padded



with humor, wish-fulfillment, and garlicky bucatini all'amatriciana. But, Gilbert says, "I think readers will recognize my themes: travel, exploration, curiosity, mysticism, adventure, and what is a woman's life."

Signature is a deeply researched, historical tale that unfolds from 1760 to 1880 — "the most fascinating moment in botanical history," she calls it — in Philadelphia, the nation's horticultural hot spot, and points beyond, including Amsterdam, Hawaii, Peru, London, and Tahiti.

Equally vast is the emotional landscape of the fictional Whittakers, a collection of memorable, if not especially likable, characters who live at White Acre (a play on the family name). The Woodlands, where a restoration plan is in the works, snagged the role over Bartram's Garden, which Gilbert found too Quakerly and modest, and Lemon Hill mansion, which "didn't feel right."

See **WOODLANDS** on D4

William Hamilton's mansion at Woodlands, depicted in a David J. Kennedy watercolor, circa 1777.

Historical Society of Philadelphia



Elizabeth Gilbert's new book, "The Signature of All Things," is her first novel in 13 years. It's due out Tuesday. DAVID SWANSON / Staff Photographer



Boot & Saddle kept the kitsch

By A.D. Amorosi
FOR THE INQUIRER

By now, local hipsters and nightlife aficionados know that the Boot & Saddle — once Philly's shrine to country music — reopened this month on South Broad Street after sitting empty and lonesome as a two-timed cowpoke for 17 years.

In this incarnation, the landmark saloon has come back as a bar and restaurant, a roomy 60-seater, as well as a concert venue for all genres of rock, capacity 150-plus.

But the spirit of the beloved old B&S is all around. It lives in every bit of Wild West kitsch that the new managers dutifully preserved, See **BOOT & SADDLE** on D5

The Boot & Saddle, reopened this month after 17 years, has its original artwork and decor and restored tin walls and ceilings. ELIZABETH ROBERTSON / Staff Photographer

HOME & LIFE | D2

Moving in together, styles are poles apart.

IT'S TIME TO... | D2

Keep pests out when you bring plants inside.

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CAROLYN HAX
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Question: Our granddaughter's behavior is causing our family great concern and anxiety. She is 8, attends an all-girls school, is very good in studies and tops in tests. She is very athletic and enjoys taking part in only boys' sports, such as martial arts. She likes to wear only boys' clothes and cuts her hair very short like a boy. The only time she wears girls' clothing is for school, a uniform. When we take her to buy clothing, she goes straight to the boys' section.

Our question is whether she has a problem identifying her gender. Is this common with some girls? Will she outgrow the problem and act like a girl? Are we paranoid over something we should not be worrying about? Please point us in a right direction.

Answer: The "right direction"? Love her.

I have a great concern about your great concern and anxiety, which can do her actual harm where her choices simply won't.

Your granddaughter's gender story is going to write itself the way it wants to no matter what any of you says or does. So, be one of the heroes who banishes expectations and gender assumptions, and instead is loving, kind and supportive of who, and whoever, she is.

✉ tellme@washpost.com



The north facade of the mansion, as seen from the nearby carriage circle, which replaced William Hamilton's greenhouse.

RYAN COLLERD / Courtesy of the Woodlands

Woodlands

Continued from D1

In real life, the Federal-style Woodlands, built in 1788, was the country home of William Hamilton, a gentleman intensely interested in architecture, landscape design, and botany. He traded seeds with Thomas Jefferson, another talented plantsman, and William Bartram, son of John, the noted Philadelphia botanist.

Presiding over the fictional White Acre, Philadelphia's grandest estate, is patriarch Henry Whittaker, a crude, self-made adventurer whose world revolves around botanical exploration and the accumulation of money, by whatever means. Daughter Alma, Gilbert's protagonist, lives a rarefied and repressed existence until age 50, when her narrative spikes in surprising directions.

More than 6 feet tall and solidly built, Alma is described as "a big homely pine cone." She's a botanist with a moss obsession, able to hold her own in esoteric debate with the scholars and adventurers — men, all — who flock to the Whittaker dinner table.

But Alma is lonely, aching with lust, and the solitary manner in which she alleviates this predicament is among the more arresting features of Gilbert's book. Relief comes in a tiny, dark room off the Whittaker library called "the binding room," where Alma ostensibly retreats to care for the family's fragile book collection.

Gilbert, 44, modeled this hideaway after a closet on the Woodlands' first floor. And she wanted Alma, she says, to be "very carnal, because women's desire has just not been written about from that time.

"You know they had that desire ... It's not like we just invented it in the 20th century."

Alma's dowdiness also serves as counterpoint to modern heroines, often portrayed as "dangerously gorgeous with flashing eyes, heaving bosoms, and auburn hair," Gilbert says. "All sorts of women feel desire, even homely women who don't incite desire in others."

Signature is quite a page-turner, in other words, with lots of pages to turn (499).



A view of the mansion's stairway and drawing room from the vestibule.

Gilbert drew inspiration from a 1784 illustrated edition of Captain James Cook's voyages, *Cook's Journeys*, which belonged to her great-grandfather, a Philadelphia lawyer. (Henry Whittaker joins Cook on a botanical expedition to Tahiti and Hawaii.)

Gilbert, who grew up on a Christmas tree farm in northwest Connecticut, tapped another strand of DNA for her novel — from her mother, a master gardener who grew all the family's vegetables.

"When I grew up, I ran away from the soil as fast as I could, moved to New York, Philadelphia, traveled the world," Gilbert recalls. "But once I moved to Frenchtown [N.J.], all I wanted to do was garden."

Gilbert lived for a time in West Philadelphia and upper Roxborough and still has family in the area. In 2009, she settled in Frenchtown, a picturesque borough on the Delaware River, with husband Jose Nunes, known to

readers of *Eat, Pray, Love* as Filipe.

At her new home, Gilbert planted vegetables, like her mother, but soon abandoned that for a sprawling flower garden and native plant meadow, which she calls "my bird and butterfly disco."

The gardens "never fail to delight me," she says. They also fueled the botanical fascination that led to *Signature*.

Another writerly influence was Gilbert's desire to avoid "the standard two endings that every novel about women in history has had, until very recently."

She describes them this way: "You either got the happy ending, meaning you had a good marriage to landed gentry and you settled down in the fine estate and had a bunch of children — or you had the unhappy ending. You made a sensual error and you're ruined, bankrupt, impoverished, or killed by yourself or somebody else.

"There aren't just two possible endings. Most of us survive all kinds of mistakes and can look back and say, 'That was a really interesting life.'"

Gilbert is eager to help raise money for the Woodlands, which recently got a \$300,000 grant from the William Penn Foundation to devise a master plan for restoration. An author event of some kind — tea and a tour of Woodlands-inspired scenes from the book, perhaps — is planned for the spring.

The tour could include the infamous first-floor "binding room," the housekeeper's bedroom (underground passageway), Alma's studio (stable), and the grounds, where Alma collected her moss specimens.

Already, a few first-time visitors have discovered the Woodlands, having heard of its influence on Gilbert.

"We really hope to use the book to help elevate the Woodlands' profile," says executive director Jessica Baumert.

Meanwhile, Gilbert contemplates her next move: "a very naughty novel."

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