

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Geraldine Brooks, a native of Australia, has won numerous awards for her work as a newspaper journalist and author of fiction and non-fiction books. Her first novel, *Year of Wonders: A Novel of the Plague* (2001), was an international bestseller. This year, Brooks' second novel, *March* (2005), earned her the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. She is also the author of the critically acclaimed *Nine Parts of Desire* (1994), which recounts her experiences among Islamic women in the Middle East, and *Foreign Correspondence* (1997), a memoir for which she won the Nita B. Kibble Award for women's writing.

Brooks, who holds a Master's Degree in journalism from Columbia University, has worked for *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Wall Street Journal*. As a reporter for the *Journal*, she covered conflicts in Africa, the Balkans, and the Middle East. In 1990, Brooks and her husband, Tony Horwitz (also a Pulitzer Prize winner), won the Overseas Press Club Award for their coverage of the first Gulf War.

THEMES

Brooks' novel, which describes how villagers in a small 17th century Derbyshire town responded to an outbreak of the plague,¹ touches upon themes related to culture, biology, economics, ethics, interpersonal communication, history, literature, medicine, philosophy, psychology, religion, science, sociology, and women's studies. The following questions are designed to stimulate informed reflection upon some of these issues in relation to *Year of Wonders*.

QUESTIONS

Economic Themes

- What does *Year of Wonders* reveal about the economic life of Eyam and vicinity?
- To what extent are the villagers of Eyam dependent upon trade with others for essential goods? How is this trade rendered possible once the villagers quarantine themselves?
- Would it be possible for the town to become completely self-sufficient? Why or why not? What sacrifices, if any, would such independence require?
- When shopping, pay attention to labels that indicate where the products you buy are made. To what extent are you dependent upon goods that are not produced locally? Could you become independent of these imported goods if you desired to do so? What sacrifices would you have to make? Would you be willing to make these sacrifices? How does the United States' economy benefit from importing goods from abroad? Are there any disadvantages associated with this trade?

¹ The plague that decimated Eyam used to go by the scientific name *Pasteurella pestis*, and it is referred to as such in much of the literature regarding the plague. Currently, it is called *Yersinia pestis*.

- The Bradford family was able to flee the plague-ridden town because they had the economic resources to do so. Others who might also have wanted to leave were unable to do so because they lacked such resources. How does this compare with the situation that occurred in the wake of Hurricane Katrina? If you had the economic resources to do so, would you have fled Eyam?
- As depicted by Brooks, the Bradford family seems to possess few if any redeeming features. Are they intended to be representative of Eyam's upper class? Of the upper classes in general? Is this depiction accurate? Fair?
- Making and possessing money are two constants in the village. Does this modern emphasis (while perhaps not historically very accurate) help a modern reader to understand the situation of the villagers?

Ethical Themes

What good should we pursue? What evil should we avoid? By what standards should we live our lives? The study of ethics is a form of humanistic inquiry which seeks to answer these important questions.

- Do you agree with Reverend Michael Mompellion's request that the villagers of Eyam quarantine themselves in order to arrest the spread of the plague?
- What responsibility do we owe ourselves? Our families? Neighbors? Strangers? To those whom we may never meet but who are affected by our decisions?
- For whom would you be willing to sacrifice? For what?
- How did the plague influence the villagers' behavior toward one another? In what ways was their behavior influenced for the good? In what ways was their behavior adversely influenced?
- What do you think of Reverend Mompellion's decision to withhold sexual affection from his wife in response to an affair she had prior to marrying him? Is this treatment of his wife just? How does this treatment compare to his casual dismissal of a male parishioner's sexual transgression? Should he forgive her? Does she have any need of forgiveness from him? Has she, in fact, transgressed against him? If so, how?
- Initially, Reverend Mompellion is portrayed as a morally upright member of Eyam's privileged class. Later, it is revealed that he was a once a lowly farm lad who later rose in station. It is also revealed that his true moral nature is significantly different from his outward goodness. Do you see a connection between Mompellion's disguised social origins and his disguised moral nature?
- Theft is sometimes excused in the novel, as was the case with the use of a tradesman's barrow to carry the cook home to the village. In other instances, theft is punished

severely, as in the case of Anna's father. Comment on the idea of theft, both material and other, and its function in the plot.

- What do you think of the miners' court, its judgment of Anna's father, and the punishment it imposes? Does the temporary isolation of the village justify the court's enlargement of its very limited purpose? In emergency, should people improvise a legal system in this way? If so, what precepts should inform such a legal system?
- "You bleed us dry," Anna's father complains of Eyam's aristocracy. Is this a fair charge? In judging whether it is fair or not, does it matter that this accusation is leveled by the most morally repugnant character in Brooks' novel? What does this tell us about truth?

Gender Themes

Year of Wonders is a first person narrative told from the perspective of a strong female protagonist. The story she tells provides telling descriptions of and insights into the place of women in 17th century England.

- What roles do women play in 17th century Eyam? How are women central to that town's society? In what ways are they pushed to the margins?
- What sources of power do women possess? How does this power advance the cause of women? How does it impede their social progress?
- What is the status of the women socially? Culturally? Economically? Politically? Religiously?
- How do the roles and status of Eyam's women differ from those for women in our time? In what ways have things remained the same?
- What parallels exist between the villagers' accusations against, and their brutal treatment of, the Gowdie women, and the treatment of other "wise women" during the Salem witch trials which were held in 17th century Massachusetts? What do you think prompted such violent responses against such learned women within each of these communities?
- With few exceptions, most of the novel's female characters possess admirable attributes. In contrast, most of the male characters are depicted as being conflicted, animal-like, or downright evil. How does this discrepancy affect your response to the book?
- Brooks depicts her female characters in almost mystical terms. They are at one with nature and the natural. This unity is evident in Anna's instinctive understanding of midwifery, and in her ability to ride Anteros, the powerful stallion. Does this theme add to or detract from the novel's other major themes?

Literary Themes

Verisimilitude is a literary term denoting the degree to which a work of fiction conforms to the “truth” of so-called “real life.”

- Do Anna, Elinor and Michael Mompellion, and the other characters depicted by Brooks seem realistic to you? Is their behavior credible in light of your own lived experience? Do their feelings seem authentic?
- How does Brooks bring 17th century Eyam to life? What details does she include? In what ways does she make us aware of how different that time and place are from our own? What similarities does she emphasize?
- Is the novel’s relatively happy ending believable? Does it have the ring of truth? What do you think the future holds for Anna?
- The characters that Brooks depicts are complex. What motivates them? Can you identify with these motives? Who is the most sympathetic character? The least?
- How does the character of Anna evolve over the course of the novel? What mental, physical, and spiritual changes does she experience? What pivotal events shape her? By novel’s end, is she strengthened or weakened by all she has endured?
- Which of the novel’s characters are most fully realized? Which are depicted only in two-dimensional terms? Why do you think Brooks provides more detailed descriptions of some characters and not others? Which character would you like to know more about?
- Both Elinor and Michael Mompellion reveal unflattering secrets about themselves to Anna. How do these revelations change the way you feel about these characters? Do you like them more or less? Do you have greater insight into the choices they have made, and have failed to make?

Literature is never written in a vacuum. The tale Brooks tells in *Year of Wonders* is a work of fiction inspired by historical events, with which she takes some liberties. The novel she has created is a recent contribution to a long and rich tradition of plague-based literature.

- How does Brooks’ novel of the plague compare to the historical plague at Eyam that inspired it?
- Compare the Eyam Plague to The Great Plague of London, of which it was an offshoot.
- How does Brooks’ narrative of the plague compare to Daniel Defoe’s classic *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1721)?

Medical Themes

Today, our medical care relies heavily upon insights derived from the sciences. This has not always been the case.

- What does *Year of Wonders* suggest regarding the state of medicine and medical theory in 17th century England? In what ways are their medical ideas and practices similar to ours? How do they differ?
- What theories do the villagers hold about the origin and spread of the plague? How do these theories differ from our own ideas regarding how diseases are spread and how they might be prevented?
- What do we learn from *Year of Wonders* about the state of medicine in the 17th century Islamic world? In what ways is that science superior to the medical science of Europe during the same period? Does this superiority surprise you?

Some of the cures and prophylactic measures used by Anna, the Gowdies, and other Eyam villagers are rooted in superstition, and some are the result of a nascent form of scientific inquiry that depends upon careful observation, systematic testing, and a search for repeatable results.

- When reflecting upon your own experience, and upon that of your family and friends, do you find an admixture of superstition and science in dealing with disease and other medical conditions? How about Americans in general? The media?

Disease is a key element in *Year of Wonders*. As events unfold, beginning with Spring 1665, there are early clues that the plague has arrived in Eyam, well before it is confirmed on page 80.

- What is the plague and what causes it? What are its symptoms? What course does the disease take? Does this disease occur anywhere in the world today?
- What are the characteristics of the three forms of the disease and of the agent that causes it?
- As depicted in *Year of Wonders*, how is the plague transmitted from one person to another? And how could it continue to spread even though people were isolated from each other? What possible explanations are there for the disease finally diminishing in the village?
- What parallels can you draw between the plague, its agent, and its transmission and modern day concerns about infectious disease? What accounts for the fact that not everyone exposed to the plague is infected, and not everyone who is infected dies of the disease?

- What factors in modern-day life make widespread dissemination of an infectious disease more likely? What factors make us better equipped to deal with infectious diseases today than the villagers in the 1660s? Do you think quarantine would be an effective and feasible control measure today? Why or why not?



The mask with the bird-like beak referred to on page 60. The beak was filled with sweet smelling herbs and/or flowers to ward off the “plague causing” miasma.

Religious Themes

Not everyone believes in a God who is all good, all powerful, and all knowing. However, for those who do, this conception of God poses a serious problem. After all, how can such a God allow sin and suffering?

- What role do beliefs about magic, the occult, and witchcraft play in the story?
- How does religion help to bring the villagers together during a time of great difficulty? How does religion divide them?
- The novel’s title comes from the Latin *Annus Mirabilis*, used by many 17th century contemporaries of Anna to describe the year 1665-1666, which included the Plague, the Great Fire of London, and a naval war with the Dutch (the second of three such wars waged from the 1650s to the 1670s). It was this war, by the way, which brought the Dutch colonies of New York, New Jersey, and Delaware under British control. What “wonders” do you think are referenced in the title? These historical events? Natural wonders? Supernatural? Personal? Social?

- What does Brooks' tale suggest about the emergence of new ideas regarding God, nature, and science during the 17th century?
- From Reverend Mompellion's early assertion that pagans are God's children to Anna's comfortable residence in a Muslim country by book's end, Brooks presents a paradigm of religious (and social) tolerance that would have been very unusual during the time of her tale. Aside from any question of *Year of Wonders*' historical accuracy, do you think this paradigm is admirable? Desirable? Possible? Or simply naïve?
- At the end, Anna holds a basically secular (and quite modern) view of reality; rather than faith, all that is left to her is "hope." Is this atavistic secular view convincing, given the novel's 17th century setting?

Year of Wonders only hints at the bitter religious conflicts (from Henry VIII's break with the Catholic Church to the persecution of the Puritans) that had wracked England in the years before the novel's plot begins. These religious conflicts cannot be fully understood without some reference to the political conflicts with which they were intertwined: the Civil War of the 1640s; the Puritan Revolution of 1648-49; abolition of the monarchy, House of Lords, and Anglican Church establishment; execution of Charles I; the Republic/Commonwealth/Interregnum and Oliver Cromwell (1649-60); and the Restoration of the Monarchy and Anglican Church in 1660, with penal laws promulgated against the religious worship of Puritans (now Dissenters).

- Why do you suppose the novelist omitted most of this background? What evidence of these political and religious conflicts does she include? And toward what purpose?

Social Themes

Societies define certain traits as undesirable. Those who possess these traits are stigmatized, marked as different from the sanctioned social norm in some discreditable way. Those marked thus are often excluded in significant ways from the social mainstream.

- In *Year of Wonders*, those who are afflicted with the plague, and those who help them, are stigmatized. Eventually, this stigmatization is extended to include the entire town of Eyam and those who live within its environs. How does this stigmatization resemble the social isolation imposed upon those afflicted with HIV-AIDS? How does it differ?
- Which other of Eyam's villagers are stigmatized? For what traits are they stigmatized? What are the consequences of this stigmatization?
- What does Brooks' narrative reveal about the political and religious situation in England in the 1660s? What major political and religious developments had preceded this decade? How does Brooks' incorporate these into her narrative? Would it be helpful if you knew more?

- Except for the Bradfords, Eyam's villagers unanimously vote for a self-imposed quarantine. What does the act of voting itself—at a time when relatively few English people had a vote in most matters—tell you about the possible strength of a community under extreme pressure? Why is the vote important? Does it confer a greater degree of authority upon the quarantine decision, and more acceptance of it, than would have been the case had Reverend Mompellion or some other leader simply announced a quarantine?

SUPPLEMENTARY READING

Plagues have inspired great works of literature, influenced history, shaped societies. The following are only a few of the many works of fiction and non-fiction that tap into and reflect the power of plagues.

- Aberth, John. (2005). *The Black Death: A Brief History with Documents*. Boston & New York: Bedford-St. Martin's.
- Barry, John M. (2004). *The Great Influenza: The Epic Story of the Deadliest Plague in History*. New York: Viking Press.
- Boccaccio, Giovanni. (2003). *The Decameron* (rev. ed.). Penguin Classics. (First published 14th century)
- Bollet, Alfred Jay. (2006). *Plagues and Poxes : The Impact of Human History on Epidemic Disease*. Demos Medical Publishing.
- Calvi, Giulia. (1989). *Histories of a Plague Year: The Social and the Imaginary in Baroque Florence*. University of California Press.
- Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure. (1977). *The Plague Reconsidered: A New Look at its Origins and Effects in 16th and 17th Century England*. Matlock [England]. (This work has a chapter on the Eyam Plague.)
- Carmichael, Ann.(1986). *Plague and the Poor in Renaissance Florence*. New York: Cambridge University Press
- Chase, Marilyn. (2003). *The Barbary Plague: The Black Death in Victorian San Francisco*. New York: Random House.
- Clifford, John. (1995). *Eyam Plague, 1665-1666*. Sheffield: The Print Centre.
- Defoe, Daniel. (2003). *A Journal of the Plague Year*. Penguin Classics. (First published 18th century)
- Diamond, Jared. (1997). *Guns, Germs and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*. W. W. Norton & Company.
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- Mack, Arien. (1992). *In Time of Plague: The History and Social Consequences of Lethal Epidemic Disease*. New York University Press.
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- Moote, A. Lloyd, and Dorothy C. Moote. (2004). *The Great Plague: The Story of London's Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press.
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- Oldstone, Michael B. A. (2000). *Viruses, Plagues, and History*. Oxford University Press.
- Poe, Edgar Allan. (1997). *Two Tales of Terror: "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Masque of the Red Death."* Pages Publishing Group. (First published 19th century)
- Porter, Roy. (2002). *Blood & Guts: A Short History of Medicine*. Norton & Co.
- Sherman, Irwin W. (2006). *The Power of Palgues*. Washington, D.C. American Society for Microbiology
- Slack, Paul. (1990). *The Impact of Plague in Tudor and Stuart England*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Townsend, John. (2005). *Pox, Pus & Plague: A History of Disease and Infection (A Painful History of Medicine)*. Raintree.
- Watts, Sheldon. (1999). *Epidemics and History: Disease, Power, and Imperialism*. Yale University Press.
- Zeigler, Philip. (1969). *The Black Death*. London: Penguin.

GLOSSARY

Black Death: Name often used to refer to widespread pandemics of the plague in earlier centuries. Different historians use the term for differing periods in history, ranging from those who use it only for 1347-1350 to those who use it for all past pandemics.

Bubo: A swollen inflamed lymph node in the armpit or groin. The name Bubonic plague derives from this common feature of the disease plague.

Contagion, Contagious Disease: Disease that can be spread from one infected individual to another

Endemic: A situation where a disease is constantly present in low numbers in a population or specific geographic area. For example, plague is *endemic* in burrowing rodents in the southwestern United States.

Epidemic: Widespread occurrence of a disease in a community at a particular time; the incidence exceeds the level normally found in that location. For example, a plague *epidemic* struck California in the early 20th century.

Incubation Period: Time period between when a person is exposed to an infectious disease and when the first symptoms begin to appear. This period is characteristic of specific diseases and can be very short (for example, the common cold—as little as 12 hours) to much longer (for example, Hepatitis A—as long as 50 days)

Infectious Disease: A disease of humans and other animals that results from the growth of a specific microbe that causes the symptoms of the disease

Pandemic: An epidemic that occurs in a much broader geographic area, for example an entire country or worldwide

Quarantine: Isolation of a person or animal that has been exposed to an infectious disease and has the potential to spread it to others. The term can also be used for individuals who have come from a location where the disease normally occurs. The length of time is typically based on the longest possible incubation period of the disease.

Quarantines take two forms: (a) absolute or complete, where the individual's freedom of movement is restricted in order to prevent any contact with someone not exposed to the disease; (b) modified, where there is selective, partial limitation of the freedom of movement in order to minimize spread of the disease. Examples include exclusion of children from school or restricting military populations to the base.

Transmission: The spread of an infectious agent from its source (a person, an animal, an inanimate object such as soil or bedding) to a person or animal

Zoonosis: A disease whose normal host is a vertebrate animal, but which can be transmitted to humans (classical definition). All diseases and/or all infections naturally transmissible between animal and man (revised definition).

***Yersinia pestis* or *Pasteurella pestis*:** Name of the bacterial species which causes the plague. Older literature uses *Pasteurella*, but it is now classified as a *Yersinia*.

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