

## Elizabeth Gilbert was ridiculed for shelving her Russia-set novel, but I quite admire her

### Level 2: Intermediate / Upper-Intermediate

#### 1 Warmer

a. Read the definition below. Then, discuss the questions in pairs or small groups.

**cancel culture:** the practice of excluding somebody from social/professional life because they've said or done something that some people do not agree with

1. Do you know who Elizabeth Gilbert is? Have you read or seen *Eat, Pray, Love*?
2. Think of someone who was cancelled because of something they said. Was it right that they were cancelled? Why (not)?

#### 2 Key words

a. Fill the gaps in the sentences using these key words from the text.

caveat      destruction      determination      endorsement      highlight      knee-jerk  
lofty      meekness      thrilled      trigger      undemocratic      withhold

1. To \_\_\_\_\_ is to refuse to give or release something.
2. To \_\_\_\_\_ is to cause something to start.
3. To \_\_\_\_\_ is to emphasise something.
4. \_\_\_\_\_ is the act of damaging something entirely.
5. When you are \_\_\_\_\_, you are extremely happy about something. (It is used sarcastically in the article.)
6. \_\_\_\_\_ means *not based on the values of democracy*.
7. An \_\_\_\_\_ is the act of approving something.
8. If someone behaves in a \_\_\_\_\_ way, they act as if they think they are better than others.
9. A \_\_\_\_\_ is a warning or danger to consider before doing something.
10. A \_\_\_\_\_ reaction or response is a quick reaction without serious thought.
11. \_\_\_\_\_ is the quality of being quiet and gentle while reserving your opinions.
12. \_\_\_\_\_ is when you keep on trying to do something even when it is difficult.

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b. Now, use the key words to complete each sentence below. You might need to change the form of the word.

1. It takes an incredible amount of \_\_\_\_\_ to become a world-class gymnast.
2. In the next section of my presentation, I would like to \_\_\_\_\_ the main effects of this change.
3. Putting people in positions of power without holding elections is completely \_\_\_\_\_.
4. He was just a rising star, but then he became a millionaire when a clothing company offered him an \_\_\_\_\_ deal.
5. I just learned that my sister is returning from Spain. I am \_\_\_\_\_!
6. Honesty is important, but sometimes it is best to \_\_\_\_\_ sensitive information.
7. Hugh is not very likeable because of his \_\_\_\_\_ attitude. He's become a bit arrogant.
8. The \_\_\_\_\_ of the rainforest could be the single most important ecological issue we have to resolve.
9. No one predicted that one sentence would \_\_\_\_\_ such a reaction from so many people.
10. Megan could be described as sweet, but sometimes I find her \_\_\_\_\_ frustrating. I wish she would be more confident!
11. They finally both agreed on a deal. After so much negotiation, I'm curious what the final \_\_\_\_\_ were.
12. I'm sorry; I didn't mean to say that. It was just a \_\_\_\_\_ reaction.

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**Emma Brockes**

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- 1 It is very common for writers to make political statements, and they often seem timed to increase interest in a book. But it is rarer for a writer to take a stand in total opposition to their commercial interests. Nevertheless, that's what Elizabeth Gilbert, the novelist and self-help guru, did when she posted a video to social media, speaking of her decision to withhold publication of her new novel. Her decision comes as a response to sensitivities around the war in Ukraine. The statement triggered many angry comments and restarted an old discussion about Gilbert.
- 2 Gilbert's novel is set in Russia but has nothing to do with Vladimir Putin. Instead, *The Snow Forest* follows a family in 1930s Siberia trying to escape the reach of the Soviet government. It also has an environmental theme, highlighting industrialisation's destruction of the natural world. Nonetheless, Gilbert has received a massive response from her readers in Ukraine, expressing "anger, sorrow, disappointment and pain" at her decision to set a novel in the land of the oppressor. Because of that, she is "removing the book from its publication schedule".
- 3 My first reaction after watching the video was: wow, her publishers must be thrilled by this. Then, I had to admire Gilbert's ability to annoy many people in new and different ways. Negative comments focused on the weakness of the connection between the subject matter of the novel and the situation in Ukraine and suggested it offered a weak excuse for a boycott. If you think like that, people said, no piece of fiction can be set anywhere in the world with undemocratic politics because it 'acts as an endorsement'.
- 4 I understand this argument. It was a grand gesture by Gilbert, who has developed a lofty persona since the success of *Eat, Pray, Love* almost 20 years ago. Gilbert addresses her readers as "dear ones". And clearly, she believes that the withdrawal of a piece of fiction might be considered meaningful in the context of a people surviving a war.
- 5 To my surprise, however, my final response to Gilbert's gesture was admiration. There were no caveats, none of the knee-jerk female instinct to apologise for causing a disturbance. It seems to me that she absolutely believes in whatever she is doing.
- 6 Looking back, much of the criticism of *Eat, Pray, Love* appears to be wrong. Published in 2006, it told the story of a year in Gilbert's life in which she travelled – to Italy, India, and Indonesia – to fix herself after her divorce. It wasn't marketed as self-help, but that's how it seemed. Twelve million copies later, Gilbert was accused by some of selling the book before setting out on the journey.
- 7 There are valid criticisms – the book's tone is not to everyone's taste – but the intensity of the reaction seemed more like a jealous reaction of those not as successful as her. Whether you like it or not, Gilbert's style has been consistent across the non-fiction titles. (Her book about creativity, *Big Magic*, is genuinely useful and sensible.)
- 8 These days, I think that Gilbert is more interesting than many people believe. I'll never fully accept "dear ones", but I think this kind of determination is refreshing in a social media landscape in which meekness is encouraged.

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#### Glossary

*oppressor*: someone who uses their power or authority over others in a cruel or unfair way

*boycott*: not buying a product or participating in an activity as a way of showing you strongly disapprove or disagree

*self-help*: giving ways to help you end a habit, learn something new or solve a problem by yourself

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#### 3 Comprehension check

a. Complete the statements with the correct words.

- Elizabeth Gilbert's decision to withhold publication of her new novel will have \_\_\_\_\_ financial consequences for her.  
a. negative                      b. positive
- Her novel is about a family trying to escape the Soviet government and focuses on \_\_\_\_\_ themes.  
a. environmental              b. political
- Gilbert removed the book from publication after many Ukrainian readers expressed their \_\_\_\_\_ at her decision to set the novel in Russia.  
a. appreciation              b. anger
- Many people argue that the setting does not act as \_\_\_\_\_ of what is happening in Russia and is not a good reason for withholding publication.  
a. approval                      b. criticism
- Others see her decision as a grand gesture that is typical of her \_\_\_\_\_ personality.  
a. meek-and-mild              b. high-and-mighty
- Her best-selling novel, *Eat, Pray, Love*, has been categorised by readers as a \_\_\_\_\_ book.  
a. self-help                      b. travel
- The writer of the article found Gilbert's book, \_\_\_\_\_, really useful.  
a. *Eat, Pray, Love*              b. *Big Magic*
- The writer of the article thinks Gilbert might be \_\_\_\_\_ than many people believe and welcomes her determination.  
a. dearer                          b. more fascinating

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## 4 Key language

a. Match the words in the left-hand column with those in the right to make phrases from the article. Scan the article for reference.

- |               |                   |
|---------------|-------------------|
| 1. take       | a. a disturbance  |
| 2. withhold   | b. a journey      |
| 3. trigger    | c. angry comments |
| 4. receive    | d. a response     |
| 5. survive    | e. a stand        |
| 6. cause      | f. a war          |
| 7. set out on | g. meekness       |
| 8. encourage  | h. publication    |

b. Complete each sentence with a collocation from task A.

1. My grandmother \_\_\_\_\_ the Second World \_\_\_\_\_ and then emigrated to the US.
2. Her agent encouraged her to \_\_\_\_\_ of the novel until the summer when it would be easier to market as beach reading.
3. The latest version of the film \_\_\_\_\_ as viewers demanded women in more empowered roles.
4. She was the only one in the family willing to publicly \_\_\_\_\_ against her stepfather's illegal construction project.
5. We want to teach our students to be polite, but we don't want to \_\_\_\_\_.
6. I am terribly sorry about the \_\_\_\_\_ we \_\_\_\_\_ yesterday. We were away, and our cat turned on the sound system at full volume!
7. After surviving a tragic bike accident, Gabriel \_\_\_\_\_ on a \_\_\_\_\_ of healing.

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## 5 Discussion

a. Discuss these questions.

- What are some of the positive or negative effects of this type of cancellation or self-cancellation?
- To what extent should artists, writers, filmmakers, and other public figures protect people's feelings?
- Would you cancel or boycott a celebrity if they do something that goes against your beliefs? Why (not)?

## 6 In your own words

a. You are going to have a debate about the statement, 'Powerful people should be held accountable for their actions through cancel culture.' Your teacher will tell you if you will argue for or against the statement.

Prepare your arguments using the phrases below. Also, prepare statements to counter the other side's view.

**Expressing and supporting a point**

*I believe ...*

*By that, I mean ...*

*What I'm saying is ...*

*I want to highlight ...*

*An example of this is ...*

**Agreeing**

*You're right. / Absolutely.*

*I completely/totally agree.*

*That's a good point.*

**Interrupting**

*Excuse me.*

*Can I say something?*

*Sorry to interrupt, but ...*

**Disagreeing**

*I don't think so.*

*I see your point, but ...*

*That's not always true.*