



Lessons in Chemistry, Bonnie Garmus **Discussion Guide**

Themes: **1960s sexism, scientific logic**, and the definition of a "**typical**" family; Many readers interpret Elizabeth Zott as being on the **autism spectrum** or as a **neurodivergent** protagonist.

1. Elizabeth Zott refuses to believe that cooking is "woman's work," but rather "chemistry." How does her scientific perspective on life help her navigate grief and discrimination?
2. Elizabeth is a non-conformist in an era of strict social roles. In what ways did her refusal to "play the game" at Hastings Research Institute ultimately benefit or hurt her?
3. How did Elizabeth's relationship with Calvin change her? Was their connection based on intellectual equality, or was there a deeper emotional dependency?
4. Why do you think Elizabeth's unconventional cooking show resonated so deeply with housewives? What does this say about the "silent" frustrations of women in the 1960s?
5. Elizabeth's approach to parenting her daughter, Mad, is highly logical. Do you think Mad benefitted from being treated like an adult, or did she miss out on a "normal" childhood?
6. The book presents a sharp critique of organized religion through characters like the Reverend. How did the clash between faith and science drive the plot?
7. The dog, Six-Thirty, is a fan-favorite character. What does his perspective (and his large vocabulary) add to the narrative tone of the book?
8. Elizabeth often wears a pencil in her hair—not for fashion, but for utility. What other symbols of empowerment or domestic "tools" did the author repurpose in the story?
9. Looking at Elizabeth's struggles today, how much has actually changed for women in **STEM** (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math)?

10. Scientific laws state that energy cannot be destroyed, only transformed. How does Elizabeth apply this to the loss of Calvin? Does her "rational" approach to mourning make her more or less relatable as a protagonist?
11. In many 1960s-set novels, a woman's success is facilitated by a sympathetic man. While Calvin and Walter Pine help Elizabeth, she often succeeds by *rejecting* male institutional help. Discuss whether the book is a critique of patriarchy or an anthem for individual resilience.
12. Both Elizabeth and Mad are exceptionally intelligent. Discuss the "loneliness of the high IQ" depicted in the book. Is their isolation a choice, or a byproduct of a society that doesn't know where to "put" them?
13. Bonnie Garmus uses a "heightened reality" (a dog that understands 900+ words, a child prodigy). How does this whimsical, almost satirical tone compare to the more gritty realism of authors like **Hilary Mantel** or **Ken Follett**? Does the humor make the underlying sexism easier to digest?
14. Elizabeth's story concludes with a surprising tie-back to her past and her research. Did this feel like a "deus ex machina" (a lucky break), or was it a scientifically sound conclusion to her life's "experiment"?
15. Elizabeth often takes things literally and refuses to engage in "small talk" or social niceties. Does this make her an **objective observer** of human absurdity, or does it isolate her from the very women she tries to help? [Goodreads Community Discussion on Elizabeth's Character](#)
16. Unlike other characters who "mask" their true selves to fit in, Elizabeth remains stubbornly herself. Discuss whether her success is a result of her **authenticity** or if she simply had the privilege of being too brilliant to ignore.
17. Between Elizabeth, Mad, Six-Thirty, and their neighbor Harriet Sloane, the "Zott household" is entirely unconventional. Is Garmus suggesting that **logic and mutual respect** are better foundations for a family than biological ties or legal marriage?
18. Harriet lives a "typical" life in a disappointing marriage. How does her friendship with Elizabeth act as a **chemical catalyst** for her own personal liberation?
19. The studio executives want Elizabeth to be a "sexy cook," but she insists on being a **chemist in an apron**. Discuss the power of **visual symbols** in the book. Why was her refusal to wear the tight dress such a radical act of rebellion?

20. Elizabeth argues that domestic labor is "vital work" that requires high-level skills. Do you think modern society has finally accepted this, or is "housework" still viewed as **low-status** compared to "professional" careers?
21. Rowing is a major metaphor in the book. It requires perfect balance and individual effort within a team. How does the metaphor of **rowing** reflect Elizabeth's philosophy on "steering" one's own life versus being swept away by the "current" of tragedy?
22. How does Elizabeth's belief that "Calvin is still here, just in a different form" influence her parenting of Mad?
23. Elizabeth often treats her emotional life as a series of variables to be managed. Does this scientific detachment act as a healthy **catalyst** for healing, or is it a "buffer solution" that prevents her from truly feeling her pain?
24. Six-Thirty observes human behavior with a "biological objectivity." Does his perspective highlight the **illogical nature of human prejudice** better than the human characters can?
25. If a discovery (like abiogenesis) changes the world, does it matter who gets the credit? Why is Elizabeth's fight for **attribution** so central to her identity?
26. Elizabeth insists on being credited for her work, a radical stance in the 1960s. Discuss the historical reality of "hidden figures" in STEM—women whose labor fueled male success.
27. Explore the theme of inter-species empathy. Is Six-Thirty's "vocabulary" a metaphor for the untapped potential in those society deems "lesser" (much like the housewives watching *Supper at Six*)?
28. Elizabeth loves chemistry because it is predictable. How does she reconcile her need for **order** with the "stochastic" nature of a world that is often chaotic and unfair?
29. Was the tragedy in Brussels (or Calvin's death) a "collision" that was necessary to create the version of Elizabeth that eventually changed the world?
30. Elizabeth finds her "morality" in the laws of nature rather than scripture. How does her **integrity** compare to the religious characters in the book?

31. Discuss the correspondence between Calvin and Wakely. Did their friendship bridge the gap between **faith and science**, or did it prove they are fundamentally incompatible?

Historical Fiction Comparisons

Book Title	Connection to <i>Lessons in Chemistry</i>	Key Discussion Point
The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo by Taylor Jenkins Reid	Both feature women navigating the 1950s/60s "man's world" (Hollywood vs. Science).	Compare how Evelyn uses her physicality/glamour to gain power vs. how Elizabeth uses intellect/logic .
The Help by Kathryn Stockett	Explores the "silent" lives of women and domestic boundaries in the 1960s.	Elizabeth empowers housewives through chemistry , while the women in <i>The Help</i> use storytelling . Which is more effective for social change?
Where the Crawdads Sing by Delia Owens	Features an isolated female protagonist who becomes a self-taught expert in a scientific field (Biology).	Compare Elizabeth's urban/institutional struggle with Kya's natural/solitary struggle against prejudice.
The Vanishing Half by Brit Bennett	Set in the same era, focusing on identity and the performance of "roles."	Discuss how social performance (passing for someone else vs. refusing to be anyone but yourself) dictates a woman's safety in the mid-century.