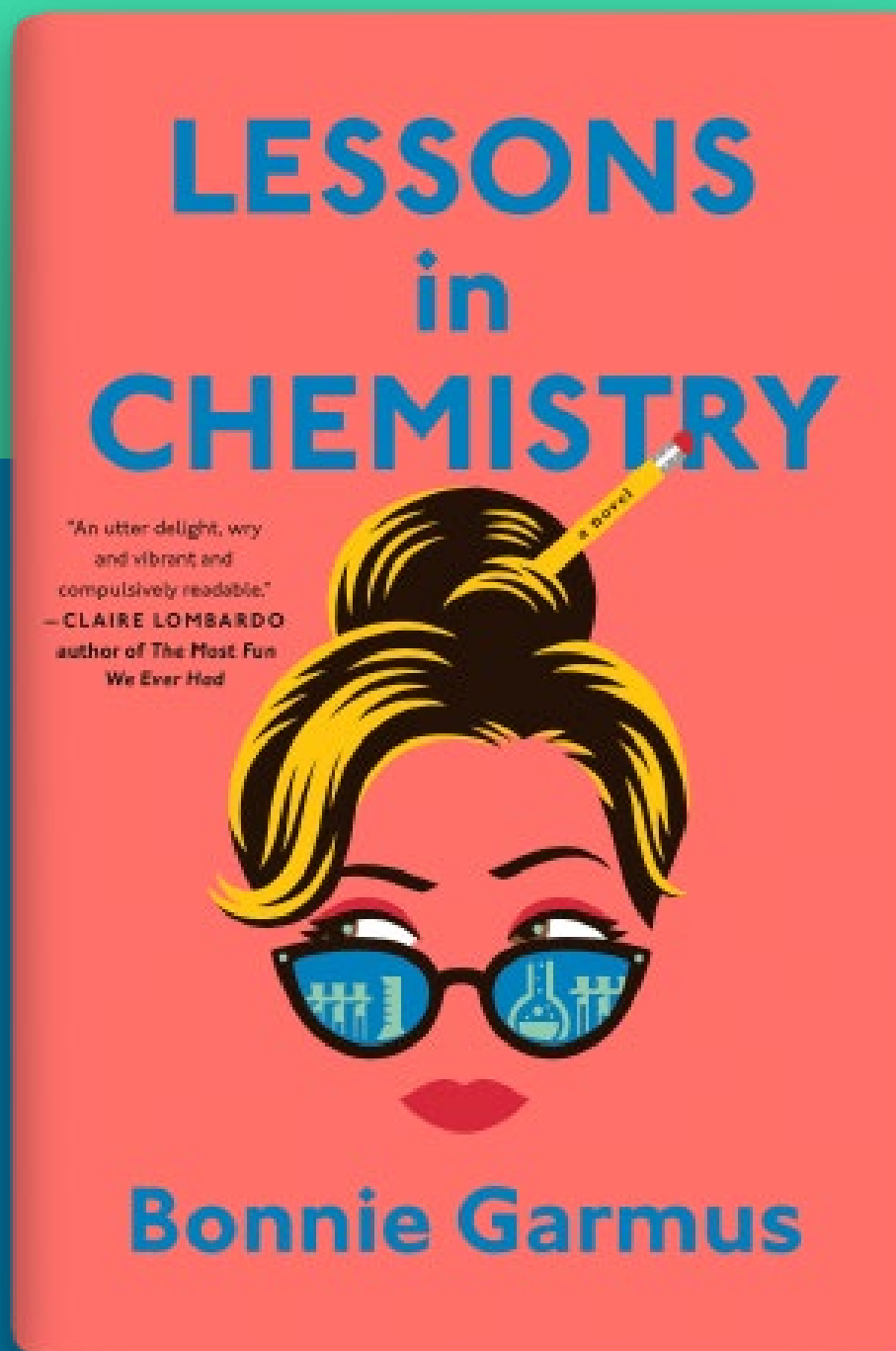


# BOOK CLUB KIT!



Dear Reader:

Thanks for choosing *Lessons in Chemistry* for your book club.

*Lessons in Chemistry* tells the story of Elizabeth Zott, a chemist in the late 1950s-early 1960s who's fired from her research job for the horrific crime of being unwed and pregnant. To make ends meet, she reluctantly accepts a job as a TV cooking show host. But what she doesn't accept are the brainless cue cards she's asked to read, nor the tight dresses she's told to wear.

Instead, Elizabeth decides to teach her mostly female viewers chemistry. Because cooking is chemistry. And along the way, she empowers them to say no to society's limitations; to stand up and be who they really are.

While reviewers have generously called *Lessons in Chemistry* "funny," "delightful," "witty," and "wise," it's my hope you'll also find Elizabeth's rational approach to life a serious inspiration for our times.

Happy Reading!

Bonnie



# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 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 With the advent of technology, the library almost seems outdated, though many would argue that the library is more important than ever.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 for 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?

## Discussion Questions (continued)

- 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?



# Q&A WITH BONNIE GARMUS

**Elizabeth Zott is a character we would all love to know or even become; where did such a personality spring from?**

Fury! I started *Lessons in Chemistry* about seven years ago. I'd just come out of a meeting, irritated by some garden variety sexism, and as I sat down to work, I suddenly realized someone else was sitting there, too. Her name was Elizabeth Zott. Like me, she wasn't in a very good mood. "You think you've had a bad day?" she said. "Well, get a load of this."

Now I should add that Elizabeth Zott wasn't new to me—she'd had a minor role in a different novel I'd started (and shelved) years before. But what was new to me was her certainty of who she was and what she had to say—about society, culture, racism, sexism, religion, and most of all, about change. How to do it and why.

**Was there a particular idea or story that inspired you to write *Lessons in Chemistry*?**

Not really, although I remember feeling like I really needed a new role model—someone who stood up for what she believed in; someone with integrity. That feeling was directly influenced by current politics and a deep-seated feeling that irrationality is on the rise. So I wanted to create a character who represented common sense—who refused to buy into society's latest set of limitations.



© Serena Bolton

**Why did you pick the era of late 1950s and 1960s as the setting of your book?**

I set the book during my mother's era because I wanted to salute a generation of overlooked women—those so-called average housewives. They were the ones who stayed at home, and, despite education and ability, did all the cooking, cleaning, sewing, baking, and ironing, while raising a herd of kids.

Obviously, theirs was a tough job, but it was made even tougher by restrictions of the time. For instance, back then a woman couldn't open a bank account without her husband's permission; she had no legal right to his salary; her name was usually absent from the deed to the house; she couldn't attend an Ivy League school; she couldn't apply for a credit card; she couldn't take birth control (it was illegal in some states and extremely difficult to get in most others); she couldn't serve on a jury; she couldn't practice law; and if she did work outside the home (a rarity) pregnancy was a fireable offense. Worse, all of her labor was trivialized.

Today, when I get frustrated because I think we still haven't made enough progress, I think

back to my mother's era. It reminds me that significant change is possible. We've done it before; we can do it again.

**Six-Thirty is destined to capture people's hearts. Tell us about the dogs in your life.**

I've had a few! My first dog was Charlie, a mutt, and he lived a very long time—nineteen years—thanks to (we believe) the bowl of ice cream he enjoyed every evening. As I child, I worshipped him and imagined he had great powers and heroic tendencies, although for a hero, he slept an awful lot.

Next came Astro and Barney, both mutts from the pound. They were our Best Dogs at our wedding and were great in the role—maybe a little too great—because a lot of our wedding photos feature only them—or them and the bottom half of our legs. We always referred to them as our “starter children.” I really think they helped prepare us for parenthood.

Friday came next—she was yet another pound rescue who'd been so badly abused, her previous owner had been sent to jail. But despite her bad beginning, Friday was basically Gandhi. Incredibly calm, wise, and smart, she had a huge vocabulary—not as big as Six-Thirty's—but large, nonetheless. When we were transferred to Switzerland, she even picked up some German. Friday was the inspiration for Six-Thirty.

Now, we have 99, an eleven-year-old greyhound ex-racer. We live in a small flat in London—99's the biggest thing in it. Living with her is probably the closest we'll ever get to living with a fawn. Extremely sensitive, if she hears crying, she'll try to do something about it—usually by gently pressing herself up against the sad person. Which is nice unless the crier in question is

**“I wanted to create a character who represented common sense—who refused to buy into society's latest set of limitations.”**



someone with a fear of dogs. She's given a few people heart attacks.

**Your book may inspire more young women to become scientists. Did you have similar aspirations when you were younger?**

I never wanted to be a scientist—I always wanted to write novels! But I've always held scientists in high esteem. We all know brilliant minds have been routinely barred from science through systemic sexism, racism, and cultural barriers, and it's still happening today. Science is one field in which keeping women, people of color, people of all genders out is not only unacceptable but perverse given that science itself doesn't recognize intellectual limitations within these groups. So I do hope young women will continue to break through these barriers and flock to science—we need them! But I hope some of them will write novels, too.

**You use the chemistry theme so creatively and make it so much fun. We could have sworn you had a scientific background! Where did the science in the book come from?**

I needed to get the basics down, so I taught myself chemistry using an old textbook from the 1950s—had to be from the '50s so I wouldn't inadvertently mention breakthroughs that



hadn't happened yet. I also used a children's chemistry book—*The Golden Book of Chemistry Experiments*—from the same era. I even conducted a few experiments in our London flat, some of which had iffy results—which is okay in science, but less so in a dense neighborhood. But now I can say for a fact that the London fire department's response time is excellent.

**“I think back to my mother's era. It reminds me that significant change is possible. We've done it before; we can do it again.”**



**Elizabeth Zott refuses to conform to societal limits of her era – are there any particular women in history whom you admire?**

I've got a long list! But I'll start with Rosalind Franklin, whose X-ray diffractions of DNA led directly to the discovery of the double helix—not that James Watson would ever admit to that. I'm also a big fan of Rosa Parks, the activist; Nellie Bly, the journalist; Jane Goodall, the animal behaviorist; Gloria Steinem, the feminist; and Gertrude Ederle, the first woman to swim the English Channel and in a time that beat every male who'd come before her.

**Do you enjoy cooking yourself? Who cooks the most in your house?**

I'm a little embarrassed to admit I don't enjoy cooking! But I do admire those who do



and that's why my favorite meal is the one someone else makes. I think cooking well is hard—it's both an art and a science. Luckily, my husband loves to cook and he's good at it. Nevertheless, we split cooking duties right down the middle. Which means we get a great meal every other day.

**Which books have most influenced you as a writer?**

I read a lot as a child and those books and authors—*Harriet the Spy*, anything by Roald Dahl, Dickens, Nancy Drew, etc., had a huge impact. But as I got older, I read broadly—especially the Russians and the French (*Anna Karenina*, *Madam Bovary*) before getting hooked on great storytellers like John Irving, Donna Tartt, and J.K. Rowling.



**Can you tell us more about the sport of rowing and why you chose to make Calvin a rower?**

That's easy: rowing was the one thing I didn't have to research! Because I'm a rower. But I also wanted to make Calvin a rower because the sport requires an incredible amount of cooperation, plus the ability to withstand pain and embrace endurance. Based on his upbringing, Calvin knew how to withstand pain and endure. But cooperate? That's where people stumble. And that's why I wanted rowing to serve as a thematic device in the book. The fastest boats aren't necessarily the boats with the biggest, strongest people, but rather the boats filled with people who cooperate and communicate well. People who pay attention to the tiny details rowing demands. Every race always starts the same way: with the word, "Attention." And it's those boats that pay attention—that row as one instead of as eight—that win.

# BETTER LIVING THROUGH BROWNIES



## START

- Heat oven to 325° F (162° C)
- Line an 8" (20 cm) square pan with parchment paper



## STEPS

1. Fill a large pot with about an inch of water. Bring to a simmer.
2. Nest a smaller pot within the larger pot to create a double boiler, then add the butter, sugar, salt, and cocoa powder. Stir until the butter is melted and the mixture looks as horrible as your day has been. Air will be carried along on the rough surfaces of the sugar crystals and then encased by a film of fat, creating a foam.
3. Remove from heat. Let cool for a few minutes.
4. Add the vanilla.
5. Add one egg at a time, making sure to fully integrate each one. The egg's protein will prevent the fat-coated air bubbles from collapsing when heat is applied.
6. Add the flour, beating the mixture vigorously with a wooden spoon. Fifty strokes of concentrated aerobic effort should produce a thick batter while relieving your body of excess cortisol.
7. Spatula the mixture into your 8" (20 cm) square pan lined with parchment paper.
8. Bake for 20 - 25 minutes depending on your oven and gooeyness preference.
9. Check doneness by ... oh, never mind ... you know how to do this.



**“I’m not going to pretend that sucrose is an essential ingredient required for our well-being, but I personally feel better when I eat it.”**  
**–ELIZABETH ZOTT**

## INGREDIENTS

- 1.5 sticks butter (or 10 tablespoons/145 grams)
- 1 ¼ cups (250 grams) granulated sucrose
- ¾ cup plus 2 tablespoons (80 grams) unsweetened cocoa powder—the best you can find (Dutch cocoa, in particular, contains a high level of polyphenols)
- ½ teaspoon sodium chloride
- 1 teaspoon vanilla
- 2 large eggs
- ½ cup (65 grams) flour
- ⅔ cup (75 grams) chopped walnuts\*





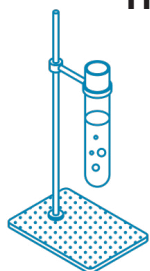


# ELIZABETH ZOTT'S COCKTAIL FOR THE DISENCHANTED WOMAN

**Readers, it's a fact:  
fighting the status  
quo takes a toll.**

**On those days when a  
moment to yourself just isn't  
enough, you can repurpose  
your potatoes and grains  
by employing a pair of  
oxygen and hydrogen atoms  
to replace the hydrogen  
atom in a hydrocarbon.**

**In other words, you can  
make alcohol—specifically  
a secondary alcohol. It is  
called ethanol. However, this  
process takes time and time  
isn't your friend, so instead  
I recommend purchasing a  
bottle of 40 percent ethanol  
in H<sub>2</sub>O. Some call it vodka.**



**The following recipe  
will serve both you  
and your depressed  
neighbor.**

## YOU WILL NEED:

- 2 limes
- Sucrose
- 40 percent ethanol in H<sub>2</sub>O (vodka)



## STEPS:

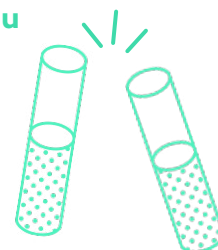
- Zest one lime in a small pan
- Add ½ cup H<sub>2</sub>O
- Add ½ cup sucrose
- Stirring constantly, bring everything to a boil until the sucrose dissolves
- Remove from heat; strain to remove the zest. This will make enough lime syrup for several cocktails, so keep the remainder in your refrigerator.
- Squeeze the zested lime to extract 20 ml lime juice
- Slice the remaining lime into several thin circles



**When you're ready for your moment,  
combine the following in a mixing vessel  
filled with ¾ ice.**

- 40 ml lime syrup
- 80 ml 40 percent ethanol in H<sub>2</sub>O (vodka)
- 20 ml fresh lime juice

**Stir vigorously for approximately  
one minute, then strain into two  
clean beakers. Float lime circle  
on top of each, then drink as you  
plot your next move.**



## LESSONS IN CHEMISTRY

# PLAYLIST



Fly Me to the Moon ----- FRANK SINATRA

L-O-V-E ----- NAT KING COLE

Volare ----- BOBBY RYDELL

Wipe Out ----- THE SURFARIS

On the Sunny Side of the Street ----- FRANK SINATRA

Bye Bye Love ----- THE EVERLY BROTHERS

Stand by Me ----- BEN E. KING

If I Had a Hammer ----- PETER, PAUL AND MARY

Accentuate the Positive ----- PERRY COMO

Green Onions ----- BOOKER T. & THE M.G.'S

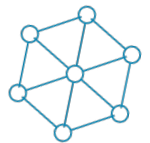
The Periodic Table Song ----- ASAPSCIENCE

Mack the Knife ----- BOBBY DARIN

Please Mr. Postman ----- THE MARVELETTES

Hit the Road Jack ----- RAY CHARLES

La Mer (Beyond the Sea) ----- BOBBY DARIN



The Spotify playlist can be found [here](#). Or scan the code below!

