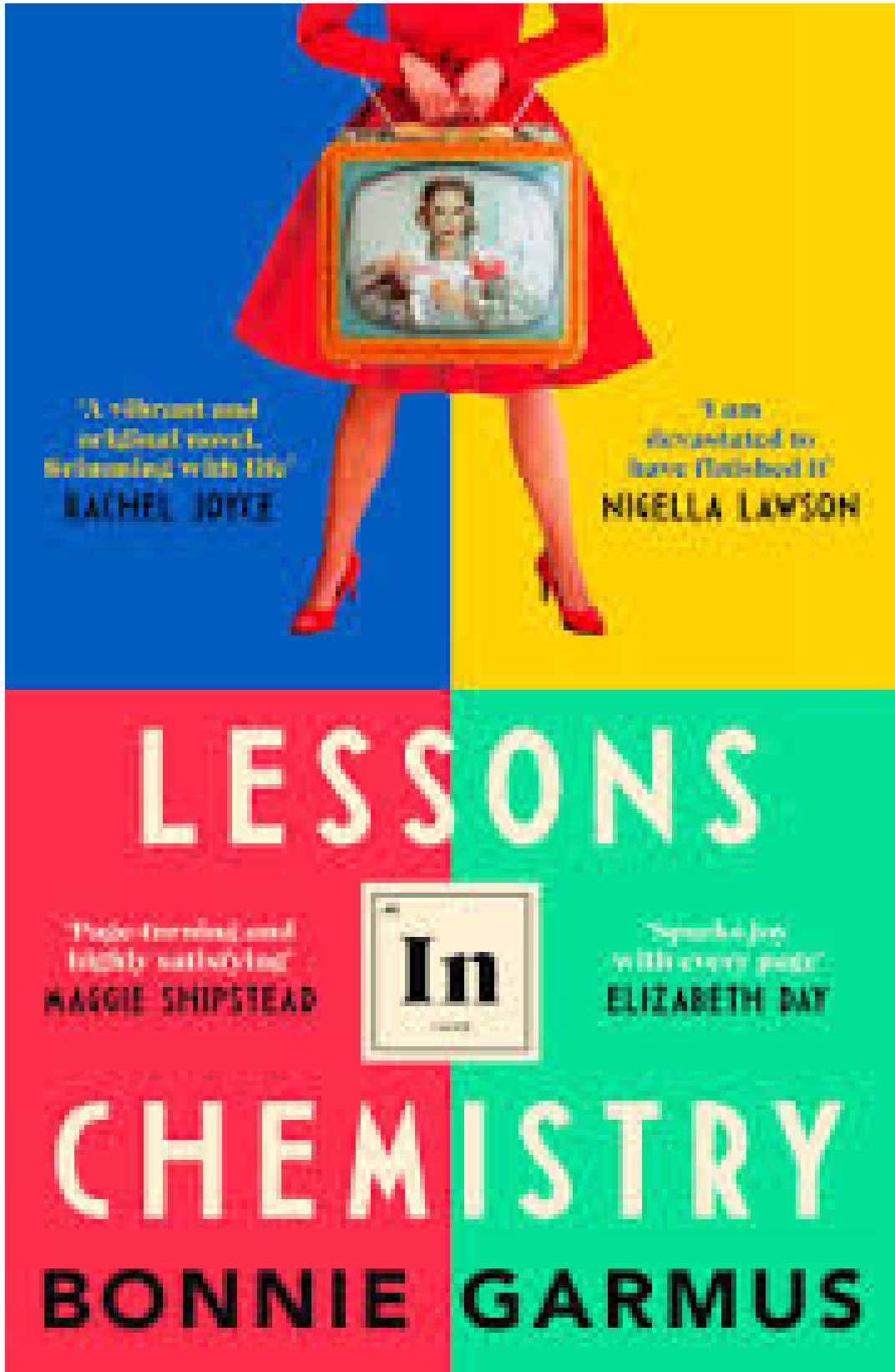


Meath County Council Library Service  
 Book Club Kit



# Notes To Readers

## Spoiler warnings

This kit was created for book clubs to use in their discussions of Lesson in Chemistry and contains spoilers

## Content warning

**Sexual violence** plays a part in this narrative. Expect a scene in which a woman is raped by a power figure and the effects it has on her. A sudden death occurs, a shocking turn of events that leads to the demise of a main character



# Interview with the Author

## **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.

**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?'

# Reading Group 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 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?

# About the Author



**Bonnie Garmus**

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.



The background features a light beige color with several decorative elements: a red-outlined monstera leaf in the top-left corner, a yellow circle in the top-center, a teal and light green monstera leaf in the top-right, a teal and light green monstera leaf in the bottom-left, and a red-outlined monstera leaf in the bottom-right. The text is centered in a black, hand-drawn font.

BOOK  
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