



Book club 11: Family & identity

Lessons in Chemistry
by Bonnie Garmus

Rules

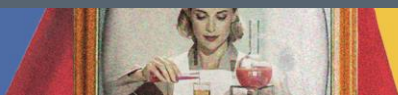
In this book club you will discuss *Lessons in Chemistry* by Bonnie Garmus in a group of 4-6 readers. You will start a conversation by responding to discussion questions about the text. The book club opens with a brief introduction that one of you reads out loud. The book club then continues in four rounds

- 1 Round 1 consists of 5 quiz questions about the text. One of the group members acts as the quiz master who reads each question out loud, after which everyone (including the quiz master) writes down their answer. The correct answers will appear on the screen after you have turned over the final question card. You may then check your answers and calculate your scores.
- 2 Round 2 consists of genuine questions that you have. Each group member consults the group about a part of the text that they thought was unclear. Together, you try to find answers to the questions that are raised. After everything has been cleared up, your group is ready to proceed to the next round.
- 3 Round 3 consists of questions for discussion. There are two categories to choose from. The person with the most correct answers to the quiz questions gets to be the first to turn over a card and respond to the question. The other members of the group may then add to the discussion by responding and sharing their ideas. Take turns until all cards are flipped.
- 4 Round 4 is when you get to review the text. How many stars would you give the text and why? Discuss this together until you have reached a shared verdict. Use the text box to explain your choice.

This book club was developed by the editors of LitLab, a digital laboratory for high school literature research. For more teaching materials, visit www.litlab.nl. A teachers' manual and a didactic justification of this teaching method are available at www.litlab.nl/docenten.



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Introduction

'For Elizabeth, cooking wasn't some preordained feminine duty. As she'd told Calvin, cooking was chemistry. That's because cooking actually is chemistry.'

Lessons in Chemistry by Bonnie Garmus tells the story of Elizabeth Zott, a research chemist. When she meets Calvin Evans at the Hastings Research Institute, the two of them fall madly in love. Sadly, their time together is cut short when Calvin dies in a freak accident. He does leave her something, a child, named Madeline (Mad). After Elizabeth is fired she becomes the host of a cooking show, but she remains a scientist at heart. She struggles to get back on her feet after losing Calvin and becoming a single mother. When Mad starts digging into her family history, Elizabeth's life takes an unexpected turn.

Lessons in Chemistry is a novel about many things all at once: grief and grudges, acceptance and forgiveness, but also about family and identity, and sometimes even about chemistry. This book club helps you connect these topics to your own ideas about the book.

Round 1: Quiz

Turn over the 5 cards with quiz questions one by one. Write down the answer on a piece of paper.

Round 2: Initial questions

What questions popped into your head while reading *Lessons in Chemistry*? Were there any parts that left you confused or wondering? Take turns sharing your questions about the story and try to come up with answers together. Use evidence from the text to support your ideas.

Round 3: Discussion

The player with the most correct answers to the quiz questions gets to turn over a card first from one of the two piles of discussion questions. Once they have answered the question, the other members of the group may then add to the discussion by responding and sharing their ideas.

Round 4: Review

Review *Lessons in Chemistry* by rating the novel on a scale of one to five stars, and then provide an explanation for your choice. Discuss what aspects you enjoyed and what aspects you didn't, and provide reasons for your opinions. Reflect on whether the discussion influenced your individual perspective, and if so, how. Incorporate examples and arguments from your responses to the discussion questions to support your review.



Question 1

Why is the dog called Six-Thirty?

Question 2

What's the name of the cooking show of which Elizabeth is the host?

Question 3

What is the other thing, besides chemistry, that Calvin Evans has a true passion for?

Question 4

Towards the end of the novel, what does Miss Frask do to make up for her earlier unkind behaviour towards Elizabeth?

Question 5

Who is Avery Parker?

Answers

1. 6.30 is the time that the dog became part of Elizabeth and Calvin's family.
2. *Supper at Six*
3. Rowing
4. She writes a letter to the editors of *Life* magazine about the cover story on Elizabeth, saying that it is full of lies.
5. Calvin's mother.



Question

3

Question

2

Question

1

Answers

Question

5

Question

4



Personal connections? 1

Elizabeth gets fired from her job because she's pregnant with Mad. Although discrimination against pregnant women in the workplace is now illegal in most Western countries, it still occurs. What do you think needs to be done to prevent such cases of discrimination? Try to connect your answer to Elizabeth's experiences.

Personal connections? 2

Elizabeth and Calvin have very different ideas about family. Elizabeth believes that although we are all born into families we don't necessarily belong to them. Calvin believes that your family defines who you are. Whose vision can you identify with the most? Explain your choice.

Personal connections? 3

Calvin asks Elizabeth to marry him even though he knows that she doesn't want to get married. Why doesn't she want to marry him, and why do you think he still proposes to her?

Personal connections? 4

Calvin convinces Donatti to allow Elizabeth to continue her research into abiogenesis at the Hastings Research Institute without her knowing. How do you think Elizabeth would feel if she knew that Calvin is the reason she can continue her research? Do you believe he was right to intervene? Why, or why not?

Personal connections? 5

In their letters, Calvin and Wakely discuss religion, among other things. Calvin is very critical of religion and states we should use fairytales to learn about morality instead. Do you agree with him? Explain your thoughts.

Personal connections? 6

"Look." Walter said, "I live in the real world, and in that world, we say and do things in order to keep our stupid jobs." Walter and Elizabeth differ in their views on how to deal with their jobs. Explain the difference between their opinions. Who do you agree with more? Why?

Personal connections? 7

Elizabeth becomes a role model for the millions of women who watch her cooking show. What makes her show, broadcast in the early 1960s, so revolutionary to her female viewers? Can you give an example of a similar role model for women today? Compare this role model to Elizabeth and explain the differences between them.

Personal connections? 8

Elizabeth considers being a scientist an identity, something she is born with or something that defines her, similar to sexual orientation or gender. According to you, to what extent can 'being a scientist' be seen as an identity?



Personal connections?

3

Personal connections?

2

Personal connections?

1

Personal connections?

6

Personal connections?

5

Personal connections?

4

Personal connections?

8

Personal connections?

7



Food for thought? 1

The book doesn't start at the beginning of the story. How would you explain the author's choice to start the book in this way?

Food for thought? 2

Both Elizabeth and Calvin hold grudges. What is the main difference between their grudges and how would you explain that difference?

Food for thought? 3

If Elizabeth had been a real person who would have had a scientific career in the 21st century, for which activist movement could she have been an advocate? Explain why.

Food for thought? 4

Calvin desperately wants Elizabeth to row with him. She initially refuses, saying: 'Women don't row.' Why is it so out of character for Elizabeth to say something like this?

Food for thought? 5

Lessons in Chemistry can be read as a feminist critique of the gender inequality and sexual violence American women had to endure in the 1960s. To what extent do you think the position of women has changed since then? Give two examples of relevant scenes from the book and evaluate whether those situations would still be realistic nowadays in The Netherlands.

Food for thought? 6

The novel's title *Lessons in Chemistry* has multiple meanings. Consider the double meaning of the words 'lessons' and 'chemistry' in the context of the story and try to come up with as many explanations for the title as possible.

Food for thought? 7

Elizabeth uses cooking and chemistry as metaphors for things such as life and marriage. Explain how, according to Elizabeth, cooking and chemistry are related to life and marriage.

Food for thought? 8

One of the main themes in the book is grief. Pick one character who is capable of transforming their grief throughout the book. What were they grieving about? What was the turning point for this character in overcoming their grief?



Food for thought?

3

Food for thought?

2

Food for thought?

1

Food for thought?

6

Food for thought?

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Food for thought?

4

Food for thought?

8

Food for thought?

7