



Summary

Set in 1960s California, this blockbuster debut is the hilarious, idiosyncratic and uplifting story of a female scientist whose career is constantly derailed by the idea that a woman's place is in the home, only to find herself starring as the host of America's most beloved TV cooking show. 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 1960s and despite the fact that she is a scientist, her peers are very unscientific when it comes to equality. The only good thing to happen to her on the road to professional fulfillment is a run-in with her super-star colleague Calvin Evans (well, she stole his beakers.) The only man who ever treated her-and her ideas-as equal, Calvin is already a legend and Nobel nominee. He's also awkward, kind and tenacious. Theirs is true chemistry. But as events are never as predictable as chemical reactions, three years later Elizabeth Zott is an unwed, single mother (did we mention it's the early 60s??) and the star of America's most beloved cooking show Supper at Six. Elizabeth's singular approach to cooking ('take one pint of H₂O and add a pinch of sodium chloride') and independent example are proving revolutionary. Because Elizabeth isn't just teaching women how to cook, she's teaching them how 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.



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.

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 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 does 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' 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

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 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, except 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 per cent the same, why do we treat each other so differently?