

UNEDITED REALTIME FILE

**Sixth & I  
Conversation with Bonnie Garmus**

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JACKIE LEVENTHAL: Hi, everyone! Hello! I'm Jackie Leventhal, and I'm the chief brand and content officer here at Sixth and I. Whether you're here with us in person or watching us virtually from home, on behalf of Sixth and I and our partner Politics and Prose, thank you so much for your support tonight for a nonprofit and an independent bookstore. I'm curious, by show of hands, how many of you are here with your book club?

(Laughter.)

I had a hunch.

How many of you this is your first time at Sixth and I? Almost as many of you! Welcome. So, many of you are new so I'll share the history of 34 this special place. This building dates back to 1908. It was a synagogue for 45 years and then home to an AME church for the next 50 years. When the church relocated and was put up for sale in the early 2000s, the highest bid was from someone who wanted to turn it into a nightclub. And for any of you have been here for a convert, you know that we dabble in what might have been but this place was destined for something greater and was saved within 24 hours. For the past 18 years, Sixth and I has served as a center for arts, entertainment, ideas, and Jewish life. Our aim is to inspire more meaningful and fulfilling lives through an unexpected mix of experiences that embrace the multifaceted identities of those we serve. Every once in a while a novel introduces us to a fictional character with a lot of truth to share. In *Lessons in Chemistry*, we meet Elizabeth Zott a gifted chemist whose professional aspirations are derailed by the sexism of the early 1960s, a time when smart women deserving of opportunities had far fewer options compared to less capable men. The popularity of *Lessons in Chemistry* is tied to its endearing characters and the quality of its writing, not to mention the love stories and the suspense and a dog with off the charts emotional intelligence

(Laughter.)

But I also think this book struck a chord with readers who saw in Elizabeth countless women born in a time that was unwilling to make space for their full potential. Maybe you saw your mother or your grandmother in this story, or maybe, despite more than a half century since the time it was set, you saw yourself and the way sexism still persists. We are thrilled to have Bonnie Garmus with us tonight, as she hits one full year on the New York Times Bestseller List!

(Cheering and applause).

As much as the characters she so vividly brought to life, Bonnie is also an example of what it means to not give up on your dreams, a copywriter and a creative director,

Bonnie faced nearly 100 rejections of projects before *Lessons in Chemistry*, her debut novel, was published when she was 64 years young!

(Cheering and applause)

*Lessons in Chemistry* has sold over 2 million copies in the U.S. and been published in 40 countries. And the TV adaptation of the book will premier this fall on Apple TV, starring Brie Larson.

(Applause.)

Tonight Bonnie Garmus will be in conversation with the Librarian of Congress Dr. Carla Hayden who we are so honored to have with us. Dr. Hayden is the 14th Librarian of Congress, and the first woman and first African American to hold the position.

(Cheering and applause)

The Library of Congress is the largest library in the world, and it hosts the National Book Festival, which will be on Saturday, August 12th at the Washington Convention Center, so save the date. Later in the program, we'd love to hear your questions and you'll be invited to line up on either side of the aisle at the standing microphones.

Thank you again, both here and at home, for joining us and please welcome Bonnie Garmus and Dr. Carla Hayden to Sixth and I.

(Cheering and applause)

BONNIE GARMUS: Oh, boy! Thank you.

CARLA HAYDEN: How does that feel?

BONNIE GARMUS: Scary!

CARLA HAYDEN: Kinda cool, isn't it?

BONNIE GARMUS: Yeah, a little!

CARLA HAYDEN: Well, this is wonderful. And I just have to say it, full disclosure... I am a librarian.

(Laughter.)

And I love to read.

And you had me at page 1.

(Laughter.)

Most young children can't read, and if they can't, they can, it's mostly words like "dog" and "go". Madeline had been reading since age 3, and by age 5 had been through most of Dickens.

(Laughter.)

I was that child too.

(Laughter.)

So, debut novel.

BONNIE GARMUS: Yup.

CARLA HAYDEN: Bestseller. But it's really, many people talk about, it's empowering, and because of the characters, led by Elizabeth Zott. So what was the inspiration for the character?

BONNIE GARMUS: Well, the inspiration was a bad mood.

(Laughter.)

I know. It's passion, right?

I had been at work one day, and I'd been in a meeting -- technology meeting. It was all men. I was I was the only woman. I'd finished presenting all of my ideas for a campaign. And then no one said anything. Which was kind of unusual, but not that unusual. And, um, a few minutes later, there was a vice president in the room that day, and he said "you know what I think we should do instead?" -- "instead". And then he recited everything that I had just said.

The worst part was, I had a PowerPoint slide up with all of these --

(Laughter.)

-- points! So I said "you know, I just said that", and PowerPoint.

And he ignored me, as if I wasn't sitting there.

No one defended me. No one came to my aid. Some of those people I'd worked with for ten years.

So, meeting went... a little long, and then we left, and I more or less stomped back to my desk, and instead of working on the deadline that I had that day by 5:00, I stopped and I wrote the first chapter of Lessons in Chemistry!

(Applause.)

CARLA HAYDEN: Yes!

Yes!

Living well is the best revenge

BONNIE GARMUS: Isn't it?

(Laughter.)

CARLA HAYDEN: So she's your heroine and she's confident and uncompromising intelligence, and I know I'm not the only one that wishes she wasn't a fictional character, right?

(Laughter.)

Okay. So, what kind of reaction had you been receiving from readers about Elizabeth?

BONNIE GARMUS: You know, it's been really great. I've heard from readers all over the world, and I've had a chance to travel to a lot of places and talk to readers. And what astounds me is how everyone feels a lot like Elizabeth Zott, or they -- because I think we all have a little bit of Elizabeth Zott in each of us. And we want things to be better. We want society to change. And we don't know how to do it. And Elizabeth Zott does. She's very forceful. She knows who she is. She lives by evidence. She's very logical and rational and that makes her seem odd to everybody else who lives in the irrational world.

CARLA HAYDEN: Now, why did you choose to make her a chemist?

BONNIE GARMUS: Well, I knew -- by the way, I wish I hadn't.

(Laughter.)

CARLA HAYDEN: Okay, wait. You can't just say that and let that go!

BONNIE GARMUS: I know, I know, I'm sorry.

CARLA HAYDEN: Why?

BONNIE GARMUS: I knew I wanted to put her on TV in order to spread her message of empowerment. And the only way to do that back then was to put her in a feminine role on television. It's one of the reasons why I made her attractive. Because I didn't think she would ever have a chance on television if she, you know, she was a CHEMIST. So I put her on television, and I thought, she could either say "here's what's behind door number 3", or she could teach cooking. So, B. But then I had to learn chemistry, so... not good.

(Laughter.)

CARLA HAYDEN: Well, that happens... across the board too. With that. Even librarianship.

(Laughter.)

So, what kind of research -- so you're not a scientist yourself.

BONNIE GARMUS: No.

CARLA HAYDEN: So did you have to do -- this is the librarian in me -- did you have to do a lot of research in chemistry?

BONNIE GARMUS: Yes, I did. I knew I had to confine the chemistry to that age, that era. And that means you can't Google it, which was a little bit of, you know, it was a shock!

So I had to buy a book off of eBay, and I taught myself '50s, '60s chemistry --

(Laughter.)

I know!

And I did the experiments as well. I know!

(Laughter.)

CARLA HAYDEN: Cause I didn't do it in the '50s -- I mean the '60s or '70s, so... phew!

(Laughter.)

BONNIE GARMUS: Well, it didn't go exactly to plan, because the fire department came twice.

(Laughter.)

I live --

CARLA HAYDEN: What were you doing??? What were you trying to do?

BONNIE GARMUS: Well, one of the experiments is in the book. It turns out pistachios really are extremely flammable.

(Laughter.)

No, and I live in London, and they're very polite when they come with the fire extinguishers, they're very polite the whole time. But the first time they came -- it was more than once -- the fireman said "oh, my god" -- he saw the textbook sitting there, and he said "you're not doing chemical experiments in your flat, are you?"

(Laughter.)

And I said, "well, we're renters".

And he goes "OH!"

(Laughter.)

CARLA HAYDEN: Oh, the British.

(Laughter.)

I do love them.

Now, okay, so now the television industry, and you mentioned that at that time period, a certain type of woman had to be on there... so, what drew you to that part of the TV --

BONNIE GARMUS: Well, you mean why did I put her on television to spread the word?

I wanted her to go on television and not do what she was supposed to do. Because women are always being told what they're supposed to do! And I wanted to write a character who knew who she was, and was going to go her own way. And a character who was her boss who, even though she was making his life a living hell, let her do it.

CARLA HAYDEN: And that was good.

Now, on the flip side, there were some... tragic stories in the novel. And you were able to put it in and balance that. How hard was that for you, to do that two sides?

BONNIE GARMUS: Well, you know, I just think it was really important -- one of the underlying themes of the book is balance. It turns out -- and I didn't know this before I started studying chemistry -- that chemistry is the science of balance. It's called the central science for a reason, because it affects us every single day, and we are all chemical beings, and we change every day.

I wanted to put in rowing-- that was the only thing I knew about in the book!

(Laughter.)

But that is -- rowing is the sport of balance. There you go, you guys know! Your boat isn't balanced, you end up doing this other sport, and that sport is called swimming.

(Laughter.)

And so it was really important to me to get the idea of balance of dark and light in the book. Because I don't think we can just read about darkness without remembering that there's a lot of lightness in life.

CARLA HAYDEN: Now, some of the characters... okay... if you could tell us -- and I'm gonna go through some, and if you could tell us who and what inspired them. Okay?

Calvin Evans

BONNIE GARMUS: Calvin Evans. I just wanted a man in the book who recognized this woman's intelligence and was not intimidated by it. Who, he was attracted to her FOR her intelligence. He wasn't trying to... squash her or put her down. He was trying to encourage her career and help her as much as possible. She didn't want help. But he recognized who she was.

CARLA HAYDEN: The coworker, Ms. Frask.

BONNIE GARMUS: Ms. Frask!

(Laughter.)

You know, the book is about sexism. Women can be sexist too. So I put Ms. Frask in because I've run into women like that in my career, and I think Ms. Frask had to learn the hard way that being sexist at work is eventually going to come and bite her, and it does.

CARLA HAYDEN: And Elizabeth's daughter... Mad or Madeline.

BONNIE GARMUS: Yeah, Mad. I wanted to put Mad in the book because we have this generational part of the book. We have Harriet, who's older, uneducated, essentially, in a bad marriage, and unattractive. Then we have Elizabeth, who is highly educated, self-educated at a library... yes!

(Laughter.)

And highly educated, does not want to be a mother, does not want to be part of this club. So these two women are living under these constraints that have been formed for them by society. Mad is the next generation, and her mother is raising her without limits. You can do whatever you want. You can be whoever you want to be. So writing that child was really great.

CARLA HAYDEN: Yeah, also on the first page... people are awful.

(Laughter.)

Oh, Walter Pine.

BONNIE GARMUS: Walter Pine. Another male ally besides Calvin Evans. I wanted a man in the book who also recognized that even though Elizabeth Zott was just doing what she wanted, following what she thought was right, even though it was going to destroy his career, he was going to let her do it. And I admired that. I mean, he was really fun to write. Because he's so... hapless.

(Laughter.)



And just wanting her -- and thinking he'd done sort of a good job and then he finds out, no he's not.

CARLA HAYDEN: Talk more about Harriet.

BONNIE GARMUS: About Harriet?

CARLA HAYDEN: Yeah.

BONNIE GARMUS: I think -- there's a generation of women -- you know, I set this book in the '50s and '60s, because that day at work, I wasn't at all sure we had moved forward as women. Not at all! I just, when I was walking back to my desk that day, I thought about how many other women in the world, at that moment, had been squashed, their ideas squashed. How many -- it's so inefficient. How much time has been wasted holding people back? We have all these problems in the world to be solved. And we're making sure that 51 percent of the population doesn't live up to their potential? It really bothered me when I thought about it.

Harriet has been squashed her whole life. And so I really wanted her to be that woman who had been overlooked. This was my mother's generation. And I had never, ever thought about what my mom had given up. So this, you know, was a learning experience!

CARLA HAYDEN: And, of course, Six-Thirty.

(Laughter.)

BONNIE GARMUS: The star of the book.

CARLA HAYDEN: Full disclosure, I'm a dog lover. Can we really teach dogs hundreds of words?

BONNIE GARMUS: There was a dog named Casper, whose dad, human dad, was a psychologist, and he taught his dog over a thousand words, so Six Thirty doesn't really know that many.

CARLA HAYDEN: Rowing you know in this book. Do you recommend it?

BONNIE GARMUS: Yes, we do.

CARLA HAYDEN: Now, there are only three of them in here. I'm just saying!

(Laughter.)

Everybody else, book clubs, you know... just saying!

(Laughter.)

BONNIE GARMUS: It's a strange -- it is a strange -- I think it's the only sport done backwards! It is strange. But you know, there's something very addictive about it. And I think what's really cool is that when you're in a boat with people, you have to work together very tightly and closely. It should be a little bit more, you know, at work, you work with people and you have a goal, but maybe you don't reach it, because people are working against each other. In a boat, you can't do that. You have to row as one. And it's hard.

CARLA HAYDEN: We know who's gonna be in the front of the line for the book signing.

(Laughter.)

We just got it.

Well, as a librarian, though, I have to thank you for your love of libraries. And it just comes through the page. And I just happened to note a page!

(Laughter.)

Page 231. "The librarian is the most important educator in school. What she doesn't know, she can find out. This is not an opinion. It's a fact!"

(Laughter.)

It's like, YESSS!

(Laughter.)

Yes! All right!

(Applause.)

So, I have to ask. How have libraries -- did they touch your life? Was there a time when -- and I'd like to ask you about libraries being under fire, too, because we were talking a little bit earlier. But how did libraries affect you?

BONNIE GARMUS: Libraries were really important to me as a child. I had a terrible stutter as a child. It lasted quite a long time, almost -- I still had part of it in college. It got better, but when I was a kid, I could barely speak. And I spent a lot of time at the library. And the librarian never once corrected me. You know, she never said "speak slowly" or - - eugh, it was horrible. But the librarian was the one -- I used to go in, and we had a limit on how many books we could take out. Yeah, what is that about, Carla?

(Laughter.)

CARLA HAYDEN: We've stopped that! We've stopped it, and also we don't do fines for children anymore.

(Applause.)

BONNIE GARMUS: I used to take my little red wagon down to the library, and then she would fill it. And she NEVER kept me from reading more advanced books. But she gave me The Godfather when I was 10.

(Laughter.)

And my parents were like... "we need to have a word with the librarian".

(Laughter.)

But you know what, she defended it. "She'll be fine, it's not gonna hurt her".

CARLA HAYDEN: Because as a kid, reading it, you skip over those parts.

BONNIE GARMUS: Well, sorta.

(Laughter.)

CARLA HAYDEN: Well, you sort of do! I was reading, you know, The Scarlet Letter, and she was a little word, and she said, "Carla, do you know what the A is?" And I said "yeah, I know. She's an adult!"

(Laughter.)

So they just skim over. So you turned out okay. You were okay.

BONNIE GARMUS: She was really important to me, and every librarian in that library was important. The school librarian was really important. It was always a place I could go. And I just... this is strange when you think about it, but you really can learn anything at the library! You can learn and find anything. And you find this community of people, you can find this world, and it's an amazing invention. I hope it never goes away.

(Applause.)

CARLA HAYDEN: Well...

Maybe that's why some libraries are under fire!

BONNIE GARMUS: Yeah.

CARLA HAYDEN: Because you can.

So what would your message be, as libraries are under fire in many instances, and books are, too?

BONNIE GARMUS: You know, how -- well, we know the world's filled with a lot of... interesting "nonfactual" information.

(Laughter.)

And I think at least when a book is published, especially the older ones that were fact-checked, I don't know how often that happens now, but, you know, it's still a place you can go and learn and find out about the world and believe most of what you read. Imagine! That just doesn't happen any place else but a library.

CARLA HAYDEN:... I know...

(Laughter.)

Well, we will move on! Because the reception for this book, you know, 20 million and global -- it's been global, and it's being turned into a limited series.

BONNIE GARMUS: Yeah.

CARLA HAYDEN: You have a star already. Brie Larson. How does that make you feel?

BONNIE GARMUS: Oh, my god! It is so bizarre. Okay, it's time to name-drop. I had dinner with Brie Larson!

(Laughter.)

And my publicist was sitting here, and, yeah, we were in Hollywood, and it was just exactly how we'd always imagined Hollywood... like... huh.

(Laughter.)

These people are really different from us.

(Laughter.)

But they were all really nice! And Brie Larson's just amazing. She's kind of a force of nature!

CARLA HAYDEN: And that's what you want.

BONNIE GARMUS: Yeah, that's what you want. I don't know if you've seen the trailer, but when she turns around and she says "my name is Elizabeth Zott, and this is Supper at Six," you go WOW.

(Laughter.)

CARLA HAYDEN: So the title came from, Lessons in Chemistry. And I would be remiss if I didn't mention the eye-catching book jacket.

BONNIE GARMUS: The eye-catching jacket. That I've received more hate mail on --

(Laughter.)

You know, no. It's -- okay. So, I was really lucky to be consulted about the cover. Because I know I've talked to other authors, and lots of authors are never consulted. Also, I have 40 covers in 40 different countries, so everybody has their idea of Elizabeth Zott around the world. And that's really been interesting.

But the problem with my cover -- I wasn't quite sure this was right, because I thought it looked too much like romance, and there's nothing like -- I don't have anything against romance novelists, because I'm friends with JoJo Moyes!

(Laughter.)

And she's just the greatest, she's a great writer. But this isn't a romance novel. And sure enough, I heard from romance readers instructing me that should I write a romance novel, I should try not to kill off the love story.

(Laughter.)

CARLA HAYDEN: Was it the lipstick? What was it?

BONNIE GARMUS: I don't know... yeah.

CARLA HAYDEN: Well, it's catching, and I think I told you that my friend, the real doctor -- she can help -- all I can do is call 911, but Tania loved it. And she needed a little something to just lift her spirits, because she said she had some of those same experiences as a doctor going on and everything.

Now, with the talking dog -- I have to get back to Six Thirty

(Laughter.)

You said he was inspired by your dog Friday. How?

BONNIE GARMUS: You've done your research! So, I had a dog Friday. My girls picked him out at the shelter -- her out. She was in very bad shape. She had two kinds of mange, and I remember that day, the vet there saying "I don't think she has the kind of mange that humans can get."

(Laughter.)

You don't THINK?

(Laughter.)

And she had been so badly abused, somebody had burned cigarettes out on her back, they'd cut her, her teeth were missing on the bottom.

CARLA HAYDEN: Awww.

BONNIE GARMUS: She was not an attractive dog. But my dogs insisted we take her home, so we did. And she turned out to be Einstein! She would sit with us at dinner, and when we talked, her head would move from person to person.

(Laughter.)

And I thought at the time, is she reading our lips?

(Laughter.)

But -- yeah, it turned out I think she was, because she used to go to work with me, and one day, I just said out loud "I can't find my keys". And Friday went -- and she started going through my gym bag, and then she started going through my briefcase, and then she opened the hall closet and went through all the jackets, the pockets.

(Laughter.)

She found my keys, threw them on the floor, like "let's go mom".

(Laughter.)

So she was -- but -- okay, it gets better though.

We were transferred abroad, we were transferred to Switzerland, and Friday learned German

(Laughter.)

She'd passed the Swiss dog test, which is famously difficult! And -- I know, I'm very proud of my dog!

(Laughter.)

We think she learned German from the other dogs in the neighborhood.

(Laughter.)

I do think that! I don't know. Anyway, the point is --

CARLA HAYDEN: The Swiss dog test?

BONNIE GARMUS: The Swiss dog test. So if -- your dog has to pass this test. They don't have to get 100 percent. They have to get a passing grade. They have to get 65 percent.

CARLA HAYDEN: Of what?

(Laughter.)

BONNIE GARMUS: It's an hour long test.

CARLA HAYDEN: Oh, sit and everything?

BONNIE GARMUS: Well, no, it's like, they take them up in the hills, you can't chase deer. You can't steal food off the grocery shelves.

(Laughter.)

All this stuff. The whole test is in German.

CARLA HAYDEN: Well, there are a lot of dogs that would not pass that test.

(Laughter.)

I had a few, I would -- I could tell, oh, my. Did Friday --

BONNIE GARMUS: Friday came back, by the way, that day her name changed to Freitag.

(Laughter.)

So she came back from the test and the vet said "this dog is not American".

(Laughter.)

I said, well, I think she is. He said, no, this dog is Swiss. This is the first dog that's passed the test with 100 percent in two years.

(Laughter.)

CARLA HAYDEN: What ????

BONNIE GARMUS: I know. I thought she should take our kids' SAT tests.

(Laughter.)

She was a smart dog.

CARLA HAYDEN: Oh, oh, my goodness! Well, now I was going to ask you something else about Friday, but I don't know! I just wish I had one!

(Laughter.)

So, your writing process. Wait, before that. You mentioned cooking and everything. Are you a great cook and everything?

BONNIE GARMUS: What is a loaded question. She knows!

(Laughter.)

She knows the answer.

CARLA HAYDEN: I know.

BONNIE GARMUS: I told her. I don't cook well. And you would never take a picture of what I made and put it on Instagram.

(Laughter.)

And I have trouble following recipes. Because my mind wanders. And I'm like, oh, there's the list. And I put everything together at one time. Oh, you have to sauté it? Oh, you have to marinate overnight? That's too bad. Here's dinner!

(Laughter.)

CARLA HAYDEN: I bet Friday didn't like --

BONNIE GARMUS: Friday was good with me. But no, my kids are really good cooks and my husband is a good cook, and they like it, and I don't like it. But I thought writing this book would make me a really good cook, and it did not!

(Laughter.)

CARLA HAYDEN: Yeah, those pistachios.

(Laughter.)

So, how did your career as a copywriter affect you becoming a writer? Because this is your first novel.

BONNIE GARMUS: Yeah, it's my first. Um, copywriting is creative writing. It's a strange sort of writing. It's very short, and novels are very long. But the thing about copywriting is, from the get-go, you're basically trying not to bore people ever, and make something very memorable for people. And so there have been all these copywriters -- Kurt Vonnegut, Salman Rushdie, James Patterson -- there are a thousand copywriters who have a novel. I'm like, it's in the desk. Let me see it. But it's actually a good training ground. You learn to write very concisely as a copywriter.

CARLA HAYDEN: You were a big reader. Did you always want to be a writer?

BONNIE GARMUS: I did. I wrote my first book when I was 5, and it was really good!

(Laughter.)

And it's never been published. But --

CARLA HAYDEN: It might be now!

(Laughter.)



BONNIE GARMUS: Well, I can -- it says "once upon a time", then it has another sentence, then it says "the end".

CARLA HAYDEN: Maybe not!

(Laughter.)

So you, and what about that, you grew up in California?

BONNIE GARMUS: We grew up in Southern California -- well, we moved abroad. We moved to South America when I was 13. But, yeah, I grew up in Southern California, and that's what so influenced me when I wrote the book. I was thinking about all the moms I grew up with. And they were always called "average housewives". Average housewives! And these women were not average. They were just never allowed to live up to their potential. And I thought about all that wasted potential, including my mom, who was a nurse.

CARLA HAYDEN: You mentioned that you thought about your mom during this.

BONNIE GARMUS: Yeah, my mom was a really good nurse, but she gave it up to have this family, four daughters. And as we were growing up, she would always say, you know, nursing is an important profession. And none of us wanted to be a nurse. We're all kind of squeamish, and I think it always kind of disappointed her. But after we all left and grew up, she went back and got her nursing license renewed, and the first year back in the hospital she won Nurse of the Year.

(Applause.)

CARLA HAYDEN: Wow.

BONNIE GARMUS: I know! Thank you. But my mom was the only nurse in her entire hospital to volunteer for the AIDS floor. And that's when AIDS had just been --

(Applause.)

-- discovered. I was super-proud of my mom, yeah.

CARLA HAYDEN: A little bit of Elizabeth in there.

BONNIE GARMUS: Yeah, no, she was something.

CARLA HAYDEN: Now, Elizabeth also, is any of that auto -- you?

BONNIE GARMUS: No.

(Laughter.)

I wish! She's my role model. I was writing my role model. I really thought that day at work, "I am doing something very wrong, and I really wish I had someone to look up to." So that's why I wrote her.

CARLA HAYDEN: She was someone for you to look up to. You had a little bit of something!

BONNIE GARMUS: Well, we all have a little bit of her.

CARLA HAYDEN: You did it! You did it.

Now, are you involved with this series coming up?

BONNIE GARMUS: No. I mean, I really wanted to write it. But because it came up SO quickly, before the book was even published, Hollywood was calling about it, which was really incredible, and I interviewed all these different production companies, you know -- I know! I know.

And this was during COVID. So I was at home, and my husband would -- we live in a really small flat. We had to move out of the one where I did all the chemistry experiments

(Laughter.)

CARLA HAYDEN: Yeah...

BONNIE GARMUS: Yeah. But my husband tried to lean over and see who I was talking to, you know, because we work at the same table. And it was all these people you always see on the red carpet! Except these people, they weren't wearing makeup, so they look really different.

(Laughter.)

They really do. They were all really great, but I finally settled on Aggregate Films, and that's Jason Bateman's company.

(Applause.)

CARLA HAYDEN: Cool. Cool. So you'll hopefully be involved some more?

BONNIE GARMUS: No, I'm not. I wanted to write it, but I couldn't, because my agents and editors very gently assured me that I would be busy doing other things, and I said "what else would I be doing?" And they said "oh, you'll see".

(Laughter.)

So they were right.

CARLA HAYDEN: Touring and all that.

BONNIE GARMUS: Yeah, I'm touring. So I didn't write it. And I did get to make notes on the script. But the deal was, I could write notes and they don't have to take them.

CARLA HAYDEN: That's okay.

BONNIE GARMUS: Yeah, that's okay. So that's pretty good. Occasionally I would write a little unhappy face --

(Laughter.)

No, they've been, they've been great to work with. But Hollywood changes everything, you just have to know that going in and be brave and let them do their work.

CARLA HAYDEN: Well, first novel that's optioned before it's even published. What, 49 weeks on the Bestseller List.

BONNIE GARMUS: (Stage whispering) 52!

(Laughter.)

CARLA HAYDEN: Sorry, research is off.

Number 1 everything. And this is your first novel! How does this make you feel? I mean, look at this!

BONNIE GARMUS: No, it's, you know, it's really hard to put into words, honestly. You know, when the book was first going through the auctions and everything, and it just seemed -- because my agent the night before we were releasing it to Frankfurt, my agent said, you know, this is a real quirky book, I don't know if anyone is going to like it, keep your expectations real low, and a lot of my friends had not gotten their books picked up, so I was prepared for the worst. And then she said, you know, Bonnie cancel all that, it's picked up. But I kept thinking it wasn't happening. I used to get up in the middle of the night and check to see if I'd dreamed it all?

(Laughter.)

And check all the e-mails and stuff. I think finally after the 10th time, my husband grabbed my hand and goes "let me save you a trip. It's real".

(Laughter.)

CARLA HAYDEN: Is it real now?

BONNIE GARMUS: It is real. It is real. It's incredible, and it's been a privilege to travel and talk to people all around the world and talk about care things we all care so much about, hear what people in other countries are doing to make changes in their societies.

It's a huge honor to get to do that. And it's also really inspiring to hear how strongly people feel about the same things that WE care about!

So...

CARLA HAYDEN: At this time, I also have to ask about, uh, empowerment for women. And has that been a theme that's, when you go even worldwide that is really... it's a book that's resonating for a reason at this time too?

BONNIE GARMUS: Well, yeah. There's been a lot -- ha -- well, you've seen the news, this week... someone finally got punished for his misdeeds!

(Cheering and applause)

(Laughter.)

CARLA HAYDEN: Just saying!

(Laughter.)

BONNIE GARMUS: Not naming names!

CARLA HAYDEN: But, that empowerment, and role models, and you can do it, and thinking about all of the dreams that -- raisin in the sun, dreams deferred, and you think about generations that had to not do whatever. My mom was a classically trained pianist, and in the '50s -- and she was Black, so that wasn't going anywhere, so she taught music, elementary school, and became a social worker. And you think about that.

BONNIE GARMUS: Yeah, exactly. I was in Dubai, and I was sitting in a room with about 25 women in burqas, and they were just incredibly delightful, but we were talking about women's rights, and I said, yeah, things are a little dark now in the United States, you know, Roe v Wade has been overturned. And they went "(scoffing) things are bad in the United States..."

(Laughter.)

They were charming! But, you know, we had a very frank discussion about what was going on there and what's going on in other parts of the world. And I've had the same frank discussions with people in a lot of different places, and what always astounds me is, is that we're still -- we're talking about exactly the same things that we all want. And why are we still so far away from achieving that?

CARLA HAYDEN: (Sighing)...

(Laughter.)

Well...

With the other question, though, what's your next book?

(Laughter.)

BONNIE GARMUS: My next book?

CARLA HAYDEN: Your next book! You know we're all, I mean, come on!

(Laughter.)

(Applause.)

We're hooked now!

BONNIE GARMUS: I know, I know.

Well, I'm not writing a sequel right now.

CARLA HAYDEN: Oh...

BONNIE GARMUS: I know. I'm working on another book. I hardly ever talk about it. I did talk about it with the Librarian of Congress.

CARLA HAYDEN: And that's why I'm telling it!

(Laughter.)

If you have a secret, don't tell me, okay?

(Laughter.)

I will tell.

BONNIE GARMUS: But I did talk about it a little bit with an audience a few months ago -  
- I know! But guess what? Then I changed the whole thing and now if it comes out,  
they're gonna go "it's not about that!" So now I don't really talk about it.

CARLA HAYDEN: Oh, come on!

(Laughter.)

We don't care. Whatever you do, we're gonna like it!

(Applause.)

You know?

BONNIE GARMUS: I'm switching from science to the arts.

CARLA HAYDEN: Ooooh!

Museums?

(Laughter.)

BONNIE GARMUS: I'm not saying anymore!

(Laughter.)

CARLA HAYDEN: And the third one could be libraries!!!

(Laughter.)

(Applause.)

Marian the Librarian.

We have stereotypes...

BONNIE GARMUS: The librarian is the star. Of course she is.

CARLA HAYDEN: We get that. Well, that would be really something. So, now, your process, sorry, going back and forth -- have you started writing?

BONNIE GARMUS: Yeah, no, I've started it. I got, you know, I got a couple months into it, and I was really excited about, then I've been doing this a lot and traveling a lot, and I realize it's hard to keep all of the characters of Elizabeth Zott alive and switch to the other book. And so I've been delayed. But also I'm just really busy doing this.

So I'm hoping that this will die down really soon...

(Laughter.)

No! Because honestly, I'm much better just sitting at the dining room table. You know? I'm -- that's where I like to be.

CARLA HAYDEN: Aww. It's not going down.

(Laughter.)

BONNIE GARMUS: Thanks, Carla.

CARLA HAYDEN: The paperback is coming out soon. And you said it's going to have a different cover and all the other covers, and all this. It's just going to be a lot of fun. There will be an entirely different rush on -- did you know that?

BONNIE GARMUS: I didn't know that.

(Laughter.)

CARLA HAYDEN: Somebody is nodding. It's like, oh, yeah, the paperback, the e-book. Oh, I forgot to ask! Are you -- are you reading the book?

BONNIE GARMUS: No! But the woman who reads the book -- this is a pretty good story. She's British, and you can tell only when she says "Jack LaLawn". It's Jack La-Lane. But she's British.

(Laughter.)

And I didn't know this, but she was 9 months pregnant, and her water broke, and during the last 50 pages, she read a little faster.

(Laughter.)

CARLA HAYDEN: Now I want to listen to the book and see if I can tell. A different sense of -- urgency!

(Laughter.)

Well, I know the audience wants to ask a few questions, and we have a virtual audience too, and I have a few of those. So we're going to open it up for questions and things. But before we do that, think about some of your questions, too.

And they have given me something to say, and they said, now, if you feel comfortable. I said, oh, yeah. I feel comfortable with this

(Laughter.)

"Out of respect for your fellow attendees, and in hopes of getting in as many questions as possible, please keep your questions brief. We can take one question per person, and if you have a comment instead of a question, stay comfortably in your seat!"

(Laughter.)

I just wanted to say that one -- because that's like cool!

(Laughter.)

That's really cool.

So we have two questions that already came out from the virtual. One is from Sherry in Arlington, Virginia, not far away. "This book has such an interesting concept and basis to convey empowerment for women. How did you come up with the idea to write about science in the story, and were you influenced by your own education or by someone that you know?"

BONNIE GARMUS: I was just really influenced that day by a bad mood! You know, I'm always a little embarrassed to say that. But... I was just really mad!

And -- but I have been inspired by a lot of books that were coming out with all these forgotten women scientists

CARLA HAYDEN: Yeah.

BONNIE GARMUS: And unbelievably, the people who get in touch with me, Rosalind Franklin, who was the true discoverer of DNA!

(Applause.)

I know, I could just go on about James Watson, but I won't! But her great-niece has been in touch with me, and talked about her great-aunt, who she knew really well, and what kind of person she was. But there are so many women like her, so many. And most of their careers were cut short.

CARLA HAYDEN: Now, Marcy in Laurel, Maryland -- Six-Thirty has a lot of fans.

(Laughter.)

She wanted to know, did you ever consider writing this book entirely through Six-Thirty's voice?

(Laughter.)

BONNIE GARMUS: I think my agent would DIE!

(Laughter.)

No, but you had -- you came -- you were talking to me about a children's book written from Six-Thirty's viewpoint.

CARLA HAYDEN: What about that?

(Cheering and applause)

I think he could be a star, it would be so cool

BONNIE GARMUS: He has a lot to say.

CARLA HAYDEN: He has a lot to say. Channel Friday in doing that. That would be nice.

So, there are microphones in the aisles, and we have someone right here, you can just come on up.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Hi. I know you mentioned there was some controversy with the cover and one of the things I particularly like about it is the inclusion of the pencil. I wanted to ask you about that because it's representative of both her strength and her vulnerability, and your decision to include the graphic scene with the pencil but then not



really overlay it after that, but nevertheless, she's never without her pencil. Can you speak a little bit about that and your choices there?

BONNIE GARMUS: Yeah, I was using the pencil not just as a weapon but as a metaphor. Because what Elizabeth Zott says is that scientists often write in pencil because they know they're going to make mistakes. You're going to have mistakes in your life, and terrible things are going to happen to you. And the great thing about the pencil is that it comes with an eraser. And it doesn't mean that it takes everything away - you can still see a faint outline, but it doesn't rule you, doesn't define you. So for Elizabeth Zott and what she has faced, it does not define her.

(Applause.)

CARLA HAYDEN: Oh, you gotta have some special pencils made with all -- merchandising!

(Applause.)

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Hi, I'd like to know if your presumably former colleagues know that they inspired the novel?

(Laughter.)

And what they think about that.

CARLA HAYDEN: Living well is the best revenge.

BONNIE GARMUS: I have a good story about that.

CARLA HAYDEN: I bet they want to be your best friend now.

BONNIE GARMUS: Kinda. I was in Seattle doing an event. I suddenly saw one of the people who had been in the meeting that day, who had been a friend of mine. I mean, I had gone to his wedding, coming at me at the book signing table. He had 10 copies of the book.

(Laughter.)

And he leaned down and said into my ear "thanks for not naming our names".

(Laughter.)

No, it was really great. And then he told me this other great thing. Now we've become friends. He bought a copy for everybody who had been in the meeting that day.

CARLA HAYDEN: WHOOOOA!

(Applause.)

Oh, I love it!

Go ahead. I think we'll go back and forth.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Hi. First of all, thank you so much for writing the book and sharing the message of empowerment for women. It was really starting -- startling to think about what it was like but also to reflect on how little has changed because these problems continue today.

I was fascinated by your use of the rowing as an example, and weaving that in, and reading *Boys in the Boat*, it was so similar, talking about balance, and the contradictions and how everything comes together in scientific and also artistic form. So, could you explain a little bit about whether you initially had the vision of incorporating that concept, or whether, you know -- and what you hoped to accomplish through that message and analogy?

BONNIE GARMUS: Yeah. I mean, I honestly, when I was writing it, and I realized I was trying to go between dark and light and balance that, and then when I realized that chemistry was the science of balance, that you can't have an unbalanced chemical equation, I thought of other balances and imbalances, and I thought of rowing. Because, well -- and then I was really glad I thought of rowing since that's the only thing I actually KNEW about and I didn't have to research in the book.

(Laughter.)

But this was really it. I really wanted to bring in this idea of rowing, because it's a really special sport. And you can really start it at any age, unfortunately for all of you here.

(Laughter.)

You can go down and take a learn to row lesson, and then you can learn to erg and you will be like Brie Larson and say "I am never erg'ing again".

(Laughter.)

But that's really what it was. I wanted to bring in the idea of balance. Because inequality of any kind is an imbalance. And it's not -- it shouldn't be that way. It doesn't -- we don't work well when we're out of balance. We see that every day in climate change. We see that in race relations. We see that with men and women at work. It doesn't work. It's never worked. And there's no scientific basis for it.

So in my view, sexism and racism is scientific ignorance.

(Applause.)

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Hi, thank you. First of all, I haven't enjoyed reading a book this much as I enjoyed just reading this book in years. But my question is about the ending, which is that everything in Elizabeth's life is against her, but the ending is like this beautiful, right, amazing thing where everything comes together and she defeats her enemies and she wins, and I was wondering if you could talk more about that choice, because it is very fulfilling when you get to that point and it ends so nicely.

BONNIE GARMUS: Well, thank you. It's really funny because about half of people think it's a happy ending and the other half think it's really sad. It's somewhere in between. Because the fact is, at the end, you have two women whose choices were decided for them, pretty much by the patriarchy. You have one woman who had to give up her child, was never able to be this mother, never able to meet her son. And on the other hand, you have Elizabeth Zott, not allowed to have an abortion, was forced to have her child, choices taken away. And then you have Madeline, the last one, you know, the next generation standing, will never have a father.

So these women still have great losses, all three are moving on.

Because that's what women have to do!

(Applause.)

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Hello, over here.

(Laughter.)

BONNIE GARMUS: Sorry.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: You talked about the development of each of the characters. I'd love to know a little bit more about the development of each character and if you had a favorite one that you developed and was there one that you developed first and was there a sequence or how did that all work in terms of your character development?

BONNIE GARMUS: Well, I don't write from an outline. So I think it's really important for me at least to let characters kind of walk on. I try to put the characters in conflict a lot, because if you put a character in conflict, all their bad behavior comes out, all their flaws come out, and then you can kind of see who they are as a person, what they're hiding, what they're ashamed of. And so for me, when I write, I have a situation going on, and then I sort of feel like someone's knocking at the door and wants to enter the scene and put in their two cents -- usually it was Six-Thirty.

(Laughter.)

But that's really how it developed.

When I wrote that first chapter that day, I also wrote the last three sentences. Just because I wanted something to aim for, and oddly, those three sentences still stand. I didn't think they would. But I needed something to, you know -- it's over there.

The rest of it, I just had to fill in the other 380 pages.

(Laughter.)

CARLA HAYDEN: Wow!

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Hi there. The comment you made earlier about Madeline being part of the next generation who is taught that they can be whatever they want to be really stuck with me. I'm a young woman in the workforce, I'm 23, and I think that's the message I received a lot growing up, and yet I still find myself running into the same road blocks that Elizabeth and yourself have. And I was just curious to hear if you have any advice for the next generation to continue on with Elizabeth's fight.

BONNIE GARMUS: Yeah, I do. I think, you know, I have two daughters. I think it's really important to speak up, and not be afraid to speak up, and to realize -- I had this talk, you know, boy, it was in Italy, actually, with women saying, you know, -- I didn't think Italian women didn't speak up!

(Laughter.)

But apparently they don't.

And what's interesting is, if you do speak up, if you refuse to remain silent, you're helping other women. A lot of women have come before you so that you can go to work and choose a career. Those women didn't have that career. I was in an event one time, and a young woman said "I haven't experienced any sexism at all, I'm not sure it ever existed", and I said "you need to thank every woman in here with gray hair for that experience".

CARLA HAYDEN: Uh-huh!

BONNIE GARMUS: But it's really true. If you can keep this fire going, that's what we need. Because obviously the fight's not over. We've got a long, long way to go.

(Applause.)

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Hi, Bonnie. My name is Madeline, and I am the daughter of a female food scientist, so I loved your book!

(Laughter.)

My question for you is about the character of Elizabeth. As a female scientist myself, I'm wondering, I know you mentioned Rosalind Franklin earlier, but did you choose to model her after any other female scientists or weave them into her character?

BONNIE GARMUS: You know what, I didn't. I really wanted Elizabeth just to be Elizabeth Zott. I really wanted her not to mirror any other woman in her journey. I wanted her to have her own, especially because I kept loading her with problems, you know? "Oh, here's something else you have to face". Because I was so interested to see how a woman with that much integrity and that much self-esteem would face it. What would she say, and what would she do? So every time I wrote a scene like that, it was really, you know, what would Elizabeth Zott do in this instance? Because I, you know, Rosalind Franklin is gone, I can't ask her. So, yeah, she was just out of my imagination.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Hi, thank you so much. It's been a joy to read this book, and actually I found myself laughing out loud in the car -- I actually listened to it, and the narrator was wonderful, and I found myself laughing, so thank you for a good belly laugh on occasion.

BONNIE GARMUS: Thank you.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: My question is, you mentioned clearly the empowerment of a woman in that time is the greatest force of the book. But I found it interesting that the book title was Lessons in Chemistry, and you mentioned that none of it was really about romance, and even though it wasn't necessarily a romantic book, what I found interesting was that I thought you actually probably had thought more about, like, the love connections that the characters had within themselves, the differences between them, and there was a point in the book where she actually talks about the chemical, um, composition of -- that defines love, and what happens in your body. And I found that interesting. So to me, it was interesting to hear you say just now that it wasn't really a romance novel. Not that it was at all. But I felt like there was an underlying -- did I just imagine that? Or was there --

BONNIE GARMUS: No, I mean --

(Laughter.)

When I studied chemistry, that's when I understood how, you know, love is quite chemical. We're attracted to people based on all sorts of chemicals going on in our bodies, and our minds change -- our bodies tell us whether we're with a person we should be with. Sometimes we ignore those signals. Not a good idea.

But, no, it's really interesting. The whole book, it's really about bonds between people. You can be born into a family and not really belong to them. You may not feel bonded to them. But you have another family elsewhere.

And so, chemical bonds between people are extremely important. And that's actually how you make dinner, too! You know, when you heat something, you activate the chemical properties of food. And that's when you start breaking bonds, you create all-new bonds, and you put that on a plate and you call that dinner! I call it a miracle. But you call it dinner!

(Laughter.)

And, you know, if you're really good at it, I love people who cook, I love people who cook well, because I don't. But it is really chemistry in action. And I don't know! I have such respect for it all. But anyway, that's my long, roundabout answer to your question. I don't know if I answered it. But... yeah, everything we do, everything we do, chemistry, the central science.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Hi, I have a writing question. I'm interested in writing and libraries and all that great stuff. I'm interested -- the book is told from so many different points of view. I'm wondering how you work out the process of controlling that. How you're in someone's head, and how the reader, you imagine the reader experiencing that?

BONNIE GARMUS: I'm so glad that you thought there was some control with that.

(Laughter.)

I'm really -- you know, copywriters don't pay attention to writing rules at all, and that's the gift of copywriting. Just don't care. And it frees you up to write in a lot of different ways.

I was told, no, you cannot have ten points of view, no, you cannot -- I mean, not by anybody in the publishing or agenting business. Nobody in that area said anything like that to me. But other people would. They'd go "no, no, you can't break this rule", and I would go, oh, watch me.

(Laughter.)

As soon as there's a rule, I want to break it. So writing those ten points of view, people would always say "people won't be able to follow it". And I would say "are you saying readers aren't smart? Because I think readers are smart".

CARLA HAYDEN: Yeah.

BONNIE GARMUS: So I had fun with it, and I'm glad you could follow it.

(Laughter.)

AUDIENCE MEMBER: The illusion of control was definitely achieved!

BONNIE GARMUS: Oh, well thank you.

(Laughter.)

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Hi. I was hoping you could talk a little bit about the story line of Calvin's mom? Because that really came as a surprise at the end. And... it was just really a moving part of the story, and very tragic, but also very hopeful. And I was just wondering if you could speak a bit about the thought process behind that character and story arc.

BONNIE GARMUS: Yeah, you know, I had done a lot of research about women whose children were taken from them because they were unwed and pregnant, they were an embarrassment to their family, they never saw their kids again. Adoption records were completely closed until about 15 years ago. This was a very common story, and still is, in Ireland. So it's really interesting how other people are deciding for you whether or not you get to raise your own child.

So that's really why I wanted to include that story in it, and that's why -- her loss that she never, ever gets to know her son, to me is, you know, a crime against nature.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Hi. I was wondering, is there any significance to Zott, and Elizabeth Zott, her name? I'm asking because this came up in our book club, somebody said there was. And I'm gonna break a rule and say that, um, I watched a documentary while I was reading your book, the documentary was called Picture a Scientist, which went so well with your book. It was amazing. About women and discovering in the academic environment, and how they were being, you know, discriminated against. So I wanted to share that. It was really good.

BONNIE GARMUS: Oh, okay, yes.

Yeah, there is a story behind Zott. This always is so terrible -- I'm married to a wonderful man, a feminist! He wasn't a feminist at first --

(Laughter.)

And it took about a year.

(Laughter.)

But, when we were dating, we lived in Northern California, and there was a restaurant, a diner in Northern California, it was called Rosatti's, but everyone called it Zot's. And we were there one time at lunch, and we never had arguments about our relationship -- we

had arguments about politics and books and things. And we had become quite heated. And one time we were eating at Zot's, and he said, "you know, when I first met you, I didn't know you'd have so many opinions."

(Laughter.)

And I said "Oh! That was exactly the wrong thing to say!"

(Laughter.)

So I left. And then he learned that that wasn't a proper thing to say.

(Laughter.)

And then I have to say, so when I started writing the book, and he was reading a couple chapters, he looked up from the chair and goes "I know where Zott came from".

(Laughter.)

JACKIE LEVENTHAL: Excellent. So we're going to start to wrap up. We'll take the questions of the people who are still standing at the microphone and then we'll transition. Thank you.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I loved this book on so many levels. I was raised by a single mom who told me I could do whatever in life, and that's been true, so I say to the younger women, just do it!

I'm also not a dog person, and I absolutely loved Six-Thirty. I'm just like now a dog person, my best friend sitting here will be shocked to hear, just based on that character. But my question is much more superficial than that. Which is, I'm not a good cook, but I really want a cookbook with plain language of these recipes. Can you please convince Jason Bateman or your publisher or your publicist or whoever to publish the book, because we'll buy it

(Laughter.)

BONNIE GARMUS: They're right there. You can get talk to them. I won't write it --

CARLA HAYDEN: And it can be a book with a gift back and merchandising, with pencils.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: So I'm glad the woman before me broke the rule with the comment because if I was a guy with the only comment.

(Laughter.)



The comment is, I read -- I gave the book to my mother who was 80 who loved books and had not read a book in 7 years, she said she hadn't been able to finish a book in 5 or 7 years, and she loved it.

(Applause.)

My question is about killing off Calvin.

(Laughter.)

CARLA HAYDEN: Personal!

(Laughter.)

AUDIENCE MEMBER: When did you think of it, and how nervous were you that killing off a central character like that, you would lose your reader, and were you worried at all about then kind of restarting?

BONNIE GARMUS: Well, so, we were in a book shop doing an event, and -- a different area -- and this woman came up with her 13-year-old girl. And the daughter said -- she said "oh, my daughter has to ask you a very important question about the book." And so finally, she said "why did you kill Calvin???"

(Laughter.)

And I said "he had to go".

(Laughter.)

And I know I scarred her for life. But the whole point of the book is that so often, women are left standing on their own. I had to see how Elizabeth Zott would handle a loss like that. But the truth of it, also, is that no matter what, even if she had married Calvin, her work would always be under his name. And I just could not allow that. So he had to...

(Laughter.)

Yeah.

CARLA HAYDEN: Had to go!

(Laughter.)

BONNIE GARMUS: Easy come, easy go.

(Laughter.)

CARLA HAYDEN: But congratulations to your mother, though. Mine is 91, and I know that. That is great.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Hi, so my book club was particularly interested in the conversations about faith in the book. Particularly faith in relationship to science. So we were wondering if you could talk a little bit about what inspired that and how you navigated that theme.

BONNIE GARMUS: I thought it was really interesting to talk about that, because Elizabeth is a scientist, and many scientists don't believe in God. Many scientists are atheists. It's not uncommon. What is uncommon -- maybe you know this -- the head chaplain at Harvard is an atheist. He's a humanist. Humanism is not a religion. It's a belief system, and the only requirement for being a humanist is that you're human. It's based on wanting the best for your community, for talking about things. You don't believe in a higher power. You don't believe, basically, in God. But you do have faith in something really important, and that's in yourself. And that's in other people. That other people and yourself, working together, can do the right things for the community, for the world. And so I wanted to bring in humanism. I wanted Elizabeth Zott to go on TV and get in trouble for saying she's an atheist, because you sure couldn't do that back then. But you can now, because it's not a dirty word. The head chaplain at Harvard is an atheist. And I think it's one of the most inclusive things that you can be part of and actually make change in the world. If I hear one more person say "we're gonna pray for everyone who's been shot dead by a gun in this country" -- --

(Applause.)

-- I'm going to explode!

So that's why it's in there

CARLA HAYDEN: And last question.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Hi. I heard that you went Through 98 publishing rejections, and I was just wondering if you could talk about that process and what made you keep going, why and what made you keep going.

BONNIE GARMUS: Yeah. I wrote another excellent, excellent book.

(Laughter.)

It was 700 pages long. And no one wanted to publish it. Or, I shouldn't say that. I only sent it to agents. And I got 98 rejections from agents. And what I didn't understand was that you can't write a book that length when you're starting out, because there's an economy to publishing that I had completely ignored and didn't understand,. A book like that from a debut author, it's so expensive to print, and then what if it's no good, and then in German it gains weight like this, like a sponge.

(Laughter.)

And I found out in Arabic it goes like this.

So it was really dumb and naive of me to do that. But I got 98 rejections. And what I did about those rejections was to feel real bad. Drink.

(Laughter.)

Not ex -- well, sometimes.

(Laughter.)

Not excessively.

CARLA HAYDEN: Balance!

(Laughter.)

BONNIE GARMUS: Yeah, all right. It's rough getting all those rejections!

But finally, number 98, the agent 98, steered me right, and she wrote me a really scathing e-mail that I've kept, and she basically said "yeah, I read 10,000 words" -- she was the only agent to read. She read 10,000 words. She said, yeah, you know, you're good. But I would never publish this, because you don't know what you're doing. And then she went on to tell me how much of what I didn't know, in a really mean, mean way. But she said, you know, what you should do is write a novel of appropriate length. Appropriate is 350 pages. And send it to me

And I never did. Because the e-mail is really mean

(Laughter.)

But anyway, I have the world's nicest agents in Felicity Blunt and Jennifer Joel, so I'm good.

(Applause.)

CARLA HAYDEN: Did you send her a copy?

BONNIE GARMUS: No.

CARLA HAYDEN: She might have one somewhere.

Well, we want to thank you, Bonnie, thank you for Elizabeth, thank you for all the characters, thank you for Six-Thirty. Thank you for writing the right book at the right time.

BONNIE GARMUS: Thank you, Carla. Thank you. Thank you!

CARLA HAYDEN: Thank all of you.

(Applause.)

JACKIE LEVENTHAL: Thank you so much to Bonnie Garmus and Dr. Carla Hayden. If you'd like to stay for the book signing, please stay seated. Otherwise, you can exit.

Exits are on this level, and additional autographed books are for sale in the main lobby.