Big magic

by Elizabeth Gilbert · Language: EN

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Overview

Elizabeth Gilbert's "Big Magic: Creative Living Beyond Fear" is a profound and encouraging exploration of creativity, urging readers to embrace a life driven by curiosity rather than fear. Gilbert posits that creativity is not solely the domain of a select few geniuses, but rather an inherent human trait accessible to everyone. She challenges conventional notions of the tortured artist, advocating for a more joyful, playful, and persistent approach to creative pursuits.

The book's central argument revolves around the idea that creative ideas are living entities, independent of human will, that seek out collaborators to bring them into existence. Gilbert encourages readers to be receptive to these ideas, to pursue them with courage and commitment, and to understand that fear is an inevitable companion on the creative journey, but should never be allowed to take the driver's seat. "Big Magic" is a call to action for anyone who has ever felt a creative impulse but hesitated due to self-doubt, perfectionism, or the pressure to make their art profitable. It champions the idea of living a "big magic" life—one filled with wonder, passion, and the consistent pursuit of what lights you up, regardless of the outcome.

Key Takeaways

- Embrace curiosity as your primary guide in creative endeavors, letting it lead you to new discoveries and passions.
- Acknowledge fear as a natural companion on the creative journey, but never allow it to dictate your actions or stop you from creating.
- Give yourself explicit permission to create, understanding that you don't need external validation or a perfect plan to begin.
- Cultivate persistence and a strong work ethic, showing up consistently for your creative work even when inspiration wanes.
- Trust in the mysterious process of creativity, believing that ideas are independent entities seeking human collaboration.
- Unburden your creativity from the pressure of financial success, allowing yourself to pursue projects purely for the joy and fulfillment they bring.
- Don't wait for perfection or genius; start creating now with what you have, where you are.
- Understand that a creative life is a process of continuous learning, experimenting, and adapting, not a destination.

Chapter Summaries

Courage

Gilbert begins by asserting that a creative life is an amplified life, but it requires courage, not fearlessness. She argues that fear is a natural, ancient companion to creativity, but it should never be allowed to drive the creative process. Instead, one must learn to coexist with fear, acknowledging its presence but choosing to act despite it. She encourages readers to pursue their curiosity and passion, emphasizing that the biggest risk is not taking any risks at all. The chapter highlights the importance of showing up and doing the work, even when fear is present, and reframes the relationship with fear as a necessary, but not controlling, part of the creative journey. She stresses that a creative life is about living more fully, not just about producing art, and that the rewards are intrinsic.

Enchantment

This section delves into Gilbert's mystical view of ideas. She proposes that ideas are living, disembodied entities that float around the universe, seeking human collaborators to bring them into reality. She describes how an idea will 'visit' a person, presenting itself as a flash of inspiration or a persistent nudge. If the person doesn't act on the idea, or if they abandon it, the idea will eventually leave them and move on to find another, more willing collaborator. Gilbert shares personal anecdotes, including the idea for Eat, Pray, Love and another novel idea that she believes left her to find Ann Patchett. This concept encourages creators to be open, receptive, and diligent in capturing and developing ideas, treating them with respect as if they have a life of their own, independent of the creator.

Permission

Gilbert argues that creators do not need external permission from anyone—parents, teachers, critics, institutions, or even themselves—to pursue their creative endeavors. She advocates for radical self-authorization, encouraging individuals to give themselves the full right to create whatever they wish, simply because they are curious or interested. She challenges the notion that one must be a genius or have a formal education to be a legitimate artist. Instead, she champions the 'amateur' spirit, emphasizing the joy and freedom that come from creating for love, not for profit or validation. This part liberates creators from the burden of seeking approval, urging them to bypass gatekeepers and trust their own inner drive and curiosity as sufficient justification for their work.

Persistence

This chapter emphasizes the critical importance of showing up consistently and doing the work, even when inspiration is absent or the work feels difficult. Gilbert likens creativity to a job, stressing the need for discipline, routine, and a strong work ethic. She introduces the concept of the 'shit sandwich,' explaining that every creative pursuit comes with its own unique set of

unpleasantries, and true persistence means being willing to eat that sandwich. She encourages creators to embrace the grind, to finish projects even if they are imperfect, and to understand that the act of creation itself is the reward, not necessarily the outcome. Persistence is presented as the antidote to procrastination and the key to transforming fleeting inspiration into tangible results.

Trust

Gilbert explores the concept of trusting the creative process, oneself, and the mysterious forces that guide inspiration. She encourages creators to let go of the need for guaranteed outcomes or external validation, and instead, to find joy and fulfillment in the act of creation itself. This involves trusting that one's curiosity and passion are valid guides, and that the universe will support one's efforts. She introduces the idea of 'creative entitlement,' not as arrogance, but as the inherent right to create and to believe that one's voice and ideas matter. Trust also means accepting that not every project will be a masterpiece, and that failure is a natural part of the learning and growth process, fostering resilience and a deeper connection to one's creative spirit.

Divinity

In the final section, Gilbert delves into the more mystical and spiritual aspects of creativity. She suggests that creativity can be a pathway to connecting with something larger than oneself, a divine or transcendent force. She discusses the idea of the 'trickster' nature of creativity, where ideas can be playful, elusive, and sometimes lead to unexpected places. This chapter encourages creators to approach their work with a sense of wonder, humility, and a willingness to be surprised. It's about finding the sacred in the everyday act of making, recognizing that creative expression is a fundamental human impulse, and that by engaging with it, we connect to a deeper sense of purpose and meaning in our lives, embracing the mystery and magic inherent in the creative journey.

Themes

- Creative living
- Overcoming fear
- Divine inspiration
- Persistence and discipline
- Curiosity and wonder
- Self-permission

Frequently Asked Questions

What is Big magic about?

Big Magic by Elizabeth Gilbert is about embracing a creative life beyond fear. It argues that creativity is accessible to everyone, not just artists, and encourages readers to pursue their passions with curiosity, persistence, and joy, rather than waiting for perfection or external validation. It's a guide to living a more engaged and fulfilling life through creative expression.

Is Big magic worth reading?

Yes, Big Magic is widely considered worth reading, especially for anyone struggling with creative blocks, self-doubt, or the pressure to make their art profitable. Gilbert's encouraging, practical, and often humorous advice offers a refreshing perspective on creativity, making it an inspiring read for both seasoned artists and those just beginning to explore their creative impulses.

Who should read Big magic?

Big Magic is ideal for anyone who feels a creative calling, whether they identify as an artist or not. It's particularly beneficial for writers, painters, musicians, or anyone in a creative field, but also for individuals in any profession who want to infuse more curiosity, passion, and innovation into their lives. It's for those who want to overcome fear and embrace a more vibrant existence.

How long does it take to read Big magic?

Big Magic is a relatively short and engaging read. Most readers can finish it in about 3 to 5 hours, depending on their reading speed and how much they pause to reflect on its ideas. It's designed to be digestible and inspiring, making it a quick yet impactful experience.

Best Quotes

“A creative life is an amplified life. It's a bigger life, a more expansive life, a happier life, a more interesting life.”

Courage

Gilbert introduces the core concept of "creative living," asserting that embracing one's natural curiosity and creativity leads to a richer, more fulfilling existence. This line sets the optimistic and empowering tone for the entire book, encouraging readers to pursue their innate creative impulses.

“You do not need anyone's permission to live a creative life.”

Permission

This quote is a powerful declaration of autonomy for aspiring creators. Gilbert emphasizes that external validation or authorization is unnecessary; individuals inherently possess the right and capacity to engage in creative pursuits, freeing them from the need for approval from critics, institutions, or even themselves.

“Your fear is not interesting.”

Courage

Gilbert confronts the pervasive role of fear in stifling creativity. She argues that while fear is a natural companion, it should not be given undue importance or allowed to dictate creative choices. This blunt statement encourages creators to acknowledge fear but proceed with their work regardless.

“Done is better than perfect.”

Persistence

This practical mantra addresses the paralyzing effect of perfectionism. Gilbert advocates for completing projects, even if they are imperfect, over endlessly striving for an unattainable ideal. It encourages action and progress, reminding creators that finished work allows for learning and further creation.

“The universe buries strange jewels deep within us all, and then stands back to see if we can find them.”

Enchantment

This poetic line suggests that every individual possesses unique, hidden creative potential. Gilbert frames creativity as a treasure hunt within oneself, implying that the journey of discovery is as important as the outcome. It encourages introspection and the exploration of one's inner world.

“Ideas are disembodied, energetic life-forms. They are completely separate from us, but they are capable of interacting with us.”

Enchantment

Gilbert introduces her whimsical yet profound theory of ideas as independent entities seeking human collaborators. This concept shifts the burden of originality, suggesting creators are vessels for ideas rather than sole originators, fostering a sense of partnership and reducing pressure.

“Pure unadulterated curiosity is the only thing that will ever lead us to our truest creative path.”

Trust

Gilbert champions curiosity as the most reliable guide for creative exploration. She posits that genuine interest, free from the pressures of outcome or expectation, naturally directs individuals

toward their authentic creative callings. It encourages following one's fascinations without judgment.

“You have to participate relentlessly in the manifestation of your own blessings.”

Persistence

This quote underscores the importance of active engagement and consistent effort in the creative process. Gilbert emphasizes that while inspiration may be magical, its realization requires diligent work and unwavering commitment from the creator. It's a call to proactive creation.

“Creativity is sacred, and it is not sacred.”

Divinity

This paradox encapsulates Gilbert's balanced view of creativity. It acknowledges the profound, almost spiritual aspect of creation while simultaneously demystifying it, suggesting it doesn't need to be treated with such reverence that it becomes intimidating or inaccessible. It's both profound and everyday.

“What is your favorite flavor of shit sandwich?”

Persistence

Gilbert uses this memorable metaphor to illustrate that every pursuit, including creative ones, comes with its own set of difficulties and unpleasant tasks. She encourages readers to choose their creative path based on which challenges they are most willing to endure, rather than seeking a path free of struggle.

“You are the only one who can bring forth the particular thing that is within you.”

Trust

This line stresses the unique and irreplaceable contribution each individual can make to the creative world. Gilbert empowers readers by reminding them that their specific perspective and talent are essential, and if they don't create what's inside them, it will be lost forever.

“Let go of the outcome.”

Trust

Gilbert advises creators to detach from the results of their work, whether it's success, failure, or public reception. By focusing on the joy of the creative process itself rather than external validation, artists can maintain their passion and freedom, making their work more sustainable and authentic.

“The work wants to be made, and it wants to be made by you.”

Enchantment

This quote reinforces Gilbert's idea of ideas as living entities. It suggests that creative projects have an inherent drive to manifest and that specific ideas are seeking specific individuals to bring them to life. This perspective can alleviate pressure and inspire a sense of purpose.

“Don't be a victim of your own creativity.”

Courage

Gilbert warns against the romanticized notion of the suffering artist, urging creators not to let their passion consume them in a destructive way. She advocates for a balanced, joyful approach to creativity, where the process enriches life rather than depleting it.

“You must learn how to become a deeply disciplined half-ass.”

Persistence

This humorous yet profound advice encourages consistency over perfection. Gilbert suggests that showing up regularly and doing some work, even if it's not perfect or inspired, is more effective than waiting for ideal conditions or striving for flawless output, which often leads to inaction.

“The only thing more terrifying than starting is not starting.”

Courage

This quote captures the common fear of beginning a creative project. Gilbert highlights that the regret and unfulfilled potential of never pursuing one's creative impulses can be far more daunting than the initial fear of taking the first step. It's a call to action.

“If you're alive, you're a creative person.”

Permission

Gilbert broadens the definition of creativity, asserting that it is an inherent human trait, not exclusive to artists. This inclusive statement aims to dismantle the intimidation many feel about being "creative," encouraging everyone to recognize and express their unique imaginative capacities.

“You don't need to be a genius; you just need to be a human being who is willing to do the work.”

Divinity

This quote demystifies the concept of genius, making creativity accessible to everyone. Gilbert argues that consistent effort and dedication are more crucial than innate, extraordinary talent, empowering individuals to pursue their creative callings without feeling inadequate.

“The most vital and generous thing you can do for your own spirit is to make some space for creativity.”

Courage

Gilbert frames creativity not as a luxury but as a fundamental need for well-being. She emphasizes that nurturing one's creative impulses is an act of self-care and generosity towards one's inner self, leading to a more vibrant and fulfilling life.

“Recognize that your creative work is not your baby; it is your pet.”

Trust

This analogy encourages a healthy detachment from one's creative output. Gilbert suggests that viewing work as a "pet" allows for love and care without the intense, often suffocating, possessiveness and identity fusion that can come from seeing it as a "baby," fostering resilience and freedom.

Questions & Answers

What is Elizabeth Gilbert's main argument in "Big Magic"?

Gilbert argues that everyone possesses innate creativity and should live a "creative life" driven by curiosity, not fear. She encourages readers to embrace their creative impulses as a natural, joyful, and necessary part of human existence, rather than viewing creativity as a painful struggle reserved for a select few. She posits that ideas are external entities seeking human partners.

What does Gilbert mean by "creative living"?

"Creative living" means a life that is "driven more strongly by curiosity than by fear." It's about actively pursuing what fascinates you, making space for your creative impulses, and engaging with the world in a way that allows for discovery, expression, and joy, regardless of whether it leads to professional success or recognition.

How does Gilbert describe the nature of "ideas"?

Gilbert describes ideas as "disembodied, energetic life-forms" that exist independently and float around, seeking human collaborators. She suggests that an idea will present itself to a person, and if that person doesn't act on it, the idea will move on to find someone else willing to bring it to fruition.

What role does "fear" play in creativity, according to Gilbert?

Gilbert acknowledges fear as a natural companion to creativity, but she insists it should not be allowed to drive or stop the creative process. She advises treating fear like a backseat passenger on a road trip – present, but not in control. The key is to proceed with curiosity despite fear, not to wait for fear to disappear.

What is the significance of "curiosity" in "Big Magic"?

Curiosity is presented as the most reliable and joyful guide for a creative life. Gilbert suggests that following one's genuine fascinations, obsessions, and compulsions, rather than striving for a grand passion or a specific outcome, will naturally lead individuals to their unique creative path and keep them engaged.

Why does Gilbert say "Done is better than perfect"?

Gilbert uses this mantra to combat the paralyzing effects of perfectionism. She argues that striving for an unattainable ideal often leads to inaction and unfinished projects. By prioritizing completion over flawless execution, creators can maintain momentum, learn from their work, and ultimately produce more.

What is the concept of "genius" as discussed in the book?

Gilbert refers to the ancient Roman and Greek concept of "genius" as an external, divine entity that assists artists, rather than an inherent quality of the artist themselves. This perspective aims to alleviate the pressure on creators, suggesting they are partners with genius, not solely responsible for brilliance.

How does Gilbert advise readers to handle criticism or lack of success?

Gilbert encourages creators to detach from the outcome of their work and not let external validation or criticism define their creative worth. She suggests viewing creative work as a "pet" rather than a "baby," allowing for love and care without the intense, often destructive, emotional entanglement that can come from over-identification.

What is the "shit sandwich" metaphor and what does it mean?

The "shit sandwich" metaphor refers to the unavoidable difficulties and unpleasant aspects inherent in any pursuit, including creative ones. Gilbert advises readers to choose their creative path by identifying which "flavor of shit sandwich" – which specific struggles and hardships – they are most willing and able to endure.

What is the difference between a hobby, a job, and a calling in the context of creativity?

Gilbert distinguishes these by their relationship to financial necessity and personal fulfillment. A hobby is done purely for pleasure. A job is done for money, regardless of passion. A calling is something you feel compelled to do, often with deep personal meaning, which may or may not provide financial support. She encourages treating creativity as a calling, even if it's not a job.

What does Gilbert mean by "permission" in the context of creativity?

Gilbert argues that individuals do not need external permission from anyone – parents, teachers, critics, or society – to live a creative life. She emphasizes that the right to create is inherent and that granting oneself permission is a crucial step in overcoming self-doubt and societal expectations that might stifle creative expression.

How does Gilbert suggest maintaining persistence in creative work?

Gilbert advocates for showing up consistently, even if it's just "deeply disciplined half-assing." She emphasizes the importance of routine, treating creativity like a job you show up for, and focusing on the process rather than waiting for perfect inspiration. She also encourages choosing the "shit sandwich" you're willing to eat.

What is the overall tone and message Gilbert conveys to her readers?

Gilbert conveys an overwhelmingly encouraging, optimistic, and empowering tone. Her message is one of liberation from the romanticized suffering artist trope, urging readers to embrace creativity with joy, curiosity, and courage. She aims to demystify creativity and make it accessible and sustainable for everyone.

How does Gilbert address the fear of not being original enough?

Gilbert addresses this by suggesting that ideas are external entities that may visit multiple people. She encourages creators to focus on bringing forth their unique version of an idea, rather than worrying about absolute originality. The emphasis is on showing up and doing the work, trusting that your unique voice will manifest.

Spoiler: What is the main takeaway regarding the "ending" or ultimate goal of a creative life, according to Gilbert?

Spoiler: The ultimate goal of a creative life, according to Gilbert, is not necessarily fame, fortune, or critical acclaim, but rather the profound personal fulfillment and amplified existence that comes from engaging with one's innate curiosity and creative impulses. It's about the joy of the process itself and living a life that feels authentic and alive.

What is the significance of the title "Big Magic"?

The title "Big Magic" refers to Gilbert's belief that creativity is a powerful, mystical force that operates in the world. It encompasses her ideas about ideas as living entities, the concept of genius, and the enchantment of the creative process. It suggests that creativity is not just a human endeavor but a magical interaction with the universe.

How does Gilbert encourage readers to overcome self-doubt?

Gilbert encourages overcoming self-doubt by acknowledging fear but not letting it drive the bus. She advises focusing on curiosity, granting oneself permission to create, and understanding that

perfection is not the goal. By showing up consistently and detaching from outcomes, creators can build confidence and diminish self-doubt's power.

What is Gilbert's view on the "suffering artist" trope?

Gilbert strongly rejects the "suffering artist" trope, arguing that creativity does not require torment or misery. She believes that this romanticized idea is harmful and unnecessary. Instead, she advocates for a joyful, sustainable, and healthy approach to creative work, where the process enriches life rather than depleting it.