



2017 WINNER

THE POWER BY NAOMI ALDERMAN

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Naomi Alderman is the author of four novels. In 2006 she won the Orange Award for New Writers and in 2007 she was named Sunday Times Young Writer of the Year, as well as being selected as one of Waterstones' 25 Writers for the Future. All of her novels have been broadcast on BBC Radio 4's Book at Bedtime. In 2013 she was selected for the prestigious Granta Best of Young British Writers and in 2017 won the Women's Prize for Fiction with *The Power*. She lives in London.

PLOT SUMMARY

In a matriarchal society, a gushing male writer writes to an influential author about his fictional account of how the matriarchy came to be, claiming that 5,000 years earlier, men dominated society. The influential author, Naomi, questions the credibility of the story. Stories emerge of women who can protect themselves with an electrical power: they can also attack, torture and even kill using it. Roxy Monke, part of a London-based crime family, has the power. So does Allie, who escapes her abusive foster parents and becomes Mother Eve, a leader of young women, and Margot and her daughter Jos. Tunde, a young man, travels the world documenting women using their power. As tensions increase, war is brewing. What will happen to a society where women gain a power they've never had before?

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

The Power includes a number of interesting 'documents' which provide 'proof' of a fictional alternative history, where women have dominated culture rather than men, for instance, the (real)

archaeological finds Priest King and Dancing Girl, which Alderman renames Serving Boy and Priestess Queen. By doing this, Alderman reminds us that we can make any number of assumptions about our history to suit our own purposes, depending on what we want to prove to be true and right in the way we live now.

The presence of these 'historical finds' therefore bolsters the reality of Alderman's woman-dominated world where Neil and Naomi exchange letters, exhibiting broadly reversed social attitudes towards gender roles: a post-Cataclysm world where, after

a great war, we can only assume that Mother Eve triumphed.

The letters at the beginning and at the end, and the authoring of the book as Neil Adam Armon's *The Power* which seeks to establish the existence of a pre-matriarchal patriarchy, serve to bookend Alderman's story as something that *really happened* – whilst Naomi, the powerful author, denies that there was ever a patriarchy to begin with. All these devices hold a mirror up to the way that patriarchal structures are created and reinforced historically and currently.



DISCUSSION POINTS

In *The Power*, the electrical energy that women discover as part of their 'skein' (and that men also discover within their bodies) has a physical origin and seems to act in a similar way to orgasm – physically generated, but experienced as a wider, intense energy.

Locating power in the body is interesting from the point of view of present day and historical feminism, which has grappled with the identity of women in relation to their biology, either valuing or denying its importance.

How does Alderman's treatment of the origin of power in the body relate to and subvert these ideas? And how does 'the power' relate to orgasm and sexual power? Could it be said that women's sexual power is ultimately what brings about the Cataclysm? How does this idea relate to religious texts, such as Eve in the Garden of Eden?



There is a suggestion in *The Power* that young girls with the power can 'wake' the dormant power in older women and in boys. What does this say about present day and historical feminism?

In the letters between Naomi and Neil, Naomi explains that women are 'naturally' aggressive to protect their children. Is this a refreshing take on the role of motherhood or simply another reductive assumption based on biology? What are the different perspectives on motherhood put forward through orphan Allie who reinvents herself as 'Mother Eve' and mother and daughter Margot and Jos?

NEXT STEPS

Inspired by Allie/Mother Eve's retelling of biblical texts to suit her own purposes, find a religious story from any tradition and rewrite it from the perspective of a female character you feel might be misrepresented within it (or not

included at all). What does she want to say about her treatment in the story?

Alternatively, imagine that patriarchy 'won' the war: how might the men's rights activists groups write about Roxy Monke and Mother Eve? Write a tabloid article, complete with a suitably worded headline and byline, describing either of them at trial or their 'bad deeds'.

Roxy Monke is a brilliantly rounded character. Consider writing a piece of crime fiction featuring Roxy, perhaps in role as a police detective after giving up a life of crime. How might she differ or compare to other fictional female detectives? Study women detectives in a range of crime fiction to inform your writing, starting with Denise Mina's Alex Morrow or Tana French's Antoinette Conway.

“ NAOMI ALDERMAN'S *THE POWER* GRABS YOU BY THE GUTS AND LAUNCHES YOU INTO A BRILLIANTLY IMAGINED FUTURE ”

TESSA ROSS,
CHAIR OF JUDGES 2017

QUESTIONS

How do Jos and Ryan's experiences represent queerness and non-gender normativity? Ryan's non-normativity is framed in a physical narrative (a chromosomal irregularity) and Jos is sent to a camp to be able to 'control' her power. Discuss the implications of Jos and Ryan's experiences with regard to gender identity politics.

BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

DISOBEDIENCE BY NAOMI ALDERMAN

THE HANDMAID'S TALE BY MARGARET ATWOOD