

# **The Last American Man Study Guide**

## **The Last American Man by Elizabeth Gilbert**

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.

# Contents

<a href="#">The Last American Man Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 1-3.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 4-6.....</a>	<a href="#">9</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 7-8.....</a>	<a href="#">11</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 9-Epilogue.....</a>	<a href="#">15</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">16</a>
<a href="#">Objects/Places.....</a>	<a href="#">19</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">21</a>
<a href="#">Style.....</a>	<a href="#">23</a>
<a href="#">Quotes.....</a>	<a href="#">25</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>	<a href="#">27</a>

# Plot Summary

"The Last American Man" by Elizabeth Gilbert begins by introducing Eustace Conway, American naturalist, preservationist, and owner/operator of Turtle Island Preserve outside Boone, North Carolina.

Gilbert refers to Eustace Conway as the last American man. Although Conway was raised in Gastonia, North Carolina, he chose to make his life in the woods. Conway's the first real foray into a life of a naturalist came when he was seven years old. By the time Conway was 12 he began to stay in the woods alone, living off the land. When Conway was 17 he moved out of the family home and lived in the woods in a teepee, surviving solely off the land and his own wilderness survival abilities.

Although Conway came up in the 1960s, the young man had a fascination with ancient ways and the naturalist lifestyle that defied everything his parents and most of civilization stood for at the time. It was this kind of upbringing that led Conway to ride his horse across the United States during which he set a new world record, hike 2,000 miles on the Appalachian Trail from Maine to Georgia, hike the German Alps in sneakers, kayak across Alaska, live with the Navajo Indians in New Mexico, and travel to New Zealand to scale cliffs.

When Conway was in his early 20s, he decided to live with the most primitive people he could find and flew to Guatemala. These types of experiences fulfilled Conway in a way no others could.

Conway went on to go to college where he had a double major in anthropology and English. By this time, Conway was already becoming famous, a man of legend. It was rare for a man to live in the woods because that is what he chose to do, where he belonged. Conway was not a tree hugger or survivalist. The wilderness was simply where Conway wanted and needed to be.

Gilbert met Conway in 1993 in New York City when Conway and his younger brother, Judson, went to visit. Gilbert and Judson were already friends. Gilbert and Eustace would also become lifelong friends, giving the author a valuable insight into this unusual character.

Eustace Conway IV's childhood was not pleasant. His father, Eustace Conway III, was a chemical engineer that prided academia above all else. Little Eustace's lack of desire and ability made him a thorn in Big Eustace's side. Little Eustace would go through his childhood and adolescent years as the target of ridicule and unfair punishment at the hands of Big Eustace.

During this time, Little Eustace found nature. The boy became a fixture at the Scheile Museum of Natural History and spent every waking moment, when he wasn't in church or school, in the woods behind the Conway house.

By the time Conway was 17 he was out in the world, making his way in tune with the land.

Eustace Conway's crowning achievement and life's work lay in the Turtle Island Preserve, located outside Boone, North Carolina. The 1,000-acre preserve had always been Conway's dream and it seems that every act, every adventure led up to owning a nature preserve that could serve to educate, and possibly change, the entire world.

# Chapters 1-3

## Chapters 1-3 Summary and Analysis

Chapter one of "The Last American Man" by Elizabeth Gilbert begins by introducing Eustace Conway who would become a famous American naturalist, preservationist, and owner/operator of Turtle Island Preserve in North Carolina.

Author Elizabeth Gilbert refers to Eustace Conway as the last American man. Although Conway was raised in Gastonia, North Carolina, he chose to make his life in the woods. Conway's the first real foray into a life of a naturalist came when he was seven years old. By the time Conway was 12 he began to stay in the woods alone, living off the land. When Conway was 17 he moved out of the family home and lived in the woods in a teepee, surviving solely off the land and his own wilderness survival abilities.

Although Conway came up in the 1960s, the young man had a fascination with ancient ways and the naturalist lifestyle that defied everything his parents and most of civilization stood for at the time. It is shocking to most parents today to discover that Conway, his brothers and sister were often left to fend for themselves in the woods despite the presence of wild animals, poisonous snakes, and various other dangers. It was this kind of upbringing that led Conway to ride his horse across the United States during which he set a new world record, hike 2,000 miles on the Appalachian Trail from Maine to Georgia, hike the German Alps in sneakers, kayak across Alaska, live with the Navajo Indians in New Mexico, and travel to New Zealand to scale cliffs.

When Conway was in his early 20s, he decided to live with the most primitive people he could find and flew to Guatemala. Once Conway was in Guatemala, he began to ask where they the primitive people lived. Gilbert recounts: "He was pointed toward the jungle, where he hiked for days and days until he found the remotest village of the Mayan Indians, many of whom had never before seen a white person. He lived with for Maya for about five months, learning the language, studying the religion, perfecting his weaving skills" (Chapter 1, page 2).

Conway's first memories were spending time in the woods with his father, Eustace Robinson Conway III, where the boy learned about birds, plants, and mammals native to the South. Conway's mother, Karen Conway, also taught her son a great deal about survival.

"As for the rest, and over the years, it was his mother who taught Eustace. She taught him how to camp, bait a hook, build a fire, handle wildlife, weave grasses into rope, and find clay in river bottoms" (Chapter 1 page 3).

Karen Conway was not an ordinary mother in the 1960s. Karen had been raised in Asheville, North Carolina as a tomboy. At age 22, Karen sold a silver flute to book passage to Alaska where she would live in a tent by the river with her dog and a gun. It

was perhaps that experience that prompted Mrs. Conway to allow her children to play in the woods, often shirtless and barefoot, and always unsupervised. The only time the children weren't in the woods was when they had to go to church and school. Even now, Mrs. Conway is unrepentant, even though she supposes that allowing her children to run free made her a bad mother by most people's standards. Still, Karen believed that her children were more than capable of taking care of themselves, a fact that was proven time and again.

Gilbert discusses the concept of the American frontier and the American man. According to Gilbert, the American man is part stereotype, part myth. Unlike provincial young men in Europe who retreat to large cities in order to become refined gentlemen, the American man leaves civilization to find his way in nature, most often in the Wild West. Therefore, the American man is nothing like the European man; he is not a gentleman, but a man. The American man was not an intellectual and had no interest in reflection or formal study.

"Instead, he could stereotypically be found, as the explorer John Fremont described the uber-frontiersman Kit Carson, 'mounted on a fine horse without a saddle and scouring bareheaded over the prairies'" (Chapter 1, page 5).

The American man seemed to be a tourist attraction for visitors throughout the 18th and 19th centuries. The most amazing thing to foreigners was the amount of resourcefulness exhibited by the American man. This resourcefulness was "born out of the challenges of wrenching a New World from virgin wilderness" (Chapter 1, page 5). According to German born Gottfried Duden, the American man worked hard and fast and was able to accomplish more in few years than Europeans could in centuries.

Isabella Bird, a famous English travel writer, was enthralled by the American man, referring to him as tall and handsome with a broad chest and an aquiline nose. The men were also intriguing because of their unusual attire, which consisted of leather jackets, large boots with embroidered tops, leather clothing, and silver spurs. The men thrilled Bird with racy stories and manner that was as free as the wind.

Although the stories of the American frontier are fascinating, Gilbert admits that she doesn't know how much of the rhetoric was true. People the world over didn't really seem to care about what was true. The stereotype of the frontiersman was seen as the Next Big Thing. Gilbert acknowledges that Americans were eager to buy the hype. "We bought it and added it to the already hearty stew of homegrown self-mythology until we cooked up a perfectly universal notion of who the American man was and how the American man was made. He was Pecos Bill. He was Paul Bunyan" (Chapter 1 page 6).

Gilbert met Eustace Conway in 1993 in New York City. Gilbert had worked with Judson Conway, Eustace's youngest brother, in Wyoming and the two became good friends. Judson worshiped Eustace and often regaled Gilbert with stories of his older brother and his astonishing accomplishments. Gilbert was particularly interested in meeting Conway because of her own upbringing.

Gilbert clearly appreciates Conway's lifestyle and contributions and mirrors them with her way of life as a twenty-something, self-proclaimed cowgirl. Although Gilbert was raised in a wealthy small town in Connecticut, the author chose to shun the modern way of life, spurred by her parents' desire to farm and to live a rugged 19th-century existence. Eventually this former field hockey player decided to venture out to Wyoming, to experience one of the last examples of the real American frontier. Once in Wyoming, Gilbert took a page from Theodore Roosevelt and invented an entirely new persona. Gilbert recounts some of her experiences on a ranch in Wyoming.

The Conways visited Gilbert in New York City. Immediately people on the streets began referring to Eustace Conway as "Davy Fuckin' Crockett." Everywhere Eustace went the moniker followed. During the visit Eustace wandered off and Gilbert was frantic with worry. Gilbert and Judson found Eustace regaling a group of crack dealers with stories of his life and experiences in the wilderness. While this would've been a dangerous situation for anyone else, the drug dealers were in awe of Eustace. According to Gilbert, Eustace had this kind of effect on everyone from the drug dealers to rowdy delinquent teenagers. No one was immune to Conway's charms or his message.

This was not unusual behavior for Eustace. It was simply his way. Eustace did not live in the woods because he was a hermit or survivalist or even a hippie, Eustace lived in the woods because that's where he belongs. Eustace believes that saving the frontier as his destiny.

Through the years of learning about the wilderness and primitive societies, Eustace developed a strong dogma. "He is convinced that the only way modern America can begin to reverse its inherent corruption and greed and malaise is by feeling the rapture that comes from face-to-face encounters with what he calls 'the high art and godliness of nature'" (Chapter 1 page 13).

Gilbert goes on to discuss Conway's dogma and his views on the disintegration of man's connection with nature. In Conway's eyes people have become completely disconnected and although Americans believe they lived in a modern society, Conway believes that it's a fake world because they have come to completely ignore the natural cycle of life.

One of the most powerful images recounted by Gilbert is Conway's lecture to a group of rowdy teenagers at a summer camp. According to Gilbert the kids looked like jerks and were disrespectful and loud. Gilbert was prepared for the worst and was utterly shocked when Conway almost immediately captured the attention of the teens.

"The shoving and shrieking and laughing stopped. The jerky teenagers stared at Eustace Conway, riveted. Just like that-dead silence. I swear it. It was like goddamn 'To Sir with Love'" (Chapter 1, page 18).

Chapter 2 returns to 1975 when Conway was 14 years old. Conway talks about Indian crafts, his own personal museum, and the Scheile Museum of Natural History, which would become Conway's second-home. Conway was a very unusual child that spent

every free moment outdoors or at the museum, where the museum's director, Alan Stout, took the boy under his wing. Conway would do anything to learn and Stout was a patient teacher. Conway also befriended Warren Kimsey, a resident taxidermist, who taught the boy how to skin a rabbit along with other small game. As with everything, Conway practiced until each move was perfect. Stout also took Conway on various trips and introduced him to yet another part of the wilderness.

While Conway was an unusually proficient student of natural history, he was an outcast among his peers. Conway had no friends until he met Randy Cable, a boy who had recently moved from Tennessee. Cable's father was an Appalachian mountain man and all of Conway's activities made Cable feel right at home.

Gilbert recounts a great deal of Conway's childhood, which is often referred to as a life similar to a POW camp. Eustace Conway III, little Eustace's father, was a brilliant chemical engineer. Little Eustace was his father's pride and joy until the age of two when it became clear that the young boy did not possess his father's mental prowess. Big Eustace showed a tremendous amount of rage toward the two year old that could not solve a jigsaw puzzle. It did not matter that the task was too difficult for such a small child. That incident seemed to shape the next 15 years of Little Eustace's life.

It is not to say that little Eustace was stupid; he simply did not possess his father's love of academia. As a result, Eustace was subjected to many hours of unsuccessful tutoring by his father and rigorous and often unfair punishment for the slightest infraction. Little Eustace was constantly being corrected and punished, and even his siblings recalled that Eustace was always the source of the trouble.

Chapter 3 details the lives of pioneers such as Davy Crockett, Daniel Boone, John Fremont, Kit Carson, and Jim Bridger. Eustace Conway would follow in these legendary footsteps.

Despite the difficult circumstances at home, Eustace managed to stick it out until age 17. After graduation, Conway took off and made a life in the Blue Ridge Mountains. Conway lived off the land and took great joy in the fact that he could pick up and take off at any minute. Conway had a job for a short period of time as a nature educator for troubled and learning disabled children at the Bodine School. The job didn't last long; Conway quit when he and a friend decided to hike the Appalachian Trail. Gilbert details events that took place during the 2,000-mile trip which started in Maine and ended in Georgia. Along the way Conway met Donna Henry, a 19 year old college student from Pittsburgh. Both were immediately smitten. Donna ended up leaving school to hike Appalachian Trail with Conway. Although Donna knew almost nothing about nature, she was a willing student and eager to please Conway in any way she could.

Gilbert goes on to compare and contrast the personalities of Eustace and Judson.

Not long after Conway finished the four and a half month long trek on the Appalachian Trail, he decided to hook up with Alan York and kayak across Alaska. It was right around this time that Conway finally grasped the concept that he was truly and completely free.



# Chapters 4-6

## Chapters 4-6 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 4 begins with Conway's return to North Carolina in the fall of 1981. Conway approached a land owner about being a caretaker alongside a creek on the man's property. Conway could offer a small amount of rent and sent along with the letter in article, written in a local newspaper. The article proved that Conway was becoming a celebrity of sorts.

Conway's lifestyle was completely contradicted by the fact that he was a straight A college student. It was surprising that Conway decided to go to college after finishing his hike on the Appalachian Trail considering how much he'd hated school. There was something different about college and it was also a way to keep his father off his back. According to classmates, Eustace was the Big Man on Campus and many thought he was the coolest guy ever. Conway also made an impression on Professor Clawson, an archaeology teacher. Clawson was fresh out of Harvard and was eager to take Conway's suggestions on teaching students how to skin a rabbit. Once again, Conway was a hit.

During those years, Conway continued to practice his hunting skills and learn how to cope with the weather. Donna and Conway stayed together through the next two years even though their relationship was often strained. Conway was taking a double major in anthropology and English, and also began to write at this time. When not studying, Conway acted as an activist throughout the South. Donna lived in the tepee and took on Conway's life as her own. Donna desperately wanted Conway to marry her but at 20 years old, Conway felt he was too immature to marry. During the rare times when Donna did see Conway, he was extremely critical of her, showing that his perfectionism went beyond his own behavior. Eventually, Donna snapped and on a January afternoon moved out of the teepee. Donna and Conway would not see each other again for six years.

It wasn't long before Conway set out to find Turtle Island.

Chapter 5 discusses the concept of America as a utopia. Gilbert discusses the concept of utopia and the development of the frontier. It is clear that the author has done her homework and is very familiar with the formation of the frontier and its history, since the Treaty of Paris in 1783. The author also discusses the Beat Generation and communal living experiments.

Over the next few years, Conway, besought by his long-suffering mother, made many attempts to reconcile with his father to no avail. The rekindling of the broken relationship was necessary however, as Conway needed a substantial loan to buy property and his frugal father had it. It was especially difficult for Conway because he had prided himself on never taking a cent from his father. However, buying land to start the Turtle Island

Preserve was too important to Conway and he eventually approached Big Eustace. Begrudgingly, Big Eustace lent money, with competitive interest.

In 1987, Conway bought the first parcel of what would become the Turtle Island Preserve.

Gilbert discusses the birth of Turtle Island, which Conway viewed as a 24-hour environment that could teach children without distractions.

Chapter 6 begins in 2000 when Gilbert sat with Conway in his office, surrounded by land maps. The author recounts a trip around Turtle Island in the snow and how Conway desired to own as far as he could see. There were many bumps and turns along the way, but eventually Conway began to collect land. For a period of 10 years there was a patch of land known as the Cabell Gregg land that haunted Conway. Every effort to purchase the tract failed. Eventually Conway found that he would have to sleep with the devil in order to attain this precious piece of earth. Conway claims that without the Cabell Gregg land, Turtle Island Preserve could not exist.

Gilbert discusses Conway's business acumen. Conway was as savvy as any one on Wall Street much like Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett, who were often seen as uneducated frontiersman but in reality were clever businessman and influential politicians.

Conway's work began to take a turn when he had to defend his work and spend a great deal of time on paperwork rather than in the woods. It was only two years after Conway founded Turtle Island that he began to burn out.

Gilbert recounts Conway's relationships with various women and how they often ended badly. Gilbert also recounts her experiences with Mr. and Mrs. Conway.

# Chapters 7-8

## Chapters 7-8 Summary and Analysis

In chapter 7, the reader is introduced to Conway's love of horses. At this point, Conway has 10 horses, which seems decadent and absurd considering the size of the small farm but Conway is hooked on their beauty.

Gilbert muses that it seems strange that Conway should have such a vested interest in horses. After all, it had only been a decade since he had purchased the first horse. Gilbert grew up with horses and is used to the creatures and their habits. Conway was not. Even so, Conway has a natural gift with the horses, much like the man does with everything else.

Gilbert recounts Conway's introduction to horses and how horses soon became the man's passion. It would seem that the horse would become a vehicle for Conway to spread his message.

Early on, just before Conway decided to set out on the trip across America with Judson, he rode toward the Carolina coast on his horse, Hasty. Along the way, Conway was spotted by a large poor black family in a group of run down shacks. When members of the family spotted Conway, they welcomed him with open arms and the man soon found another family. The people took to Conway, asked many questions, listened to Conway's dogma, and took turns riding Hasty.

The trip across America was no easy undertaking. The Conway brothers adopted a name for themselves - The Long Riders. Susan, a friend of Judson, asked if she could go along. Susan had been born in the saddle and it didn't take long for her to become a part of The Long Riders. There was also the benefit of having a seasoned horse woman along, particularly since she had a pickup truck and a horse trailer.

Gilbert details their trip, which was thoroughly documented by Eustace, including the four a.m. start times, long days, and the expected wear and tear on both human and animal. Hasty did not fare well and to give the horses a break, Eustace purchased some along the way. Also purchased was Peter Rabbit, the immortal mule. Eustace had been set on buying a mule.

There was some friction between Judson and Eustace regarding a trip into a canyon. Judson loved the experience but Eustace knew he was right in refusing to go, as the horses returned limping and Judson and Susan could have very easily been killed. The dispute was resolved and Judson gave in to Eustace after that, although their relationship had changed.

The Long Riders arrived on the Pacific coast just hours before Easter, Eustace's promised date. The trip took 103 days, a new world record.

Along the way, Eustace had acquired Hobo, a horse that would quickly become his equine soul mate. Months after the trip and return to Turtle Island Preserve, Conway sprung Hobo from the corral and went for a joyride in the mountains. On the way back, just in sight of the barn, Hobo tripped on a tiny rock and broke his leg. Conway was devastated. Despite calls to every veterinarian and farrier Conway knew, the prognosis was the same. Hobo would have to be put down. Conway was inconsolable. The following year, Conway revisited Hobo's bones certain that the horse had been carrying around a stress fracture, probably for many years, most likely caused by his career as a racehorse. Conway was right. The tiny rock did not cause the break, the fracture finally gave way.

Eustace eventually fell for a gorgeous 23-year-old schoolteacher named Patience. All of Conway's women were beautiful. Patience was the perfect match in Conway's eyes although the pair seemed quite odd to outsiders. Patience was a modern girl, fiercely independent, and filled with self preservation that often made her seem cold. Conway was exactly the opposite. Despite those differences, Conway loved Patience and as with Donna, brought her into his naturalist world. Also, like Donna, Patience found that she was beginning to be sucked into Eustace's way of life, slowly sacrificing her own in the process. This was one of the biggest fears for Patience. Add to it that Conway told Patience that he wanted 13 children and the thought scared her. Gilbert asked Conway about the remark, who simply declared that a century ago a woman would not have been scared by the idea. Gilbert also includes a vignette about Daniel Boone's wife Rebecca.

Conway and Patience took another monumental journey together. Along the way, it became clear to Patience that Little Eustace was acting a lot like Big Eustace in the way he treated Karen. Patience did not necessarily think that Little Eustace was becoming his father; rather, it seemed as if the man was honoring his father through relentless perfectionism and harsh criticism. Little Eustace proclaimed that he would put a shotgun in his mouth if he ever treated anyone the way Big Eustace had treated him.

Eventually, Patience began to distance herself from Eustace and Turtle Island. Patience moved to Boone to coach field hockey and the relationship disintegrated. Despite all of Conway's pleas and efforts, Patience would not be moved.

Chapter 8 begins with the founding of Camp Sequoyah by Chief Johnson, father to Karen Johnson Conway and grandfather to Eustace and Judson. In 1924 Chief Johnson founded Camp Sequoyah, which was well known for its motto, "Where the Weak Become Strong and Strong Become Great." Johnson was a formidable man who ruled the camp with an iron fist until he died of a heart attack at age 80. After the Chief died it was discovered that there was not a successor named to take over Camp Sequoyah.

When staff and campers went to Camp Sequoyah, the Chief took over their lives. The Chief told the visitors when they would pray, when they would exercise, how they would dress and what they would eat. Nobody was ever good enough for the Chief and he often spent time lecturing people on the proper ways to behave. The Chief prohibited cursing, alcohol and tobacco from the camp along with vinegar, pepper, Coca-Cola, and

denim. It was also said that the Chief put saltpeter into the applesauce to keep his boys from temptation and self abuse. It was the Chief's blood in that camp, the place that had been carved by his own hands out of virgin wilderness. The Chief was known for being uncompromising and was a man who was never pleased. It is not surprising that 50 years later the Chief's grandson, Eustace, would employ many of the same traits in the operation of Turtle Island.

Gilbert details the life of Chief Johnson and his family. Every boy at the camp became the Chief's son, and it seemed that most if not all went on to lead stalwart and exemplary lives. Unfortunately, the Chief's own sons, Harold and Bill, were everything the Chief was not. The boys were wild and disobedient. They drank and smoked by the age of 15, raced cars, and shot guns.

The boys continued to be a disappointment throughout their father's life. Harold ended up building an empire in Alaska and Bill became a real estate developer. When the Chief died, neither son wanted to run Camp Sequoyah. Harold hated the South and wanted to stay in Alaska. Bill wanted to sell off the property to be used for lumber and housing developments. Oddly enough, no one gave Karen the opportunity to run the camp. Karen had her father's vision but since there was not a will there was absolute in no way to Karen could get Camp Sequoyah, because Harold and Bill hated her husband. There is absolutely no way Eustace Conway III would get his hands on Camp Sequoyah. It turns out that Big Eustace would have given anything to have Camp Sequoyah. He had worked as his father-in-law's right hand and was revered by campers and staff as being one of the best nature educators that had ever lived. Eventually, Big Eustace gave up the hope of ever running Camp Sequoyah and went on to his job as a chemical engineer. This may have been part of the reason Big Eustace was so dead set against the life of Little Eustace. Perhaps he was jealous because he would never have the opportunities that Little Eustace would have.

Camp Sequoyah finally succumbed in the 1970s because no one could run the operation like the Chief. Little Eustace wanted to take over the camp at that time but he was a child and no one would listen.

The Long Riders made their momentous trip across America in 1999. When Eustace returned to Turtle Island, he found his beloved paradise in shambles. Over the years Turtle Island had gone from a piece of wilderness to a highly organized primitive farm. Conway built many buildings in various styles and took great care in fashioning bridges, pastures and paths. There was much evidence of traditional craftsmanship at Turtle Island. When Conway left to go on the trip across the country, the apprentices were left in charge. Conway had never been able to find a manager for the preserve and there was nobody who could perform all of the tasks routinely performed by Eustace. It would be ridiculous to assume that such a manager could exist. Eustace did virtually everything at the preserve, and even if a person could be found that would be able to handle even a portion of the duties, Conway's unrelenting perfectionism most likely would have driven the manager away. Before Conway departed, he told the apprentices not to kill the animals or burn down any of the buildings. Upon Conway's return he discovered that the apprentices had kept their promise, but had done little else. The

paths were overgrown, the bridges were in need of repairs, and the animals were put into the wrong pastures. Eventually Conway hired a program manager in the form of a gifted naturalist. The program manager could take over some of the daily duties of the operation and organize the educational aspects of the preserve. This would free Eustace to concentrate on his apprenticeship program. Although things seemed to be going well, Conway began to doubt that he would ever make any lasting change on American society.

Gilbert details the arrival of Alice, a young hippie girl who wanted nothing more than to return to nature just like Eustace Conway. The book contains a letter written by Alice introducing herself to Eustace and crowing with joy over the beauty and primitiveness of Turtle Island. Alice moved to Turtle Island to live out the fantasy of living as the characters did on "Little House on the Prairie." Seven months later, Alice wrote a scathing letter to Conway, claiming bad treatment along with many other complaints. Conway relayed that Alice was a hippie and a lounge-about. The girl had done a lot of drugs in her youth and the toll on her brain was apparent. Alice was unable to learn to perform certain tasks and constantly pulled many cockamamie stunts that put herself and others in danger. The final straw came on the day when Conway was preparing to train a young horse to pull his buggy. Conway settled himself in the buggy, and before Alice handed him the reins, the girl untethered the horse. The young horse was skittish and took off into the woods. There was no way Conway could control the horse without the reins. Conway had to jump out of the buggy in the woods as it was going 25 mph. Conway landed on his face and was seriously injured. The horse was also injured and the buggy was ruined. The buggy was a Mennonite antique that Conway was in the process of restoring. Along with the injuries, Alice's stunt cost Conway \$2,000.

Gilbert goes on to talk about the other employees at Turtle Island and Conway's interaction with the staff. Conway began to burn out and to lose hope that he would ever fully achieve his dreams.

# Chapter 9-Epilogue

## Chapter 9-Epilogue Summary and Analysis

Chapter 9 begins with Gilbert and Conway getting drunk on whiskey and giggling over their own jokes. Gilbert told Conway that he needed to lighten up, to let people see the spontaneous and fun side of him. It is apparent that Conway does not know how to do that.

Eustace Conway was in control of many things but love was not one of them. The closest Conway ever came to having a family came and went with a 24-year-old girl named Ashley. Ashley was a great deal like Conway. The only issue Conway had was that Ashley had three children to another hippie who still spent a significant amount of time in the children's lives. Gilbert tried to convince Conway that love doesn't work off a grocery list like the one Conway had prepared.

Gilbert follows Conway through the next few years, detailing the development of Turtle Island. It is clear that the world has become much of what Conway had hoped it would not - fast paced, cynical, and the producer of people without honor, loyalty, and a love for nature.

The chapter ends with a story about Dave Reckford, a young man that spent many years being lost. It was Eustace Conway that helped Reckford find himself. In that way, Conway did help to change the world.

Epilogue:

Gilbert summarizes Conway's life very briefly before recounting a conversation in which the author tells Conway to spend less time telling people how to live life and spend more time living it. It is clear that Conway knows Gilbert is right but somewhere along the way lost the ability to do just that.



# Characters

## Eustace Conway

Eustace Conway (1961- ) is an American naturalist, preservationist, and owner operator of Turtle Island Preserve in North Carolina.

Author Elizabeth Gilbert refers to Eustace Conway as the last American man. Although Conway was raised in Gastonia, North Carolina, he chose to make his life in the woods. Conway's first real foray into a life of a naturalist came when he was seven years old. By the time Conway was 12 he began to stay in the woods alone, surviving off the land. When Conway was 17 he moved out of the family home and lived in the woods in a tepee, surviving solely off the land and his own wilderness survival abilities.

Although Conway came up in the 1960s, the young man had a fascination with ancient ways and the naturalist lifestyle that defied everything his parents and most of civilization stood for at the time. As a result of this unusual behavior, Conway had almost no friends, save for Randy Cable, the son of an Appalachian mountain man.

Conway gained much of his knowledge from his mother, an unrepentant tomboy, and the Scheile Museum, a small natural history museum. At the museum, Conway became an apprentice of sorts to the museum's director, Alan Stout.

During Conway's lifetime he chose to live rather than attempt to make a living and by and large shunned modern conveniences and the current way of American life. One way in which Conway made a living was by speaking to groups of people, particularly young people in schools and camps. The author states that she was shocked when Conway's mere presence settled a group of rowdy teenagers. Gilbert refers to it as a scene straight from the movie "To Sir with Love."

Although Conway has devoted his life to spreading the message of nature to people all over the world, the man found that many people were unwilling or unable to receive his message.

## The American Man

The American man is part stereotype, part myth. Unlike provincial young men in Europe who retreat to large cities in order to become refined gentlemen, the American man leaves civilization to find his way in nature, most often in the Wild West. Therefore, the American man is nothing like the European man; he is not a gentleman, but a man. The American man was not an intellectual and had no interest in reflection or formal study.

"Instead, he could stereotypically be found, as the explorer John Fremont described the uber-frontiersman Kit Carson, 'mounted on a fine horse without a saddle and scouring bareheaded over the prairies'" (Chapter 1, page 5).



The American man seemed to be a tourist attraction for visitors throughout the 18th and 19th centuries. The most amazing thing to foreigners was the amount of resourcefulness exhibited by the American man. This resourcefulness was "born out of the challenges of wrenching a New World from virgin wilderness" (Chapter 1, page 5). Additionally, the American man worked hard and fast and was able to accomplish more in few years than Europeans could in centuries.

Isabella Bird, a famous English travel writer, was enthralled by the American man, referring to him as tall and handsome with a broad chest and an aquiline nose. The men were also intriguing because of their unusual attire, which consisted of leather jackets, large boots with embroidered tops, leather clothing, and silver spurs. The men thrilled Bird with racy stories and manner that was as free as the wind.

## **Elizabeth Gilbert**

Elizabeth Gilbert is the author of "The Last American Man." Gilbert appreciates Conway's lifestyle and contributions and mirrors them with her way of life as a twenty-something, self-proclaimed cowgirl. Although Gilbert was raised in Connecticut, the author chose to shun the modern way of life and spend time in Wyoming, where she invented an entirely new persona. Gilbert met Eustace Conway in New York City in 1993.

## **Alan Stout**

Alan Stout is the director of the Scheile Museum, a small natural history museum located in Gastonia, North Carolina. Stout was Conway's teacher and mentor.

## **Davy Crockett**

Davy Crockett was the ultimate frontiersman, politician and American folk hero, who was often referred to as "King of the Wild Frontier."

## **Randy Cable**

Randy Cable was Eustace Conway's childhood friend, son of an Appalachian mountain man.

## **Judson Conway**

Judson Conway is Eustace Conway's brother and friend to author Elizabeth Gilbert.

## **Theodore Roosevelt**

Theodore Roosevelt was the president of the United States and one of the American men to shun modern civilization in order to explore the wilderness.

## **Frederick Jackson Turner**

Frederick Jackson Turner (1861 - 1932) was an American historian, staunch preservationist and author of "The Significance of the Frontier in American History."

## **Walton Conway**

Walton Conway is Eustace Conway's brother.

# Objects/Places

## American Frontier

Since colonial times, the American frontier was considered to be any place in the new world that was not yet inhabited and beyond the reach of the Europeans. Soon the American frontier became synonymous with the forested interior of the country and what eventually became known as the Wild West.

Frederick Jackson Turner (1861 - 1932), an American historian and author of "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" was one of the foremost to defenders of the American frontier. Turner believed that the uninhabited land of the West gave people a sense of unlimited opportunity and therefore shaped a new segment of society. In fact, Turner believed that the existence of the American frontier is what gave new spirit and encouragement to bridge the gap between modern civilization and savagery.

Turner's work was responsible for the foundation of the future of the recording of American history and the solidified concept of the American frontier.

The American frontier fell wide open after the Treaty of Paris in 1783, when it was ruled that Americans would have access and ownership to lands west of the Appalachian Mountains. This time, soon to be famous pioneers such as Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett had already forayed as far west as Kentucky. In 1890, the United States Census Department stated that the American frontier was to be officially closed. Many Americans, including Turner, feared what this might mean to pioneers and future generations.

## Turtle Island Preserve

Turtle Island Preserve is a 1,000-acre nature preserve owned by Conway, located eight miles outside of Boone, North Carolina. The preserve is used mainly as an educational facility, where participants learn about the governing laws of nature. Conway has a hands-on approach at the facility, teaching and acting as tour guide. As a master horseman, Conway offers participants the opportunity to learn about horses and other animals on the preserve.

At the facility, participants may learn how to chop wood, live off the land, and learn the art of traditional crafts such as woodworking, blacksmithing, spinning, pottery, stonework, basket weaving, and more. Participants also learned about flora and fauna, leadership skills, teamwork, and how to enjoy life without computers and television.

Turtle Island Preserve is well-known for its summer camps for kids, ages 7-18.

Turtle Island Preserve has also been featured in a National Geographic book titled "The 100 Best Vacations to Enrich Your Life."

## **Wyoming**

Wyoming is one of the last pieces of wilderness, chosen by the author to reinvent herself as a cowgirl.

## **New York City**

New York City was the home to author Elizabeth Gilbert and the city in which she met Eustace Conway for the first time.

## **Gastonia, North Carolina**

Gastonia, North Carolina is the small city where Eustace Conway was born and raised.

## **Boone, North Carolina**

Boone, North Carolina is the home to 1,000-acre Conway's Turtle Island Preserve.

## **Scheile Museum**

The Scheile Museum is a small natural history museum located in Gastonia, North Carolina. Museum director Alan Stout was Conway's teacher and mentor.

## **Asheville, North Carolina**

Asheville, North Carolina is a small city located about two hours south of Boone and the Turtle Island Preserve.

## **Blue Ridge Mountains**

The Blue Ridge Mountains are the mountain range in which Turtle Island Preserve is located.

## **Preserve**

A preserve is a parcel of land devoted to the protection of various forms of flora, animals, and nature.

# Themes

## The American man

The American man is part stereotype, part myth. Unlike provincial young men in Europe who retreat to large cities in order to become refined gentleman, the American man leaves civilization to find his way in nature, most often in the Wild West. Therefore, the American man is nothing like the European man; he is not a gentleman, but a man. The American man was not an intellectual and had no interest in reflection or formal study.

"Instead, he could stereotypically be found, as the explorer John Fremont described the uber-frontiersman Kit Carson, 'mounted on a fine horse without a saddle and scouring bareheaded over the prairies'" (Chapter 1, page 5).

The American man seemed to be a tourist attraction for visitors throughout the 18th and 19th centuries. The most amazing thing to foreigners was the amount of resourcefulness exhibited by the American man. This resourcefulness was "born out of the challenges of wrenching a New World from virgin wilderness" (Chapter 1, page 5). Additionally, the American man worked hard and fast and was able to accomplish more in few years than Europeans could in centuries.

Isabella Bird, a famous English travel writer, was enthralled by the American man, referring to him as tall and handsome with a broad chest and an aquiline nose. The men were also intriguing because of their unusual attire, which consisted of leather jackets, large boots with embroidered tops, leather clothing, and silver spurs. The men thrilled Bird with racy stories and manner that was as free as the wind.

## Turtle Island Preserve

A great deal of Elizabeth Gilbert's "The Last American Man" details the founding and development of Turtle Island Preserve. Turtle Island Preserve is a 1,000-acre nature preserve owned by Conway, located eight miles outside of Boone, North Carolina. The preserve is used mainly as an educational facility, where participants learn about the governing laws of nature. Conway has a hands-on approach at the facility, teaching and acting as tour guide. As a master horseman, Conway offers participants the opportunity to learn about horses and other animals on the preserve.

At the facility, participants may learn how to chop wood, live off the land, and learn the art of traditional crafts such as woodworking, blacksmithing, spinning, pottery, stonework, basket weaving, and more. Participants also learned about flora and fauna, leadership skills, teamwork, and how to enjoy life without computers and television.

Turtle Island Preserve is well-known for its summer camps for kids, ages 7-18.

Turtle Island Preserve has also been featured in a National Geographic book titled "The 100 Best Vacations to Enrich Your Life."

## **American Frontier**

In Eustace Conway's own way, he is one of the preservers of the American frontier. Since colonial times, the American frontier was considered to be any place in the new world that was not yet inhabited and beyond the reach of the Europeans. Soon the American frontier became synonymous with the forested interior of the country and what eventually became known as the Wild West.

Frederick Jackson Turner (1861 - 1932), an American historian and author of "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" was one of the foremost to defenders of the American frontier. Turner believed that the uninhabited land of the West gave people a sense of unlimited opportunity and therefore shaped a new segment of society. In fact, Turner believed that the existence of the American frontier is what gave new spirit and encouragement to bridge the gap between modern civilization and savagery.

Turner's work was responsible for the foundation of the future of the recording of American history and the solidified concept of the American frontier.

The American frontier fell wide open after the Treaty of Paris in 1783, when it was ruled that Americans would have access and ownership to lands west of the Appalachian Mountains. This time, soon to be famous pioneers such as Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett had already forayed as far west as Kentucky. In 1890, the United States Census Department stated that the American frontier was to be officially closed. Many Americans, including Turner, feared what this might mean to pioneers and future generations.

# Style

## Perspective

Elizabeth Gilbert is the author of "The Last American Man." Gilbert appreciates Conway's lifestyle and contributions and mirrors them with her way of life as a twenty-something, self-proclaimed cowgirl. Although Gilbert was raised in Connecticut, the author chose to shun the modern way of life and spend time in Wyoming, where she invented an entirely new persona.

Because Gilbert chose to raise herself in much the same way Conway did, the author is able to relate to the preservationist. Like Conway, Gilbert grew up in a suburban neighborhood. However, Gilbert's parents did everything possible to raise their children in an old way of life, with farming and the ultimate resourcefulness. It is perhaps that upbringing that allowed Gilbert to reinvent herself as a cowgirl and to survive out on the open range.

Gilbert met Eustace Conway in New York City in 1993. Since that time, Gilbert has spent time at the Turtle Island Preserve, learning about Conway's way of life and assisting in the creation and upkeep of the preserve. Gilbert says "Nobody gets to visit Turtle Island without working" (Chapter 6, page 131).

It is obvious from Gilbert's perspective and style that she has great respect, admiration, and love for Conway and all he hopes to accomplish.

## Tone

The tone used in "The Last American Man" by Elizabeth Gilbert is definitely partisan and biased. The book is written in the first person point of view through the eyes of author Elizabeth Gilbert. It is clear that even before Gilbert met Eustace Conway she held a kind of reverence toward him. Gilbert met Judson Conway in Wyoming, and the two became good friends. It was through Judson that Gilbert met Eustace in 1993.

Gilbert clearly has a fondness for the Conways and their way of living. Although Gilbert clearly has great knowledge of the American frontier and its development, at no time does she profess to be an expert. In fact, Gilbert often remarks that she wasn't actually there. The same can be said of Eustace's youth and early adventures in the wilderness.

Over the years, Gilbert has spent a great deal of time with Conway and at Turtle Island Preserve. The details of those years are written in a straightforward manner, without any sugar coating or editing, giving the reader a realistic picture of Conway, Gilbert and America.

Although biographies and history lessons can sometimes be dry and boring, Gilbert infuses her work with a great deal of humor and sarcasm, making it an entertaining and informative read.

## Structure

"The Last American Man" by Elizabeth Gilbert is a work of nonfiction. It is comprised of 268 pages, broken down into nine chapters and an epilogue.

The shortest chapter, the epilogue, is seven pages in length; the longest chapter is 71 pages in length. The average number of pages per chapter is 27.

Chapter 1 details Eustace Conway's youth in Gastonia, North Carolina. The reader learns about Conway's adventures in the woods beginning at age 7 and goes up to the first time the author Elizabeth Gilbert accompanied Conway on one of his lectures for teenagers at camp. This chapter also details a similar youth for Gilbert.

Chapter 2 talks about Conway's work at the Scheile Museum with director Alan Stout; Conway's mother and grandfather, Chief Johnson, operator of Camp Sequoyah in the 1930s. The chapter also discusses Conway's friendship with Randy Cable.

Chapter 3 discusses the American frontier, including the lives of Davy Crockett and Conway's trip across the Appalachian trail.

Chapter 4 details Conway's relationship with Donna Henry and the process of developing his philosophy and destiny as a teacher.

Chapter 5 discusses the early frontier and its peoples.

Chapter 6 details the ownership and procurement of Turtle Island Preserve.

Chapters 7 and 8 discuss Conway's activities at Turtle Island Preserve and its development as well as his ability when handling horses.

Chapter 9 details the relationship between Conway and the author.

The Epilogue summarizes Conway as well as the book.



## Quotes

"Instead, he could stereotypically be found, as the explorer John Fremont described the uber-frontiersman Kit Carson, 'mounted on a fine horse without a saddle and scouring bareheaded over the prairies.'"

(Chapter 1, page 5)

"If we don't cultivate our own food supply any more, do we need to pay attention to the idea of, say, seasons? Is there any difference between winter and summer if we can eat strawberries every day?"

(Chapter 1, page 15)

"If people love the Bible so much, Eustace wondered, why couldn't they just obey the clear instructions it offers and quit lying, cheating, stealing, murdering, and whoremongering?"

(Chapter 3, page 55)

"No, Eustace wanted Turtle Island to be the setting of a colossal utopian experiment in which he would try to do nothing less than change and save America."

(Chapter 5, page 95)

"Eustace was killing himself with work."

(Chapter 5, page 109)

"He was in bliss over the success of what he had created. There seemed no limit to what he could teach up here."

(Chapter 5, page 112)

"Nobody gets to visit Turtle Island without working."

(Chapter 6, page 131)

"To Judson's eternal credit, he was willing at times to sacrifice his authentic cowboy image for practicality."

(Chapter 7, page 159)

"Dismissing apprentices is never easy, particularly since it's a point of pride for Eustace Conway to claim that anyone can learn to live this primitive life, and he is the man who can teach anybody."

(Chapter 8, page 201)

"In more primitive societies, a boy might go through an entire year of initiation rites to usher him into manhood"

(Chapter 8, page 201)

"Sometimes I'm lucky enough to have a glimpse into that best part of Eustace Conway in the most unlikely instances. Sometimes the moment just finds him."  
(Epilogue, page 267)

## Topics for Discussion

Discuss the role of Eustace Conway's parents in his upbringing. Do you think Karen Conway was a bad mother? Why do you think his father was so critical of everything Eustace did?

What do you think spurred Eustace Conway's interest in the wilderness and living the life of a naturalist?

Elizabeth Gilbert, Judson Conway and others completely reinvented themselves in Wyoming. Why do you think no one ever called them on their charade? How do you think they managed to pull off their new personalities?

Why do you think Conway have such a difficult time keeping staff at turtle Island preserve? Do you agree that the staff issue would have been much better if the workers were less focused on their own feelings and needs?

What is it about Eustace Conway that causes everyone to stop and take notice, from rowdy teenagers to drug dealers?

Why do you think people are unable to absorb Conway's message? Do you think that people are too busy or simply aren't interested?

Conway openly admits to putting on an act of the wild mountain man to get attention. Do you think this behavior tarnishes Conway's reputation? Explain.