

Year of Wonders: A Novel of the Plague

by Geraldine Brooks

Incoming Senior Study Guide Summer reading for 2015-16 school year

To be prepared for the opening of the school year you should:

- 1) Have the novel read. Please remember that academic reading means CLOSE reading, not skimming or relying on summaries.
- 2) Be prepared to test on this book. At the discretion of your teacher this test may be given on the first day of class or any other time early in the year.
- 3) Be prepared for any other type of assignment your English teacher may choose to give. This might include essay writing, presentation, discussion, project, etc.
- 4) Be prepared on the first day of school with written (typed) responses to the work/questions below and be prepared to upload your work to TURN-IT-IN.

Be familiar with the novel's Context:

Year of Wonders is a bestselling novel published in 2001. Classified as “historical fiction” it is set in the year 1666, the year of the Bubonic Plague that killed many people in Europe. The story is based on the history of the small [Derbyshire](#) village of [Eyam](#) that, when beset upon by the plague [quarantines](#) itself in order to prevent the disease from spreading further. While the plague in the novel is not identified as The Bubonic Plague it is very similar and stays true to the symptoms and impact of that plague. The action of the story revolves around a small community of people trying to survive in isolation from the rest of the world.

The Bubonic Plague: Bubonic plague circulated mainly in [fleas](#) on small [rodents](#). Without treatment, the bubonic plague kills about two thirds of infected humans within four days. While this form of plague does still exist it is extremely rare. The term *bubonic plague* is derived from a Greek word meaning "groin". Swollen [lymph nodes](#) (buboes) especially occur in the [armpit](#) and [groin](#) in persons suffering from bubonic plague. Other common symptoms of it are high fever, muscle cramping and exhaustion.

Vocabulary: List 25 words from this novel that were new to you; give the definition of each, and provide for each word a sentence in which it is used in the novel.

Characters: Briefly identify the following characters, using at least one significant quotation from the book that describes that character.

Anna Frith	Sam, Jamie & Tom Frith	George Viccars
Michael Mompellion	Elizabeth Bradford	Anys Gowdie
Jane Martin	Mem Gowdie	Josiah (Joss) Bont
Thomas Stanley	Aphra	
Ahmed Bey	Elinor Mompellion	

WRITTEN RESPONSES

1. A novel has a certain **structure**, that is, a way it is put together or arranged. The story in a novel might, for instance, be separated into chapters, be told chronologically, or the author may choose to jump back and forth in time. Describe the structure of *Year of Wonders*; for what reasons did the author choose this particular structure? What effect did the structure have on you as the reader?
2. One of the **themes** in this novel is that of “hypocrisy and betrayal.” Define “hypocrisy,” then discuss ways in which hypocrisy and betrayal are found in the novel. Support your answer with direct quotations. Another **theme** in the novel is that of the “redeeming power of human love.” Briefly discuss ways in which Brooks demonstrates how love is redemptive.
3. All of the characters in the novel have their failings and as a result they are all fully human. Are you surprised by the secrets concerning their marriage that Elinor and Michael Mompellion each reveal to Anna? How do those secrets change your feelings about each character? Do they make either seem weaker in any way? Give reasons for your answers.
4. The Bradford family bears the brunt of Mompellion’s rage when they leave town to save themselves. But weren’t the Bradfords only doing what every other noble family was doing in those times -- running because they had the means to run) Setting aside the events near the end of the novel (which make it clear that it’s hard to find any redeeming qualities in any of the Bradfords), can you really blame the Bradfords for escaping? Give reasons for your answer.
5. How much of Mompellion’s push for the quarantine had to do with the secrets he shared with Elinor? Did his own dark side and self-loathing push him to sacrifice the town, or, was he really acting out of everyone’s best interests?
6. Discuss the feminist undertones of the story. How does each female character-- Anna, Elinor, the Gowdies, and even Anna’s stepmother-- exhibit strengths that the male characters do not?
7. Pretend you are a book critic for a high school newspaper; critique the novel with respect to its literary merit and appropriateness for a teenage audience.
8. This novel can be categorized as “historical fiction.” Make a list of historical characters, events and places named in this book. Also make a list of fictional characters, events and places from the novel.