



Naomi Alderman (-)

[Mike Witcombe \(Royal Holloway, University of London\)](#)

Novelist.

Active 2006- in United Kingdom

Ranging widely across formats, genres, and styles, Naomi Alderman is one of the most dynamic writers working within the United Kingdom today. Her novels are grounded in both pathos and satire, and refuse the simple ideological categorizations that many of her characters grapple with. Alderman's increasing prominence within the British literary establishment is partly due to the success of her novel *The Power*, which won the Baileys Women's Prize for Fiction in 2017, as well as to the 2017 adaptation of her debut novel *Disobedience*.

The breadth of Alderman's career gives her work a certain critical pliability, and prevents it from being placed into reductive categories. At the same time, the increasing prominence of her work has created a need for perspectives that transcend single texts all the more important. As scholarly work on Alderman's oeuvre develops over the coming years, the varied critical perspectives that emerge may be telling as to how Alderman's position in the contemporary canon will be negotiated.

Alderman first garnered significant critical attention for *Disobedience*, a 2006 novel describing the experiences of Ronit, a former Orthodox Jewish woman returning from New York to the community she was raised in – Hendon, in North London. As a writer who had grown up in this community (Alderman is the daughter of Geoffrey Alderman, a noted historian of Jewish culture) and spent significant time in New York City as a young woman, there is arguably a distinct autobiographical tint to the novel; Alderman has encouraged this reading by claiming that “I went into [writing *Disobedience*] religious and by the end I wasn't. I wrote myself out of it”. She added nuance to this in a later interview, noting that writing the novel encompassed “an unravelling and reknitting of self that took me the best part of a decade to feel complete, solid and peaceful again”. *Disobedience* won the 2006 Orange Award for New Writers and the 2007 Sunday Times Young Writer of the Year Award.

Alderman's subsequent novels, *The Lessons* (2010) and *The Liar's Gospel* (2012), were less controversial but equally ambitious. *The Lessons* continues the autobiographical basis of *Disobedience*, building on her experiences at university in Oxford to develop a complex narrative of youthful naivety and broken trust; in the character of Franny, the only explicitly Jewish character in the novel, Alderman may even have included an authorial surrogate. In its explorations of queer identity (albeit in terms of male sexuality), *The Lessons* yields immediate parallels to its predecessor. In its premise of exploring the boundaries of intimate friendship in a collegiate environment, it also bears distinct similarities to texts such as Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* and Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* – references that were picked up on by many of the book's reviewers (most of whom were complimentary about the novel itself). Few of these reviewers, however, engaged with the novel's potentially problematic representation of male bisexuality.

The Liar's Gospel represented yet another change of direction for Alderman. Written in a more austere and somber tone, *The Liar's Gospel* tells the story of Jesus from the perspective of supposedly peripheral characters. Jesus, who is known as Yehoshua in the novel, is now seen as a part of the stories of these peripheral characters. The novel charts a series of intersecting narratives, starting with Jesus' mother and moving on to cover Judas, a head priest, and Barabbas. The chief theme in the book is the difficulty of piecing together a coherent story from the incoherent testimonies of very different characters, and the resultant slipperiness and ambiguity of language itself.

Between 2012 and 2013, Alderman was mentored by (and collaborated with) Margaret Atwood through the Rolex Mentor and Protégé Arts Initiative. Atwood's influence is visible in the premise behind *The Power*, which functions as a counter-text to Atwood's dystopian vision in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Rather than a theocratic regime in which men are given the ability to control women's lives, Alderman imagines the opposite: the titular "power", an ability to provide electrical shocks, enables women to marginalize and, eventually, oppress men. The novel charts the experiences of a number of characters as the planet adjusts to this new reality, ranging from neo-religious figureheads to London gangsters. *The Power* is Alderman's most commercially successful work to date, and will likely be the subject of a good deal of scholarly attention in the years ahead.

During the period when Alderman was establishing her literary career, Alderman pursued her creative ambitions in many other directions, including a range of fictional and non-fiction works. Alderman has authored several short stories which remain uncollected at the time of writing. These stories expand on many themes in her longer fiction whilst showcasing the diversity of her thematic interests. Some of these works, such as "Dirty and Unclean", "The Matchmaker of Hendon", "Other People's Gods", and "United" are concerned with the limits of Jewish faith and identity. They also include experiments in genre fiction that may have influenced the potential change in direction into speculative fiction signaled by *The Power*, including a piece titled "Internal Investigations" that was dramatized by the BBC World Service in 2012. Alderman contributed the title *Borrowed Time* for a book series derived from the BBC TV show *Doctor Who* in 2011.

Alderman has also been successful as a creator of videogames, the most successful of which is the running app *Zombies, Run!*, a form of virtual reality storytelling based on imaginative narrative; a combination of game and audiobook that, in the words of one critic, allows players to "rewrite the functionality of their own neighborhoods" (Henthorn, 165). This game has been so successful that, at the time of writing, it has received more scholarly attention than her fiction. Alderman has been involved in other gaming projects in her career, most notably the alternate reality game *Perplex City*, for which Alderman served as lead writer between 2004 and 2007. Although Alderman has had less engagement with film as a medium, this may be a potent area for future work – she is writing the television adaptation of *The Power* for Amazon, a series in which she is also acting as an executive producer. Alderman also acted as associate producer for the 2017 film adaptation of *Disobedience*.

The difficulties generated by this diversity may be insurmountable, in that there does not yet exist a coherent interpretative framework that can account for Alderman's range. However, the wealth of material on offer to the potential critic suggests the value of trends and themes that can help navigate them. Two of the most significant perspectives that could enable this are themes connected to Jewish identity, and the construction of narrative multivocality.

Themes around Jewish identity have been pivotal in many of Alderman's works, and her engagement with her Jewish upbringing can be traced in several of her works. *Disobedience*, for example, was notable for being set within the British Orthodox Jewish community. *The Lessons*, though primarily secular in outlook, offers some wry commentary on Jewish assimilation - for example, the aside that "some male members of the Jewish society, in a depressing attempt to introduce the same misogynist practices as the rest of Oxford to that institution, had formed an all-male dining society".

Bryan Cheyette and Ruth Gilbert among others, have commented on the rise in texts produced by British Jewish writers in the 21st Century. In an article exploring these changes, Ruth Gilbert has argued that “many contemporary British-Jewish writers highlight the desire to identify the particularity of their difference, whilst acknowledging that that difference is neither fixed nor final, but always open to change, re-signification and re-interpretation” (2010, 219). Indeed, “change, re-signification, and re-interpretation” have become hallmarks of Alderman’s approach to themes around ethnic and religious identity. Consider how *Disobedience* negotiates the complexities of gender and sexual identity within Orthodox culture - ending as it does with an ambivalent attitude towards the potential for change within the community.

The Liar’s Gospel is perhaps even more ambitious in this regard, depicting many familiar characters from the New Testament in ways that emphasize both their Jewish origins and the stories that get left out. Even in texts which seem to shirk from explicit engagement with Jewish themes, there are arguably thematic continuities that underlie them. *The Power*, for example, explores ideas of female empowerment within the boundaries of religious communities in a way that evokes similar themes in *Disobedience*, even if its only mentions of Jewish identity are in the context of right-wing conspiracy theories. Gilbert may be accurate in identifying Alderman as a “leading contemporary British Jewish writer”, but all of these terms – barring perhaps “leading” and “contemporary” – open up spaces for debate when discussing Alderman’s work (Gilbert 2014, 18).

This sense of ambiguity and uneasiness with established categories can be applied across multiple areas of Alderman’s work. Crucial to *The Liar’s Gospel* is the notion that people lie for different reasons, and that coherence is neither possible nor desirable. Mary, or Miryam, is portrayed not in her triumphant role as the mother of Jesus. We see her as a traumatized, lonely woman, regretful over her son’s death but more focused on surviving life in Galilee as a divorced woman. *The Power* thrives on multiple perspectives in a similar fashion, deploying multiple intersecting narrative perspectives to build its plot.

This fragmented and multivocal approach to narrative is a common trope in Alderman’s work, where the reader is frequently asked to engage with each character on their own terms, and appraise them as much in terms of their rhetorical value as their trustworthiness as a source of information. The tension between Esti and Ronit in *Disobedience* may be primarily viewed from Ronit’s perspective, but the novel is careful to present the complexities and nuances of their respective positions – Esti is no more a victim of her faith than Ronit is a fully-justified iconoclast. *The Lessons* can be seen in a similar fashion, as the novel evolves from a coming-of-age narrative into a story of dependency and desire in adult life. In this novel, Alderman lives up to her narrator’s claim that “disasters occur where accidents meet character” – she is interested in seeing how characters change from their set roles when external pressures are applied. As with the rest of her novels, the outcome for all concerned is ambivalent at best, destructive at worst.

With an impressive range of material under her belt and a variable sense of thematic connections between her works, it is difficult to predict how Alderman’s career will develop from this point. What does seem certain, with her having already gained a substantial global readership and an emerging body of scholarly analysis, is that Alderman’s work is likely to be of keen interest for the foreseeable future.

Works Cited

- Alderman, Naomi. “Coming out: Naomi Alderman on leaving Orthodox Judaism behind” *The Guardian*, 24th November 2018.
- . *The Lessons*. London: Penguin, 2010.
- . “Naomi Alderman interviewed by Claire Armistead” *The Guardian*, 26th October 2016.
- . “British-Jewish Literature” in Sorrel Kerbel, Ed, *Jewish Writers of the Twentieth Century*. New York: Fitzroy Dearbon, 2003, p.7-10.
- Gilbert, Ruth. “Displaced, Dysfunctional and Divided: British-Jewish Writing Today”, *Jewish Culture and*

History, 12:1-2, 2010, p. 267-280.

--- “Genes, Shmenes’: Jew-ish identities in Contemporary British Jewish Writing”. *European Judaism*, 47:2, 2014, p. 12-10.

Henthorn, Jamie. “Rewriting Neighborhoods: *Zombies, Run!* And the runner as rhetor”, in Tama Leaver and Michele Wilson, Eds, *Social, Casual and Mobile Games: The Changing Gaming Landscape*, London: Bloomsbury, 2016, p. 165-178.

Citation: Witcombe, Mike. "Naomi Alderman". *The Literary Encyclopedia*. First published 25 November 2019 [https://www.litencyc.com, accessed 28 February 2020.]

This article is copyright to © [The Literary Encyclopedia](#).

All entries, data and software copyright © The Literary Dictionary Company Limited

ISSN 1747-678X