

The Power (Alderman)

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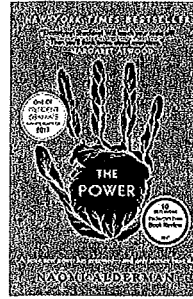
The Power

Naomi Alderman, 2016 (U.S., 2017)

Little, Brown and Company

400 pp.

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Summary

Winner, 2017 Baileys Women's Prize-Fiction

What would happen if women suddenly possessed a fierce new power?

In *The Power*, the world is a recognizable place: there's a rich Nigerian boy who lounges around the family pool; a foster kid whose religious parents hide their true nature; an ambitious American politician; a tough London girl from a tricky family.

But then a vital new force takes root and flourishes, causing their lives to converge with devastating effect. Teenage girls now have immense physical power—they can cause agonizing pain and even death. And, with this small twist of nature, the world drastically resets.

From award-winning author Naomi Alderman, *The Power* is speculative fiction at its most ambitious and provocative, at once taking us on a thrilling journey to an alternate reality, and exposing our own world in bold and surprising ways. (*From the publisher.*)

Author Bio

- Birth— 1974
- Where—London, England, UK
- Education—B.A., Oxford University; University of East Anglia
- Awards—Orange Prize-New Writers; Baileys Women's Prize-Fiction
- Currently—lives in London, England

Naomi Alderman is an English author, novelist and game designer whose most recent novel, *The Power*, won the 2017 Baileys Women's Prize for Fiction.

Born in London, the daughter of Geoffrey Alderman, a specialist in Anglo-Jewish history, Naomi attended Lincoln College, Oxford, where she read Philosophy, Politics and Economics. Following Oxford, she studied creative writing at the University of East Anglia.

From 2003-07, Alderman was the lead writer for Perplex City, an alternate reality game, at Mind Candy. She went on to become lead writer on the running video game

Zombies, Run! which launched in 2012.

Since 2012, Alderman has been Professor of Creative Writing at Bath Spa University. She continues to write a monthly technology column for *The Guardian*.

Novels

Alderman's literary debut came in 2006 with *Disobedience*, a well-received (if controversial) novel about a North London rabbi's lesbian daughter living in New York. The novel garnered her the 2006 Orange Award for New Writers. Writing the book Alderman to reject her life as a practising Jew. "I went into the novel religious and by the end I wasn't. I wrote myself out of it," she told Claire Armistead of *The Guardian* in 2016.

Her second novel, *The Lessons*, was published in 2010, and her third, *The Liar's Gospel* in 2012. That work portrays Jesus as an "inconsequential preacher," as described by Jewish Renaissance Magazine, which also referred to the novel as "uncomfortable and problematic."

Alderman's first three novels were all serialized on BBC Radio 4's *Book at Bedtime*.

In 2016, Alderman published *The Power*, a dystopian novel about young women who develop the ability to deliver deadly electrical shocks and who misuse their new found power. The book won the 2017 Baileys Women Prize for Fiction.

Recognition

2006 - Orange Prize for New Writers

2007 - *Sunday Times* New Writer of the Year

2012 - Rolex Mentor and Protege Arts Initiative*

2013 - Granta's 20 Best Young Writers list

2017 - Baileys Women's Prize-Fiction

* The Initiative is an international philanthropic program which pairs, for one year, "masters" in a specific discipline with emerging talents. Margaret Atwood selected Alderman as her protege, and the result was Alderman's fourth novel, *The Power*, which she dedicated to Atwood. (*Adapted from Wikipedia. Retrieved 1/18/2018.*)

Book Reviews

I was riveted by every page. Alderman's prose is immersive and, well, electric, and I felt a closed circuit humming between the book and me as I read.... I felt so hungry, reading this book, for a ball of lightning in my hand instead of keys between my knuckles on a long walk home at night. I felt hungry for the victory of these women...over those who would hurt them.

Amal El-Mohtar - New York Times Book Review

The Power is the stuff of superhero fiction.... What starts out as a fantasy of female empowerment deepens and darkens into an interrogation of power itself, its uses and abuses and what it does to the people who have it.... [Alderman's] breakout work.

Claire Armistead - Guardian (UK)

Richly imagined, ambitious, and propulsively written.

Sophie Gilbert - Atlantic

The Hunger Games crossed with *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Cosmopolitan

Narratively complex, philosophically searching, and gorgeously rendered.

Lisa Shea - Elle

Sometimes lightning does strike the same place twice. Sometimes it strikes a whole bunch of times. In Orange Award winner Naomi Alderman's chilling *The Power*, women across the globe discover a sudden ability to harness their aggression by inflicting electric shocks through their fingertips. Fans of speculative fiction...about empowered youth will be struck by Alderman's speedy and thorough inhabitation of a world just different enough from ours to jolt the imagination. Mothers, lock up your boys.

Sloane Crosley - Vanity Fair

The Power doesn't necessarily hold the answers to what organizing principle we should rally around instead.... It does audaciously depict, however, the most extreme results of a movement that seeks rather than interrogates power: That if feminism has become a means for domination, it has lost its way.

Bridget Read - Vogue

Alderman tests her female characters by giving them power, and they all abuse it. Readers should not expect easy answers in this dystopian novel, but Alderman succeeds in crafting a stirring and mind-bending vision.

Publishers Weekly

A page-turning thriller and timely exploration of gender roles, censorship and repressive political regimes, *The Power* is a must-read for today's times. —*Lauren Bufferd*

BookPage

(*Starred review.*) [S]ublime.... That Alderman is able to explore...provocative themes in a novel that is both wildly entertaining and utterly absorbing makes for an instant classic, bound to elicit discussion and admiration in equal measure. —*Kristine Huntley*

Booklist

All over the world, teenage girls develop the ability to send an electric charge from the tips of their fingers.... [The novel asks] interesting questions about gender.... It's fast-paced, thrilling, and even funny. Very smart and very entertaining.

Kirkus Reviews

Discussion Questions

We'll add publisher questions if and when they're available; in the meantime, use our LitLovers talking points to help start a discussion for *The Power* ... then take off on our own:

1. The premise of *The Power* seems to be that if a new world order were created—with women in charge—it would look little different from the way it does now. That woman would use their power to oppress men. Do you agree with that premise? Does Naomi Alderman make her case convincingly? Do you see other possibilities?
2. *Follow-up to Question 1*: The book poses a question: why do people abuse power? What does the book suggest the answer is? What is your answer?
3. As an interesting exercise, go through the novel to identify those societal structures, both legitimate and criminal, that have been changed by feminine power. Look at how the book treats religion, the military, sex trafficking and porn, harassment, even bullying. What does the new power inversion say about the way gender and sexuality operates in "normal" society (i.e., today in the early 21st century)?
4. In what ways does each of the four characters—Eve, Roxy, Tunde, and Margot—illuminate the events of the novel and all that has changed? Whose perspective or story do you find most interesting ... or revealing ... or engaging?
5. What do you make of Neil Adam Armon and his gushing letter to Naomi Alderman, "I am so grateful you could spare the time," and "Sorry, I'll shut up now"? If you are a woman, does that tone, do those words, have a familiar ring? Also, what's the joke here about appropriation, given that Alderman's name, not Neil's, ends up on the novel? (If you haven't already, play around with the letters of Neil's name.)
6. *Vogue* reviewer, Bridget Read (really), calls parts of the book "revenge porn." Do you agree with her label? Do you find the revenge satisfying or twisted ... or both?
7. Neil ponders: "Gender is a shell game. What is a man? Whatever a woman isn't. What is a woman? Whatever a man is not. Tap on it and it's hollow. Look under the shells: It's not there." What does Neil mean, and do you agree or disagree? How do you see gender? Is it "real" or a social construct?
8. The novel: bleak or hopeful?

(Questions by LitLovers. Please feel free to use them, online and off, with attribution. Thanks.)

top of page (summary)

Our March pick for the PBS NewsHour-New York Times book club is Naomi Alderman's "The Power." Become a member of the Now Read This book club by joining our Facebook group, or by signing up to our newsletter. Learn more about the book club here.

Below are questions to help guide your discussions as you read the book over the next month. You can also submit your own questions for Alderman on our Google form here. Alderman will answer reader questions on the NewsHour broadcast at the end of the month.

Spoiler alert on questions further down.

1. Before starting "The Power," what assumptions do you have about a book on women who develop superpowers?
2. The book's epigraph is a quote from the Bible, 1 Samuel 8, about how Samuel cautions people against wanting a king, but they do not listen. What is the significance of this passage?
3. From the beginning of "The Power," the reader discovers that it is a book-within-a-book. What did you make of the opening correspondence between Naomi and Neil?
4. "The shape of power is always the same; it is the shape of a tree," Alderman writes on page 3. "Root to tip, central trunk branching and re-branching, spreading wider in ever-thinner, searching fingers." What does she mean by this? How does the book's cover play off this imagery?
5. Why do you think Alderman chose the ability to conduct electricity and send jolts as women's newfound superpower?
6. The novel-within-a-novel's structure is divided into chapters about different people affected by "the power": Roxy, Allie, Tunde, Margot and more. To which story line did you feel most attached, and why?
7. The novel's characters include a politician, a journalist, a religious figure and a member of an organized crime family. How does Alderman use these characters to explore the theme of power?
8. What is the significance of the illustrations Alderman includes?

9. As more and more women gain “the power” in the book, how does the global order shift? How does the change shift your own perspective of “the power”?

10. In The New York Times Book Review, speculative fiction writer Amar El-Mohtar writes that the book explores “how power corrupts everyone: those new to it, and those resisting its loss.” How does it corrupt those new to it?

11. On page 135, Alderman includes archival documents that explain the electrostatic power’s origins and potential cure. Were these convincing to you?

12. On page 154, she excerpts discussions from an online forum discussing Mother Eve. Did this feel relevant to today’s online communities, and if so, how?

13. At several points in the book, Alderman writes that women are using the power in unsettling ways simply “because they can.” Do you believe this is true of human nature?

14. Near the end of the book, the voice tells Allie that the questions she’s asking are the mistake. The voice says everything is more complicated than about Adam vs. Eve, who’s good or who’s bad, and the powerful vs. the powerless. Do you agree?

15. At the end of the novel, the correspondence between Naomi and Neil reappears. What do their letters tell us about the future the world is set in? What does it show us about the present we’re living in?

16. How did this book make you think differently about gender, or about power? Was it unsettling to you?