

Lessons in Chemistry, by Bonnie Garmus

Reviewed by Cindy Kennedy

First-time novelist Bonnie Garmus hit the jackpot with *Lessons in Chemistry*. Her whimsical novel, with its bubblegum pink cover, has stayed atop *The New York Times* bestseller list for months. *Lessons in Chemistry* was included in several 2022 best fiction lists, and Barnes & Noble has deemed it the “Book of the Year.”

Set in southern California, *Lessons in Chemistry* begins in 1961, a time when “women wore shirtwaist dresses and drove legions of children around in seat belt-less cars, before anyone knew there’d even be a sixties movement.” Elizabeth Zott, the novel’s protagonist, is an Eisenhower-era anomaly: A woman scientist and a single mother.

Elizabeth’s career as a research chemist has been stymied at every turn. During graduate school, her professor made inappropriate advances. At Hastings Research Institute, her male colleagues, who had an “unscientific view of equality,” belittled her work, and her boss took credit for her findings. Calvin Evans, Hastings’ top scientist, was the only man who believed that his female associate’s scientific research had value.

Despite her disdain for marriage, Elizabeth and Calvin had a romantic relationship. When Elizabeth became pregnant, alas, Calvin no longer was in the picture. She was left to raise their precocious daughter Madeline alone. As an unwed mother, Elizabeth lost her position at Hastings.

Maintaining that “cooking is chemistry,” Elizabeth is an excellent baker and cook. While many kids’ lunchboxes might contain a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, Madeline’s lunches often include “a thick slice of leftover lasagna, a helping of buttery zucchini, and two still-warm chocolate chip cookies.” So coveted are Madeline’s noontime meals, that a classmate, Amanda Pine, bribed Madeline for hers.

After Elizabeth discovered that Amanda is taking Madeline’s lunches, she confronted Walter Pine, the lunch-thief’s father, at the TV station where he is producer of daytime broadcasting. Exasperated, Elizabeth rhetorically asked him, “Does anyone have the time to teach the entire nation to make food that matters?” Her retort prompted Walter, who had an empty programming slot to fill, to come up with an idea for a cooking show. He implored Elizabeth to host the program, *Supper at Six*, but she initially balked: “I’m a scientist!” Once she agreed, however, she became a rising TV star. Elizabeth ended every show with her signature line: “Children, set the table. Your mother needs a moment to herself.”

Lessons in Chemistry, like its ebullient heroine, is charming and clever. The feel-good blockbuster already is in development for a TV miniseries. *Lessons in Chemistry*, indeed, is an impressive debut for an up-and-coming writer.