

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## ***Three Thousand Years of Longing* (2022)**

George Miller

### OVERVIEW

**Director** George Miller was born in 1945 in Chinchilla, Queensland, Australia. From an early age, Miller was interested in both film and medicine: he practiced for several years as a medical doctor while simultaneously making short films with producer Byron Kennedy. Miller and Kennedy achieved huge international success with *Mad Max*, Miller's feature film debut. Kennedy Miller Productions went on to produce two *Mad Max* sequels and films by other Australian directors such as John Duigan and Phillip Noyce. Miller then directed high-profile and internationally acclaimed films including *The Witches of Eastwick* (1987), *Lorenzo's Oil* (1992), *Babe: Pig in the City* (1998), and *Happy Feet* (2006), for which he won an Oscar. Miller returned to *Mad Max* in 2015 with *Mad Max: Fury Road*, which earned widespread praise. Soon after its release, Miller announced plans to make *Three Thousand Years of Longing*, which was also well received.

**Film** *Three Thousand Years of Longing* is based on "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye" (1994), a story by A. S. Byatt. In the story, a middle-aged female professor of narratology meets a djinn (another word for "genie"), who tells her many stories of his very long life and becomes something of a companion to her. The storytelling style somewhat resembles that of *The Thousand and One Nights*, with the djinn fulfilling the role of master storyteller Scheherazade. Much of the film consists of elaborate dramatizations of the djinn's stories, most of which take place in the Middle East.

**Background** Following the huge critical and commercial success of *Mad Max: Fury Road*, Miller announced in late 2018 his plans to adapt Byatt's story. Tilda Swinton and Idris Elba signed on to play the two leads. Production was delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic, but filming finally began in late 2020. The film was shot in Australia, Turkey, and the United Kingdom. Ultimately, critics largely praised the film (especially its visuals), but it was a box office disappointment, making \$20.3 million despite a production cost of about \$60 million.

### CHARACTERS

*Alitheia Binnie* – British professor of narratology

*The djinn* – a djinn (or genie) trapped in a bottle for centuries

*Queen of Sheba* – onetime lover of the djinn

King Solomon – becomes the lover of the Queen of Sheba; captures the djinn in a bottle

*Gülten* – Ottoman slave girl who first opens the djinn's bottle

Prince Mustafa – beloved of Gülten

*Murad* – heir to Ottoman throne

*Zefir* – young wife of Turkish merchant in 19<sup>th</sup> century; second owner of djinn's bottle

### SYNOPSIS

British narratology scholar Alitheia Binnie travels to a conference in Istanbul. She goes to a local shop and picks up a small blue bottle as a souvenir. When she opens the bottle in her hotel room, a djinn escapes from it. Some of the djinn's powers are immediately evident. He changes his size, he learns English in a matter of minutes, and he turns on the television simply by tapping it. He announces to Alitheia that he is a djinn and must grant her three wishes. She responds that she is content in her life, and that as a scholar of narratology, she is all too aware of the many stories in which wishes come back to haunt the wisher.

Alitheia tells the djinn about her own fairly ordinary life. The djinn tells Alitheia several stories of his long existence. His first story is of his love for the Queen of Sheba; it turns out that it was King Solomon, his rival, who originally captured him in a bottle. 2,500 years later he is temporarily freed by a slave girl named Gülten, who wishes to find favor with the prince of Constantinople, whom she loves. His bottle is next discovered by Zefir, a brilliant nineteenth-century Turkish girl whose wish for knowledge he easily grants. The djinn and Zefir have a love affair that results in another incarceration in the bottle for the djinn. After hearing all these stories, Alitheia tells the djinn she wishes for him to love her. He agrees, and they go to her home in London together. Before long, though, the electromagnetic waves and other technologies of modern London hurt the djinn, so Alitheia makes two wishes that free him from the bottle for good, enabling him to return to the djinn realm.

## SCENES

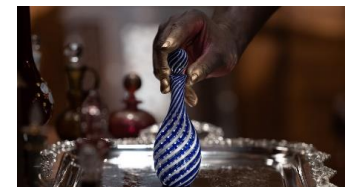
**Scholar of stories** – A middle-aged white woman reads a book while riding in an airplane; a voiceover tells us that her name is Alitheia Binnie and that she is a scholar of storytelling who lives alone by choice. She is on the way to a conference in Istanbul. She arrives and is greeted by three fellow scholars, who take her to her hotel.



**Lecture** – Alitheia and one of the other scholars deliver the keynote lecture in a large lecture hall. The subject of the lecture is the ancient purpose of storytelling, which they argue is to make sense of the world in the absence of modern scientific explanations. While Alitheia speaks, she sees a misty and mysterious figure in the crowd; very pale, he is wearing elaborate old-fashioned garb and appears rapidly in different parts of the auditorium. No one else shows any indication of seeing him. The figure shouts and zooms toward Alitheia, who faints.



**Souvenir** – Alitheia and her co-lecturer walk through Istanbul together; she assures him that she feels fine, and that sometimes her imagination simply gets the better of her. They go into a shop filled with old, strange objects. Alitheia chooses a souvenir: a small blue bottle with a pattern that the shop owner identifies as a “nightingale’s eye.”



**The djinn** – In her hotel room the next morning, Alitheia attempts to clean off the slightly dirty blue bottle in the sink. She uncaps it, which causes a swoosh of some sort of vaporous dark-colored matter to jet out of it. It races out of the bathroom into the main room and takes shape as a giant-sized, dark-skinned man. Alitheia tries to speak to the creature in several languages; ancient Greek is the first one he understands. He responds to her in the same language and thanks her for his release, saying that he is a djinn and must grant her three wishes.



**A new world** – The djinn examines various objects in the hotel room, including the television, which he turns on simply by tapping it. He asks Alitheia to explain the television to him, which she tries to do. As they talk, he switches to English, which he says is straightforward and easy to learn. Alitheia says she is familiar with the concept of djinn and wants to take it slow before making her wishes.

**Alitheia's first story** – The djinn says that he has all the time in the world, given his immortality, so he is happy to talk as long as she wants. Alitheia tells him that when she was a girl in a girls' boarding school, she invented an imaginary friend, a boy whom she called Enzo. She says that it seems contrary to reason that the djinn is here, yet here he obviously is.



**Djinn's first captivity** – The djinn reduces himself to human size and conjures a platter of food that he offers to Alitheia; she accepts. He tells her that he has been incarcerated in the bottle more than once. The first time, he says, was due to his desire for the Queen of Sheba, in whose palace he lived three thousand years ago. He says that while he loved the queen, she treated him as a plaything. The djinn tells the story of King Solomon's pursuit of the Queen of Sheba, using magical musical instruments and various other talents. The djinn opposed the royal marriage, but King Solomon trapped him in a bottle and had the bottle dropped in the sea. There he stayed for two and a half thousand years.



**Hesitation to wish** – They talk about Alitheia, who says she has no children, siblings, or parents, though she once had a husband. She tells the djinn of the story of her marriage, which was short-lived and came to an end after she suffered a miscarriage. The djinn suggests that she might wish for her husband back, but she says she has no desire for that and actually prefers her freedom. She says she has everything she wants and does not have any wishes to make. As a narratologist, Alitheia adds, she is well aware that all stories about magical creatures granting wishes turn out poorly for the human wishers.



**Gülten** – The djinn tells the story of his next period outside the bottle. His bottle becomes encased in a rock that in turn ends up forming part of the wall of the palace in Constantinople. A slave girl named Gülten discovers the bottle in the rock and takes it to a secret place to open it. The djinn is freed and asks her what she desires. Her first wish is to find favor in the eyes of Prince Mustafa, whom she loves. The djinn grants this wish, as well as her next wish to become pregnant by Mustafa, despite his increasing concern that Gülten is in danger of getting tangled in palace intrigues. Indeed, Mustafa is killed, and Gülten is killed in turn before making her third wish, so the djinn is not freed.



**Encouragement to wish** – Alitheia and the djinn argue about whether she has any wishes to make. She insists that he could be a trickster, and that in any case she has no unfulfilled desires. The djinn tells Alitheia about Murad and Ibrahim, two brothers who nearly discover the djinn's bottle but ultimately do not, leaving him longer in captivity.

**Zefir's quest for knowledge** – The djinn tells the story of Zefir, the next owner of his bottle. She is the young wife of a much older Turkish merchant in the nineteenth century. Zefir has no formal education but is extremely bright. Her first wish is for all knowledge that is useful, beautiful, and true; the djinn happily grants the wish by teaching her what he knows and bringing her many books. The djinn and Zefir become lovers, and he grants her second wish to solve a great mathematical problem.



**Forgetting** – After Zefir becomes pregnant, the djinn becomes worried that she might make a third wish, which would free him from the bottle and send him back to the djinn realm—thereby separate them. He actually stops her from wishing a couple of times. Zefir resents this and accuses him of trapping her just like her husband. One day in her anger, Zefir says, "I wish I could forget I ever met you." Which, promptly, she does, at a moment when the djinn happens to be in the bottle, so he is trapped there again.



**A wish for love** – Alithea silently looks at the djinn for a few moments after he finishes his story. She announces that she does have a wish: she says she has begun to love him and wishes for him to love her in return. She says she wants the kind of love spoken of in ancient tales. He touches her face and agrees to grant her wish.



**In London** – Alithea returns to London; the djinn accompanies her hidden in a salt shaker, as his original bottle was broken. When they arrive at her flat, he leaves the bottle and stands in her backyard. He says that the air is “thick” in London with the electromagnetic waves and other emanations of various technological devices. Alithea has a brief, contentious conversation with the two older ladies who live next door; they criticize her for studying other cultures instead of British culture.



**Peace offering** – Alithea goes to work at a university and comes home at the end of the day to join the djinn in her flat. She takes a bowl of the sweets conjured by the djinn over to her neighbors; they each take a sweet. She also introduces the neighbors to the djinn, saying he is a friend and will be staying for a while.



**Companions** – Alithea goes to work, while the djinn explores various arenas of modern human life, such as hospitals and scientific laboratories. “Humankind is a wonder,” he says to Alithea. She agrees but says that human beings remain bewildered by many aspects of life, such as relationships. She reflects that she used to argue in all her academic work that the supernatural creatures of ancient stories were no longer necessary in our scientific age, yet here is the djinn before her.



**Second and third wishes** – Alithea comes home to find the djinn crumpled over in the basement, his face dry and starting to crumble. “I wish for you to speak,” she says, and he does. He admits that the electromagnetic waves in the air are harming him. She says that she knows he cannot really love her because love is given freely, not in response to a demand. “If this world is not for you, I wish that you return to the one where you belong, wherever that may be,” she says. The salt shaker on the shelf cracks and dissolves; Alithea and the djinn embrace.



**Epilogue** – Three years later, Alithea sits in a park writing the djinn’s stories in a notebook. Suddenly the djinn appears and is walking toward her. They smile at each other and he kisses her hand. In a voiceover, Alithea says that she has subsequently received multiple visits from the djinn.



## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Alithea Binnie** Alithea is a single middle-aged Englishwoman. A prominent scholar of narratology with a job at a London university, she is particularly interested in the literature of other cultures and of stories’ evolution over the centuries. She describes herself as content with her life but begins to think differently after meeting the djinn.

**Intellectual** Above all, Alithea is an intellectual. She is devoted to her scholarship, traveling the world to present at conferences and spending a great deal of time reading and writing. Alithea has achieved prominence in the field, with a London university job and a keynote lecture slot at the conference she attends in the film.

**Adaptable** While the djinn can change his shape, Alithea can change her mind. After listening to the djinn, Alithea realizes she is not as content with solitude as she believed. The djinn’s very presence also leads her to reconsider her scholarly argument that the supernatural creatures of ancient tales lose relevance in the modern world.

**The djinn** The nameless djinn is an ancient, immortal, supernatural being. He is trapped in a bottle by his rival for the love of the Queen of Sheba, King Solomon, and spends most of the next three thousand years in captivity. He sometimes falls in love with later women whose wishes he grants.

*Loving* One of the first things the djinn tells Alithea about himself is that he is frequently made vulnerable by his love for the conversation of women. He subsequently shares stories of his great loves, first for Sheba and then for Zefir. Both loves ultimately cause him to be trapped in the bottle.

*Impatient* By the time he meets Alithea, the djinn has been waiting three thousand years to be liberated to the djinn realm; for most of that time, he has been stuck in the bottle. He longs for freedom, begging Alithea to grant the wishes that will provide it.

*Powerful* Despite his restrictions, the djinn is extremely powerful by human standards. He can change his form, conjure and manipulate physical objects, and acquire knowledge with incredible speed. He can influence human emotions and cause someone to become pregnant. Once freed from the bottle, he can also move between realms.

## THEMES

**Storytelling** Near the beginning of the film, Alithea says in a voiceover that her story is true, but that we are more likely to believe it if she tells it as a fairy tale. She has already introduced herself as a scholar of narratology, on her way to a conference where she and her colleagues will “tell stories about stories.” The bulk of the film consists of the stories the djinn tells Alithea about his three thousand years of life. The style of storytelling and partially Middle Eastern setting evoke humankind’s ultimate story collection, *The Thousand and One Nights*. The nature of reality and fiction are central to Alithea’s scholarly work, which argues that the supernatural creatures and occurrences of ancient tales reflect ancient humans’ need to understand phenomena for which they had no scientific explanations. The story of *Three Thousand Years of Longing* itself, though, depicts a supernatural creature actually coming into Alithea’s life; she herself ruefully remarks to the djinn that his presence gives the lie to her whole scholarly career. But she loves him and accepts it. In the end, she writes down a collection of the stories he told her.

*Illustrative moment:* The first story Alithea tells the djinn is about a story she told herself as a child. She reveals that as a lonely girl in a boarding school, she invented a boy named Enzo to be her friend. Although she took comfort from this imaginary friendship, her desire to pin it down by writing down information about Enzo in a notebook caused her to feel that Enzo actually slipped away from her. Writing the story down, in this case, dissipated its power.

**Time** The djinn and Alithea both see themselves as part of a broad sweep of time—he because he is immortal and has already lived over 3,000 years, she because her scholarship explores the evolution of storytelling throughout recorded history. The film’s very title, *Three Thousand Years of Longing*, foregrounds its wide temporal scope (clearly a very deliberate choice, given that the title of the source material, “The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye,” makes no reference to time at all). It is the trapped djinn who experiences the three thousand years of longing—a duration of suffering unavailable to a mortal human being. The djinn is also a witness to humanity’s progress over the course of his lifetime; he marvels at all the advancements achieved between his time with Gülten in the nineteenth century and his time with Alithea in the modern day. Alithea, meanwhile, initially believes the passage of time to be definitive for storytelling, arguing in her scholarship that those scientific advancements cause the gods and monsters of ancient tales increasingly to fade. But Alithea changes her mind after meeting the djinn, coming to believe the difference in time does not necessarily bring a difference in storytelling.

*Illustrative moment:* After describing his dispute with the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon, the djinn tells Alithea that he was stuck in a bottle for two and a half thousand years. Alithea asks what a djinn can do in a bottle other than sleep. He replies that djinn do not sleep, to which Alithea does not immediately respond. He continues by saying that for the first hundred years he raged against his fate, then prayed to

his god, then prayed to every god he knew, then prayed to any god he did not know, and finally tried to play a trick, praying that he would *not* be released from the bottle. None of this, he tells Alitheia, did any good or relieved his boredom and suffering.

## Politics

**Freedom** The djinn longs for freedom for three thousand years while he is stuck in the bottle or busy trying to grant enough wishes to become truly freed to the realm of the djinn. Many other characters, too, are unfree for one reason or another. The Queen of Sheba promises the djinn that no man could ever control her, but that is exactly what King Solomon does almost from the moment he arrives at her palace. The first person to open the djinn's bottle is Gülten, who is a slave in the palace of Ottoman sultan Suleiman the Magnificent. She is also enslaved because of her love for Prince Mustafa, which ultimately gets her killed. The next owner of the djinn's bottle, Zefir, is in a subordinate position as the young third wife of a Turkish merchant in the nineteenth century. She longs most not so much for physical freedom as for intellectual freedom, which to some extent the djinn is able to grant her in spite of her marriage; he teaches her in secret and acquires books that he magically hides from the husband's eyes. Alitheia enjoys by far the most freedom of any of the film's characters.

*Illustrative moment:* Although Alitheia's first wish was for the djinn to love her and stay with her, she overturns this wish with a final wish for the djinn to go wherever he belongs. She remarks that her first wish was misguided because love is a gift that must be given freely. In making the wish, she says, she effectively took away the djinn's power to truly grant it. Alitheia's change of heart is, appropriately, the very thing that finally gives the djinn his freedom from the cycle of wishes and incarceration in the bottle.

**Power** Power in *Three Thousand Years of Longing* rests in fairly predictable places. Royal characters (including the Queen of Sheba, Suleiman the Magnificent, and Prince Mustafa) have power over their subjects. Men (including King Solomon, Prince Mustafa, and Zefir's husband) have power over women. The rich have power over the poor. The djinn has supernatural powers that he uses to produce various effects. Those who are beloved have power over those who love them (the Queen of Sheba over the djinn, King Solomon over the Queen of Sheba, Mustafa over Gülten, Zefir over the djinn, the djinn over Alitheia). But power can also shift: Zefir and Gülten, for example, both gain power when the djinn is able to grant their wishes. It is the nature of supernatural power to unsettle traditional power dynamics in the human world. As Alitheia insists when she first meets the djinn, however, supernatural power also has a way of turning on those who use it: wishes granted by the djinn often do not turn out well for the wisher in the long run. This is particularly true for Gülten, who gets her wishes to be loved by Mustafa and become pregnant with his child, but is then swept up in a plot against Mustafa and killed.

*Illustrative moment:* Soon after Alitheia frees him from the bottle, the djinn tells her that his love for the conversation of women has repeatedly caused him to lose power. Indeed, his love for the Queen of Sheba leads to his original incarceration by the jealous King Solomon, and his even greater love for the brilliant Zefir causes him to stay with her and keep her from making the third wish that would free him to the realm of the djinn and thus separate them. The djinn's conversations with Alitheia, though, establish a relationship that ultimately does result in his freedom, so he successfully breaks his pattern.

## Relationships

**Love** One of the most prominent themes of *Three Thousand Years of Longing* is love, specifically heterosexual romantic love. The djinn loves the Queen of Sheba; the Queen of Sheba; loves King Solomon; King Solomon loves the Queen of Sheba; Gülten loves Prince Mustafa; the djinn loves Zefir; Alitheia loves the djinn. These loves are largely built on simple attraction, without much rational basis (except for the djinn's love for Zefir's mind). Love in the film also generally takes the form of a desire for possession and control. Only at the very end of the film does anyone express a more mature kind of love: Alitheia enacts her love for the djinn by setting him free to leave her and go to a place where he will no longer be harmed by electromagnetic waves. The film is remarkably narrow in its presentation of love: there is a near-total absence of love between family members or friends. The one exception to this—

sultan Suleiman the Magnificent's love for his son Mustafa—is shown to be very flimsy, as the sultan orders Mustafa's death when he is tricked into believing that his son is plotting against him.

*Illustrative moment:* The djinn is so overwhelmed by his love for the Queen of Sheba that when she takes up with King Solomon, he cannot keep himself from trying to talk her out of it, even though he has realized how powerful King Solomon is (and thus how dangerous as a rival). Indeed, after King Solomon marries the Queen of Sheba and realizes that the djinn is hanging around, he traps the djinn in a bottle and has it thrown into the sea. The djinn pursues his love even at the risk of his own safety.

## Flaws

**Jealousy** Unsurprisingly, given the widespread selfish love discussed earlier, a major theme in the film is jealousy. The djinn and King Solomon are jealous of each other's position in the eyes of the Queen of Sheba. Gülten is jealous of everyone who has access to Prince Mustafa; then, once she gets close to him with the djinn's help, other people become jealous of her for the same reason. Upon hearing the djinn tell stories of his love affairs with the Queen of Sheba and Zefir, Alithea becomes jealous, telling him that she wants exactly what he had with them. Alithea's jealousy ends well: the djinn is able to grant her this wish, and the result of their relationship is that the djinn is ultimately freed from captivity, with Alithea's consent. But no other jealous feelings in the film have any good outcomes, causing only fighting, violence, and even death.

*Illustrative moment:* Almost as soon as King Solomon arrives at the palace of the Queen of Sheba, the djinn becomes jealous and worried. The first thing Solomon does is play music for Sheba and others in the palace using a magical instrument. The djinn looks at Sheba during the music and sees how moved she is. Once Solomon has stopped playing and gone to a different part of the palace, the djinn begins trying to persuade Sheba not to fall for Solomon's charms.

## Quest

**Quest** Both the djinn and Alithea are on quests that began before they meet. The djinn is on a quest for freedom from incarceration in the bottle. The “three thousand years of longing” referred to in the film's title more plausibly reflect the djinn's longing for freedom than any specific romantic longing (given that he transfers his affections from Sheba to Zefir). The djinn often expresses his desperation to grant someone three wishes and thus be freed. Most of the time he is on this three-thousand-year-long quest, he is stuck in the bottle and cannot do anything to further his goal. Alithea, by contrast, is a more active character. She is on a quest for knowledge, specifically the knowledge of the true nature of the evolution of storytelling throughout world history. This is a monumental topic, much broader in scope than what most scholars pursue. Her quest is a quiet one, mostly involving a great deal of reading and the occasional trip to a conference. Meeting Alithea brings about the achievement of the djinn's quest, but meeting the djinn throws Alithea's quest into doubt. She realizes that her provisional conclusions were wrong, and that she has much further to go in truly understanding global storytelling.

*Illustrative moment:* Zefir, like Alithea, goes on a quest for knowledge. Because of her historical and personal circumstances (as a subordinate wife in the nineteenth century), Zefir is only able to pursue this quest with the djinn's help. Thanks to him, she is able to read numerous books in all areas of knowledge, and she also finds a solution to a great mathematical problem. Unlike Alithea, though, Zefir can only work privately; she cannot share the progress of her quest with the wider world.

## Change

**Transformation** Literal and abstract transformations occur during the film. The djinn begins performing literal transformations as soon as he appears: he transforms himself from a vapor in the bottle to an embodied being, and he also changes his size a couple of times. In order to accompany Alithea back to London, the djinn not only makes himself small enough to fit in a bottle again, but also makes himself completely invisible in that bottle. In addition, the djinn has the power to make objects besides his own body transform. Meanwhile, characters also undergo transformations in their thoughts and feelings.

Alithea experiences a total transformation in her scholarly outlook after she meets the djinn and is forced to acknowledge the literal reality of supernatural beings that she had believed to be merely symbolic. She is also transformed in that she passes from a single woman content in her solitude to someone who actively asks for love and companionship with the djinn. These transformations are presented as a discovery of truth.

*Illustrative moment:* The physical transformations of the djinn when Alithea first frees him from the bottle are striking. The vapor that first comes out of the bottle is dark, extensive, and fast-moving, making a swooshing sound and rocketing to the other side of the hotel room. Alithea follows it, gingerly, and discovers the djinn in humanoid but giant form, barely fitting in the room. He talks to her for a while at this size, then shrinks himself to the size of a tall but relatively ordinary human being. These transformations are the first sign in the film of the djinn's magical powers.

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Alithea's scholarship argues that people have less need for stories about supernatural creatures in a world in which so many phenomena have been explained by science. To what extent do you agree with this, and why?
2. Which of the djinn's stories did you find most interesting, and why?
3. Did you find the film's handling of "exotic" places and characters to be respectful? Offensive? Or somewhere in the middle? Why?
4. Somewhat like the lawyer protagonist of *The Last Wave*, directed by Miller's fellow Aussie Peter Weir, Alithea is a rational scholar forced to confront the reality of the irrational. How might you compare and contrast *Three Thousand Years of Longing* with *The Last Wave* or with another film or book about a similar protagonist?
5. What do you think you would do yourself if you opened a bottle and found yourself face-to-face with a djinn?
6. What did you think of the film's presentation of gender?