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

Between 18th-century estates on the west bank of the Schuylkill is one of Philadelphia’s lesser-known historic spots. New York 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. Bewarewarned: Signature is not Eat, Pray, Love, which was well-padded with humor, wishfulfillment, and garlicy 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 unfolded 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, New York, London, and Tahiti.

Gilbert grew up with her mother, a botanist, and her father, a teacher, who were international travelers and moved frequently. “I was always in transition, and I’ve always been interested in transition,” says Gilbert, who once took a course in botany with the famed Dr. David Fairchild at the New York Agricultural Experiment Station before dropping out and marrying the professor’s son.

Gilbert says her latest novel is about a botanist named Linnet, who is “sort of present in all of my characters.” The story centers on the relationship between Linnet’s father and daughter, both of whom are botanists and travel the world. Linnet’s father, who was a gardener, is the one who found the Woodlands.

“It’s this story of discovery, of travel, of a quest that’s also a quest for the heart,” Gilbert says. “There are all sorts of images about gardens and the horticultural world. But there’s a particular kind of garden that is so rich and so strange, so full of mystery, and this is that garden.”

Elizabeth Gilbert’s new book, “The Signature of All Things,” is her first novel in 13 years. It’s due out Tuesday.

— By A.D. Amorosi

FOR THE INQUIRER

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.

“Moving in together, styles are poles apart.”

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Opposite page: Elizabeth Gilbert's new book, "The Signature of All Things."
Q: 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 sports. 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 gives straight to the boys’ section. Our question is whether she has a problem identifying her gender. Is the common with some girls? Will she outgrow the problem and act like a girl? Are we paranoid over something we shouldn’t worry about? Please point us in a right direction.

A: The right direction? Love her.

I have a great concern about your great concern and anxiety, which arise from her actual harm where her choices simply won’t.

Your granddaughter’s gender story is going to be yours, the parents. That’s what you want to do, and what matters most to you. If you allow her to be one of the heroes your lives, with your stories and gender assumptions, and to explore her identity and experiment, kind and supportive of her and whoever she is.

Carolyn Hays

Woodlands

Continued from 01

In real life, the Fictional-styled Woodlands, built in 1788, was the country home of William Hamilton, a potterman intensively interested in architecture, landscapes design, and botany. He traded seeds with Thomas Jefferson, another talented plantermen, and William Bartram, son of John, the noted Philadelphia botanist.

Presiding over the fictional White Acres, Philadephia’s grandest estate, is patriarch Henry Whittaker, a crusty, self-made adventurer whose world revolves around botanical exploration and the accumulation of money for whatever mends his ancient, ail-oli and repressed existence until age 50, when he narrates elliptic in surprising directions.

More than 6 feet tall and solidly built, Alma is described as “a big hulking mass. She’s a botanist with a mean obsession, able to hold her own in esthetic debate with the scholars and adventurers — men, all — who flock to the Whittaker dancer house.

But Alma is lonely, with just fast, and the solitary manner in which she conducts this pros- dicimic is among the more arresting facets of Gilbert’s book. Before comes in a tiny dark room off the Whittaker library called “the bind- room,” where Alma sensibly retreats to care for the family’s fragile book collection.

Gilbert, 44, modeled this bindery after a closet on the Woodlands’ first floor And she wanted Alma, she says, to be “very, very, very much a character in her own right.” There was just not been written about from that time.

“You her mother has that done. It’s not like just around it in the 20th century.

Alma’s lifeblood also serves as a conduit to modern heroes, often portrayed as “desire-as-erotic” passion, banding, feisty, feisty be- and asylum. Gilbert says. “All sorts of good men, men who trying to do their thing, in other words, with lots of pages to turn (499).