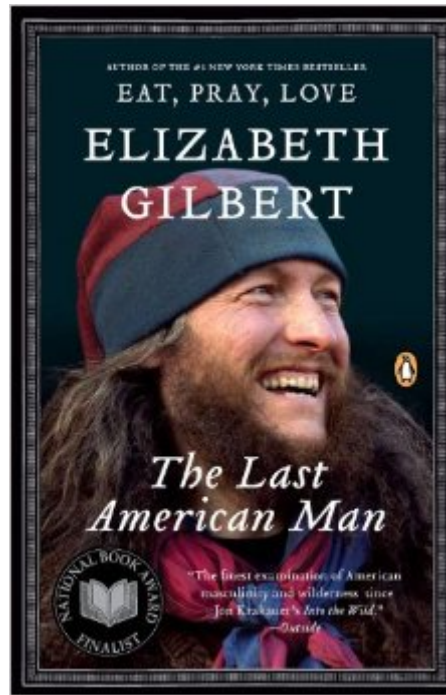


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The Last American Man



Synopsis

Finalist for the National Book Award 2002 Look out for Elizabeth Gilbert's new book, *Big Magic: Creative Living Beyond Fear*, on sale now! In this rousing examination of contemporary American male identity, acclaimed author and journalist Elizabeth Gilbert explores the fascinating true story of Eustace Conway. In 1977, at the age of seventeen, Conway left his family's comfortable suburban home to move to the Appalachian Mountains. For more than two decades he has lived there, making fire with sticks, wearing skins from animals he has trapped, and trying to convince Americans to give up their materialistic lifestyles and return with him back to nature. To Gilbert, Conway's mythical character challenges all our assumptions about what it is to be a modern man in America; he is a symbol of much we feel how our men should be, but rarely are.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

While Gilbert's book is well written and she doesn't appear to pull her punches in criticizing Eustace Conway's flaws, the truth is that she has still left out important facts which show Conway's incredible hypocrisy. Anyone who has actually worked for the man (as I have) can tell you that the man seen by guests and the man seen by employees are totally different. The man does not practice what he preaches, and Gilbert's description of his interns' disillusionment hardly scratches the surface. Eustace Conway is largely a fraud. While he may have practiced a low-impact, back-to-nature way of life as a teen (although when he drinks, Eustace admits many things that contradict this), Turtle Island today reflects very little of that. It is a non-productive "farm" covered by

half-built cabins and strewn with rusty old cars and trailers (all exposed to the weather and leaking oil, coolant, etc. onto the soil). On any given day, you are more likely to hear the din of heavy deisel trucks and tractors, gas generators, electric power tools, chainsaws, and motorcycles than you are the natural sounds of the forest. Here are some things Gilbert neglects to tell the reader:--Livestock routinely die from neglect at TI. I watched one goat and her kid die from a bacterial infection, despite the intern's repeated warnings to Eustace of its condition. A former volunteer told me that he saw 3 other goats die in a similar manner during the previous months.--Turtle Island DOES NOT produce most of its food. The majority comes from the neighbors' donations and farmer's markets. His vegetable gardens are usually so overgrown and neglected that it is difficult to tell what is food and what is not. (interns are not allowed to work on them except on their "off" days, and are routinely called away to do other jobs, such as road building and automobile maintenance)--only 1 building--a small shack hardly tall enough to stand up in--was built without power tools. Every other building on Turtle Island has been built using chain saws, chop saws, nail guns, etc. Interns have to BEG to do things with primitive tools, because Eustace feels it takes too much time.--Eustace treats the wood of his house and truck beds by painting them with a mixture of diesel and motor oil without any attempt to keep it from leaching into the soil.--Interns spend the majority of their time fixing cars or building his new house as free labor, NOT learning primitive/sustainable living skills.--Interns are seldom allowed to use simple tools, because Eustace feels they waste too much time. Any "primitive" living must be done on their own time. Eustace apparently doesn't even know how to properly sharpen a traditional cross-cut saw, because when a former volunteer asked him to teach the skill, Eustace gave up after a feeble attempt and told him he should get a book on the subject.--Horses are hardly used for anything other than buggy rides for tourists and occasionally plowing fields. They are show pieces. Eustace travels around on a motorcycle, and interns are expected to use 4x4 trucks, rather than walk.--Eustace owns and regularly operates bulldozers, backhoes, and industrial-size dump trucks to clear forest for roads, buildings, and anything else he can think of.--Eustace's home is surrounded by rusting trucks, cars, horse trailers, etc., most of which do not run or function at all. I counted 60 cars, not to mention the numerous trailers strewn throughout the surrounding forest. Piles of car batteries sit exposed and leaking in the forest amongst the cars behind the house. Worst of all, INTERNS ARE EXPECTED TO LIE TO THE PUBLIC about these things in order to keep the illusion of "primitive living" at Turtle Island.

If Eustace Conway were the last American man, then fare thee well. The man described by Ms Gilbert does not actually live primitively. Nor does he treat his animals (or wildlife) with respect. Nor

does he show any compassion for his 'apprentices'. Even his primary expectation of his women is that they be beautiful. Ms Gilbert writes that Conway lives 'mindfully', suggesting some Zen-like awareness on his part. Yet every novice zazen practitioner realizes the connection between true mindfulness and compassion. Ms Gilbert draws a portrait of a man without compassion. Rather, he is pictured as a man of uncommon cruelty to both humans and others, a self-serving, self-promoting, self-described 'tortured' soul (lacking in paternal love). Oh, poor little unloved Eustace. He treats women with no respect and whines when they leave him. He experiences the AT by running across it as quickly as possible, leaving even his 'love' to catch him at camp late in the evenings. He runs horses to extremes for his own fun and because "that's what they are made for." The first challenge in reading this book is to look past Ms Gilbert's own infatuation with her subject, and to ignore her comparisons of Conway to actual American pioneers like Daniel Boone and Davey Crockett. While she correctly recognizes the self-promotions of those men, she overlooks the thousands of others who moved west, pioneering, living 'primitively' because that's what it took, thousands who actually subsisted on their work's rewards, without self-promotion, without abusive relationships, without whining about daddy-love. The ancestors of many of us, ancestors who struggled on the edges of a migrating population and diminishing wilderness, would not recognize Eustace Conway as one of their own. His own ego would have separated him from the serious business at-hand for those determined to be productive survivors. All-in-all, *The Last American Man* is a mis-titled volume as emotionally unbalanced in its writing as its subject is in his living. Read John Muir instead. Or just go sit under a tree.

Some years ago I read a magazine article about Eustace Conway and found his story captivating. Thus I was eager to read this book when I learned of its publication. I won't summarize his life - the Reviews above do so sufficiently to capture almost anyone's interest - but let me urge others who post reviews to remember you are reviewing the book, not Eustace Conway. I'd give him 5 stars - or 10 - for many qualities, but surely not for his troubled personal relationships. But Elizabeth Gilbert has done a wonderful - definitely 5 star - job in telling his story. She knows him very well (and clearly likes him), has talked at length with a great many of his friends and with his parents and siblings, and she loves the lifestyle ideal he seeks to propagate. She also writes in a wonderfully engaging, personal style. I can't imagine anyone who reads the first couple of pages not being totally hooked.

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