

Author Elizabeth Gilbert suspends novel's publication due to protests by Ukrainian nationalists

David Walsh
14 June 2023

On June 6, American author Elizabeth Gilbert revealed she had written a new novel, *The Snow Forest*, which would be published in February 2024. Six days later, Gilbert explained on Instagram she was “removing the book from its publication schedule” because of complaints by Ukrainian nationalists about its Soviet-Russian setting.

Gilbert is best known for *Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman's Search for Everything Across Italy, India and Indonesia*, a popular 2006 memoir, later adapted as a film in 2010, directed by Ryan Murphy, featuring Julia Roberts and Javier Bardem.

The new novel, apparently already completed, deals fictionally with the Lykov family, Russian Old Believers (Eastern Orthodox Christians who rejected 17th century reforms in the Russian Orthodox Church), who lived apart from human society for decades. In the mid-1930s, the Lykovs moved to a remote region of southern Siberia and did not encounter other human beings until the late 1970s.

Gilbert's June 6 statement set into motion what has now become predictable and formulaic: a well-organized, well-publicized outburst of protest from Ukrainian chauvinists, none of whom, of course, could have read the unpublished novel. The book received over 500 one-star reviews on Goodreads, the review platform.

Goodreads has taken down the item on the book and the responses, but other sources cited some of the comments. These are apparently typical: “While Ukrainians are dying from Russian terrorists, famous authors are writing books about them and romanticizing these bastards,” one individual writes, while another complains that “during air alert due to Russian missiles I see this annotation ... how wonderful to live somewhere far from Russia and write about it. How cool to romanticize colonizers.” The ignorant, right-wing drivel includes the assertion that it

would be morally wrong to write sympathetically about Russians, because there is “nothing interesting in them, nothing human.” A further “review” argues that Russians have “no soul,” only “total obedience and undeserved pride,” and are a “pure evil” that “cannot be civilized.”

This is the outlook of a fascistic minority, whose views are distant from those of the vast majority in virtually every country of the world, including the US. Nonetheless, a few hundred people participated in a stage-managed event and prevented the publication of a book by a well-known novelist.

In her June 12 video comment, Gilbert asserted that she had “received an enormous, massive outpouring of reactions and responses from my Ukrainian readers expressing anger, sorrow, disappointment and pain about the fact that I would choose to release a book into the world right now—any book, no matter what the subject of it is—that is set in Russia.” It is, of course, dubious that the commentators were her “readers.” They were more likely obeying the instructions of various far-right nationalist outfits.

Gilbert further insisted it was “not the time for this book to be published,” adding, “I do not want to add any harm to a group of people who have already experienced and who are all continuing to experience grievous and extreme harm.”

The writer's decision to suppress her own work in the face of this sort of ideological filth was so strikingly spineless that even anti-Russian propagandists of the PEN America variety felt obliged to wring their hands. The latter organization's CEO, Suzanne Nossel, a former assistant to both Richard Holbrooke and Hillary Clinton, called the decision “regrettable.” Nossel observed that the notion “that, in wartime, creativity and artistic expression should be preemptively shut down to avoid somehow

compounding harms caused by military aggression is wrongheaded.” Fiction and culture, she continued, were “essential to supporting mutual understanding and unleashing empathy.”

This is all public relations hogwash, of course, a form of damage control. What disturbs Nossel and her ilk is that the brazenly anti-democratic character of the Ukrainian far right laid bare in such episodes further undermines support for the war and helps expose the big lie that the Ukrainian regime represents a beacon of anti-authoritarianism.

Writer Phil Klay (*Redeployment*, 2014) called Gilbert’s action “pretty silly,” and Matt Bell, author of *Appleseed* (2021), commented, “I just can’t get over what a bizarre move self-cancelling your own book over 500 Goodreads reviews is, especially when not one of those ‘reviewers’ has actually read it.”

The incident, to say the least, does not cast Gilbert in a favorable light. *Eat, Pray, Love* was part travelogue, part romance novel, part self-help book, with a bit of “Eastern wisdom” thrown in. Oprah Winfrey devoted two episodes of her talk show to the book, helping it to remain on the *New York Times* Best Seller list for 187 weeks.

Gilbert’s light-mindedness and unseriousness come out in her original, June 6 announcement about *The Snow Forest*. She observes that she spent “the first year of covid living alone in the middle of nowhere. I found that the silence and isolation was actually a magical time for my own creative and spiritual life, as well as my connection to nature.” The pandemic, leading to the deaths of tens of millions, had at least this much of a silver lining!

This period of living alone led Gilbert to become “increasingly fascinated by the idea of what it would be like to spend one’s life absolutely separated from the world: what would the most extreme version of this fantasy be like? Is there anyone out there living like this?”

A little investigation apparently brought her to the story of the Lykovs, she explains, “a Russian family that lived alone in the Siberian wilderness, who went undetected for half a century. This story came back to me during the pandemic and it served as the inspiration for *THE SNOW FOREST*.”

That the drama of the Lykovs was bound up with the vast, complex history of the Soviet Union, with Stalinism, with religious fanaticism and other social processes does not seem to resonate with Gilbert. She temporarily experienced isolation during the pandemic and, therefore, identified herself with the tragic fate—working itself out over the course of decades!—of an oppressed but deeply

disoriented Soviet family! A cat has a head, a dog has a head, therefore a cat equals a dog, seems to be the guiding principle.

Moreover, so much for the principle of the true writer, that, if necessary, he or she sacrifices his or her own existence to the existence of the work. In this case, a few hundred hostile “reviews” and the possible threat to a lucrative career, and the book gets tossed in the garbage can.

The sensitivity of Gilbert to the Ukrainian lobby, which represents a very small segment of the population numerically, speaks to the character of the US-NATO war with Russia and its base of support. As the WSWS recently argued, backing for the war effort is concentrated in a narrow, upper-middle class social layer, “whose rabid hatred of Russia is historically rooted in Cold War anti-communism. Despite the restoration of capitalism, Russia will not be forgiven for its historical association with the October Revolution, Bolshevism and socialism.”

The comments by the Ukrainian protesters expresses a form of chauvinism of the most frothing, unthinking variety. If the essentially subhuman Russians, people without a soul, are entirely evil and “cannot be civilized,” then the most desperate and ruthless actions are permissible, even obligatory.

The language of the commentators recalls that of Adolf Hitler in *Mein Kampf* (1924). Hitler described “the rulers of present-day Russia” as “the scum of humanity,” who belonged “to a race which combines, in a rare mixture, bestial cruelty and an inconceivable gift for lying, and which today more than ever is conscious of a mission to impose its bloody oppression on the whole world.”

To try and block the publication of a novel due to its national setting is a desperate, reactionary attack on creative freedom. It is a blotting out of the most elementary conception of artistic expression, that art has the task of fearlessly bringing to light essential features of reality. Now, instead, novels are to be written to conform to and confirm the prejudices and hatreds of this or that national grouping. It is a peculiar but logical form of identity politics. There is no objective truth, only competing ethno-communalist narratives.



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