The story may have autobiographical elements—like her protagonist, Gilbert—Gilbert’s short story collection, Pilgrims (Penguin), 19-year-old Martha Knox leaves her home in rural Pennsylvania and finds work as a ranch hand in Wyoming. She saves her money to buy a scrawny horse and, when a co-worker dashes off, until he awkwardly climbs onto the saddle with her and they lie there, unhurt, he watches her call his bluff. She begins to ride the horse’s reins, and it wasn’t some- thing she mentioned.

For the first time in her life, Gilbert was trying to satisfy millions of readers. The voice didn’t sound like anybody. "And she had no idea how to fix it—I was writing for," says Gilbert, "the novel’s sightless narrator, re- imagining the dirt for a few months while she puzzled out what was inspiring her. She meditated for a long time before realizing the problem. For the first time in her life, she was trying to satisfy millions of readers. Those throngs were the devost- ed fans of Eat, Pray, Love (Viking Adult), Gilbert’s memoir about a year she spent exploring cuisine in Italy, finding God in India, and seeking equilibriums in Indonesia after a devastating divorce. Though Gilbert had published three books before it (Pilgrims, a novel, and a biography), and through those books had won ac- claim (a Pushcart Prize, two New York Times Notable Book designations, and nominations for the PEN/Hemingway, National Book, and National Book Critics Circle awards), it was Eat, Pray, Love that introduced her to the greater public. With 57 weeks at No. 1 on The New York Times paperback nonfiction best-seller list, translation into more than 30 languages, and interna- tional praise, the book made Gilbert famous in a way that she never anticipated.

Needless to say, she was happy about its reception, but she also found her popularity somewhat perplexing. After all, she had been writing stories steadily since high school, refusing to stop despite accumulating five years of magazine rejection slips. When she was finally published in the pages of Esquire, she landed an agent and a job as a journalist, but she thought she was launching a literary career that might appeal to a small circle of readers. As she embarked on Committed, with five million copies of Eat, Pray, Love in print, expectation reared its head for the first time. Gilbert knew her next book would be subjected to an avalanche of attention—"probably more than anything else I’ll ever write," she says. Committed truly deserves at- tention. It elegantly combines Gilbert’s personal story about her decision to remarry with an exploration of the history of marriage and the ideas that have shaped the institution. And it’s written with the same warm inti- macy that drove the voice in Eat, Pray, Love, which is how she finally conquered the competitive barrier that fame produced. "I was writing for," says Gilbert, "the novel’s sightless narrator, re- imagining the dirt for a few months while she puzzled out what was inspiring her. She meditated for a long time before realizing the problem. For the first time in her life, she was trying to satisfy millions of readers. Those throngs were the devost- ed fans of Eat, Pray, Love (Viking Adult), Gilbert’s memoir about a year she spent exploring cuisine in Italy, finding God in India, and seeking equilibriums in Indonesia after a devastating divorce. Though Gilbert had published three books before it (Pilgrims, a novel, and a biography), and through those books had won ac- claim (a Pushcart Prize, two New York Times Notable Book designations, and nominations for the PEN/Hemingway, National Book, and National Book Critics Circle awards), it was Eat, Pray, Love that introduced her to the greater public. With 57 weeks at No. 1 on The New York Times paperback nonfiction best-seller list, translation into more than 30 languages, and interna- tional praise, the book made Gilbert famous in a way that she never anticipated.

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The story may have autobiographical elements—like her protagonist, Gilbert (WSUC ’91) grew up on a Christmas-tree farm, and she spent a year working on a ranch in Wyoming—but that final image says the most about her: the voice didn’t sound like me,” she explains. “The voice didn’t sound like anybody.” And she had no idea how to fix it—how to “write naturally.”

Gilbert burned the manuscript in a drawer and asked her publisher for more time. She went to work in her tomato garden, digging in the dirt for a few months while she puzzled out what was stymying her. She meditated for a long time before realizing the problem. For the first time in her life, she was trying to satisfy millions of readers.

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The young woman reaching for the reins while everyone else is still catching their breath. That same unrelenting determination has carried Gilbert through the stages of her career. Or at least it did until she attempted to write her newest book, Committed. A Sleep-tic Makes Peace With Marriage (Viking Adult). When she sat down to compose this one, she had those familiar reins in hand. But then she looked at her 500-page draft and knew that there was a problem. “The voice didn’t sound like me,” she explains. “The voice didn’t sound like anybody.” And she had no idea how to fix it—how to “write naturally.”

For the first time in her life, Gilbert was trying to satisfy millions of readers.
For centuries, American Jewry had rightly seen itself as a net importer of Judaica from Europe and had self-critically believed that in terms of Jewish culture, religious or secular, the Europeans did it better than the Americans, occupants of the backwater of the Jewish world. [Post-WWII] the denizens of the Jewish hinterland, the United States, had no one to rely on. If they sought a vibrant Jewish life, they had to do it themselves…. Reform Rabbi William Berkowitz, in a 1961 book… opened with “A Message to the Twentieth Century Jew,” articulating a common sentiment of the postwar years: “We, today, have witnessed one of the darkest chapters in our long history. Our mighty centers of culture have been destroyed, the Yeshivoth of Poland, of Austria, of Hungary are no longer on the map…. In the span of our lifetime we have witnessed the massacres of one third of our nation.” He then asked, “Are we,” the Jews of the United States, “prepared and willing to assume a dominant role in Jewish cultural activities?”

**book club**

**What I’m Reading:** Poet and Author

**Stephen Haven**

Stephen Haven (GSAS ’98) doesn’t fit the poet stereotype. He’s just as happy talking about the Boston Celtics as he is Byron. And in addition to holding an MFA in poetry from the University of Iowa, he went on to earn a PhD in American Civilization at NYU, which helps him write with both poise and intimacy about everything from abstract expressionists Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman to his time spent touring China as a Fulbright lecturer.

The author more recently penned The River Lock: One Boy’s Life Along the Mohawk (Syracuse University Press) about his conflicted adolescent years with a minister father in an Upstate New York mill town. The memoir was nominated for a National Book Award in 2008, and Haven, currently an English professor and director of the MFA program at Ashland University, was named Co-Ohio Poet of the Year in 2019.

**WHAT ARE YOU READING?**

I recently finished a book by [artist and writer] Nicole Hollander. It’s called George Immes [American painter known for his nature studies].

**WHY GEORGE INNESS?**

I’m writing a poem about his paintings Summer Landscape 1894 (Syracuse University Press) about his conflicted adolescent years with a minister father in an Upstate New York mill town. The memoir was nominated for a National Book Award in 2008, and Haven, currently an English professor and director of the MFA program at Ashland University, was named Co-Ohio Poet of the Year in 2019.

I’m an NBA basketball fan. Bill Russell [Celtics center from 1956–69] was a hero in my childhood, so I read everything I could about the Boston Celtics. In graduate school at the University of Iowa, I took a class with a Melville scholar who was also a rabbi, Jay Halprin. He loved basketball, and he gave me biographies of Russell with all the savoy details [of Russell’s wild personal life] that I wasn’t allowed to read as a child. So I was studying Melville with a rabbi who knew more about basketball than I did. —Lee Huggleston

**bibliophile**

**SHAKE THE DEVIL OFF: A TRUE STORY OF THE MURDER THAT ROCKED NEW ORLEANS**

**HENRY HOLT**

**ETHAN BROWN**

**GSAS ’98**

“Please help me stop the pain” were the words spray-painted on the ceiling above the bed of 28-year-old Zacarry Brown, who committed suicide by jumping from the roof of a New Orleans hotel in 2006. Soon after, police found the charred, dismembered body of Bowens girlfriend, Addie Hall, in her oven. New York journalist Ethan Brown was vacationing there with his wife when the story broke and moved to New Orleans the following summer to investigate why a charming young bartender, so beloved in the French Quarter, would commit one of the most gruesome crimes in city memory. Brown’s harrowing portrait of Brown’s life as an Iraq war veteran suffering from untreated PTSD is just as startling as the author’s firsthand account of a deteriorating post-Katrina New Orleans.

—Raúl Arriola

**FORDLANDIA: THE RISE AND FALL OF HENRY FORD’S FORGOTTEN JUNGLE CITY**

**METROPOLITAN BOOKS**

**GREG GRANDIN**

**PROFESSOR OF HISTORY**

In 1927, Henry Ford founded Fordlandia, a vast plantation on a fork of the Amazon River to provide rubber for his automobiles. If one person could bring “white man’s magic” to the Brazilian jungle, as the Washington Post declared, it was the magnate synonymous with efficiency. Anti-intellectual, anti-dairy (he was obsessed with soy), and anti-Semitic, Ford dreamed of building a model Midwestern town, which his cars were ironically transforming back home. Plagued with corruption, Fordlandia instead became a lawless frontier town, its oversize failing to grasp basic Amazonian ecology. A National Book Award finalist, the work was called “Conradian” and a “reflection of one man’s personalty—arrogant, brilliant, and very odd” by The New York Times.

—NJ

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EXCERPT FROM HASID R. DINE’S WE REMEMBER WITH REVERENCE AND LOVE: AMERICAN JEWS AND THE MYTH OF SILENCE

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