

Lab Girl Discussion Questions

Adapted from [NEA Big Read Lab Girl Reader Resources](#)

- What was your impression of what a “scientist” is before you read the book? Did your impression shift or expand after reading Lab Girl?
- What feelings and messages did Jahren embrace during her childhood spent in her father’s laboratory? How did they set the stage for her adult life? Is there a setting from your childhood that has played a significant role in your life?
- Jahren writes of “growing up in a culture where you can never ask anyone anything about themselves” (p.11). How does Jahren respond? Can you think of cultures or cultural attributes that have played a part in shaping your personality and/or adult pursuits?
- How would you describe some of the obstacles Jahren has faced as a woman in a male-dominated field? Have you experienced or witnessed others experience similar obstacles? What other obstacles does Jahren face in her career as a research scientist?
- Jahren quotes from Charles Dickens throughout Chapter 4, as well as other books in subsequent chapters, challenging a common perception that science and literature exist in separate realms. What might scientists learn by reading literary works?
- “On some deep level, the realization that I could do good science was accompanied by the knowledge that I had formally and terminally missed my chance to become like any of the women that I had ever known” (p.71). Can you think of a moment or realization in your life that marks a line between who you are and who you might have been?
- Throughout her memoir, Jahren juxtaposes descriptions of human life with that of plant life. Did you find any of the facts she provided about plants particularly interesting? Did you find any parallels between these descriptions and your own life?
- What aspects of Jahren’s relationship with Bill—both personal and professional—help each of them through their toughest periods? Was there a scene involving both of them that was particularly moving to you or that you felt captured the essence of their friendship?

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Continued, Lab Girl Discussion Questions

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- **Jahren describes her struggles with mental illness in a gripping and vivid interlude (pp.144–47). Are you familiar with bipolar disorder? If so, did Jahren’s descriptions resonate with you? If not, did you find her description of her illness illuminating?**
- **Jahren describes ancient Arctic ecosystems that are “better characterized as ‘resilient’ than ‘stable’” (p.198). What do you think she means? Can you think of situations in your own life that have called for resilience instead of stability?**
- **Take a few moments to stop and look at a tree. What do you see? What might you want to know about what you’re seeing? What are some actions that we—as individuals and as a society—can take on behalf of a plant or plants?**

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