

## ENGLISH: *YEAR OF WONDERS*

**“I woke to the slow tolling of our church bell, ringing once again for the dead.” Brooks gives the reader limited room for optimism in her novel. Do you agree?**

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In Geraldine Brooks’ novel *Year of Wonders*, the small town of Eyam is ravaged by the spread of the Plague during the seventeenth century. The overwhelming amount of deaths, along with the fear of this deadly disease, causes dramatic changes amongst Eyam’s society. The reactions to the plague leave readers somewhat disheartened, as hope is quickly lost. However, through the triumph of a few characters, optimism is regained as Brooks exhibits how positive reactions to these terrible circumstances have the potential to lead to growth and new beginnings.

The “voluntary besiegement” of the people of Eyam is seen as a noble and altruistic act from the outside, however, from within the community, it is seen to cause much anguish. The arbitrary nature of “the poison in the blood” leaves the villagers confused and scared. With “fears so raw”, they are quick to pass blame, immediately believing it to be “the workings of the Devil”. The scapegoating of the innocent Anys Gowdie is a key example of this, when she is accused of being a witch and killed by a drunken mob of villagers. These horrible actions are seen as repulsive by the readers, as Brooks accentuates the negative consequences of the plague. A pessimistic view of the situation is maintained as Brooks depicts the further consequences of the plague on individual characters. Jane Martin, after the loss of all her family members, turns to the “ale pot” and “wanton caress”. A once “simple girl”, is destroyed by the disease, and so too are many other villagers. The significant loss of life, and even basic professions, such of that of the sexton, suggests that the village has little hope of rebuilding or a bright future.

The character of Michael Mompellion in many ways also causes readers to feel disappointed. The cyclical structure of the novel begins by showing Michal “undone by grief” after the death of his wife. As the novel progresses, a contrasting side to Michael is displayed: that of a “strong” man with a “voice full of light and dark”. Michael’s charismatic leadership and presence amongst the village allow him to become a hopeful hero for the village. However, again, Brooks removes this sense of optimism in the reader when Michael cuts himself off from the village upon Elinor’s death. This is reinforced by his radical declarations that “there is no God” and that he was “false in everything”. Michael’s loss of faith is seen to bring about his cynical world view, and is used by Brooks to provide contrast to the “sermons of love and understanding” given by Mompellion earlier in the novel. However, unlike many of the other characters, Brooks shows Michael’s positive change when he is “saved” by Anna. By understanding that he does not to “believe in order to bring comfort to those who still do”, readers are left hopeful for Mompellion. The importance of some form of belief – or hope – as opposed to the strong religious practices of the time, is emphasised by Brooks as she shows it is necessary in order to keep any sort of optimism.

Similarly, the protagonist of the novel, Anna Frith, is employed to bring a positive attitude to the circumstances. In many ways Anna has suffered the most – losing her husband, children, friends, teacher and family. It is for this reason that Anna’s triumph is heightened and all the more impressive. Anna’s “ordeal” leaves her “tempered and made strong”, as she refuses to “let fears be [her] master”. By finding her passion and devoting herself to “the virtue of plants”, Anna is able to ring “motherly comfort” to those around her. Brooks uses first person narration from Anna’s point of view to bring a sense of optimism to readers. While the brutality of the plague is clear from the descriptive language used, the beauty of nature and new life is also evident. “Rings of roses” around plague sores are described, as well as the beauty in the “green” of the village as the seasons pass. This allows for honest narration from Anna, allowing the reader to truly believe in her sense of hope. Although Anna too goes through a loss of faith her established vocation as a midwife, surpassing all class and gender boundaries of the time, is admirable. Through the characterisation of Anna Frith, Brooks also allows much room for optimism in the novel.

While the plague destroys the social structure of the town of Eyam, it also provides opportunities for characters to find their purpose. The reactions to the plague bring both disappointment and positivity in readers, as some characters allow fear and grief to control them, and others find hope. Brooks' overall message however, is that of optimism and triumph as she shows that in order to flourish, one must move "away from death, and towards life... living amongst wonders".