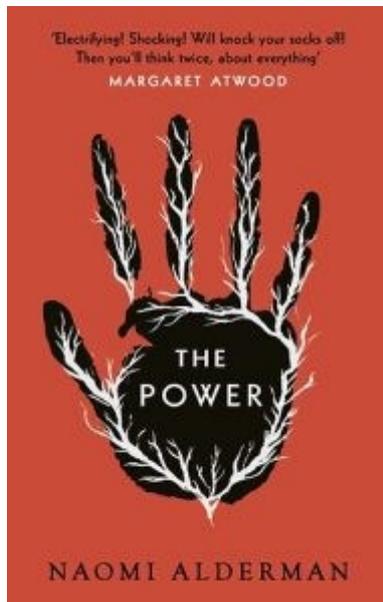


The Power – A Review



Now I'm frightened. But it's not the book that I find frightening. It's the reaction of many women to it in the real world which terrifies. The author's own position, too, seems paradoxical.

It's not what you'd call fine writing, but if you are happy to judge a book by its page turning qualities, then this is a good book. My own personal criterion of quality is whether you find yourself thinking about a book for some days after reading it. *The Power* by Naomi Alderman passes that test also.

But I didn't say it was *nice*. It's not *nice*. It's really quite nasty. It's odd, isn't it, that the safe-space and trigger warning generation seems simultaneously to have sensibilities so jaded, so inured to depictions of violence, that the datum of normality is on an ever-escalating ratchet. The resolution of this paradox is that novels of this type have one foot in the world of computer games. No great insight is required to make this observation given that Naomi Alderman also writes game scripts. This hybrid of novel-cum-game potentially allows the gamer's cartoonish levels of violence to be imported into the novel format, to the detriment of the novelistic element, in my opinion. To an antediluvian brought up on the gentility of E.M.Forster and André Gide, it is all rather brutish.

Is it a feminist novel? I was almost poised to declare it an anti-feminist novel. How can the violent excesses of the second half of the book be regarded as presenting female power in a favourable light? Unfortunately, those in thrall to a sufficiently powerful feminist lens can do so, it seems. *The Power* was reviewed on a Radio 4 book programme a month or two back. Owen Jones opined that it was "a fascinating dissection of the Patriarchy – it's a satire on Patriarchy". Err, no. It isn't. Mr Jones

proceeded to treat us to the familiar feminist line on VAWG. But the book is about female violence upon men – and this is not allegorical, it is *essentially* about female violence upon men. Was it my imagination, or was the female presenter a little embarrassed by Jones's take on the book? She expressed her view as being "*whoever has the power is going to abuse it*". That is certainly very much closer to the mark. But I get ahead of myself.

Adolescent girls suddenly acquire The Power – the ability to send high voltage shocks from their fingers and electrocute others. Quickly it spreads to all women. Alderman's book examines the consequences of this change for society.

Spoiler alert! Synopsis follows. If you are thinking of reading the book you might wish to do so now, before proceeding.

The book opens with thugs breaking into Roxy's house and killing her mother and sticking Roxy in a cupboard. Turns out it was Roxy's Dad that sent the thugs to bump off her Mum, but we don't know that yet. Also it turns out later that Roxy was sexually abused (surprise!) by her piano teacher, so her Dad cut his balls off, as one does. Roxy discovers her ability to electrocute, and soon all adolescent girls do too. From them it spreads to all women. A man in a supermarket oppresses a girl by asking her to smile, so he gets zapped. Had it coming, the bastard. That's the start of The Day of the Girls. Domestic violence figures soar, boys get segregated for their own safety, girls start to fight each other. Girls with feeble power are mocked and shamed.

By chapter two we have The Power also being used by girls to sexually stimulate boys. Yes, there's going to be lots and lots of The Power being used to execute sexual violence, as well as plain vanilla frying of brains and such.

Mixed race Allie was orphaned and passed around many foster homes. Her foster 'Dad', Mr Montgomery-Taylor, sexually abuses her (surprise!), so, obviously, the menz darn well deserve what they've got coming. That biblical voice in Allie's head is a little worrying.

We have some delightful vignettes such as seven policemen beating a woman to within an inch of her life, thus further legitimising what the menz have got coming. By chapter seven the Saudi women are on the rampage. They want sex, and they're going to get it by raping men. But we all know what vile misogynistic scum the Saudis are, so that's OK too, you must agree. (No, you **MUST** agree). In the blink of an eye, masses of cities all over the world are being run by gangs of women "mostly freed from sexual slavery" (which legitimises anything, including near obliteration of the human race, as we'll see).

Ricky, one of Roxy's Dad's mobsters, gets raped by three women. *"Down there it was just burned flesh, fern pattern on the thighs, pink and brown and raw red and black. Like a Sunday roast"*. Roxy and the girls take revenge (role reversal). Tunde nearly gets raped too, but is saved by other women (more role reversal).

Jocelyn is a nice girl – really – but a little uncontrolled. *"His scalp crisps under her hand. He screams. Inside his skull liquid is cooking. Delicate parts are fusing and congealing. The lines of power are scarring him, faster than thought. She can't hold it back. It's not a good way to go. She didn't mean to do it"*.

Roxy takes over the Mob and also becomes an international big wheel via the leadership of Allie who is now Mother Eve. Mother Eve can now use The Power to heal and to control people's thoughts and actions. Pretty darn cool superpower. She's still being guided by her biblical voices. She declares God to be a woman, that *"woman rules over man"*, and that Lesbianism is preferable. This all seems vaguely familiar.

We are constantly reminded that men are vile and deserve all they damned well get, such as,

"This is a place men come when they want a woman they can use without law or licence, discard without censure"

"There are eight of them, four women, four men, all mid-twenties....Bankers. One of the men already has his hand up one of the women's skirt"

"We don't have to ask ourselves who is on the side of justice when we meet the brave fighters of Bessapara – many of whom were trafficked women, shackled women, women who would have died alone in the dark".

"There was a time that a woman could not walk alone here....now they (i.e., men) will know that they are the ones who should not walk out of their houses alone at night. They are the ones who should be afraid".

A quote with a large number of highlighters showing on my kindle is *"The only wave that changes anything is a tsunami. You have to tear down the houses and destroy the land if you want to be sure no one will forget you."* Bear that in mind when it comes to debating whether feminists might actually think it worthwhile destroying the planet and sending humans back to the Neolithic in order to achieve their feminist Utopia. And be worried.

There are no straight white males in the book who are not vile. Tunde is about the only non-vile male in the book, but he's Nigerian, so that's OK. Oh, and, Jocelyn's friend Ryan, but he's indeterminate on the gender spectrum, so that's OK too. Daniel, the archetypal straight white 'powerful' male politician is an egomaniac. Margot hates him and covets his job.

Once the pogrom of men has started – but the media are covering it up - Tom makes a plea on-air about the need to protect men. Gets sacked.

At the simplest level, *The Power* is a tale of feminist wish-fulfilment. I'm sure that the appeal of the book to many feminist readers will be simply this revenge-porn aspect. (*"As I began to read this futuristic tale I was nodding and going YESS, when the young girls first discover their power, like when Wonder Woman kicks ass..... the book certainly packs a punch, makes you think, makes you dream makes you tingle and makes you wonder: what if?"* reviewed on [feministlibrary](#)). I spent the first half of the book hoping there would be more to it than that. There was. It got worse.

It seems women are not entirely lovely. Increasingly through the second half of the book, the women's often gratuitous violence becomes impossible to defend, surely even to someone of feminist sympathies. At least, you would think so. Disconcertingly, though, it would appear that women in the real world react differently – of which more shortly.

After her power kicks in, Margot's political career really takes off. It seems the public didn't mind her zapping her opponent live on TV. She becomes a sexual predator and starts to lie blatantly to further her career, selling out for power and money. (For all of which read "just like a man" – more role reversal). *"Later, in the hotel, she buys a couple of drinks for one of the junior guys from the American embassy in the Ukraine. He's attentive – well, why wouldn't he be? She's going places. She rests her hand on his firm young ass as they ride the elevator together up to her suite."* Later, *"she could lick the flesh straight off his bones, there's always more blokes where he came from; they're ten a penny. Especially if she were President"*.

Tatiana becomes leader of Bessapara by the simple expedient of killing her husband, then goes full-on Stalin-Mao-Pol-Pot but worse. Men must be under the guardianship of a woman and have papers to prove it. Men may not gather. *"They are rounding up the men without papers. They go away for 'work detail' but they do not return"*.

"The young man swallows. 'I'm sorry', he says. 'Did I tell you to speak?' she (Tatiana) says.....'Needs to be taught some manners', says one of the women.....Tatiana plucks the bottle of brandy from the young man's hands....A glass of this is worth more than you.....She drops it to the floor. The glass

smashes.....'Lick it up', she says.....There are glass fragments among the brandy.....He kneels down and begins to tongue the floor".

"The police here no longer investigate the murder of men...if a man is found dead it is presumed that a vengeance gang had given him his proper reward for his deeds in the time before. Even a young boy....a boy who is only fifteen now – what could he have done in the time before?"

"There are accounts on Tom Hobson's website of things happening in Bessapara that Jos can't really believe. Torture and experiments, gangs of women on the loose in the north near the border, murdering and raping men at will."

Roxy saves Tunde and Tunde saves the now-Powerless Roxy. They both witness the utter horror of mass rapes, torture and murder of men by gangs of militarised feral women who attack refugee camps for the purpose, high on drugs which enhance their power further. Graphic depictions of this sadistic sexual violence perpetrated by women.

"You are weak and we are strong. You are the gift and we are the owners. You are the victim and we are the victors. You are the slave and we are the masters. You are the sacrifice and we are the recipients.....And when she killed him it was ecstasy"

"He will not stop screaming. Two of the women take him by the throat and send a paralysis into his spine. One squats on top of him. She pulls off his trousers. He is not unconscious.....The woman cups his balls and dick in her palm.....She puts her head to one side, makes a sad face at him. She might as well have said in any language in the world 'What's the matter? Can't get it up?'....The woman sitting on the man's chest applies her palm to his genitals.....He's still doing muffled screaming.....His cock comes up like a salute, like they always do.....She holds his balls, tugs on them once, twice, just as if she were giving him a treat, and then jolts him fiercely, right through the scrotum. It'd feel like a glass spike, driven straight through.....He screams, arches his back. And she unbuttons the crotch of her combat trousers and sits on his cock. Her mates are laughing now and she's laughing herself as she pumps herself up and down on him. She's got her hand firmly planted in the centre of his stomach, giving him a dose every time she thrusts up with bunched thighs."

"There is no sense in what is done here this day. There is no territory to be gained, or a particular wrong to be avenged, or even soldiers to be taken. They kill the older men in front of the younger with palms to the faces and the throat, and one shows off her special skill of drawing crude effects upon the flesh with the tips of her fingers. Many of them take some of the men, and use them, or simply play with them.....They do it because they can."

"...they have the arm off. The others are at his legs, and his neck, and the other arm....Like the wind stripping leaves from a tree, so inexorable, so violent.....they get his head off, and at last he is quiet, their fingers dark with his blood....."

By this time, it is clear that Alderman is not portraying women as demonstrating a responsible and constructive use of Power.

Well, it's clear to me. Staggeringly, it is not to others. I watched several YouTube videos of women reviewing the book. You might have expected these reviewers to have found the women's violence against men as salutary. You might have expected some conclusion to be drawn, such as 'power corrupts' or something along those lines. You might have expected the extremity of the violence to at least be recognised as reprehensible. But no. The words these women used to describe the book were "fun", "exciting", "fulfilling", "satisfying". One said, *"I did feel like I wanted to get back at men for the pain inflicted on women"*. The nearest another managed to come to condemnation of brutal mass murder of men by women was that it was *"disconcerting the decisions people make"*. Do note the use of the word "people" there.

Another woman reviewer said, *"For me it showed the depth of pain that these women felt about what men had done to them and that was the important point"*. Most of the men in question were attempting to flee, in refugee camps. Deconstruct the sentiment behind that remark. Do you recall those social experiment videos on YouTube in which a woman is violent to a man in public – and the public reaction is to assume the bloke must have done something to deserve it? Well, that woman's comment is exactly in that tradition. Some women – is it the majority? – simply cannot interpret a woman as being responsible for her own violence against a man. It would seem their psychology compels them always to hold a man, or men in general, as culpable for their own victimisation – even when the level of women's violence comes within an ace of obliterating the entire human race. Still the prejudice holds.

One woman reviewer declared the MRA bloggers made her really angry and complained that there were no male allies in the book. That's right, whilst women are busy around the globe electrocuting men to death, this woman seems still to think that men should be supporting their noble cause. This is pretzel logic taken to new heights.

There is a toxicity abroad in our society, but it isn't masculinity.

Immediately before the denouement, the global conflict which results in Cataclysm, Allie perceives the fraudulence of the militant women's supposed moral legitimacy.

Mrs Montgomery-Taylor, it turns out, was the prime mover behind her husband's sexual abuse of Allie. And not only Allie but a succession of children. When Allie finally learns of this, she realises the skew in her own perception, that the simplistic 'men bad, women good' won't cut it. *"to denounce her would be to denounce everything. If she roots this out, she roots out herself. Her own roots are rotten already. And with this she is undone"*. At last, Allie questions her inner voice. Is it not, after all, the unimpeachable voice of rectitude and justice? *"I keep meaning to ask. Who are you? I've wondered for a while. Are you the serpent?"*

Tellingly the voice attempts to exonerate itself thus: *"The whole point of me was to keep things simple for you, you see? That's what you wanted. Simple feels safe. Certainty feels safe."*

This is the most important passage in the book. It exposes as clearly as Alderman dares the appeal of an ideology based on cognitive minimalism. Eliminating moral dilemmas at a stroke, women are always blameless whatever they do. But Allie has finally realised that this is not reality.

"Who's bad and who's good? Who persuaded the other to eat the apple? Who has the power and who's powerless?" asks the voice. *"It's more complicated than that.... You people like to pretend things are simple, even at your own cost."*

Allie silences the voice for ever – but goes right on with her jihad in any case. This is the nature of tragedy. She tells her followers, *"the apocalypse is near at hand and only the righteous will be saved, she can call the world to a new order. The end of all flesh is near, because the Earth is filled with violence. Therefore, build an ark. It will be simple. That is all they want."* It is hard to read this as anything other than an admonishment.

Roxy is not keen on apocalypse. She says to Mother Eve, *"But you know what's going to happen. We'll bomb them and they'll bomb us and it'll spread out wider and wider....the women will suffer as well as the men, Evie. The women will die just as much as the men will if we bomb ourselves back to the stone age. And then we'll be in the stone age....And then there will be five thousand years of rebuilding, five thousand years where the only thing that matters is: can you hurt more, can you do more damage, can you instill fear?"*

"And then the women will win", replies Allie.

But what sort of a "win" is it, Alderman implicitly asks? Near obliteration of the human race, with the mass suffering which is implied, followed by a return to the Neolithic. After 5,000 years re-running human history what we end up with (according to Alderman) is just like now – except with the sex roles reversed. So in what way is anything improved?

Monstrously, those whose world-view is that men are currently powerful and privileged may actually regard this as a win for women. I'm not even sure of Alderman herself. It is possible that the loopier feminist could read the whole book without thinking the planet-wide violence against men had gone too far. Anything – anything – is justified, even putting the human race back 5,000 years, in order to achieve feminist Utopia.

Based on its contents alone I would have been inclined to praise the book (though not necessarily its readers) for illustrating how destructive female violence would be if they were gifted such a Power. Given the premise, I think Alderman has the subsequent course of events bang on – at least as far as the Cataclysm. Exactly what would happen during history#2, and what sort of society would emerge in 5,000 years, is another matter. That, I suspect, she has wrong.

However, I am very conflicted regarding what Ms Alderman herself intended. Could it be that she thought near-global death and trashing humans back to the Neolithic was a price worth paying to achieve a society just like our present society, but with women “on top”? If she were reincarnated at that time, she would be *so* disappointed at how not-on-top that turns out to be! (Ask [Norah Vincent](#)). There are reasons to be concerned that Ms Alderman inclines rather more to the revenge-porn position than the salutary-tale-of-corrupting-power perspective. For example, she has explained her motive for writing the book thus,

“I got onto the Tube and saw a poster for some movie, a thriller, where the main image was a beautiful woman crying. It was also what I was doing: waking up crying, feeling that I might break into pieces. It felt like the culture we live in was saying: ‘Good. That’s what you should be doing. We like it. We find it sexy’. Hey, that crying that you’re doing right now, carry on with that, that’s sexy, that’s great. We love it when women cry. We love it when women suffer. Do more of that. Hey, it’s really attractive. I just started thinking furiously on this Tube train about what I would have to do, or what would have to change in the world for me to be sitting opposite a poster of a really beautiful, attractive man crying.” I simply do not recognise what she is claiming here. We (ie., men) love it when women suffer? We find it sexy? No, false. I believe that in general men and women both react in the same way to seeing a woman cry – namely with sympathy and concern. Why does Ms Alderman think differently?

In the book, Margot, day dreaming in a political meeting with the hated Daniel and others, thinks, *“She could kill them. That is the profound truth of it.....Nothing that either of these men says is really of any great significance, because she could kill them in three moves before they stirred in their comfortably padded chairs....The power to hurt is a kind of wealth”*. What does this tell us about Naomi Alderman? Does she think that men sit around musing on how easily they could kill women? Disturbingly this is indeed the basis of feminist patriarchy theory: that men dominate in society by

physical violence upon women – real or threatened. But I know, via my lived experience, that it is untrue.

It is difficult to decide whether Alderman is deliberately exposing the unacceptable extremes of feminism, or glorying in contemplating their fruition. I am prevented from working it out by Poe's Law. Take, for example, this extract, supposedly characterising the emerging consensus amongst the increasingly murderous women,

"How many men do we really need?...Men are dangerous. Men commit the great majority of crimes. Men are less intelligent, less diligent, less hard-working, their brains are in their muscles and their pricks. Men are more likely to suffer from diseases and they are a drain on the resources of the country. Of course we need them to have babies, but how many do we need for that? Not as many as women....Maybe one in ten."

A TV presenter reacts to this with the words, *"I blame those men's rights people; they're so extreme, they've provoked this kind of response."*

What am I to make of this given that, here in the real world, the suggestion that males would be best reduced to around one-in-ten has been [a staple of radical feminism for decades](#)? And, in truth, it took decades for even a small number of men to have the temerity to object to views suggesting they should be culled. Is Alderman just winding us up in suggesting that radical feminism was a reaction to the men's movement, rather than the reverse? I cannot tell.

In the book Alderman has Jocelyn describe UrbanDox's web site as "horrible" for observing that what is happening is a *"holy war between men and women"* – and yet this war has been declared *de facto* by women the world over "because they could" – and is explicitly holy to Mother Eve and her followers. Yet she refers **in the book** to *"the men's movement, and...their particular conspiracy theories"*. But how can Alderman refer to men's concern – in the book – as being a conspiracy, given that shortly most people in the world are to die in the Cataclysm?

And what can we infer about the consistency of Alderman's position in real life? In [an interview](#) she used almost the same words of the real world: *"Men's rights activists spread conspiracy theories in online forums whose rhetoric is sickeningly familiar"*. Does Ms Alderman think her book has helped defused such conspiracy theories, or poured more fuel on their fire?

Alderman does an amusing pastiche of Evo-psych, but that does not stop her making her own implicitly Evo-psych prediction. She goes wrong by assuming that power would be the key determinant of the resulting society, and hence that society would be much like ours but with the sex

roles reversed. Whilst the Power would obviously have an effect, the key determinant of the course of evolution remains reproductive success. So long as women have the monopoly of the uterus and mammary glands, a role-reversal cannot be assumed to be the outcome – especially as these biological attributes are directly related to reproduction, whereas The Power is not. Tempted though I am to speculate what sort of society would result I must leave it for another time.