

Book of the Month

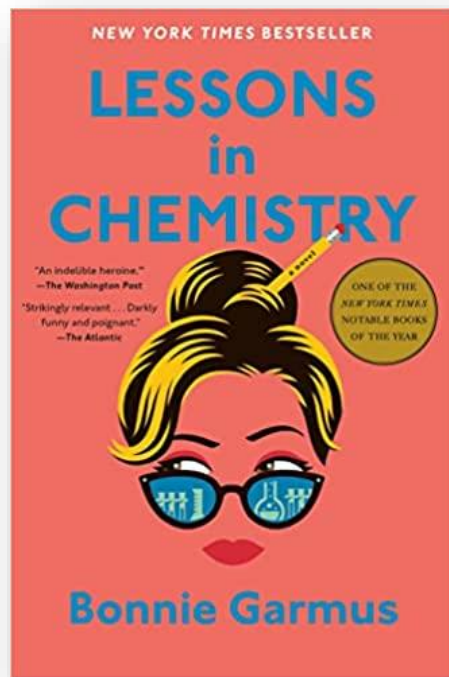
Lessons in Chemistry by Bonnie Garmus

Book Review by Peggy Bates, Friends of the Starkville Library Board Member

From the first two chapters of this entertaining, funny and yet empowering novel, *Lessons in Chemistry* by Bonnie Garmus, you know who Elizabeth Zott is. It is 1961 and Elizabeth is a 30-year-old unwed, independent mother of a precocious five-year-old daughter named Madeline. She is the host of the wildly popular afternoon television cooking show for housewives called *Dinner at Six*. This is not the life Elizabeth envisioned for herself. She is a brilliant, serious, no-nonsense, literal, determined Scientist with a capital S, and her life's course was altered when she met Calvin Evans.

Elizabeth Zott's upbringing was unstable and dysfunctional, so she learned at an early age to trust no one. There was, however, one concept that she trusted and believed in to her very soul and that was science in general and chemistry in particular. She read and studied and worked very hard to build a good foundation in knowledge, but she had some drawbacks. She was tall and slender and luscious, and she was studying and working at UCLA in a field that was entirely dominated by men in the 1950's and forever before that!

After an unfortunate incident involving a #2 pencil and a major professor, Elizabeth was hired to work as a scientist at the Hastings Institute "Where Groundbreaking Research Breaks Ground." It was at Hastings that Elizabeth Zott, lowly female scientist, met Calvin



Evans, his photo featured on the cover of *Chemistry Today* and a shoe in for the Nobel Prize. Calvin had had an unfortunate upbringing, having been orphaned at a very young age. He was raised in a strict Catholic Boys Home, questioning religious teachings with his scientific mind. He excelled in his studies and athletics and went on to study at Cambridge on a rowing scholarship. He was also an introverted genius who was tall, unattractive (except when he rarely smiled), and held a grudge, but he had terrific grants and additional funding from a mysterious benefactor. Hastings was fortunate to have him.

After a rocky start involving beakers (Calvin obviously had more than he needed), the couple realized that they were soulmates and began spending time together in the lab and away from the lab. The male colleagues were jealous that Elizabeth, whose lab coat was labeled by her initials E.Z. instead of her name as were the male scientists, was transferred to Calvin's lab where they were "collaborating" with plenteous references to "coattails" and "why buy the cow when the milk is free." Incidentally, it is when the couple was discussing living together that the arrangement was decided for Calvin to buy a house and, because E.Z. was paid so much less than her co-workers, she would do the cooking five days a week.

"I'm a good cook, Calvin. Cooking is serious science. In fact, it's chemistry."

So obviously it makes sense that Elizabeth Zott became host on a cooking show, right? Well, there are a lot of circumstances that have to come to pass before that happens and the story progresses with a great deal of humor, compassion, determination, friendship, a family tree school assignment, abiogenesis and rowing. There is also an undercurrent of sexism, gender inequality, male superiority and unprincipled practices. A particularly odious human relations director at Hastings, Miss Frask, surprised Elizabeth with the realization that she was pregnant (E.Z. not Miss Frask) when they were packing up Calvin's lab after he died while jogging with their dog Six-Thirty outside instead of inside in ballet slippers like Jack LaLanne. Elizabeth was fired for being pregnant. It was 1955 after all.

By 1961, Elizabeth Zott has become a household legend with a dedicated following of women behind her, and their families have never eaten better. They love and respect her and she respects them. She doesn't talk down to her audience. She uses lessons in chemistry to explain nutrition, how ingredients interact and, by the way, how important they are in the running of their households and that they should appreciate themselves. She encourages them to experiment, to grow, to question, to reach for their dreams, to explore, to change. Chemistry is change. And did I mention that their families had never eaten more healthy meals or more delicious ones.

I think you will love this book, *Lessons in Chemistry* by Bonnie Garmus. It is fun and empowering and inspiring and filled with great characters, both male and female, and a courageous dog who cares a lot about Elizabeth, Madeline, and Calvin. There are some really awful ones, too, but that just makes it real. I couldn't put it down.

"Children, set the table. Your mother needs a moment to herself."

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