

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

Level 3: Advanced

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

- Do you know who Elizabeth Gilbert is?
- Have you seen or read *Eat, Pray, Love*?
- Can you think of an example of someone being cancelled because they addressed a sensitive topic or made an offensive comment?
- Is "cancelling" someone a good way of holding them accountable for inappropriate actions? Why (not)?

2 Key words

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

caveat	cynical	deference	earnestness	endorsement
inflamed	insufferable	knee-jerk	land	lofty
meekness	oppressor	outpouring	tank	

1. _____ is politeness or respect.
2. _____ means *angered* or *aroused*.
3. A(n) _____ is an exaggerated or passionate outburst.
4. A(n) _____ is someone who uses their power or authority over others cruelly or unfairly.
5. A(n) _____ is the act of approving or approbation.
6. If someone behaves in a _____ way, they act as if they think they are better than others.
7. A(n) _____ is a statement that limits another statement or a warning to consider certain things before acting.
8. A(n) _____ reaction or response is a quick reaction without any serious thought.

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9. If someone is _____, they don't trust the goodness or sincerity of others.
10. To _____ is to have the expected effect.
11. To _____ is to fail suddenly or become less successful.
12. If something or someone is _____, they are unpleasant or very annoying.
13. _____ is the quality of being unwilling to argue or express your opinions while being quiet and gentle.
14. _____ is determination and seriousness.

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

1. Influencers need to evaluate their _____ practices since their choices can greatly affect others.
2. At the risk of sounding _____, I want to point out that even the most selfless of us have our motives.
3. Even though she tried not to take it personally, Hannah was quite distressed by the _____ comments her post triggered.
4. Nestor has always been respectful to me, but I've noticed he often takes a _____ tone when talking to some of our younger peers.
5. This new drug trial has had astounding results, but one _____ is that the study did not include female participants over the age of thirty.
6. Although she is no longer the headteacher, everyone still treats her with a lot of _____.
7. When confronted about her decisions, her _____ reaction is to become defensive.
8. He meant to compliment her on her dress, but his comment did not _____ well, and he instantly regretted it.
9. Although the author is sarcastic much of the time, his _____ cannot be doubted. He is completely sincere at heart.

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10. When he posted that his beloved celebrity dog, Jack, needed surgery, there was an _____ of support.
11. Her first rom-com was a box-office hit, but her next film _____.
12. Unfortunately, it has been common for independence heroes to cling to power and ultimately become their own people's _____.
13. Thank you for inviting me, but I'm afraid I find closed spaces _____.
I don't think I would do well on a cruise.
14. There is a fine line between kindness and _____; it requires a certain level of maturity to voice your opinions with kindness.

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It was a fantastically grand gesture by the writer. You don't have to agree with it to applaud the boldness and sincerity.

Emma Brockes

14 June, 2023

- 1 Political statements by writers practically come with the job description and, no matter how sincerely delivered, often seem timed to ignite interest in a book. Rarer is the writer who takes a stand in total opposition to their commercial interests. However, that's what Elizabeth Gilbert, the novelist and self-help guru, did when she posted a video to social media outlining her decision to withhold publication of her new novel indefinitely in deference to sensitivities around the war in Ukraine. The statement triggered an avalanche of inflamed commentary and a reboot of an old discussion about Gilbert and what exactly her deal is.
- 2 Gilbert's novel is set in Russia but has nothing to do with Vladimir Putin. Instead, *The Snow Forest* follows the fortunes of a family in 1930s Siberia trying to escape the reach of the Soviet government. It also has an environmental theme, highlighting the destruction of the natural world by industrialisation. Nonetheless, Gilbert has received an "enormous, massive outpouring" from her readers in Ukraine, expressing "anger, sorrow, disappointment and pain" at her decision to set a novel in the land of the oppressor. On that basis, she is making a "course correction" and "removing the book from its publication schedule". My first response after watching the video was: wow, her publishers must be thrilled by this last-minute turn of events. (In her note on Instagram, Gilbert promised a full refund to all those who had preordered the book.) Then, I had to admire Gilbert's cast-iron ability to annoy vast numbers of people in different ways to those in which she'd annoyed them before. In the wake of the video post, negative reaction focused on the weakness of the connection between the subject matter of the novel and the situation in Ukraine and suggested it offered slim pretext for a boycott. By that reasoning, it was pointed out, no piece of fiction might be set anywhere in the world with undemocratic politics, on the understanding that it acts as an endorsement.
- 3 I can see the merits of this argument. It was a fantastically grand gesture on the part of Gilbert, who, since the success of *Eat, Pray, Love*, almost 20 years ago, has developed a lofty persona. Gilbert addresses her readers as "dear ones", with the kind of airy manner one suspects is reinforced with steel. 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.
- 4 To my surprise, however, my final response to Gilbert's gesture was one of admiration. It had a strangeness to it that, politics aside, seemed to me impossible not to find broadly pleasing. There were no caveats, none of the knee-jerk female instinct to apologise for causing a disturbance. A strand of criticism about Gilbert going back to the success of her memoir is that, under the guise of a hippyish outlook, she pushed through a cynical, market-savvy piece of writing. But it seems to me that one fact about her is that she absolutely believes in whatever the project to hand is.
- 5 And looking back, much of the criticism of *Eat, Pray, Love* appears off the mark. The memoir was published in 2006 and told the story of a year in Gilbert's life in which she travelled – to Italy, India and Indonesia – in an effort to fix herself after her divorce. It wasn't marketed as self-help, but that's how the book landed, and, 12 million copies later, Gilbert was accused in some quarters of pre-cooking her revelations, on the basis that she sold the book before setting out on the journey.
- 6 There are valid criticisms of the book – the tone frequently tips towards a charm that's not to everyone's taste – but the intensity of the reaction seemed an inevitable result of the sour grapes that attend a spectacular success in a field where most projects tank. The charge that she was not only insufferable but insincere doesn't stand up, either, given the work that came later. Whether it's your cup of tea or not, Gilbert's style, which might be broadly characterised as a sort of disciplined gushing, has been consistent across the non-fiction titles. (Her book about creativity, *Big Magic*, is genuinely useful and sensible.)

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- 7 These days, I tend to think that Gilbert is more interesting than she is given credit for. I'll never get fully on board with "dear ones", but I think in a social media landscape in which meekness and conformity is encouraged, this kind of earnestness is bold and refreshing.

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3 Comprehension check

a. Complete the summary with the correct words – a, b or c – below.

Elizabeth Gilbert recently announced her decision to withhold publication of her new novel, a decision which comes with a personal (1) _____ impact attached. Her book is set in Siberia in the 1930s and is about a family trying to escape the Soviet government. It also touches on (2) _____ themes. In the face of an outpouring from Ukrainian readers expressing their (3) _____ at her decision to set the novel in the land of the oppressor, Gilbert has removed the book from publication.

Her announcement has been met with mixed, mostly (4) _____ reactions. Many argue that the setting does not act as (5) _____ of what is happening in Russia or offer a pretext for a boycott. Others see her decision as a grand gesture in line with her (6) _____ persona. She delivered the announcement without apologies or caveats.

She has been criticised for writing a best-selling (7) _____ that reads as self-help (*Eat, Pray, Love*) before setting out on the journey. While her writing style might not be to everyone's taste, a lot of the criticism seems (8) _____. Gilbert might be more interesting than she gets credit for, and her gutsy (9) _____ is simply a breath of fresh air.

- | | | |
|-------------------|--------------------|------------------|
| 1. a. financial | b. political | c. social media |
| 2. a. commercial | b. environmental | c. sensitive |
| 3. a. consolation | b. discontent | c. relief |
| 4. a. annoyed | b. apologetic | c. knee-jerk |
| 5. a. approval | b. avoidance | c. interrogation |
| 6. a. meek | b. grandiose | c. modest |
| 7. a. novel | b. political piece | c. travel memoir |
| 8. a. fair | b. ungrounded | c. valid |
| 9. a. conformity | b. determination | c. meekness |

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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. ignite | a. a course correction |
| 2. trigger | b. an avalanche of |
| 3. make | c. grapes |
| 4. appear | d. interest |
| 5. sour | e. off the mark |
| 6. not stand | f. on board |
| 7. (your) cup | g. of tea |
| 8. get fully | h. up |

b. Write a short definition for each phrase based on its use in the article. Check your answers in a dictionary.

5 Discussion

a. Discuss the following questions.

1. Do you think Gilbert's decision to shelve her latest novel was well-founded? What else could she have done in response to her Ukrainian fans' outpouring?
2. What are some positive and negative effects of this type of (self-)cancellation?
3. To what extent should artists, authors, filmmakers, and other public figures remain politically correct?
4. Should political correctness always trump dialogue and expression?
5. Would you boycott an artist or company who has said or done something to offend you? Give examples.

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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 rebuttal arguments to counter the other side's view.

Expressing and supporting a point

I'm positive/certain/convinced that ...

As far as I know, ...

By that, I mean ...

What I'm suggesting is ...

To be more specific, ...

I'd like to emphasise...

An example of this is ...

The point I'm making is ...

I'd like to add something.

Agreeing

You're right. / Absolutely.

No doubt about it.

I couldn't agree with you more.

Interrupting

Can I say that ...?

I'd like to comment on that.

Can I add something here?

Can I jump in for a second?

Disagreeing

No, I don't think that's true because ...

I see your point, but ...

I'm sorry, but I have to disagree because ...

That's not always the case.

Not necessarily.