

“An absolute joy.”
—BETH O’LEARY

“Voicy, heartfelt, hilarious, propulsive.”
—CHRISTINA LAUREN

Sometimes love
is a little offbeat

Love Songs for Skeptics

a novel

CHRISTINA
PISHIRIS



READING GROUP GUIDE

1. What is it that makes your first love so different? Do you think Zoë's attachment to Simon is stronger than most? Who was your childhood crush or first love?
2. Zoë has a complicated relationship with her Greek heritage. How does her family shape the way she sees the world? What effect does your family heritage have on your attitude towards love?
3. Zoë relies on Patrick to guide her when she feels lost at work. How would you describe his mentorship? Do you have anyone you consider to be your mentor?
4. Simon admits that a big part of his failed marriage was avoiding problems until they spiraled past solutions. Do you think any other characters are hiding from their issues? Who? How do they resolve them?

5. Zoë has a flicker of doubt about using Jess to get through to Marcie. Did you think she was being manipulative? What consequences, intended and unintended, did she run into?
6. Nick calms Zoë down in the Eye by getting her to recite capitals. Have you ever used a strategy like that? What other advice would you give to Zoë if you saw her panicking?
7. Which of Zoë's suitors were you rooting for? Did your opinion change throughout the book?
8. Marcie highly values her privacy. Do you think the public demands too much of celebrities? Would you be comfortable in the spotlight?
9. The adage "never meet your heroes" might be the hardest advice to follow. How did you think Zoë's interactions went with Marcie? Would you have done anything else in her place? How would you feel if your idol acted like Marcie?
10. Zoë says she fell for the image of Simon rather than the person he became. Has that ever happened to you? Is it possible to see someone fully?

A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

You have a background in journalism. How does novel-writing compare? Did any of your own journalism experiences sneak into Zoë's work?

Writing a novel is really different to knocking out a 150-word news story or a 1000-word feature. I know that should have been obvious from the start, but as a journalist, you're so used to writing under tight deadlines and getting it right, more or less, the first time that it's a shock when you realise just how much re-writing and re-thinking a novel needs. Also, *Love Songs For Skeptics* ended up being over 100,000 words. Keeping all that in my head was a nightmare. I had to stick a ton of index cards to my wall—I still have the blue-tac stains!

Two things that happened to me as a journalist made their way into the book. First, I referred to someone as English when they were Scottish. One angry phone call later and I'd learned my lesson... I'm actually pleased that they called because if they hadn't, I would never have realised my mistake, and after that I was much more conscious of using "British," which covers Scottish and Welsh as well as English.

Another time, someone rang me to ask where they could get a life-sized cut-out of David Duchovny. (I wrote about TV production, so somehow this person thought this qualified me?) But instead of just saying no, I had a five-minute chat with him and gave him a couple of leads. I couldn't quite bring myself to say no and hang up! I have no idea if he found one, by the way, and now that I think about it, I'm worried that it was a friend winding me up because I was a huge *X-Files* fan...

Working as a journalist taught me to stop worrying about calling strangers with the oddest of requests because people did it all the time to me!

Do you listen to music while you write? What did your playlists look like for *Love Songs for Skeptics*? What's your favorite love song?

I love to listen to music while I write. At first it was to drown out other noise, but even silence can feel a bit daunting when you're staring at an empty page. Then I realized that the right song can make you feel exactly the emotion you're trying to describe, so now I always listen to Spotify when I'm writing. I made two playlists that I played constantly during the final push to finish the book. A couple of those songs are mentioned in the book: "Kiss from a Rose" and Marvin Gaye's "I Want You." It's the song Nick's playing in his car when Zoë realizes she might be developing feelings for him. Maybe Marvin was a clichéd choice, but unlike "Let's Get It On," I think "I Want You" is on the right side of cheesiness. It's about longing, and I love that in a song. And "I want you, but I want you to want me, too" is a great lesson in enthusiastic consent, kids.

My favourite love song? What a hard question! But, if I had to choose only one, it would be Elvis's "Can't Help Falling in Love."

Fun fact: I let my husband choose our first song at our wedding—how feminist am I?? He chose an instrumental piece which I never would have thought of, but it worked beautifully because some great love songs have fantastic melodies, but their lyrics sometimes let them down. I mean, what on earth is “Kiss from a Rose” actually about? I’m all ears, Seal!

Speaking of music, how did you pick the song titles for each chapter?

It was a bit tricky to be honest, because I needed to find songs that a lot of people knew but weren’t too current as it would age the book. That’s why so many songs are from classic artists rather than more recent ones. I also needed songs that had descriptive titles that told you exactly what the chapter was going to be about. So, for example, I knew upfront that I needed a song about unrequited love, and even though my favourite is Ray Charles’s “You Don’t Know Me,” its title doesn’t pack much of an emotional punch. However, “The First Cut Is the Deepest” is pure poetry, so it was an easy choice for chapter one. The songs that work the best in the book for me are: “Goodbye Yellow Brick Road,” “Love Is for Suckers,” and “Somethin’ Stupid.”

In the story, Zoë gets to meet her music idol—if you could interview any famous musician, living or dead, who would you choose?

I am terrible with famous people. I am far too easily starstruck. So, for example, a few years back, I left my paid lunch on the counter in a sandwich shop because Alan Rickman came to stand beside me. I later returned, red-faced, to pick it up, and the staff knew exactly what had happened.

Also, unlike Zoë, I've always loved boy bands, and I once ran across six lanes of traffic when I saw JC from NSYNC. I was fine, obviously, and more importantly I got his autograph.

The one famous person I would have loved to meet is George Michael. He always came across as very down to earth and fun.

You and Zoë share Greek Cypriot heritage. How does that shape your worldview and your writing?

I love my Greek Cypriot heritage, although like Zoë, I was a bit embarrassed by it when I was younger. My parents forced me and my sister to go to Greek school on Saturday morning for ten years, and although I hated it at the time (or least, until I was about thirteen and discovered boys), I'm so grateful I learned the language and made Greek friends that I still have to this day.

Did your own family inspire Zoë's?

In small ways. My parents always say "*The Facebook*," which makes me smile. They can also have long, detailed conversations about how good the most recent watermelon they bought was/wasn't. It's an art form. We also had a cat called Rambo growing up, and my cousins had one called Rocky. Don't ask me why we called the poor kitty Rambo as we didn't particularly like the film—actually, I'm not sure I've ever seen it. Still, it rolled off the tongue and worked in Greek. (Because obviously we all talked to him in Greek.) In later years it got quite embarrassing to admit we'd called our cat Rambo, but luckily the vet misheard my mum when she first told her, so his microchip identified him as Rumble, which is marginally better. I think.

What does your writing process look like?

Chaotic and inefficient, but I suspect that's the only way that works for me. It also involves a lot of index cards, late nights, and strong tea.

The Greek food is a sleeper star in this book. Do you have a favorite dish? Are you more of a Simon or Zoë in the kitchen?

I feel awful, but I'm not a natural cook, so sadly, I'm much more of a Zoë in the kitchen. Luckily, my husband is a great cook, so I don't just eat tinned beans at night.

My favourite dish is souvlaki—a pork or chicken kebab done over a charcoal barbecue, eaten with lemon, salad, and pita bread. Delicious!

What is your favorite part of a romance to write? The happy ending? The banter?

Oh yes, writing banter is a joy. Two characters disagreeing with each other is just inherently sexy, isn't it? It gets the blood flowing, feels physical, and keeps you up at night. (Or is that just me?) Of course, I also love writing a happy ending, and nothing gets me grumpier than having my expectations raised, then being sorely disappointed—I'm still angry about how they ended *Sanditon*. And don't get me started about *La La Land*. Angry face emoji.

What books are on your bedside table right now?

Mostly women's commercial fiction, so any one time will likely include: Marian Keyes, Mhairi McFarlane, Lucy Vine, Lindsey Kelk, Christina Lauren, Sarah Hogle, and Emily Henry.