



The Lessons

Naomi Alderman

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Hidden away in an Oxford back street is a crumbling Georgian mansion, unknown to any but the few who possess a key to its unassuming front gate. Its owner is the mercurial, charismatic Mark Winters, whose rackety trust-fund upbringing has left him as troubled and unpredictable as he is wildly promiscuous. Mark gathers around him an impressionable group of students: glamorous Emmanuella, who always has a new boyfriend in tow; Franny and Simon, best friends and occasional lovers; musician Jess, whose calm exterior hides passionate depths. And James, already damaged by Oxford and looking for a group to belong to. For a time they live in a charmed world of learning and parties and love affairs. But university is no grounding for adult life, and when, years later, tragedy strikes they are entirely unprepared. Universal in its themes of ambition, desire and betrayal, this spellbinding novel reflects the truth that the lessons life teaches often come too late.

The Lessons Details

Date : Published 2010 by Viking

ISBN : 9780670916290

Author : Naomi Alderman

Format : Paperback 288 pages

Genre : Fiction, Lgbt, Contemporary, Gothic, Literary Fiction, Glbt, Queer

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Patricia Kaiser says

Für mich war das eine unterhaltsame Wochenendlektüre, die ich nur ungern aus der Hand gelegt habe, weil die Handlung spannend war und die Geschichte fesselnd erzählt wird. Ich bin ein Fan von College Romanen und wenn sie in England spielen, sind sie mir gleich noch lieber, weshalb mich diese Lektüre schon mal nicht enttäuschen konnte. Bald sah ich Ähnlichkeiten zu 'The Secret History' und die Beziehung der beiden Hauptfiguren hat etwas von 'Brideshead Revisited', obwohl ich sagen muss, dass die Handlung nicht an Donna Tartts Roman herankommt.

Laura says

From BBC Radio 4 - Book at Bedtime:

The Lessons is the second novel from Naomi Alderman, winner of the Orange New Writer's Award and Sunday Times Young Writer of the Year. Set among the dreaming spires of Oxford, it follows the progress of a gilded group of under-graduates drawn together by their dazzling and mercurial fellow student Mark Winters. Fuelled by his trust-fund they live a charmed life of learning and parties and love-affairs. But university is no grounding for real life and none of the friends will be prepared, some years later, when tragedy strikes.

The Lessons is a novel about friendship, ambition, betrayal and desire, and the fact that only life can teach the lessons you really need to learn.

Naomi Alderman won the Orange New Writers Award for her first novel Disobedience and has subsequently been named as the Sunday Times Young Writer of the Year. She is a graduate of Lincoln College, Oxford.

Rory Kinnear, fresh from playing Angelo at the Almeida and about to play Hamlet at the National Theatre studied at Balliol College, Oxford and reads his first Book at Bedtime.

Producer Di Speirs.

Blair says

As you may already know, *The Secret History* by Donna Tartt is one of my favourite books, possibly my all-time favourite. Nothing in all the modern fiction I've ever read has matched it, so I tend to be interested when reviews compare a new novel to it, as they often do - particularly with novels by relatively young female authors, like this one. There are indeed many similarities between the two, and at the beginning in particular the influence of Tartt's modern classic is so obvious that *The Lessons* almost feels like an homage. Elite, highly intellectual university setting (in this case Oxford)? Check. Close-knit, mixed-sex (and sexuality) group of friends, at least some of them fabulously wealthy? Check. Somewhat naive young male narrator, less privileged than his peers? Check. The tone and dialogue, too, are remarkably similar. I couldn't help but feel the book was specifically designed to appeal to those who loved *The Secret History*, but for me at least, it succeeded. As much as it's so clearly influenced by another writer, Alderman is obviously very talented

and this is a great book in its own right.

As for the story itself, I really enjoyed it but just felt frustrated throughout that there wasn't more of everything. It's so eloquently written and evocative, but lacks the depth and complexity of Tarrt's book and so many aspects of the story could have been expanded on. The sudden turnaround in James's feelings towards Mark could be implausible, but it's deftly handled and the realistic narrative voice makes it completely believable. I just wish I could have known more about the other characters, particularly Mark, the mystery of his troubled background and exactly how his relationship with Nicola began and developed. I almost feel like Alderman could write a whole other novel about these characters without running out of material. That said, this is still a very good book and well worth reading if you loved *The Secret History* - to anyone who enjoyed this, I would also recommend Lucie Whitehouse's *The House at Midnight*, which is in a similar vein and also excellent.

eduarda says

I don't normally bother to write reviews, but considering how little known this book is and how amazing it turned out to be, here I go.

He had been the centre, the one who bound us together, because beside him we seemed more similar to each other. Without him, Emmanuella was too rich, and Franny too opinionated, and Simon too shallow. Without him, we were just a scattering of people.

I feel like it's important to point out that this book is for a particular crowd of people. Not everyone is going to like this as avidly as I did. The reason for this is simple: there's little plot but an inner monologue (much like TSH's Richard Papen) of someone who's lost then found (more on this later). It's written in first person and the narrator is recalling the story from memory—and he is *love blind*. He only tells what's important, I think, to redeem himself and his lovers.

For this reason, and the gradual decline of the characters, I feel I gotta write this review making parallels alongside Donna Tarrt's *The Secret History*. But let me also point this out: *these are very different books*. The plot of *The Lessons* reminded me little of *The Secret History*. Of course, both of these stories happen in a collegiate ambient, etc, etc, and you can tell that there is at least some inspiration.

(Also: it's gaaayyyyyyyyyy)

Ok! Now what I mean when I say this book's for a very particular crowd (and you'll understand what I'm saying if you've read TSH). To me, *The Lessons* was written in the same mourning, decaying and surreal atmosphere as the epilogue in *The Secret History*. See:

He turned from me and walked away. I watched his back receding down the long, gleaming hall.

— *The Secret History's* Epilogue

I heard the sound of Italian voices from the next carriage — boisterous, confident teenage voices arguing and laughing. This moment, like all moments, would be lost. I closed my eyes, inhaled. And when I breathed out I felt nothing at all.

— *The Lesson's* Chapter 26

So when I say only a particular crowd will like this, that's what I mean. All chapters are written this way, like something's just out of your grasp, but then you realize it's not you, it's not you at all, it's the *characters*. And if you didn't like *The Secret History* you'll probably not like this book either, and I think if you haven't read *The Secret History* you might not be prepared for how *The Lessons* is like—so yes, you might have to be in a particular mindset to really enjoy this book.

Here's why: nothing much happens. Like I said, there's always something just out of your reach. The plot... moves on like a life should. Of course, by the time you're on the second half, the entire thing shakes and you're left crying and staring in horror and you're like oh my god oh my god this is the most amazing book I've ever read. Most of it isn't action, it's thought, it's remembrance. If I had to summarize *The Lessons*' atmosphere in a couple of sentences, I'd say it's the story of someone who loves too much. Who doesn't know who he is without someone to love. And it destroys him, because no one can love him back, really, if he's empty aside from bits and pieces he stole from his lovers. That's both the MC's entire story and ruin.

[...] And there are those of us who love unboundedly, giving everything, offering up their whole selves as a sacrifice of love. Nothing short of total love was ever enough for me.

But let me be clear: this book was amazing. In a few short sentences, it talks about James, a physicist who's starting his life at an Oxford College, following his successful and bossy sister's steps. Except, when he gets there, he discovers that while he was great surrounded by his average high-school classmates, here every classmate was the same as he, and now he's the average one. And it startles him, and puts him in a depression, and now he has an injured knee and he can't do anything right. That is, until he finds another person to wrap his life around: the girlfriend of the classmate James is the most jealous of. Anyway, through the girlfriend, Emmanuella, he meets another girl, Jess, and Jess introduces him to Mark, different and wild and very, very rich. And as Jess and James' relationship goes on, he becomes crazy fascinated by Mark, as they all are—him and Jess and Franny and Emmanuella and Simon—and all of the sudden they're nothing without each other (I'd say literally nothing. To me, they're empty). Hence, my comparasion to *The Secret History*'s characters decaying during the epilogue.

And... that's the plot. His life with Jess. His learning of feelings for another man. His way to go on and not lose either. His love that's too intense, that sparks jealousy, greed, arrogance, selfishness. Which is why this book is so good and yet the story—the plot—is... Well. It's a life. Studying, graduating, getting a job, moving in with your long-term girlfriend, having an affair, seeing tragedy and realizing: Oh my God, I asked for this, why am I true evil? (He's as melodramatic as he sounds.) And Mark's emptiness, and selfishness, and his need to always have, have, have, and when he can't buy what he needs the most, his rage. Arrogance. His blackmailing and sucking of the lives of the people who love him.

And if the price of his life has increased over the years, it has grown so slow and subtly that I have scarcely noticed.

— *The Lesson's* Chapter 23

But—if you're into that sort of thing, the objective, slow yet engaging and incredible narrative (I mean... I read TSH in 3 months, and that's my favorite book. I read this in 5 days. So it's not slow in the way that drags.), this is a must read. Also, one thing I'd like to take notice of is, I couldn't have read this book at a better moment than I did. This book's about moving away from childhood, adolescence and college life. About growing into adulthood but not in that oh-my-god-this-again kind of way.

[...] At last, I was not to be thrown away or beckoned with a gesture. I had wanted this; there was a triumph to it. My love had never been enough without his pain.

karen says

this **may** be one of those books that is a **four** star book for me, but maybe not a four star book for everyone else.

for starters, it is a combination of *secret history* and *the talented mr. ripley*. so if **you** like those things, get in line. it is about an average **man** from an average background coming to the attention of a wildly **charismatic** man and his circle of friends.

however, this is a book which simply tells a story.
that's it.

no bells, no whistles, no uncovering the mysteries of the universe.

just a story about people and the things they **do** and the **choices** they make.

so, why did you like it so much, **karen**?

1) i **love** secret history. and any time someone writes a book about close-knit friends who **all** live together in a crumbling mansion and are among the careless wealthy entitled elite with a scholarly bent, but then there are seeeeecrets, i am already there with my face in the **book**.

2) the atmosphere of this one was more haunting than most of the secret history wannabes. **this** one's seeeeecrets were more of the emotional, realistic ones, and less of, you know, *murrrder*. which is refreshing. it **becomes** less of an escapist treat and one that is a more contemplative experience.

3) the descriptions of oxford alone **were** enough to make me **love** this one. i dated someone that went there, and i remember hearing the **tales** of rigo(u)r and beauty and it kind of gives me a little yearn.

and while this is in no way unexplored territory, i think she expresses herself well.

There is no safety that does not also restrict us. And many needless restrictions feel safe and comfortable. It is so hard to know, at any moment, the distinction between being safe and being caged. It is hard to know when it is better to choose freedom and fear, and when it is simply foolhardy. I have often, I think, too often erred on the side of caution.

i mean, it's not a revolutionary observation, but the way she wrote it was lovely; she knows how to express things in a way that is pleasing.

I wanted to tell him something about how it was with Jess and me, how I had found that love was a constant cycle of coming together and breaking apart. But I did not want to talk or think about Jess just then. And perhaps I did not at that time have the ability to explain the truth about relationships: that they produce their fruit intermittently, unpredictably. That every relationship has moments where someone says, or thinks, or feels that it might not be worth doing. Every relationship has moments of exasperation and fear. And the

work of the thing is to come through it, to learn how to bear it. And even if I could have explained this, Mark would never have understood it. He has always been rich enough that if something breaks he can simply throw it away and buy a new one. He had never used string or glue to bind something together again. He had never been forced to learn how to mend.

you know? i like that. i'm simple.

one more, just because i think this final sentence is heartbreaking the way she invokes that perfect confidence of children and softly implies how much of that these characters have lost.

Daisy grew sturdy and sweet. She learned to say her own name, 'Daidy', and mine. She began to recognize Jess and me, to trust us as she trusted her family. Once, on a walk, she could not quite clamber over a fallen log and held out her little hand to mine with such an expectation of my aid that I felt suddenly heartsick at the charm of her.

because that's a lot of what this book is: the realization that "you are unprepared for the emotional challenges of life." in love, in friendship, in academia, in family... and poor beautiful james, drawn into a world to which he has nothing to contribute but so desperately wants to be a part of.

again, *yearn*

so, yes, a lovely book, but maybe not for people who need more than just personal resonanace from their reading material.

mathilde mairé says

Reminded me of *The Secret History* and *Brideshead Revisited*, so yes, of course I loved it.

Melissa says

This book is achingly like reading *The Likeness* again, full of the creepily, wonderfully, close relationships of Oxford students who live in a big, decrepit house together. All that's missing is the police investigation. Since I kind of wish my default reading mode was to always be reading *The Likeness* again, it's safe to assume that I loved that about this book. It's only getting three stars, however, because the end is such a disappointment. While it could be that I didn't care for it because I never wanted the book to end, because I wanted to wallow in the story for at least another day or two, it may also be that it just wasn't any good. I need more!

nicky says

Really, really want to re-read *The Secret History* right now...

Yet I do not wish to compare *The Lessons* to *The Secret History*. There are similarities but only in terms of the atmospheric-ness. *The Lessons* is not a carbon copy of Donna Tartt's novel - not at all. It has its own

magic to it, its own darkness, its own suffocating and desperate quality that really starts to pick up in the second half of the book and I very much enjoyed it.

I could not be more glad to have found *The Secret History* through bookstagram this year, as I feel like the qualities this novel possesses are exactly what i've always been looking for in books. And I am so glad that there are similar stories !

So for anyone who did enjoy *The Secret History*, I can wholeheartedly recommend *The Lessons* !

Kirsty says

I was sucked into Naomi Alderman's *The Lessons* from the very first page. It is as intriguing as it is strange, and as strange as it is unsettling. Well written and compelling, I would have happily given this a five-star rating if the ending had been more realistic, and less predictable. Very enjoyable overall, Alderman is an author whose other work I will definitely be looking out for in future.

Tooter says

4.5 Stars

Anna Luce says

★★☆☆☆ (2 stars)

The premise itself was enough to intrigue me. **A close-knit group of friends attending Oxford? Yes please.** Naomi Alderman's style lends itself well for this: it has a 'polish' that evokes notions of privilege. *However, the characters and plot do not convey the good qualities of Alderman's style.* Throughout, there is a sort of entitlement which feels hollow: **Oxford is not the forefront of the story**, and it is the annoying attitude of the characters which render this novel so self-important rather than the 'exclusive' setting. *The Lessons lacks* the compelling characters of *The Secret History*, the atmosphere of *The Likeness*, and the dramatics of *If We Were Villains*.

The focus of the novel isn't as clear-cut as I expected. For such a short novel, I found **my interest wavering time and again due to the lack of the story's focus**: Oxford seems forgotten soon after the first few intriguing chapters and Mark's house also becomes seemingly forgotten. Alderman doesn't spend enough time maintaining the background of this novel and **the characters are not fleshed out** enough as to detract from this. I would have been forgiving if I could at least have read about a decent character study, but there was no such thing. **This 'group of friends' was composed of interchangeable characters who were so poorly developed that even the author is aware of it and tries to excuse her poor rendition of them by having the narrator say things like 'so and so is still a mystery to me' and 'no one ever understood what she/he was about'.** Really? That is a **cheap trick**. Her characters aren't unknowable as they claim to be, but rather, they simply lack, in all fronts. They are shallows sketches who do not even appear that often in the novel. And I wouldn't have minded as much if at least the two 'main' characters were fully developed. But they weren't. Their relationship was...questionable. **We saw no proof or progress, but we are made to believe that the protagonist falls under the influence of this very charismatic character who is anything**

but interesting. They all read like copies of the cast of **ahem** **The Secret History** **ahem**. What was the point of it all?

Lastly, the 'Italian' factor of this novel is complete nonsense. At least google real Italian names for Pete's sake.

Maciek says

The Lessons, Naomi Alderman's second novel, is reminiscent of Donna Tartt's famous *The Secret History* - featuring a young and naive narrator from a relatively poor background, who enrolls in at a prestigious university (Tartt's is located in a sleepy Vermont town) where he falls in with a group of quirky, overly privileged and rich young people, and learns their ways by participating in the crazy things they do. *The Secret History* was not the first novel to do that, but it was undoubtedly the most successful and popular example of such set-up in the late 20-th century fiction.

Alderman's narrator is James Stieff (the obvious pun will come up - get it?), a freshman at Oxford and a student of physics. James has a hard time adjusting to the Oxford rigor and feels lonely, misplaced, envious of other more successful students - until he enters the circle of people hovering around the charming Mark Winters, a trust fund baby living the hell out of the bohemian lifestyle in an decaying Georgian mansion. Mark invited James and others to live with him - without worries about the rent or expenses, and just enjoying their life. But there's more behind Mark's wealth and glitter, which might affect James in ways he did not thought possible.

While the fact that I did not find most of the characters likable is not in itself a fatal flaw - I could say the same about *The Secret History* - but I did not find any of them interesting. The mysterious Mark failed to made me care enough to want to know more about him, and I felt that James off as pathetic and whiny. The rest of thee characters resemble sketches more than people. In comparison, Tartt's clueless Richard Pape was a much more engaging narrator, and the drama between Henry and Bunny was a highlight of the novel. *Lessons* also lack a central focal point such as the murder and its coverup in *The Secret History*, making the novel wander around aimlessly, not knowing if it wants to center on James, Mark or Oxford, and trying to bring all three together.

(view spoiler)

Alderman's novel is an attempt at capturing the lost period of youth spend at college, where one tries to find the meaning of life and parties a lot - but just like that time it comes out without answers and somehow hungover. While she can certainly write and there are nice description passages, its familiar plot offers few surprises and rewards, and while it's a pleasant way to spend a couple of hours it's most likely to be gone and forgotten in a couple of years.

Bettie? says

[Bettie's Books (hide spoiler)]

Felice says

There is an almost endless supply of novels about college friends: *Brideshead Revisited*, *The Group*, *The Secret History*, *The Line of Beauty*, *The Emperor's Children* and at last count 83,477 others. They all use the same basic formula: desperate people make intense friendships more by virtue environment than choice and are led by the most charismatic of the bunch into making bad decisions and the same basic characters: the snob, the innocent, the addict, the rich one, the charity case, *Thelma and Daphne*. In order to stand out within that huge pack a novel needs to be at the very least excellent. Enter *The Lesson*.

The sun of this group of collegiates is the flamboyant and impossibly rich Mark. The satellites are: James, Simon, Emmanuella, Jess and Franny. A lifetime of reading has already taught you that there will of be affairs, changing partners, tested loyalty, betrayal, financial success, financial ruin and tragedy. The author, Naomi Alderman brings nothing new to the plot of *The Lesson* but then the plotline for this kind of novel was established long before she was born. What Alderman does bring in spades is freshness. From the experience of going from high school graduation and being the master of your universe to being a little fish in a intimidating pond once you get to college to discovering that real life is less than exciting, Alderman makes this all new again.

The Lesson has all the readable delights of a richer than thou coming of age story and the intellectual grab of a documentary. You enjoy it all despite the train wreck you know is coming...or maybe it's because you know it's coming?

The Lesson is currently available in the U. K. I do not know if a U.S. edition is planned. If you're interested in this author you could try Alderman's excellent *Disobedience*.

charlotte says

tw for self harm, suicide ideations, domestic abuse

* you know that trope where there's an unhealthy gay relationship in a literary novel? this book *exemplifies* that trope. if you look that trope up, you will see a picture of this book. not only is the relationship unhealthy, it's manipulative, and at the end you see it's also abusive. thanks for that.

* the two main characters who have this relationship are both bi (i assume, given that it's never said, but they both have relationships with women as well as each other), and *both* are cheating on their respective others. thanks also for that.

* this quote "*franny's teaching something clever at harvard: psychology of consumption. oh, and i think she's a lesbian now. or bisexual. she's in a relationship with a neuroscientist woman anyway.*". """"she's a lesbian now"""" as if she wasn't before and suddenly changed. fuck you.

* it's implied that mark has a mental illness (he has a breakdown before the book starts), but he's also the incredibly manipulative, abusive one (who also excuses his abuse as "you know how i am"), so thanks for the demonisation.

* someone compared this to *the secret history* but if francis and charles had been more than just a sidenote or whatever. maybe if i had read it around the same time as that, i'd have enjoyed it a little more (equally i might not have been so critical while reading), but nowadays i'm not so into characters who have zero redeeming features.

* the timeline appears to skip and jump all over the place and it's not always clear when some events are happening in relation to previous events. and as a result the ending seemed very rushed. there's a mention of 18 months after daisy, then suddenly they're talking about jess and mark is being cruel about that to james (another example of the abusiveness, i guess) and then suddenly he's attacking james, and we learn that it's not the first time? which makes it seem like that at least was used as a plot device (we do see obviously the manipulativeness of mark earlier on, and him throwing an ashtray at james' head, both of which foreshadow, but the reveal that the physical abuse has happened multiple times seemed a bit out of the blue).

* this being said, the writing was pretty good. it's just the whole plot, with its demonisation of mental illness, and unhealthy gay relationship, and cheating bisexuals, was not worth it (and i'm angry).

* final update i swear, but the one good thing was that james got out of the abusive relationship (though with jess - the straight character's - help, maybe iffy?). it did leave it completely open as to what he did next though (i hope he lives happily and contentedly and finds a partner he can be soft with).
