

YEAR OF WONDERS.

**By Geraldine Brooks. New York: Penguin Books, 2002 ISBN #
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Comments by Bob Corbett June 2005

The plague has come to a small English inland village in 1666. It wasn't very common for plague to hit such a remote and tiny place, a village of only 380 people. But come it did, wreaking its havoc for a full year and leaving 2/3 the village dead.

Narrator Anna Frith comes to believe, probably rightly, that the "plague seeds" came along in the baggage of a young tailor who moved to the village from London, the disease being carried in the cloth he brought along as part of his trade.

The village is a simple place, lead mining and farming the center of the economy, the people primarily illiterate, startlingly superstitious, and habitually religious. Young minister, Michael Mompellion and his wife Elinor are exceptions, being highly literate, relatively non-superstitious for this pre-scientific period, and liberally reformist in religion.

The story itself is humble: village life and personalities, lead mining, the constant growing death and suffering, the struggle for existence as the plague, unstoppable, does its will.

However, author Geraldine Brooks elevates this simple tale to a

high level of literature and human drama in five ways:

The incredibly authentic language, giving distinctness to the period, and the compellingness of her writing style in general.

In the development of the narrator, Anna Frith and her relationship with the Mompellions.

In her treatment of healing, both during the plague and in normal times.

In the exceptional decision of the village to voluntarily wall itself off from the outer world in order to protect the surrounding countryside from the ravages of the black death the village is already suffering.

And especially in the extraordinary sections of the village trying to make any sense of the plague and of the notion of a good, fair and just God in relation to this terrible event.

The central story which gives the novel its power and unity effectively ends when the plague ends. Unfortunately the novel does not end here and in the last pages the now liberated post-plague Anna goes on to other adventures which come out of the blue, radically breaking the unity of the novel and challenging credulity beyond measure.

No matter, even the last “adventure section” is fun to read (once I fought down my disappointment with the rupture of wholeness which it produced) and does point to a knowledge a particular history about which author Brooks would be exceptionally suited to write another novel. In respect to the integrity of the story of the village, the plague and the central relationships of the “year of wonders,” I won’t further comment on “the years after.”

While the “story,” especially in the other items I’ll discuss next, was riveting, this was a novel which offered great rewards in the writing itself. There is the illusion of authenticity of the language. Brooks writes about Elizabethan-Shakespearean England, but not

really in Elizabethan language. Yet the writing powerfully gives the illusion of being contemporary to the narrator, Anna. Brooks cleverly crafts the language to force our consciousness to be aware that Anna is not one of “us” telling this historical tale. It’s Brooks who does the telling and Anna’s is the voice and language of a woman of the village, with sensibilities and experiences of her time telling her tale in a language which by itself calls attention to antiquity, as though this were a discovered journal of Anna’s reminiscences. Yet, the cleverness is that it isn’t at all really Elizabethan language, it is just so different from our English it gives that illusion.

I was so fascinated by Brooks’s obsessive care to language that I began to record words which I didn’t know, and chose to look up in dictionaries, that this became a sort of game I was playing against the author. Anna’s sensibilities, even her values are more contemporary, but the language obscures that fact which I think Brooks wanted to obscure.

My notes show I was sent scurrying to the dictionary primarily for nouns, but not exclusively. Among the words I had to look up were:

Stowes – caul – bings – bavin – louting – riband – hirsel – croft – barmester – sennight – precisian – shippon – branks – pipkin – scrin – posset – raveling – bouse – sprags – malter

And that list is just a medium SAMPLE of strange words which appear.

Anna Frith is a very young widow with two small children. Her husband was a lead miner and died in the cave-in of his own small mine. She has a job at the rectory of the Mompellions and is befriended by Elinor, the minister’s wife. Elinor teaches Anna to read and little by little Anna is able to overcome her underclass

status in her own mind and to become a true friend to Elinor who's been open to such friendship from the beginning.

As the plague progresses and the local folks healers are killed as witches, Anna and Elinor take over the functions as local healers and begin to systematically learn folk healing.

Along the way Anna more slowly comes to know Michael Mompellion though she cannot break down the distance of their "status" until late in the novel.

The treatment of healing practices, especially herbal remedies, is fascinating. Early on, healing was in the hands of a radically independent and occult mother and daughter team, vaguely linked to a cult of healers over the centuries – suggesting links to ancient Celtic traditions. However, during the early part of the plague, the superstitious villagers decide these two women are witches and are causing the death; they are then murdered.

With Elinor's leadership and scholarly ways and Anna's touch with people, the two quickly become much sought after healers.

Elinor observes that healing is much called for in plague time. The dying can be made more comfortable, but few ever recover. However, the healthier one is the less likely it is one will succumb to plague. Thus they develop their two fold principles of triage.

- Fortify the healthy, not cure the afflicted
- Offer the balms of comfort to the dying.

As the death toll mounts it becomes clear this is plague and a major outbreak of it. People are preparing to flee. However, local minister, Michael Mompellion is the most respected voice to counsel the village. He realizes that by fleeing some might indeed save themselves and family, but in all likelihood the price of those few saved would be to spread the plague to neighboring villages,

bringing plague to the whole region while still likely dying themselves.

He convinces the villagers to voluntarily condemn themselves to stay and suffer the consequences of death in order to save the rest of the area. This much of the novel is based on an historical village in rural England which did exactly this.

They inform the next village of this (by long-distance shouting) and work out a system in which their own basic needs will be provided and food and other supplies left at a safe boundary region, and the village seals itself in. Periodically Michael Mompellion and the neighboring priest meet in a rocky area some 30-40 yards apart and communicate news by shouting.

It was impossible for me to read this novel and not compare it with Albert Camus's *The Plague*. There are some radical differences, especially in that Oran of Camus's plague was walled off by international military powers, and the events took place in the 1940s. One of the central characters was constantly planning to escape, the others ready to leave if they could, but resolved to cave into the superior force of those surrounding them. But the English village of Brooks's novel takes this on of its own free will.

Much of the discussion in both novels has to do with the relationship of God to the plague. In Camus's novel there are ½ dozen characters whose primary purpose in the novel seems to be to develop and expound some such theory. The main character, the physician Dr. Rieux, comes to basically the same conclusion as Elinor and Anna on what to do, though he uses western medical balms, not herbal medicines. One such character is Father Paneloux, a Jesuit priest who has decided the plague is a punishment of God on the people of Oran for their sins. Thus, his message is, repent and the plague will go away.

Brooks's village of 1666 is even more superstitious than Camus's Oran of the 1940s, as first the village seeks someone to blame, leading to the murders of the mother/daughter healers, whose primary crime was that they were "different."

But the strange outcome that the villagers surrender to the plague and voluntarily isolate themselves is rooted in the power of the sermon of Pastor Mompellion (just as in Camus's novel it is the sermon of Father Paneloux). Mompellion advances two arguments, one very practical and one theological/abstract.

He first argues that little will be gained by leaving. Already many have died and the "plague seeds" which they all credited as being the mediate cause of plague, were already spread through the village. The second part was again practical, albeit heroic. The gains of leaving would be slim; the price would be the death of thousands more if the plague were to spread to the whole countryside. (The precise reason why, in Camus's novel, the international community sealed Oran from the outside.)

But the argument hung on more religious grounds. What was God's role in all this? Mompellion argued that the goal of human existence was salvation – everlasting life in heaven. But humans were sinners. God sent hardships – pain and suffering, death and tragedies, at times even things as horrible as the plague – to be tools of people's purification. If even this disaster could be embraced in faith as coming from a loving and good God so that in accepting they could purify themselves, then they would be more likely to earn eternal life.

Together these two arguments sway the villagers and they self-impose their own quarantine.

Many other inquiries do arise concerning God's role. The eternal question of evil – how does such an all-good God allow such evil

to be suffered by the innocent? – dominates much of the world of human suffering.

The novel is a wonderful read. The writing is beautiful and sensitive despite the horrifying topic. In closing these comments I'll share or comment on a few odds and ends which especially attracted me along the way.

Some marvelous passages of description:

I loved the description of living in this hilly area: “ We live all aslant here, on this steep flank of the great White Peak. We are always tilting forward to toil uphill, or bracing backward on our heels to slow a swift descent. Sometimes. I wonder what it would be like to live in a place where the land did not angle so, and people could walk upright with their eyes on a straight horizon. Even the main street of our town has a camber to it, so that the people on the uphill side stand higher than those on the downhill.

Anna's boarder, the tailor who brought the plague, talks of London's growth since he was a boy: The city is like a corpulent man trying to fit himself into the jerkin he wore as a boy.

Anys, the younger of the two murdered healers, a very independent woman, explains to Anna why she has never married. Why would I marry? I'm not made to be any mans chattel. I have my work, which I love. I have my home—it is not much, I grant, yet sufficient for my shelter. But more than these, I have something very few women can claim: my freedom. I will not lightly surrender it. And besides,” she said, shooting me a sly sideways glance from under her long lashes, “sometimes a woman needs a draught of nettle beer to wake her up, and sometimes she needs a dish of

valerian tea to calm her down. Why cultivate a garden with only one plant in it?

As they walked checking their sheep Anna created stories for her kids. A line of fungus marching up a fallen branch might become, in our tale, the stairway to a faery's bower, while an acorn cup might be the cup left behind by a party of feasting wood mice.

Lib Hancock, one of the villagers, having lost some of her children to the plague, counsels Anna that she shouldn't be so attached to her own children. It is dangerous.

"Why do you let yourself love an infant so? I warned you, did I not, to school your heart against this?" It was true. Aphra had seen three of her own babies into the ground before their first year, one through fever, one through flux, and one, a lusty boy, who had just stopped breathing in his bed, with nary a mark upon him. I had stood with her through all these deaths, marveling at her dry eyes. "It is folly and ill fortune to love a child until it walks and is well grown."

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