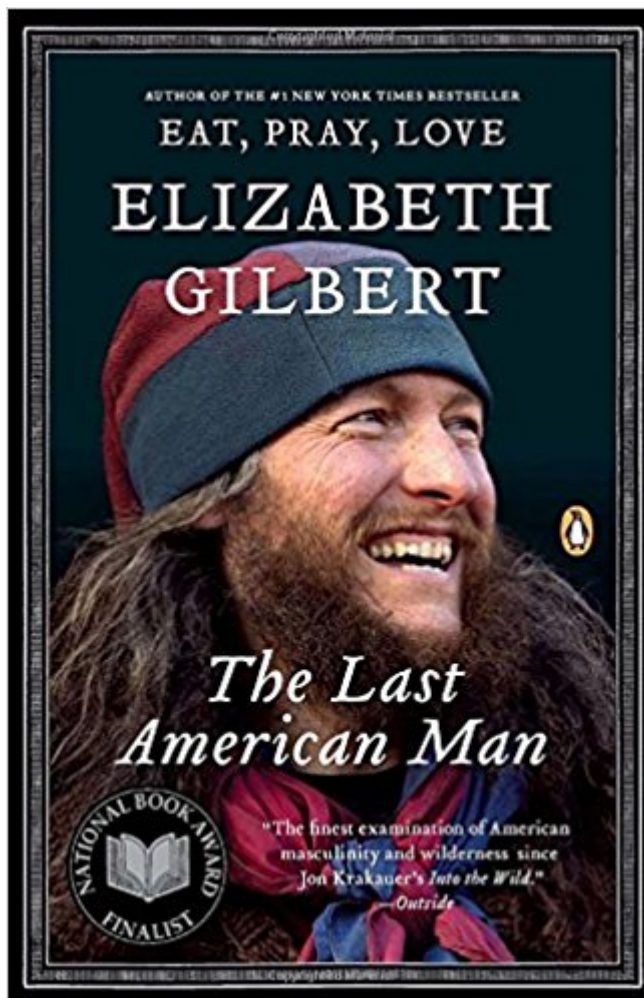


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The Last American Man



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

"By the time Eustace Conway was seven years old he could throw a knife accurately enough to nail a chipmunk to a tree." Such behavior might qualify Eustace as a potential Columbine-style triggerman, but in Gilbert's startling and fascinating account of his life, he becomes a great American countercultural hero. At 17, Conway "headed into the mountains... and dressed in the skins of animals he had hunted and eaten." By his late 30s, Eustace owned "a thousand acres of pristine wilderness" and lived in a teepee in the woods full-time. He is, as Gilbert (*Stern Men*) implies with her literary and historical references, a cross between Davy Crockett and Henry David Thoreau. Gilbert, who is friends with Conway and interviewed his family, evidences enormous

enthusiasm for her subject, whether discussing Conway's need for alcohol to calm down; his relationship with a physically and emotionally abusive father; or his horrific hand-to-antler fight with a deer buck he was trying to kill yet she always keeps her reporter's distance. At times, Conway's story can be wonderfully moving (as when he buries kindergartners in a shallow trench with their faces turned skyward to help them understand that the forest floor is "alive") or disconcerting (as when, in 1995, he's uncertain about Bill Clinton's identity). Gilbert has a jaunty, breathless style, and she paints a complicated portrait of American maleness that is as original as it is surprising.

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Starred Review Eustace Conway discovered nature's wonders as a boy growing up in South Carolina during the 1960s. Miserable at home, a born perfectionist and fanatic, he took to the woods and developed wilderness skills unknown to most modern Americans. By the time he finished high school and moved into a teepee (his abode for 17 years), he was convinced that only encounters with "the high art and godliness of nature" could help save American society from its catastrophically wasteful habits and soul-deadening trivial pursuits. Conway is not alone in his beliefs, but he is unique in his maniacal drive to proselytize, and, ironically enough, he's taken his teaching mission to such extremes by attempting to create an Appalachian wilderness utopia that it's impossible for him to live the very life he champions. Tough, shrewd, gifted, vigorous, and contradictory, Conway, who set a world record crossing the continent on horseback in 103 days, both enlightens and confounds all who know him. Gilbert, a top-notch journalist and fiction writer, braids keen and provocative observations about the American frontier, the myth of the mountain man, and the peculiar state of contemporary America with its "profound alienation" from nature into her spirited and canny portrait, ultimately concluding that Conway's magnetism is due in part to his embodying society's most urgent conundrums. Donna Seaman
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"The Last American Man" is the third Elizabeth Gilbert book I've read: In fact, that makes three Gilberts in a row, something I rarely do. Although I've come to admire her spirit and writing ability, this book is somewhat disappointing. The interesting subject matter is still there, the writing is impeccable, and, as usual, she keeps me engrossed. But somewhere, in her study of this unusual man's makeup, I consider her subject, Eustace Conway, as being an unlikeable person with flawed

makeup who doesn't deserve her soft-pedaled praise and admiration. It's the story of a survivalist with such a strange and outrageous lifestyle that, in my opinion, his mental balance comes into question. I appreciate Conway's passion for uncomplicated living and return-to-nature enthusiasm. But his intent to convert all wasteful and thoughtless humans into his own image while using tyranny, selfishness, and one-sided logic does not make him an admirable figure; especially as he leaves in his wake a history of family turmoil, broken friendships, and disillusioned women. A lengthy succession of brilliant women, initially enthralled with his charisma, has abandoned him because of his unreasonable dominating nature. I was highly offended by his actions and expectations of other people. Eustace Conroy IV is a product of his father's brutal nurturing and agonizes over it, yet he displays the same sort of cruel demeanor. He believes that obedience, discipline, and order is the way people should endure life and he doesn't like to have his convictions or his demands on how to achieve such a life be questioned. If folks desire to be trained in the rigorous procedure of returning to nature at his service farm community at Turtle Rock in North Carolina, all demands for compliance with his techniques must be met. Over the years, however, he has found that very few employees or campers share his enthusiasm for backbreaking work, meager rations, and unpleasant living conditions. They leave in droves with unpleasant memories. I am uneasy with Gilbert's apparent fascination with Conway. She does disparage him a bit for his self-centered behavior and agonizes over his failure to make corrections in the way he treats people, but I detect a sprinkling of admiration in some of her observations of his deportment. In my opinion he doesn't rate even a drizzle and I would not have expected this based on other Gilbert writing or her personal convictions. But my faith in this author and her talent has not diminished. I still stand in admiration for her research, her writing clarity, and her ability to capture the reader's interest. In spite of my misgivings about the man, I found "Last American Man" to be very illuminating. I urge you to read this book because my displeasure might be misguided and there might be other merits I'm overlooking. You shouldn't miss the chance for some thought-provoking musing and the opportunity to tell me that I'm full of crap.

Schuyler T Wallace
Author of TIN LIZARD TALES

The author chose a captivating title "The Last American Man", and that's why I bought the book. Unfortunately, the book turned out to be a description of a man who was so out of step with everyone else, he seemed to be the lost American man. He his goal was to live and exist off the

land in the woods of North Carolina on his own wits. He was totally successful in doing that. He worked long, hard hours with little sleep and he expected the same from everyone that came to his isolated location. Yes he did well, but his downfall in working and trying to train others is that he always believed he was right, and he expected immediate obedience. But people are not built that way, especially when they have volunteered for their positions. I think the author did an excellent job of portraying the breadth of Eustace Conway. He truly was an enormously capable and resourceful man. He walked the length of the Appalation Trail with very little preparation. He took limited food, hunting and scavaging for sustenance along the way. He rode horses coast to coast through America with his brother and friend. What Eustace set out to do, he could do. But he did it his way and at his own fast pace. He was always in a hurry. Eustace wanted a lifetime partner and he was willing to marry to have children. But he never found a woman who was willing to commit to living with him. His pace, his style, and his insistence that he was always right undid every relationship he tried. So, in the end I was captivated by this book. I hated to stop reading at the end of each day. Why did I give it only three stars? Because I felt betrayed by the author, who by the title led me to believe I would read a story of a man who truly represented an outstanding American male. The way she developed the story in the book led me to think I would find a good guy that I might want to emulate. It turned out that Eustace Conway was not that man, in my opinion. If you want to read a well written book, read *The Last American Man*. It is a good book. Don't expect to be in love with the main character by the time you finish. You will finish, and be glad you did.

Hollywood and Wild West fiction gave us the stereotype of a "mountain man". Abandon all that Grizzly Adams nonsense before reading this book. It's clear that Gilbert worked hard on research and interviews. She tried to present the reader with a fair, well rounded bio of Eustace Conway. The book reminded me how we set ourselves up for disappointment when we put people on a pedestal and proclaim them Hero. If someone wants to learn about primitive living skills then this may not be book for you. This book is more about a man overcoming adversity, achieving his personal goals, having mental toughness, and relationship challenges. I would have liked more detail about his learning curve with backcountry skills and less about his love life. Calling Eustace Conway "the last American man" is a stretch.

I had hoped for a biography and an understanding of a way of life. I am confused about Gilbert's outlook and opinion of her subject. Gilbert is a talented writer, and her fiction is extremely enjoyable. I think she didn't know what to make of her subject here, and wrestles with that and without a

resolution within her own mind, this is the product of her thoughts. I'm not trying to be overly critical, as the subject of the book is a complex one that likely surprised the author in the complexity of the situation, and also the dichotomies. Eustace is a man living out of time in many respects. He is full of conflicting outlooks and presentation. I believe he is traumatized by his upbringing as his home life and the treatment of him by his father even in adulthood is abusive. Eustace is like Christopher McCandless in *Into the Wild*, a child grown into a confused adult as the result of trauma and abuse in his upbringing.

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