



## Exploring Senior Cycle Texts

### *Lessons in Chemistry* by Bonnie Garmus

*Lessons in Chemistry* by Bonnie Garmus is a novel included as part of the Prescribed Material for the Leaving Certificate English Examination in 2026, 2027 and 2028. It may be used as part of the Comparative at Ordinary Level or Higher Level.

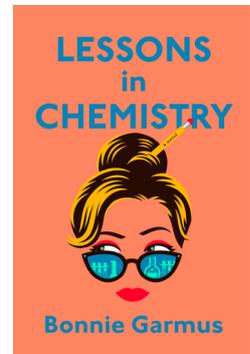


Image courtesy of  
The New York Times

#### Please note:

- The following tasks might be completed over a series of lessons.
- You may like to adapt and adjust the tasks to suit your context.
- *Lessons in Chemistry* covers themes which could be considered sensitive and controversial. You may wish to consult with our READY Framework to support you in your study.



Scan the QR code or [click here to access a Getting Started with Guide](#) for this Text

### Before you read... (Teacher Guidance)

These activities support students in considering historical context and the role of setting in shaping narrative understanding prior to engaging in extended writing. Adapt as appropriate for your class context.

#### 1. Exploring Context

Facilitate discussion introducing the cultural context of 1960s America, the setting of *Lessons in Chemistry*. You may wish to invite students to draw on prior knowledge of texts, films, or other works set during this period and consider how cultural context influences narrative.

Encourage comparison between 1960s American society and contemporary Ireland through paired or small-group discussion, followed by whole-class sharing.

#### 2. Reflecting on Setting

Guide students in reflecting on the importance of setting in shaping character, theme, and reader understanding. Students may record responses in a format of their choosing, such as an audio reflection, poem, or visual representation combining text and image.



## Extract

**Background:** This extract is from chapter one of *Lessons in Chemistry*. It is set in the early 1960s and follows Elizabeth Zott, a brilliant chemist whose career is derailed by sexism in science.

*Back in 1961, when women wore shirtwaist dresses and joined garden clubs and drove legions of children around in seatbeltless cars without giving it a second thought; back before anyone knew there'd even be a sixties movement, much less one that its participants would spend the next sixty years chronicling; back when the big wars were over and the secret wars had just begun and people were starting to think fresh and believe everything was possible, the thirty- year- old mother of Madeline Zott rose before dawn every morning and felt certain of just one thing: her life was over.*

*Despite that certainty, she made her way to the lab to pack her daughter's lunch.*

*Fuel for learning, Elizabeth Zott wrote on a small slip of paper before tucking it into her daughter's lunch box. Then she paused, her pencil in midair, as if reconsidering. Play sports at recess but do not automatically let the boys win, she wrote on another slip. Then she paused again, tapping her pencil against the table. It is not your imagination, she wrote on a third. Most people are awful. She placed the last two on top.*

*Most young children can't read, and if they can, it's mostly words like "dog" and "go." But Madeline had been reading since age three and, now, at age five, was already through most of Dickens.*

*Madeline was that kind of child— the kind who could hum a Bach concerto but couldn't tie her own shoes; who could explain the earth's rotation but stumbled at tic- tac- toe. And that was the problem. Because while musical prodigies are always celebrated, early readers aren't. And that's because early readers are only good at something others will eventually be good at, too. So being fi rst isn't special— it's just annoying.*

*(Bonnie Garmus, Lessons in Chemistry, 2022, p. 3).*

### Activities Based on Extract (Teacher Guidance)

The following may be completed in written or oral format,  
as individuals or as part of a group activity.

#### 1. Exploring Contextual Detail

Guide students in examining references within the extract such as "seatbeltless cars," "shirtwaist dresses," or "legions of children." You may wish to prompt discussion on how these details reflect social attitudes and cultural norms of 1960s America, building on prior contextual exploration.

#### 2. Understanding Character

Encourage students to consider the range of tones present in Elizabeth's notes to her daughter. Discussion may focus on how shifts between encouragement and criticism contribute to students' understanding of Elizabeth's character and motivations.



### 3. Considering Difference and Identity

Facilitate discussion exploring Madeline's portrayal as a gifted child who does not easily fit social expectations. You may wish to invite connections with other literary characters whose differences function as both strengths and challenges.

## Reflect and Respond (Teacher Guidance)

The following questions may be based on the extract included or form part of your extended study of the novel.

### 1. Exploring Imagery and Context

Guide students in comparing imagery from the extract with imagery from a poem previously studied that conveys a sense of time or social change. Discussion may focus on how imagery shapes readers' understanding of historical context.

### 2. Narrative and Character

Encourage students to examine how Elizabeth Zott is constructed through Garmus's narrative perspective. You may wish to invite reflection on how narrative voice shapes character and how similar techniques might inform students' own writing.

Students may identify aspects of style or characterisation they wish to incorporate into future writing.

### 3. Speaking and Performance

Support students in planning a short radio interview featuring Elizabeth Zott, exploring her experiences of the early 1960s, professional challenges, and hopes for Madeline. Attention may be drawn to audience awareness, tone, and language in oral delivery.

### 4. Voice and Perspective

Facilitate collaborative planning of a speech Elizabeth might deliver to aspiring scientists in 1961. Students may explore themes of ambition, frustration, and hope before composing individual written responses and reflecting on differing approaches.

### 5. Personal Reflection

Invite students to compose a personal essay exploring how the words of parents or mentors can influence an individual's understanding of the world, drawing connections with Elizabeth's relationship with Madeline.