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About Bonnie Garmus



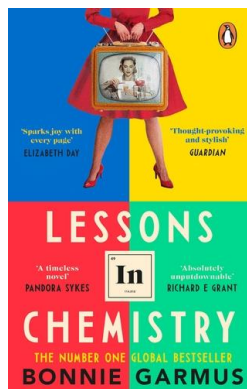
Bonnie Garmus
PHOTO CREDIT: Serena Bolton

[photo credit: Serena Bolton]

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 a 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.

Source: <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/authors/2249085/bonnie-garmus/>

Synopsis – Lessons in Chemistry



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 is unpredictable. 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. Because as it turns out, 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.

Source: <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/677234/lessons-in-chemistry-by-bonnie-garmus/>

Reviews

New York Times Book Review

She Moved From the Chem Lab to the Kitchen, but Not by Choice

In Bonnie Garmus's debut novel, "Lessons in Chemistry," a woman who has been banished to the home front turns it into a staging ground for a revolution.

LESSONS IN CHEMISTRY

By Bonnie Garmus

Reviewed by: Elisabeth Egan · April 10, 2022

Here are a few words I loathe in conjunction with fiction written by women: Sassy. Feisty. Madcap. These supposedly complimentary adjectives have a way of canceling out the very qualities they're meant to describe: Opinionated. Funny. Intelligent. This last one is not to be confused with its patronizing cousin, Clever. Don't even get me started on Gutsy, Spunky and Frisky — the unfortunate spawn of Relatable.

With that out of the way, let's talk about **LESSONS IN CHEMISTRY, by Bonnie Garmus (Doubleday, 386 pp., \$29)**, a debut novel about a scientist in the 1960s who is opinionated, funny and intelligent, full stop. Unfortunately, Elizabeth Zott has been unceremoniously and brutally sidelined by male colleagues who make Don Draper look like a SNAG (Sensitive New Age Guy).

How, exactly, she was cheated out of a doctorate and lost the love of her life — Calvin Evans, a kindred scientist, expert rower and the father of her daughter, Madeline — are central elements in the story, but feminism is the catalyst that makes it fizz like hydrochloric acid on limestone.

Elizabeth Zott does not have "moxie"; she has courage. She is not a "girl boss" or a "lady chemist"; she's a groundbreaker and an expert in abiogenesis ("the theory that life rose from simplistic, non-life forms," in case you didn't know). Not long after Zott converts her kitchen into a lab equipped with beakers, pipettes and a centrifuge, she gets hoodwinked into hosting a staid television cooking show called "Supper at Six." But she isn't going to smile and read the cue cards. Zott ad-libs her way into a role that suits her, treating the creation of a stew or a casserole as a grand experiment to be undertaken with utmost seriousness. Think molecular gastronomy in an era when canned soup reigned supreme. Baked into each episode is a healthy serving of empowerment, with none of the frill we have come to associate with that term.

In addition to her serious look at the frustrations of a generation of women, Garmus adds plenty of lighthearted fun. There's a mystery involving Calvin's family and a look at the politics and dysfunction of the local television station. There's Zott's love affair with rowing and her unconventional approach to parenthood and her deep connection to her dog, Six-Thirty.

Still, beyond the entertaining subplots and witty dialogue is the hard truth that, in 1961, a smart, ambitious woman had limited options. We see how a scientist relegated to the kitchen found a way to pursue a watered-down version of her own dream. We see how two women working in the same lab had no choice but to turn on each other. We meet Zott's friend and neighbor, Harriet, who is trapped in a miserable marriage to a man who complains that she smells.

"Lessons in Chemistry" may be described with one or all of my verboten words, and it might end up shelved in that maddeningly named section "Women's Fiction," which needs to go the way of the girdle. To file Elizabeth Zott among the pink razors of the book world is to miss the sharpness of Garmus's message. "Lessons in Chemistry" will make you wonder about all the real-life women born ahead of their time — women who were sidelined, ignored and worse because they weren't as resourceful, determined and lucky as Elizabeth Zott. She's a reminder of how far we've come, but also how far we still have to go.

Source: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/04/books/lessons-in-chemistry-bonnie-garmus.html>

Lessons in Chemistry by Bonnie Garmus review – the right comic formula

A tale of female disempowerment in the 50s and 60s gets a culinary tweak in this sweet revenge comedy

Reviewed by: Stephanie Merritt · April 19, 2022

Every now and again, a first novel appears in a flurry of hype and big-name TV deals, and before the end of the first chapter you do a little air-punch because for once it's all completely justified. *Lessons in Chemistry*, by former copywriter Bonnie Garmus, is that rare beast; a polished, funny, thought-provoking story, wearing its research lightly but confidently, and with sentences so stylishly turned it's hard to believe it's a debut. Since the success of [The Queen's Gambit](#) and [The Marvelous Mrs Maisel](#), there's been a renewed interest in stories of pioneering women fighting to prove themselves in traditionally male arenas in the years – late 50s and early 60s – before second-wave feminism took off. Elizabeth Zott, the heroine of *Lessons in Chemistry*, follows firmly in their footsteps; the book also nods to the rediscovery of TV chef Julia Child as a trailblazer, and even echoes *Breaking Bad*'s Walter White in Elizabeth's mantra: "Chemistry is change."

As the novel opens in 1961, Elizabeth is a 30-year-old single mother and the reluctant, "permanently depressed" star of a cooking show for housewives called Supper at Six. By training she is a research chemist, though her academic career has foundered despite her obvious talent, and as the narrative jumps back 10 years we understand why. Female scientists are viewed with suspicion by their male colleagues; from her earliest undergraduate days, Elizabeth has been subject to attacks on her reputation and her person, from the major – sexual assault and theft of her work – to the casual everyday misogyny meted out by people, including other women, who see her independence and single-mindedness as a threat. Even when she finds her soulmate, Nobel-nominated chemist Calvin Evans, their happiness is a further spur to jealous rivals and doomed not to last.

Though she takes the TV gig to pay the bills after being fired from her research institute, Elizabeth initiates a quiet revolution, using her platform to speak directly to millions of housewives about their own capacity for change. Garmus's great skill here is to create a richly comic novel around a character who is entirely deadpan, and to whom some pretty dreadful things happen: "She'd been defined not by what she did, but by what others had done." The comedy exists in the gap between Elizabeth's calm but dogged refusal to be anything less than herself, and the determination of those around her to squeeze her into an acceptable mould.

There are, inevitably, a few first-novel flaws: the narrative perspective hops around too often, dallying with minor characters when its strength is in Elizabeth's inner life. There's a semi-magic-realist strand from the viewpoint of Elizabeth's unnaturally perceptive dog, which some readers may find charming and quirky and others somewhat grating. But Garmus understands the importance of a satisfying resolution; if her revenge comedy relies a little too heavily on coincidence, that's all part of the larger-than-life, Technicolor world she has created. It's easy to see how fluently the story will translate to the screen, but the real pleasure of the novel is in the dry wit of Garmus's writing.

Source: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2022/apr/19/lessons-in-chemistry-by-bonnie-garmus-review-the-right-comic-formula>

Interview

Penguin.co.uk

Bonnie Garmus Interview: 'I had to teach myself chemistry from a 1950s textbook'

Author Bonnie Garmus on the terrible day at work that prompted her to write her debut novel *Lessons in Chemistry* and the inspiration behind Six-Thirty, one of the most inspirational dogs in fiction.

Sarah McKenna · March 29, 2022

After a meeting at work left her in a bad mood, 64-year-old Bonnie Garmus decided it was time to finally put pen to paper: "I sat down and felt like Elizabeth was there with me and I began to write my first chapter." The result was *Lessons in Chemistry*, a story about 1960s America in which Elizabeth Zott, a talented chemist, is forced out of her research job and becomes the star of a popular cooking show. But instead of teaching housewives how to make dinner, she teaches them how to change their lives.

When did it occur to you that you might want to be an author?

Well, I had wanted to be an author since I was five years old, maybe earlier. My daughter found this little book that I wrote when I was probably four. But I had started another novel, which is where Elizabeth Zott came from. She was a very minor character but I never finished that book. Then I wrote another novel, and that didn't go anywhere. And then I wrote this one – and Elizabeth came back. But you know, it's funny, because I know there are all these people who can work and write novels. But since I was working as a copywriter, coming home and writing more was not what I wanted to do. And then there's having kids, walking the dog, exercise – I don't know how people do it.

Your debut novel is being adapted for Apple TV. How does that feel?

It's over-the-top. It's really wonderful, though. It is like giving the child you've raised over to someone else to finish, so that's a little frightening. I have had the pleasure of working with Susanna Grant, who wrote the screenplay for *Erin Brockovich*, and Brie Larson will star as Elizabeth. So I think I'm in really good hands.

What was the hardest part about writing your book?

Some of the darker parts are always really hard for me to write. I get really upset when I write them but I think they're necessary. Darkness is part of everyone's life no matter what.

But the hardest part was actually keeping the science confined within the 1950s and early 1960s. I could not use Google to research because you can't mention things that have been discovered in 1970. It's really hard when you're reading something, and it mentions, you know, a reaction and you think, okay, 'when was that reaction discovered?' Would it fit the timeframe? So I had to teach myself chemistry from a textbook from the Fifties.

Elizabeth Zott is a brilliant scientist but does she understand the politics that surround her?

She's clueless. She really doesn't understand why everyone just doesn't read science books and understand how the world actually works at a molecular level, because that is really basic to our human understanding of what we're here for and how we live on this earth and all the animals that are here with us and all the plant life and everything. And we often go against it. And we're paying the price for that now.

I don't recognise the people in our governments as people who are working in everyone's best interests. We're not really thinking of science in a world which operates on science. It does not operate on religion, or misogyny, or racism or anything – the Earth spins because of science. And I wish that we would respect those laws of science – follow them and allow that to shape our society.

There is a very special character in this book called Six-Thirty, can you tell us more about him?

Okay, well, Six-Thirty is the only character in the book who actually is based on somebody. He is based on a dog I had named Friday who was a really intelligent dog. She had been badly abused but she could learn and she knew a lot of words.

But what I really wanted to do with Six-Thirty was have a voice from the other side of the animal kingdom commenting on us, loving us, but being kind of fed up with us. Commenting on how ridiculous we can be and how much we lie. You know, animals don't really lie. So I really wanted to bring that out in him and also stand back a little and comment on the choices we make.

Which writer do you most admire and why?

Oh, I have a huge list. As a kid the authors I admired the most were Roald Dahl and Louise Fitzhugh, who wrote *Harriet the Spy*. But then I read Dickens and Tolstoy.

I love people who write big stories: Donna Tartt; and oh, gosh, Hanya Yanagihara. I think these people are not only tremendous storytellers, their craft is impeccable. And the craft in a novel is what attracts me to a book. And I love looking at their sentences on the page – if I feel the rhythm, I know I'm going to stick with it.

Tell us about a book you've reread many times

Oh, I've re-read *The Secret History* three times. And I re-read it three times because I cannot believe her sentences. I think she writes so well and it was her debut novel. I think writing like that is really hard. It is a craft.

And I remember it was Maya Angelou who said she was always infuriated when people said, 'Oh, you're just so good at it' and she said, 'No, I'm not good at it. I rewrite every single thing I do.' It is so hard to just stick with writing and make it work.

What's your most surprising hobby?

Well, I like cold water swimming a lot. You know, actually, it's the UK's fault as I picked up that habit in the UK. I think you guys like to 'do' cold – cold water swimming, wild swimming, just in skins. So now unbelievably, I swim just in a swimsuit in the ponds in the winter, but then in the summer, I use a wetsuit for longer swims. I'm a rower too, but I haven't been rowing at all since being in London.

Was that the inspiration for Elizabeth's passion for rowing?

Yeah, because I loved it and also it was the only thing I didn't have to research. I thought 'Oh wait, I know this sport. I can write about it.' And I think rowers are just a strange bunch of people that I love. You know, if you're not a rower, you have no idea why these people are so excited about water conditions and getting up at dawn to be at the boathouse.

What is your ideal writing scenario?

You know, it is really terrible. My husband and I sit at the same table and we work there all day. Then in the evening, we shove our books and our computers aside, and we eat there. So it's not ideal. But we're so used to it now. And it's really quite comfortable. So I don't have an office or a desk or anything but for me I need real silence. I can't work with noise.

One time, I thought, 'Okay, I'm going to be like other authors, and I'm going to go write in a cafe.' And, then I realised I read my stuff out loud and it suddenly occurred to me, 'Oh my God, these people have to listen to me.' And I'm just so surprised no one came over and said, 'Would you shut up?'

Source: <https://www.penguin.co.uk/articles/2022/03/bonnie-garmus-interview-lessons-in-chemistry>

Discussion Questions

Source: Penguin Random House– *Lessons in Chemistry* Reader's Guide
<https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/677234/lessons-in-chemistry-by-bonnie-garmus/9780385547345/readers-guide/>

Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. The late 1950s into the early 1960s was supposedly a halcyon time in American history. But was it? The war was over and men returned home to take back the jobs women had done in their absence. As a result, women were pushed into more subservient roles. What influences played a part in encouraging women to accept their place as only in the home? And why, in today's world, when women are in the workforce in record numbers, are they still doing most of the housework and child-raising?
2. Elizabeth Zott had no formal education, and yet she was able to self-educate, thanks to her library card. With the advent of technology, the library almost seems outdated, though many would argue that the library is more important than ever. Do you think libraries are important? If so, why?
3. Why does Elizabeth always wear a pencil in her hair? Is it a weapon or is it a symbol of strength?
4. Elizabeth refuses to accept limits placed on her by society and insists that others also ignore those limits. How do each of those characters ultimately rise to that challenge? And in what ways have you or others been limited by societal norms?
5. In the book, rowing is a metaphor on how Elizabeth sees a better society: that no one person in the boat is more important than the other. Have you ever participated in anything—work, sports, community efforts—where everyone must “row as one” in order to succeed? What are the hurdles people must overcome in order to reach the point where “it all feels easy”?
6. Six-Thirty is amazed by not only how often humans lie to each other, but how poorly they communicate overall. He struggles to understand the word “smart,” finding its very definition unintelligent. What does “smart” actually mean to you? Have you ever thought about what your pet might be trying to teach you?

7. The dictionary first defines faith as “the complete trust or confidence in someone or something” and “a belief in religious doctrine” second. Madeline draws this same distinction—that faith isn’t based on religion. Knowing this, what role does religion play in the book? What is a Humanist? What does the science of psychology tell us about the human’s desire to believe in something greater than themselves? And why do Elizabeth, Calvin, and Wakely all believe that personal responsibility—faith in one’s self—is more important?

8. The book includes male characters who are sympathetic to Elizabeth’s plight, and yet, with the exception of Calvin and Dr. Mason, have trouble standing up for women or other minorities in the workplace. Why do good-hearted people have trouble speaking up? And what are the consequences of not speaking up?

9. Elizabeth is sometimes depressed by the circumstances in her life. Not coincidentally, her show airs in the “Afternoon Depression Zone.” And yet she’s never a victim. How does she continually pick herself up? What fuels her resilience? And why, after she’s reached stardom, is she more miserable than ever?

10. Harriet Sloane is an inveterate magazine reader. How do magazines and media shape our culture? And what did Harriet mean when she first told Elizabeth to “recommit”? Is there some dream of yours that you wish you would recommit to?

11. Friendship and family are interconnected themes in the book. Can friendships sometimes provide family better than family itself? Walter isn’t Amanda’s biological father, but he loves her fully and is the most present person in her life. On the other hand, Avery Parker still loves the son she never knew. How do you define family?

12. Madeline fills her family tree with Sojourner Truth, Amelia Earhart, and Nefertiti to point out that all humans are related. But if humans are 99.9 percent the same, why do we treat each other so differently?