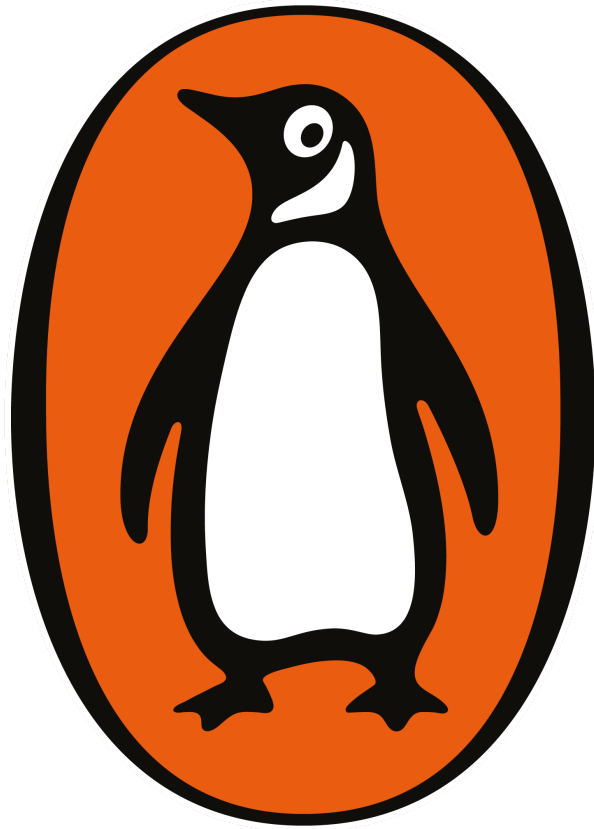


'Electrifying! Shocking! Will knock your socks off!
Then you'll think twice, about everything'

MARGARET ATWOOD



NAOMI ALDERMAN



Naomi Alderman

THE POWER



Contents

Epigraph

PROLOGUE

TEN YEARS TO GO

Roxy

Tunde

Margot

Allie

NINE YEARS TO GO

Allie

Roxy

Tunde

Margot

EIGHT YEARS TO GO

Allie

Margot

Tunde

Roxy

SIX YEARS TO GO

Tunde

Allie

Margot

Roxy

FIVE YEARS TO GO

Margot

Tunde

Allie

Margot

Roxy

Jocelyn

ONE YEAR

Margot

Allie

Roxy

Tunde

CAN'T BE MORE THAN SEVEN MONTHS LEFT

Allie

Darrell

Jocelyn

Tunde

Roxy

HERE IT COMES

Darrell

Apocrypha excluded from the Book of Eve

Acknowledgements

Follow Penguin

By the same author

Disobedience

The Lessons

The Liars' Gospel

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or to actual events or locales is entirely coincidental.

For Margaret and for Graeme, who have shown me wonders

The people came to Samuel and said: Place a King over us, to guide us.

And Samuel said to them: This is what a King will do if he reigns over you: he'll take your sons and make them run with his chariots and horses. He'll dispose them however he wants: he'll make them commanders of thousands or captains of fifties, he'll send them to plough, to reap, to forge his weapons and his chariots. He'll take your daughters to make perfume for him, or cook his food or do his baking. He'll take your fields and your vineyards and your olive groves – oh, he'll take the very best of those and give them to his cronies. He'll take much more. A tenth of your grain and your wine – those will go to his favourite aristocrats and faithful servants. Your manservants and your maidservants, your best men, your donkeys – yes, he'll take those for his own use. He'll take one tenth of your flocks and you yourselves will become his slaves. On that day, believe me, you will cry out for relief from this King, the King you asked for, but the Lord will not answer you on that day.

But the people would not listen to Samuel. They said: No. Give us a King over us. So that we can be like all the other nations. Give us a King to guide us and lead us into battle.

When Samuel heard what the people said, he told it to the Lord.

The Lord answered, Give them a King.

1 Samuel 8

The Men Writers Association
New Bevand Square

27th October

Dear Naomi,

I've finished the bloody book. I'm sending it to you, with all its fragments and drawings, in the hope that you'll give me some guidance or at least that I'll finally hear the echo of it as I drop the pebble of this book down the well.

You'll ask me first of all what it *is*. 'Not another dry volume of history' was what I promised. Four books in I realize that no general reader can be bothered to wade through endless mounds of evidence, no one cares about the technicalities of dating finds and strata comparison. I've seen audiences' eyes go blank as I try to explain my research. So what I've done here is a sort of hybrid piece, something that I hope will appeal more to ordinary people. Not quite history, not quite a novel. A sort of 'novelization' of what archaeologists agree is the most plausible narrative. I've included some illustrations of archaeological finds that I hope are suggestive, but readers can – and I'm sure many will! – skip over them.

I have questions for you. Is it very shocking? Too hard to accept that anything of this sort could ever have been the case, no matter how far back in our history? Is there anything I can do to make it all *seem* more plausible? You know what they say about 'truth' and 'the appearance of truth' being opposites.

I've put in some terrifically troubling stuff about Mother Eve ... but we all know how these things work! Surely no one will be too distressed ... everyone claims to be an atheist now, anyway. And all the 'miracles' really *are* explicable.

Anyway, sorry, I'll shut up now. I don't want to influence you, just read it and tell me what you think. I hope your own book's going well. I can't wait to read it, when it's ready to be seen. Thank you *so much* for this. I am so grateful you could spare the time.

Much love,
Neil

Nonesuch House
Lakevik

Dearest Neil,

Wow! What a treat! I've been flicking through the pages and can't wait to dive in. I see you've included some scenes with male soldiers, male police officers and 'boy crime gangs', just as you said you would, you saucy boy! I don't have to tell *you* how much I enjoy that sort of thing. I'm sure you remember. I'm practically on the edge of my seat.

I'm very intrigued to see what you've done with the premise. It'll be a welcome relief from my own book, if I'm honest. Selim says if the new one's not a masterpiece, he's leaving me for some woman who *can* write. I don't think he has any idea how these offhand remarks make me feel.

Anyway! Looking forward to this! I think I'd rather enjoy this 'world run by men' you've been talking about. Surely a kinder, more caring and – dare I say it? – more *sexy* world than the one we live in.

More soon, my dear!

Naomi

The Power
A historical novel

NEIL ADAM ARMON

The shape of power is always the same; it is the shape of a tree. Root to tip, central trunk branching and re-branching, spreading wider in ever-thinner, searching fingers. The shape of power is the outline of a living thing straining outward, sending its fine tendrils a little further, and a little further yet.

This is the shape of rivers leading to the ocean – the trickles to rivulets, the rivulets to streams, the streams to torrents, the great power gathering and gushing, becoming mightier to hurl itself into the great marine might.

It is the shape that lightning forms when it strikes from heaven to earth. The forked tear in the sky becomes a pattern on flesh or on the earth. These same distinctive patterns bloom in a block of acrylic when struck with electricity. We send electric currents down orderly runs of circuits and switches, but the shape that electricity wants to take is of a living thing, a fern, a bare branch. The strike point in the centre, the power seeking outward.

This same shape grows within us, our inward trees of nerves and blood vessels. The central trunk, the pathways dividing and redividing. The signals carried from our fingers' ends to the spine to the brain. We are electrical. The power travels within us as it does in nature. My children, nothing has happened here that has not been in accordance with the natural law.

Power travels in the same manner between people; it must be so. People form villages, villages become towns, towns bow the knee to cities and cities to states. Orders travel from the centre to the tips. Results travel from the tips to the centre. The communication is constant. Oceans cannot survive without trickles, nor steadfast tree trunks without budlets, nor the enthroned brain without nerve endings. As above, so below. As on the outskirts, so at the very heart.

It follows that there are two ways for the nature and use of human power to change. One is that an order might issue from the palace, a command unto the people saying 'It is thus.' But the other, the more certain, the more inevitable, is that those thousand thousand points of light should each send a new message. When the people change, the palace cannot hold.

As it is written: 'She cuppeth the lightning in her hand. She commandeth it to strike.'

from the Book of Eve, 13–17



TEN YEARS TO GO

Roxy

The men lock Roxy in the cupboard when they do it. What they don't know is: she's been locked in that cupboard before. When she's naughty, her mum puts her there. Just for a few minutes. Till she calms down. Slowly, over the hours in there, she's worked the lock loose with a fingernail or a paperclip in the screws. She could have taken that lock off any time she wanted. But she didn't, because then her mum would have put a bolt on the outside. It's enough for her to know, sitting in there in the dark, that if she really wanted to she could get out. The knowledge is as good as freedom.

So that's why they think they've locked her in, safe and sound. But she still gets out. That's how she sees it.

The men come at nine thirty in the evening. Roxy was supposed to have gone over to her cousins that night; it had been arranged for weeks, but she'd given her mum lip about not getting her the right tights from Primark, so her mum said, 'You're not going, you're staying in.' Like Roxy cared about going to her poxy cousins, anyway.

When the blokes kick in the door and see her there, sulking on the sofa next to her mum, one of them goes, 'Fuck, the girl's here.' There are two men, one taller with a face like a rat, the other shorter, square-jawed. She doesn't know them.

The short one grabs her mum by the throat; the tall one chases Roxy through the kitchen. She's almost out the back door when he grabs her thigh; she falls forward and he's got her by the waist. She's kicking and shouting, 'Fuck off, let me go!' and when he puts a hand over her mouth she bites him so hard she tastes blood. He swears, but he doesn't drop her. He carries her through the living room. The short one's pushed her mum up against the fireplace. Roxy feels it start to build in her then, though she doesn't know what it is. It's just a feeling at her fingers' ends, a prickle in her thumbs.

She starts screaming. Her mum's going, 'Don't you hurt my Roxy, don't you fucking hurt her, you don't know what you're into, this is gonna come down on you like fire, you're gonna wish you was never born. Her dad's Bernie Monke, for Christ's sake.'

The short one laughs. 'We're here with a message for her dad, as it goes.'

The tall one bundles Roxy into the cupboard under the stairs so fast she doesn't know it's happening until the dark is around her, and the dusty-sweet smell of the Hoover. Her mum starts screaming.

Roxy's breathing fast. She's frightened, but she's got to get to her mum. She turns one of the screws on the lock with her fingernail. There's one, two, three twists, and it's out. A spark jumps between the metal of the screw and her hand. Static electricity. She's feeling weird. Focused, like she can see with her eyes closed. Bottom screw, one, two, three twists. Her mum's saying, 'Please. Please don't. Please. What is this? She's just a kid. She's just a child, for God's sake.'

One of the men laughs low. 'Didn't look much like a kid to me.'

Her mum shrieks then; it sounds like metal in a bad engine.

Roxy tries to work out where the men are in the room. One's with her mum. The other ... she hears a sound to her left. Her plan is: she'll come out low, get the tall one in the back of the knees, stomp his head, then it's two against one. If they've got guns, they haven't shown them. Roxy's been in fights before. People say things about her. And her mum. And her dad.

One. Two. Three. Her mum screams again, and Roxy pulls the lock off the door and bashes it open as hard as she can.

She's lucky. She's caught the tall man from behind with the door. He stumbles, he topples, she grabs his right foot as it comes up, and he goes down hard on the carpet. There's a crack, and he's bleeding from the nose.

The short man has a knife pressed against her mum's neck. The blade winks at her, silver and smiling.

Her mum's eyes go wide. 'Run, Roxy,' she says, not more than a whisper, but Roxy hears it like it was inside her head: 'Run. Run.'

Roxy doesn't run from fights at school. If you do that, they'll never stop saying, 'Your mum's a slapper and your dad's a crook. Watch out, Roxy'll nick your book.' You've got to stomp them till they beg. You don't run.

Something's happening. The blood is pounding in her ears. A prickling feeling is spreading along her back, over her shoulders, along her collarbone. It's saying: you can do it. It's saying: you're strong.

She jumps over the prone man, groaning and pawing at his face. She's going to grab her mum's hand and get out of here. They just need to be on the street. This can't happen out there, in the middle of the day. They'll find her dad; he'll sort it out. It's only a few steps. They can do it.

Short man kicks Roxy's mum hard in the stomach. She doubles over in pain, falls to her knees. He swishes the knife at Roxy.

Tall man groans. 'Tony. Remember. Not the girl.'

Short man kicks the other in the face. Once. Twice. Three times.

'Don't. Say. My fucking name.'

Tall man goes quiet. His face bubbles with blood. Roxy knows she's in trouble now. Her mum's shouting, 'Run! Run!' Roxy feels the thing like pins and needles along her arms. Like needle-pricks of light from her spine to her collarbone, from her throat to her elbows, wrists, to the pads of her fingers. She's glittering, inside.

He reaches for her with one hand, the knife in the other. She gets ready to kick him or punch him but some instinct tells her a new thing. She grabs his wrist. She *twists* something quite deep inside her chest, as if she'd always known how to do it. He tries to wriggle out of her grip, but it's too late.

She cuppeth the lightning in her hand. She commandeth it to strike.

There's a crackling flash and a sound like a paper snapper. She can smell something a bit like a rainstorm and a bit like burning hair. The taste welling under her tongue is of bitter oranges. The short man is on the floor now. He's making a crooning, wordless cry. His hand is clenching and unclenching. There's a long, red scar running up his arm from his wrist. She can see it even under the blond hairs: it's scarlet, patterned like a fern, leaves and tendrils, budlets and branches. Her mum's mouth is open, she's staring, her tears are still falling.

Roxy tugs at her mum's arm, but she's shocked and slow and her mouth is still saying, 'Run! Run!' Roxy doesn't know what she's done, but she knows when you're fighting someone stronger than you and they're down, you get out. But her mum doesn't move quickly enough. Before Roxy can get her up the short man is saying, 'Oh no, you don't.'

He's wary, pulling himself to his feet, limping between them and the door. His one hand hangs dead by his side, but the other's holding that knife. Roxy remembers what it felt like to do the thing, whatever it was she did. She pulls her mum behind her.

‘Whatcha got there, girlie?’ says the man. Tony. She’ll remember his name to tell her dad. ‘Got a battery?’

‘Get out the way,’ says Roxy. ‘You want another taste?’

Tony steps back a couple of paces. Eyes her arms. Looks to see if she’s got anything behind her back. ‘You dropped it, dintcha, little girl?’

She remembers the way it felt. The twist, the explosion outward.

She takes a step towards Tony. He stands his ground. She takes another step. He looks to his dead hand. The fingers are still twitching. He shakes his head. ‘You ain’t got nothing.’

He motions towards her with the knife. She reaches out, touches the back of his good hand. Does that same *twist*.

Nothing happens.

He starts to laugh. Holds the knife in his teeth. Grabs her two wrists in his one hand.

She tries it again. Nothing. He forces her to her knees.

‘Please,’ says her mum, quite softly. ‘Please. Please don’t.’

And then something hits her on the back of the head and she’s gone.

When she wakes, the world is sideways. There’s the hearth, just like always. Wooden trim around the fireplace. It’s pushing into her eye, and her head hurts and her mouth is mashed up into the carpet. There’s the taste of blood on her teeth. Something is dripping. She closes her eyes. Opens them again and knows it’s been longer than a few minutes. The street outside is quiet. The house is cold. And lopsided. She feels out her body. Her legs are up on a chair. Her face is hanging down, pressed into the carpet and the fireplace. She tries to lever herself up, but it’s too much effort, so she wriggles and lets her legs drop to the floor. It hurts when she falls, but at least she’s all on one level.

Memory comes back to her in quick flashes. The pain, then the source of the pain, then that thing she did. Then her mum. She pushes herself up slowly, noticing as she does so that her hands are sticky. And something is dripping. The carpet is sodden, thick with a red stain in a wide circle around the fireplace. There’s her mum, her head lolling over the arm of the sofa. And there’s a paper resting on her chest, with a felt-tip drawing of a primrose.

Roxy is fourteen. She’s one of the youngest, and one of the first.