

Marlborough Public Library Adult Book Club

March 12 or 14, 2024

*The Exceptions* by Kate Zernike

Questions abridged from:

<https://www.simonandschuster.com/books/The-Exceptions/Kate-Zernike/9781982131838>

1. On page 61, Nancy recalls that her boss, Mark Ptashne, “had told her that she was smarter than any other woman at Harvard and at least half the men.” Make note of the backhanded compliments that Nancy receives throughout the book. Discuss how her male colleagues and supervisors use these kinds of observations to pit the women against each other. Do you think that’s intentional? Why or why not?

2. Many of the women highlighted in *The Exceptions* who came before Nancy—Rosalind Franklin, Dr. Ruth Hubbard, and Barbara McClintock—experienced humiliating discrimination, including lack of acknowledgment for their critical scientific contributions. How did each of them handle this differently? Discuss the differences in their careers and personal lives.

3. Nancy’s marriage to Brooke is complicated by his appearance of being supportive and progressive, but also feeling threatened by her expertise in a field he does not understand (see page 77). Compare and contrast Brooke’s attitude toward Nancy with that of Gene Dresselhaus toward Millie.

4. Throughout *The Exceptions*, there are people (usually men) in positions of leadership who approach their work in a more equitable fashion (Joe Gall and Jim Watson). Do you think this is learned behavior from their education and backgrounds, or does it have more to do with their character?

5. On pages 146–47, Zernike outlines a promotional brochure that the MIT alumnae association sends out to 10,500 girls across the nation. What picture do the quotations on the brochure paint of MIT? How would a brochure like this be received today by high school students in your circles?

6. In a letter addressed to a woman in MIT’s administrative office, Nancy notes, “You are quite right that it is probably the tremendous stress of demanding their share that causes women to retreat too soon and thus to almost invariably end up with less” (page 245). How does this ring true for Nancy in her career at MIT? How does it continue to ring true today?

7. Near the end of the book (page 350), Nancy stirs up a new round of press, asking the questions “Were women in short supply at the highest levels of science because they were not good at it and did not like it? Or because they had repeatedly been told that they were not good at it and did not like it?” What other areas of expertise could you assign that second question to today?