



Book Club Set

# Lessons in Chemistry

By Bonnie Garmus

## About the Author



Bonnie Garmus is a copywriter and creative director who has worked widely in the fields of technology, medicine, and education. She's an open-water swimmer, a rower, and mother to two pretty amazing daughters. Born in California and most recently from Seattle, she currently lives in London with her husband and her dog, 99.

Retrieved from: <https://www.bonniegarmus.com/about>

## About the Book

Chemist Elizabeth Zott is not your average woman.

In fact, Elizabeth Zott would be the first to point out that there is no such thing as an average woman. But it's the early 1960s and her all-male team at Hastings Research Institute takes a very unscientific view of equality. Except for one: Calvin Evans; the lonely, brilliant, Nobel-prize nominated grudge-holder who falls in love with—of all things—her mind. True chemistry results.

But like science, life doesn't always follow a straight line. Which is why a few years later Elizabeth Zott finds herself not only a single mother, but the reluctant star of America's most beloved cooking show *Supper at Six*. Elizabeth's unusual approach to cooking ("combine one tablespoon acetic acid with a pinch of sodium chloride") proves revolutionary. But as her following grows, not everyone is happy. That's because Elizabeth Zott isn't just teaching women to cook. She's daring them to change the status quo.

Laugh-out-loud funny, shrewdly observant, and studded with a dazzling cast of supporting characters, *Lessons in Chemistry* is as original and vibrant as its protagonist.

Retrieved from: <https://www.bonniegarmus.com/lessons-in-chemistry>

## Discussion Questions



1. What is your overall impression of Elizabeth as a protagonist? Why was chemistry the right career choice for her?
2. She enters a male-dominated field and it's a constant uphill battle. Have you ever worked in a field like that and/or been in a similar type situation? Could you relate to what Elizabeth went through?
3. How did her unusual upbringing and violated relationship with her parents impact how she approached relationships as an adult?
4. What did you think about the eventual romance between Elizabeth and Calvin? Why were they a good fit, aka, full of 'true chemistry'?
5. Calvin proposes but Elizabeth says no. What was behind her reasoning for turning down the proposal?
6. Why do you suspect the author decided to include the viewpoint of their dog, Six-Thirty?
7. Let's talk about Calvin's death and how that changed everything for Elizabeth.
8. When Elizabeth finds out she's pregnant, she's less than thrilled. She never planned to become a mother and with Calvin's death, she's now all alone to raise their child. In what ways did motherhood surprise Elizabeth?
9. The story features a great supporting cast from the neighbor Harriet (who eventually becomes like an extended family member) to Elizabeth's producer Walter (who becomes her best friend). Who was your favorite supporting character and why?
10. Why did Elizabeth agree to host the cooking show? Why did the show resonate with women across the country?
11. Why did Elizabeth eventually leave the cooking show?
12. What are your thoughts about the reveal that Calvin's real life mother was the one behind the funds to Elizabeth's scientific research?
13. What did you think about the ending overall? What happens next for Elizabeth?

14. Did you feel like you learned any lessons or anything else from reading the novel? Do you have any favorite passages or scenes you would like to discuss?

Retrieved from: <https://bookclubchat.com/books/book-club-questions-for-lessons-in-chemistry-by-bonnie-garmus/>

## Author Interview



**Bonnie, what did you enjoy most about our six-week online Write to the End of Your Novel course?**

I'd been working on *Lessons in Chemistry* for a few years in between work and constant moves and was starting to get that sinking feeling that I might not ever finish. But then my daughter sent me a link to Write to the End of Your Novel and I thought – hey! I can be done with my novel in *six weeks!* Which...I wasn't. But it didn't matter because the course got me out of my slump. Anna Davis is brilliant. She gives solid, empathetic advice about so many things, but it was her ideas about what to do when you're stuck in the middle of the book – and I was *really* stuck – that made me rethink where I was going and how I was going to get there. I also really enjoyed getting to read everyone else's work and getting their feedback. A bunch of us still keep in touch!

**After completing Write to the End of Your Novel you secured a place on our Writing Your Novel – Three Month course. What were the biggest lessons that you took away from studying with us?**

I loved this course because of the people in it. Our instructor, Charlotte Mendelson, was so entertaining. Her lectures on writing were amazing and thought-provoking and we were all better for them. I think everyone will remember the night she demonstrated the art of conflict by engaging us in a game she called 'Fortunately/Unfortunately' where each of us contributed a line to a story where things got better, then got much worse. A talented author, she also writes about gardening for this tiny little magazine no one's ever heard of called *The New Yorker*.

**Many of our students find their writing community on our courses – are you still in touch with any of your course mates?**

We are! Pre-covid, we used to try and get together once a month at Waterstones to share our woes and our successes, but now we rely mostly on our private WhatsApp group to share news and support each other. I'd applied to the three-month course, in part, to force myself to keep making progress, but I was also fairly new to London and didn't know anyone. Starting over in a new place, let alone a new country isn't always so easy. But from the first night, I knew these people were not only serious writers, but were also my kind of people: well-read, funny, and not looking forward to being reviewed in class. We would often go out together after class to wind down, but sometimes we'd also meet *before* class to fortify ourselves for the ensuing comments. Writers are sort of like baby seals: always awaiting that club.

**Shortly after studying with us you gained representation from Curtis Brown's Felicity Blunt. Now your debut *Lessons in Chemistry* will be published by Doubleday in the UK (there are also many more exciting international deals in the works). Can you talk us through how it felt when Felicity delivered the news that you were going to be published?**

I shrieked. Felicity had said (in her calm and reassuring way!) that there was 'a lot of interest,' but when she explained the level of interest, I really couldn't believe it. Like most writers, I tend to assume the worst. But suddenly there I was, in the unfamiliar position of having to choose between my publishing heroes – people I have long noted and admired as the best of the best. It was both surreal and difficult. I lost a lot of sleep. In fact, I kept getting up in the middle of the night to check my email because I was sure I'd dreamed the whole thing. One night, when I was getting up yet again, my husband mumbled, 'let me save you a trip. It's real.'

**The relationship between author and agent is a special one. Was there any point before signing the client agreement where things 'clicked', and you knew you had to work together?**

I was in a state of denial that night I met Felicity. I had already identified her as my dream agent, so when she took me aside, I suddenly found myself back in Charlotte's game. (*Fortunately*, Felicity told me she liked my work! *Unfortunately*, she'd mixed me up with someone else!) But within a few minutes, I found myself so at ease with her. She's really fun, really kind, and so extremely (scarily) smart. The fact that we both don't like yoga was just icing on the cake. Our next meeting in her office was one of the easiest, most exciting conversations I've ever had. To be paired with an agent who 'got me' was something every writer dreams of. I've been writing professionally for a very long time and have worked with scores of reviewers, editors, and clients. But when it comes to trusting someone with your manuscript, it's a different ballgame. You want someone who supports you, but also pushes you. And that's what she did. And the fact that she was willing to take a chance on me – she signed me before I finished the book – was flat-out crazy. That's trust. That's belief. It's also maybe just a little bit insane.

**Can you tell us a little bit about the work you did together on *Lessons in Chemistry* before sending the book out to editors?**

The best thing about Felicity is that she doesn't sugarcoat anything. I knew my structure and pacing were wobbly, but naturally, I was hoping she wouldn't notice. (She did.) But then she went on to give me the kind of critical feedback I work best with – the kind that identifies balance issues (too fast here; too slow here; more from this character) but

trusts me to fix these things in my own way. She never once questioned the voice, the POVs, the number of rules I was breaking, the story's internal drive – nothing. She was the one who convinced me to make Elizabeth Zott more vulnerable and to add more about the mother-daughter relationship. I tortured her throughout with my dog character (SORRY FELICITY!). He used to have a much larger role. But I think she was right (*again*) about scaling him back. (Although whenever a reader tells me how much they love the dog and wished there'd been more of him, I always make sure to share that news with her.????)

Did she torture me? Yes! But that's what you want. You want someone to care enough to torture you. And if I really didn't want to make a certain change, she'd graciously let it stand. I always question people who say they love to write. I guess I'd say I love to tell a story. The actual writing – the blank page paralysis, self-doubt, spontaneous bathroom cleaning, trips to the refrigerator, I could do without. Also, credit Felicity with the title! We had to change it about five minutes before she released it!

***Lessons in Chemistry* is a vibrant, feminist story set in the 1960s with an amazing protagonist – Elizabeth Zott – a chemist turned cooking show host. Bonnie, what first inspired the character of Elizabeth and for you to tell her story?**

Our world is beset by problems and yet our society keeps far too many of the best and brightest minds from tackling these problems due to a long history of sexism, racism, and self-serving political narrow-mindedness. I wanted to write about a woman who refused to accept these limits at a time when women could not--and who, through cooking and science, restores a sense of purpose and capability to her audience. At the same time, and despite some of the serious underlying themes, I wanted to make the book entertaining and fun to read. The world's pretty dark these days -- I didn't want to pile on!

Retrieved from: <https://www.curtisbrowncreative.co.uk/blog/interview-bonnie-garmus-and-felicity-blunt-lessons-in-chemistry>



## Other Links and Resources



Lessons in Chemistry — First Look | Apple TV+  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0PQE-Xcx1Gs>

Lessons in Chemistry the show information:  
<https://www.apple.com/tv-pr/originals/lessons-in-chemistry/>

Bonnie Garmus, Lessons in Chemistry author, with Dr. Carla Hayden podcast:  
<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/bonnie-garmus-lessons-in-chemistry-author-with-dr/id1305094066?i=1000615303190>

Book of the Day - Weekend Edition, NPR 8 minute listen  
<https://www.npr.org/2022/04/07/1091451057/in-lessons-in-chemistry-a-chemist-is-the-star-of-a-cooking-show?t=1659104578673>

The Women's Podcast EP 556 Bonnie Garmus: Lessons in Chemistry:  
<https://shows.acast.com/6155e18746dfcc0014273af1/episodes/ep-556-bonnie-garmus-lessons-in-chemistry>

## Share your thoughts with other readers!



DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

BOOK CLUB: \_\_\_\_\_

BOOK TITLE: \_\_\_\_\_

As a group we rated this book:

1	2	3	4	5
Ugh!		It was OK...		Loved it!

Would we recommend this book to other book clubs?

Yes              No              Undecided

Why/why not?

Our discussion: