



Book Club Questions

All the Way to the River by Elizabeth Gilbert

1. In *All the Way to the River*, Elizabeth Gilbert details her intense, beautiful, and harrowing relationship with Rayya Elias (1960–2018). She also writes of their individual histories with different forms of addiction, which became entwined with their story. How did you experience this multi-stranded approach to memoir? What experiences and challenges of your own did it evoke?
2. The book's title is taken from an analogy Rayya had for the different kinds of friendships one might have over a lifetime, from relatively superficial "Fifth Avenue friends" to the rare ones you'd go "all the way to the river" with. Consider your own friends: How would you categorize them? What are the pluses of having different kinds of friends with varying degrees of intimacy?
3. As a self-confessed love and sex addict, Gilbert often references the lessons and principles she learned in the "rooms of recovery." Which of these concepts spoke to you, whether or not you identify as an addict?
4. Falling in love with Rayya—and discovering that Rayya was in love with her—was in many ways everything Gilbert thought she had been seeking. How did her experience with Rayya and afterward shift her attitude about the wisdom of getting what you want? When has attaining some desperately desired prize turned out other than as you'd hoped? When has not getting what you wanted unexpectedly led you exactly where you needed to go?
5. In the book, Gilbert puts forward a concept called "Earth School," the idea that experience unfolds just as it's meant to unfold. As a model of thinking about the terrible things that happen in life, she notes, it "takes me out of a victim mentality and offers up a worldview that feels far more empowering and fascinating than the limiting, anguished cry of 'Why me?!'" What ways of thinking have helped you to process pain and grief in your own life?
6. "The truth has legs," Rayya liked to say. "It always stands." How did the power of this revelation play out for Gilbert, with and beyond Rayya? In her decision to seek help? To write this book?
7. The grip of addiction and the ravages of illness are often described in terms of struggle. Yet surrender is a major theme throughout the book. What does surrender mean, and what is its relationship to liberation?
8. Gilbert speaks candidly about her intimate relationship with forces she cannot see or prove, including conversations she has with the dead. Most crucially, she has an ongoing relationship with divinity itself (which she alternates between calling "God," "the eternal mystery," "the Great Mother," "She," "He," and even "We"), before whom she repeatedly acknowledges spiritual surrender as part of her healing process. How did this aspect of the story speak to you? What is your own relationship to spirituality and mystical experience? What form(s), if any, does the god of your own understanding take, and what role has it played in your own experiences with compulsion, grief, and loss?
9. Gilbert reveals that her own path to health has included a commitment to a period of celibacy and financial "sobriety," along with developing a "sober dating plan." What are the reasons for these strictures, and what are the rewards? Does reigning in impulsivity mean sacrificing pleasure and joy?
10. Toward the end of her journey, Gilbert revisits her child self, not with the aim of assigning blame for past harm, but in order to take on the tender task of caring fully for herself. How does this approach distinguish itself from others you may have encountered, in counseling or in self-help advice?
11. Gilbert's narrative ranges from candidly confessional to wise and reflective. It is also frequently—and sometimes unexpectedly—uproarious. What effect did this variation in tone have on your reading of the book?
12. The narrative is accompanied by drawings and poetry from Gilbert's journals. How did their inclusion color your reading experience? Which images and lines most stuck with you?
13. "I belong here. Those three words save my life, day after day," Gilbert writes. What does that phrase mean—in the context of the "rooms of recovery," the book, life?

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